





## F. Associated Property Types

I. Name of Property Type parkway

### II. Description

The National Capital parkway system is composed of more than 8,761 acres of protected arterial byways in Washington, D.C., suburban Maryland, and Northern Virginia, totaling more than 74 miles. The contributing parkways include the Rock Creek and Potomac, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway George Washington Memorial, Suitland, Baltimore-Washington, and numerous neighborhood strip parks (although this last category is not included in the acreage/miles figures given). All are related to provide a "garden system" within a densely developed urban scheme, in keeping with a scale and layout that dates to the eighteenth century. The parkways serve as a link among the parks, monuments, and suburbs of the national capital region, with features that include scenic overlooks, hiking/biking trails, picnic/parking areas, native and ornamental plantings, and formal monuments--each situated to provide advantageous vistas and accessible day-use recreation

### III. Significance

The various parkways of the national capital reflect the culmination of several national trends after the turn of the century: the City Beautiful movements' emphasis on integrated urban green space; automobility and the rapid development of road systems; and the decline in the quality of city living and resulting popularity of outdoor recreation. In Washington, D.C., the McMillan Commission's recommendation for a series of parks and parkways was coupled with the American Institute of Architects's assessment of a cityscape badly in need of formal planning and direction--in keeping with the original eighteenth-century urban scheme by Pierre L'Enfant. The four primary parkways and numerous small, regional strip parks--developed from 1913 to 1965 through the cooperative efforts of Maryland, Virginia, and District authorities--collectively represent all major justifications

### IV. Registration Requirements

#### A. Landscape architecture

1. natural terrain and topography
2. existing and enhanced native vegetation
3. variable-width median and buffer articulation
4. vistas

#### B. Architecture/structures

1. dual-lane roadway
2. culverts and guard rails
3. bridges
4. monuments and statuary

#### C. Site

1. limited and well-distanced access
2. vertical and horizontal curves
3. enhancement of natural scenic features
4. roadside overlooks, parks, parking areas

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See continuation sheet for additional property types

## G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Numerous resources were used to evaluate the significance of Washington, D.C.'s parkway system. The general history of the period of significance--approximately the first half of the twentieth century--is historically linked to regional cultural organizations and the comprehensive plans they issued: the McMillan Commission, National Capital Park and Planning Commission, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and the Commission of Fine Arts. Each has been concerned with the same historic and physical boundaries of the national capital and neighboring suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. The integrity of the contributing landscape-architectural features and structures has remained high because of ongoing ownership and maintenance by the National Park Service, the arbiter of the guiding Secretary of the Interiors' Standards for Historic Preservation. Federal records exist for each parkway in the collection of the National Archives, as well Historic Resource Study: Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Suitland Parkway, Baltimore-Washington Parkway, by Historian Jere Krakow (NPS, 1990). Also, a Rock Creek Park administrative history documents the development of that parkway. The original section of the George Washington Memorial Parkway--the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway--is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is the subject of a historic-resource study being produced by EDAW Inc. of Alexandria. The Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record Division, NPS, completed a selective survey of historic bridges in the National Capital Region, NPS, including many associated with the parkways discussed here. This material provided information on the contexts and themes related to the parkways: conservation, history and development of the park and parkway system of the national capital, and the influence of automobiles and the development of commuter arteries.

## H. Major Bibliographical References

### GENERAL

#### National Archives:

RG 66, Commission of Fine Arts  
RG 351, Records of the District of Columbia  
RG 328, National Capital Park & Planning Commission  
RG 79, National Park Service  
RG 30, Bureau of Public Roads

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Primary location of additional documentation:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> State historic preservation office | <input type="checkbox"/> Local government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other State agency                 | <input type="checkbox"/> University       |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Federal agency          | <input type="checkbox"/> Other            |

Specify repository: National Capital Region, NPS; National Capital Planning Commission

## I. Form Prepared By

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These specifications are: a limit to non-commercial, recreational traffic; the avoidance of unsightly roadside developments; a wider-than-average right-of-way to provide a buffer from abutting property; no frontage or access rights, to encourage the preservation of natural scenery; preference for a new site, to avoid already congested and built-up areas; to best access native scenery; the elimination of major grade crossings; well-distanced entrance and exit points to reduce traffic interruptions and increase safety.<sup>7</sup> Collectively, they ensured a self-contained, well-preserved, and safe thoroughfare.

