

A Journey Through History & Design

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

George Washington Memorial Parkway
Maryland, Virginia, Washington, DC



Designed view from the Parkway over the Potomac River to Washington, DC
NPS Photo

The George Washington Memorial Parkway is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the official list of the nation’s historic places worthy of preservation. What makes this 20th-century roadway part of American history?

The Parkway

The George Washington Memorial Parkway is both a memorial to our first president and a national park. Built in sections from 1928 to 1970, the road runs for 38 miles along the Potomac River. It connects the nation’s capital with George Washington’s home at Mount Vernon and extends west toward Great Falls.

The Parkway protects lands along the river, and it is rich in natural, historic, and recreational sites. It is also historically significant in its own right. The roadway’s innovative design and engineering became a model for connecting nature, parks, and history with modern car culture.

Planning & Design

Washington, DC, saw two great episodes of urban planning. The L’Enfant Plan of 1791 laid out the city. The McMillan Plan of 1901 aimed to make it more livable and beautiful for the 20th century. The McMillan Plan pushed the idea of the George Washington Memorial Parkway forward as part of an integrated system of parks and roads.

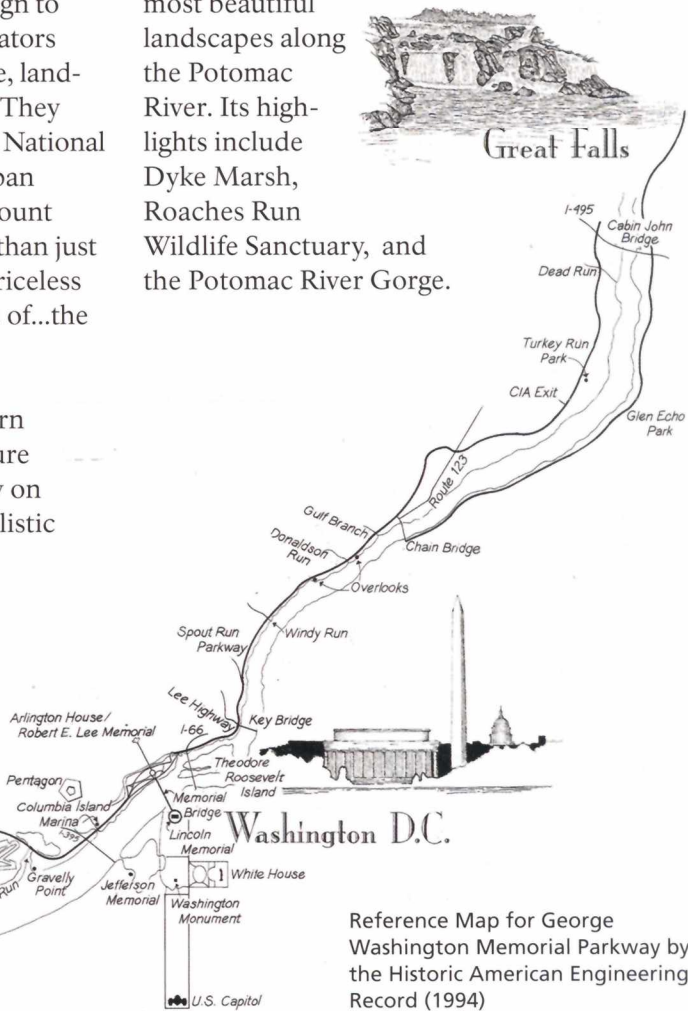
Their design reflects the changing environmental zones the Parkway passes through. A selection of largely native plants enhances the natural scenery. Hills, curves, and trees screen out commercial areas and focus views on scenery and monuments. Rustic roadway features include stone walls and bridge faces and wooden guardrails.

The plan followed the ideals of the City Beautiful Movement, which used design to improve quality of life in cities. Its creators were leaders in architecture, sculpture, landscape architecture, and city planning. They proposed lines of museums along the National Mall and scenic drives connecting urban parks. Their vision of a parkway to Mount Vernon and Great Falls was for more than just a road. They hoped for a park with “priceless recreative value” and “beautiful views of...the Potomac Valley.”