Despite these in-house Park Service ideals, in 1944 the U.S. Department of Interior complained that, "To date, Congress has not defined parkways. Legislation pertaining to parkways is piecemeal and lacks uniformity."<sup>8</sup>

In Washington, at least, the definition of a parkway has historically differed according to the period of development, site, and transportation needs. And although its function as a road can never be divorced from its scenic role, parkways have been consistently patterned as formally or informally designed connectors within a system of predetermined destinations that include parks and monuments--and later, federal reservations. Credit for this belongs to the City Beautiful movement.

## CITY BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT

The City Beautiful movement that developed around the turn of the century is evidenced in particular in the urban park systems of Boston and New York--a vital element of which are parkways. Using these as models, planners and landscape architects assembled in Washington to develop a similar program for the nation's capital. The McMillan Plan of 1902 calls for numerous "parkways" linking the Great Falls, Mount Vernon, Potomac River bridges, and existing parks. Like New York City's Riverside Drive, Washington had its own token "riverside drive," a muddy carriage path built in 1904. It wound around the Tidal Basin and up 26th Street in northwest, serving as a literal and figurative prologue to the era of parkway construction.

The parkway was a byproduct of the suburbanization movement, born in the late nineteenth

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<sup>7</sup> Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williams, Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s (Washington D.C.: Denver Service Center, 1983), p. 146; ASLA fellow Laurie D. Cox identified the same standards in an article, "Appearance: Essential Element in Superhighway Plans," Landscape Architecture, vol. 32, no. 2 (January 1942), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Memo to Demaray, Appendix A, p. 1.

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century; however, its role accelerated with the increasing sense of city-to-city regionalism and the rise of motoring characteristic of the twentieth century.

The purpose served by parkways and boulevards is, roughly, to provide agreeable routes connecting parks with each other, the parks with the centers of population, and the suburbs and countryside with the congested districts. The first two purposes have long been established. The last is a recognition of the changed methods of travel introduced with the automobile.<sup>9</sup>

The car--which gave enormous impetus to the improvement of the American road system in general--had a significant impact on parkways and the development of recreational roadways. According to Charles W. Eliot II: "It is the informal landscape parks of all sizes, and in the parkways, that the automobile has notably changed the situation."<sup>10</sup>

As an added bonus, Eliot felt that if recreation-seekers took to scenic roads, it might alleviate the inevitable and increasing congestion of national and state parks, as well as "atone for the exclusion of automobiles from landscape parks except under rigorous conditions," which he advocated.<sup>11</sup> The speed of motorized vehicles, as compared to horse-drawn carriages, also lent itself to new design needs: convenient and unobtrusive parking areas, service facilities, and dramatic-but-simple landscaping enjoyable from afar at 75 mph, rather than in detail at a meandering pace.

Although the District of Columbia's Division of Trees and Parking (established in 1871 and later part of the city's Engineer Department) was "one of the first public bodies to regard street-tree planting as a public function," the city trailed behind others in the development of urban green space. Massachusetts, one of the forerunners in the City Beautiful movement, became the first state to enact legislation for the caring of shade trees on public highways in 1890. But it was not until 1933 and the National Industrial Recovery Act that "appropriate landscaping of parkways or roadside on a reasonably extensive mileage," was provided at the federal level.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eliot, p. 36; for information on Eliot, see footnote 24.

<sup>10</sup> Charles W. Eliot, II, "The Influence of the Automobile on the Design of Park Roads," Landscape Architecture, vol. 13, no. 1 (October 1922), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Wilbur H. Simonson, "Roadside Planting," Landscape Architecture, vol. 26, no. 4 (July 1936), p. 167.

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comprehensive scheme of urban parks and parkways in Washington. "There has been candid admission in Congress," reported one newspaper, "that the park system of the National Capital is not what it should be"--for which the poor "economies of the past five years" were blamed.<sup>13</sup>

As the desirability for sophisticated roads grew, "the modification of highway design to conform to the principles and technique of landscape architecture" became a direct concern of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). This remained true even as the engineering aspects of road construction improved, because "the fundamental purpose of roadside planting operations should be to make the highway strip a mere foreground, or screen against what lies beyond."<sup>14</sup> As late as 1940, however, an ASLA editorial reported:

There is still a tendency to consider the work of the landscape architect as a last step after all the other important decisions of design are made and put into effect.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the growing acknowledgement that landscape architecture was a mandatory component to road design, certain parkway characteristics remained subordinate to one another: Traffic provisions, safety, and economical maintenance take precedent over landscape design; while landscape-design features including location, alignment, profile, and adaptation to natural topography, take precedent over horticultural embellishments. All, however proportioned, are crucial parkway elements.<sup>16</sup>

And last, the site design of a parkway should appear compositionally natural, with irregular groupings of plantings recommended: The purpose was to enhance native vegetation beyond. According to one landscape architect:

In the open countryside it is a mistake to use exotic plants, or anything which is not indigenous to that general region and to the particular type of topography at hand. . . .Native materials should be

<sup>13</sup> Bill Price, "A Great National Park Along the Potomac," Washington Times (18 April, 1922).

<sup>14</sup> Simonson, p. 171, 173; ASLA committee reports of 1939-40 outline the procedure for the collaboration between landscape architects and engineers "in the design and construction of highways, "Landscape Design in Highway Development," Landscape Architecture, vol. 32, no. 2 (January 1942), p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Harlean James, "Comment: Tendency to View Landscape Contribution as Final Step," Landscape Architecture, vol. 30, no. 3 (April 1940), p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur R. Nichols, "Landscape Design in Highway Development," Landscape Architecture, vol. 30, no. 3 (April 1940), p. 115.

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exist of the never-realized Archbold-Glover Parkway in northwest D.C. Despite their absence, a system of largely complete parkways does exist in the capital.

The vision of a National Capital laid out along wide avenues and ceremonial routes replete with parks and formal city entrances, is descended from the design scheme of engineer-turned-city planner Maj. Charles Pierre L'Enfant. His 1791 plan for the Federal City incorporates political, residential, and commercial centers, as well as waterways such as the Potomac and Anacostia (or Eastern Branch) rivers, two canals, and Rock Creek with its tributaries.

With the urban schemes of Paris and other world capitals in mind, L'Enfant surveyed the site of the future U.S. capital from all directions, including the north approach from Baltimore, "which offered travelers a synoptic view of the town and its natural setting from the hills above the Bladensburg Road."<sup>19</sup> Among the guidelines for his plan are thoroughfares "to not merely contrast with the general regularity, not to provide a greater variety of seats with pleasant prospects. . . but principally to connect each part of the city."<sup>20</sup> In addition to "outroads" identified on William T. Partridge's 1926 study of plans by L'Enfant and his successor, William Ellicott, a "city entrance" occupies a prominent position on the Potomac River in the approximate area where the Baltimore-Washington Parkway exits the city today.<sup>21</sup> Little of L'Enfant's vision was constructed during the eighteenth- or nineteenth centuries, however.

New and extended modes of transportation dominated the nineteenth century that--for service and speed--superseded those provided by water- and roadways. A rail line operated between the two cities in 1835, bettering the traditional stage coach travel time by half.<sup>22</sup> The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad opened a direct line to Washington City and encouraged regional development between the capital and not-insignificant Maryland port to the north. All the while, in Washington and environs a miscellany of crossroads towns and farms steadily grew up within the ten-mile city boundaries. One exception to such growth was the region along the east bank of the Anacostia River: "An area of commanding panoramic views and a hilly topography."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Gutheim, Frederick, Worthy of a Nation (D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Gutheim, p. 25..