The Parkway also helped to preserve the most beautiful landscapes along the Potomac River. Its highlights include Dyke Marsh, Roaches Run Wildlife Sanctuary, and the Potomac River Gorge.



The Parkway’s design blended modern engineering and landscape architecture to create a useful road that lies lightly on the land. Its designers chose a naturalistic approach for the landscape.



Reference Map for George Washington Memorial Parkway by the Historic American Engineering Record (1994)

Transportation & Engineering

The George Washington Memorial Parkway was one of the first modern parkways built by the U.S. government. As more Americans traveled and commuted by car, parkways offered safe and pleasant driving experiences. This one became a national model for how to combine state-of-the-art engineering with natural and historic landscapes. Five million cubic yards of fill and gravel were pumped from the bed of the Potomac River to create land for a stable road along the shore. This was more than for any earlier highway project. The Parkway incorporated new features for faster and safer driving that are now standard for modern highways. These include the U.S. government’s first cloverleaf intersection and the area’s first pre-stressed concrete girder bridge.



Aerial view of a cloverleaf interchange at Route 123, looking south ca. 1962 (NPS Photo / Abbie Rowe)

Modernizing the National Parks

After World War II millions of newly mobile Americans drove to the national parks. The National Park Service began a major project to “modernize, enlarge, and even reinvent” the parks for these visitors. In the decade leading up to its 50th anniversary in 1966, a program called Mission 66 made many parks more friendly for day use. Mission 66 sparked construction of new roads and parking lots, visitor centers, and facilities built in the new “Park Service Modern” style. As part of this program, the Parkway built new parking lots, a visitor center at Great Falls, VA, and picnic areas at Carderock, Fort Hunt, and Turkey Run. It also gained funds to complete Parkway sections in Virginia and Maryland.



Carderock Pavilion, an example of “Park Service Modern” architecture (NPS photo / Louis Berger)

Remembering Great Americans

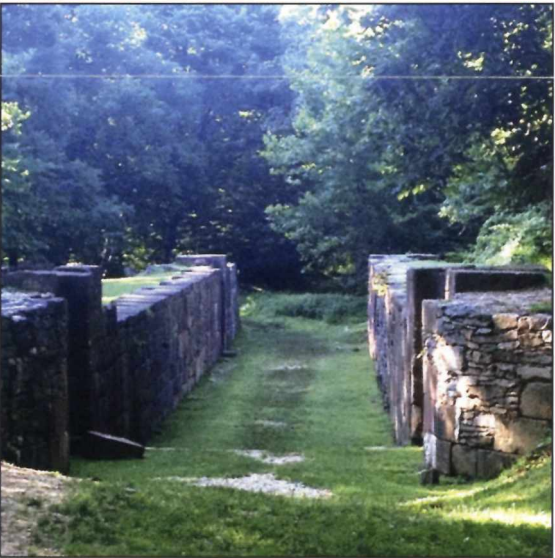
The Parkway’s first section was named the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway. This route for patriotic pilgrims to George Washington’s home was completed in 1932 for the 200th anniversary of his birth. The journey connects travelers to places that were important to Washington’s life and legacy. It offers vistas of the Washington Monument, his house of worship at Christ Church in Alexandria, VA, and more. The Parkway’s views and location made it a fitting place for commemoration beyond the first president. Today its many national memorials honor famous and ordinary Americans who have served their country.



The Navy and Marine Memorial alongside the parkway overlooks the National Mall. (NPS photo)

Washington’s Canal

George Washington shaped one part of the park during his lifetime: the remains of the Patowmack Canal. After the American Revolution, Washington planned to build canals linking the Potomac and Ohio rivers. These would connect the East Coast with new settlements west of the Appalachian Mountains. As president of the Patowmack Company in the 1780s, he helped create a section of canal to help boats journey past Great Falls. Workers had to blast into cliffs of solid rock to open a route. The canal and locks were completed in 1802 and used until 1830, when the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal opened on the other side of the Potomac River. The Patowmack Canal is now a National Historic Landmark.



Ruins of Patowmack Canal Lock 1, Great Falls, VA (NPS photo / Louis Berger)