<sup>21</sup> Gutheim, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

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The first attempt to cohesively develop L'Enfant's scheme beyond city limits came in the 1890s with successive--but equally ineffectual--legislation, the 1893 and 1898 Highway Acts. Authorization was introduced for a plan extending L'Enfant's street plans, taking into account already-established subdivisions, but it failed to address funding or offer a timetable for implementation. The "Permanent System of Highways Plan," however, became the foundation for the McMillan Commission's revival of the original urban scheme in the grand, baroque tradition.

Several nationwide movements contributed to Washington's urban development at this time: The unparalleled success of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago turned designers on to comprehensive and formally integrated city planning that included a generous landscape component, the essence of the City Beautiful movement; the increasing popularity and affordability of the automobile, which necessitated adequate roadways and service facilities; and the general decline of urban living conditions through overcrowding and poverty, which logically resulted in the out-of-doors as a popular recreation destination.

A trio of local events further drew the focus to Washington. "A small group of the country's best-known designers" assembled there to coordinate the centennial celebration of the "removal of government" to the city; the American Institute of Architects convened in 1900 to address issues of sculpture, landscape and public-building design; and, Senator James McMillan of Michigan orchestrated the creation of the Senate Park Commission. The McMillan Commission--as it is better known--was a highly influential group that advised the formation of a team of professionals "eminent in their professions, who shall consider the subject of the location and grouping of public buildings and monuments to be erected in the District of Columbia and the development of the entire park system of the District of Columbia."<sup>24</sup>

Commission members included: Charles Moore, assistant to McMillan (who later served on the Commission of Fine Arts for twenty-seven years); Charles Eliot II, whose father designed Boston's comprehensive park system and worked at the Olmsted brothers' firm; Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., a principal in that office and head of the nation's first landscape-architecture curriculum at Harvard University; pre-eminent architects Charles F. McKim and Daniel Burnham, both of whom worked on the Columbian Exposition; and sculptor August Saint-Gaudens who joined the team later. Moore, Olmsted and Eliot would remain key figures in the design of the national capital region during the next three decades.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 113, 116.

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In addition to downtown development, the McMillan Commission recommended a series of drives and park connections around the city: in Virginia along the Potomac River down to Mount Vernon, in Maryland and D.C. up to Great Falls; a Fort Drive to connect forty or so historic Civil War sites; and to enlarge and embellish Rock Creek Park for intensified recreational use.<sup>25</sup> In keeping with L'Enfant's vision:

The City Beautiful movement in Washington was . . . swept along to include city entrances, parkways, boulevards, monumental bridges, and entire streets.<sup>26</sup>

This was followed by the Commission of Fine Arts' (CFA, established in 1910) recommendation in 1918 for a "permanent system of highways [to] be revised to allow for the new park schemes." Crucial to a citywide network of local and "grand entrance" parkways was the Olmsted Brothers' urging for protection of the Rock Creek Park property. The idea followed up by a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' recommendation for the acquisition of 400-foot strips of land along Rock Creek and its tributaries in D.C. and neighboring Montgomery County, Maryland.<sup>27</sup>

**ROCK CREEK & POTOMAC PARKWAY: 1913-1935**

The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was legislated 1913 as a two and one-half-mile connector between the East and West Potomac Parks on the river, and Rock Creek Park and the zoo. Rock Creek Park was established in 1890 as a nature preserve, an "open valley" of streams and forest to which hiking and riding trails were later added. A winding two-lane road, Beach Drive, provides the primary access through the park, which occupies 1,754 acres in the District and Montgomery County, Maryland. Access to the park interior is limited to about twenty entry points from small neighborhood thoroughfares.

Distinguishing traffic use through the park was an issue during the 1920s, even as the parkway was being developed. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., believed there should be a distinction between the lower and upper portions of the Rock Creek Valley. The bulk of the valley--above the zoo--

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 145; these neighborhood parkways, also called "strip parks" or "border roads," protected the creek's floodplain and provided welcome green space within the urban sprawl.

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remains a park, while the parkway to the zoo is the narrowest right-of-way and serves as a commuter route. "You must be careful not to ruin that valley if it is to be all one. The valley of Rock Creek should not be turned into that kind of thoroughfare and ruin the stream and park character," he warned.<sup>28</sup>

A parkway linking the zoo and the Potomac parks was first studied in 1900, when Congress allocated \$4,000 to employ landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr. During the early years of the century--concurrent to the McMillan Commission's workings--two options evolved. The first was to fill the valley and enclose the creek in an underground brick culvert--the fate that earlier befell Tiber Creek. This was determined to be a long-term and costly undertaking, and the commission pursued the second option: to maintain the open-valley plan and bring a road through it, thus allowing east-west traffic to traverse the park on bridges at non-grade level.<sup>29</sup>

But it was not until President William Howard Taft signed the parkway's enabling legislation in March 1913 that any progress was made--for reasons of conservation and transportation:

That for the purpose of preventing the pollution and obstruction of Rock Creek and of connecting Potomac Park with the Zoological Park and Rock Creek Park, a commission. . . is authorized and directed to acquire. . . such land and premises. . . lying on both sides of Rock Creek. . . That [such] lands. . . are hereby appropriated to and made a part of the parkway herein authorized to be acquired.<sup>30</sup>

The bill--whose justification resembled the New York legislation of 1906 that resulted in the Westchester parkways--included a \$1.3 million appropriation for land acquisition, the cost of which was to be shared equally by District and federal governments. The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Commission, which included landscape architect James D. Langdon, sought to acquire slightly more than 4.1 million square feet of land, assessed at \$1.42 million. By 1923, the commission had 82 percent of its goal, but funds ran out while twelve acres were still needed. This was mitigated through boundary adjustments and land condemnations. Segments of the road were under construction in the mid-20s, but title disputes and unacquired land prevented a continuous thoroughfare. The last leg of the parkway, between K and P streets, opened to traffic in October 1935.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> NCP&PC minutes (16-18 September, 1927), p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Barry Mackintosh, Rock Creek Park: An Administrative History (Washington, D.C.: NPS History Division, 1985), p. 49

<sup>30</sup> Congressional Record, pp. 4693-94, 4816. Pub. 432, 62nd Congress, 37 Stat. 885.

<sup>31</sup> Mackintosh, p. 61, 63.

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## BORDER, STRIP, AND STREAM VALLEY PARKS

Ancillary to Rock Creek, and the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers are a number of "strip" or "border" parks that occupy the floodplain of local tributaries or park-related topography. These have historically been identified for local importance.

Stream valley parks form the backbone and major portion of the District of Columbia and Metropolitan Park System. Their value as routes for passenger car traffic augmenting the city and metropolitan street system cannot be overestimated. One of their primary values which is often overlooked is the conservation of small wild life, woodland and water.<sup>32</sup>

In the District, Maryland and Virginia, a total of 11,552 publicly owned acres were devoted to such stream valley parks by the late 1930s, with nearly 12,000 additional acres planned.<sup>33</sup>

Maryland's Sligo Branch Parkway, conceived in the 1920s, is the single-largest strip park in the region. It descends about ten miles (northwest to southeast) from the city of Wheaton in Montgomery County to Hyattsville in Prince George's County, to link up with parkway extensions of the northeast and northwest branches of the Anacostia River, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and Anacostia Park. The two-lane, undivided roadway winds alongside Sligo Creek, where numerous picnic and recreational spots are provided in a wooded setting, although access to the parkway from adjacent neighborhoods is limited. Right-of-way width varies within relatively narrow boundaries, and offers a limited buffer between the road and community development. During the late 1930s, Maryland was accepting donations of stream valley lands of 80 to 100 feet wide, with a total of forty-six miles anticipated upon completion.

The Piney Branch Parkway (extending east at 16th Street and Arkansas Avenue) was to average 400 feet wide, as an extension of Rock Creek Park's Beach Drive in 1908, and again in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Pinehurst Parkway (extending west from the park along Beech Street to the Montgomery County line) is a *slim green space* flanked by residential streets that "embraces an important feeder stream."<sup>35</sup> The function of flood control was one important reason to protect these small waterways.

<sup>32</sup> Max Wehrly, "Stream Valley Parks in the District of Columbia and Metropolitan Area" (12 October, 1939). RG 328, Box 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Mackintosh, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> "Potomac Power Dam Report Due Today," Evening [Washington] Star (13 January, 1944). RG 66, Box 69.

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Linear parks created between roadways also include Beach Parkway (at the northernmost point of the District boundary) and the nearby North Portal Parkway at Blair Road. A "Northern Parkway" around Western Avenue and Oregon Avenue-extended (out to Old Bladensburg Road) was identified in 1945 as a priority project for the next five years by the Maryland National Capital Park & Planning Commission, as were improvements to the Western Avenue-Dalecarlia Reservoir area, and the George Washington Memorial Parkway from D.C. to Great Falls. Only the last of these three was constructed, and it was not completed until 1965.<sup>36</sup>

The western corner of the District contains the fragments of a minor park and parkway system that also failed to materialize in its entirety. Glover-Archbold Park in north Georgetown very nearly connects with the Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway. The NCP&PC had long planned for the nearby Whitehaven Parkway to extend from the Palisades Park to Massachusetts Avenue through this park, but today it exists as a road leading to it, then as a green extension of the park, and picking up again as a brief parkway that ends at Wisconsin Avenue. This was still a trouble spot in the 1950s when the NCP&PC sought to acquire the land between Wisconsin Avenue and Dumbarton Oaks Park to link the parkway with Whitehaven Street, only to discover that Dumbarton's dedication deed prohibits the incorporation of roadways.<sup>37</sup> In the 1920s, the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds sought to build the Klinge Valley Parkway to connect with the Normanstone Parkway, north of Dumbarton Oaks Park and the Naval Observatory, to serve as a western detour around the zoo; the development of each continued into the 1950s, but the connection between them never did.<sup>40</sup>

Nearby, the Arizona Parkway was slated for development between Canal Road and Van Ness Street: In a "portion of the valley of Foundry Branch along the general line of Arizona Avenue. . . of a parkway character that will provide facilities as a means of access to the park and to provide for a scenic highway for through traffic."<sup>41</sup> Had this been accomplished, it would have completed a link with the Dalecarlia Parkway, which occupies the right-of-way buffer along the Dalecarlia Reservoir grounds, situated at the D.C.-Montgomery County boundary abutting the Palisades Park.

Another slender park exists in the B&O railroad right of way that turns north at the Maryland

<sup>36</sup> Fred Tuemmler to John Nolen (22 March, 1945). RG 328.

<sup>37</sup> W.E. Finley to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss (12 March, 1959).

<sup>40</sup> Mackintosh, p. 64-65.

<sup>41</sup> "Memorandum of Agreement between the NPS and the Government of the District of Columbia Relative to the Development of the Arizona Parkway" (16 April, 1948) RG 66, Box 8.

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line, and continues along the west side of the reservoir. Between Massachusetts Avenue and Bradley Boulevard, the Little Falls Parkway serves as a limited-access thoroughfare that leads into Chevy Chase, Maryland, park areas. During the 1920s, it was proposed to use this and the Dalecarlia property as part of "a circuit drive around the District of Columbia beyond Rock Creek Park."<sup>42</sup> Between the District line and Great Falls lies the Cabin John Creek, whose valley "in many respects compares favorably in scenery with the famous valley of Rock Creek." The NCP&PC sought this parkway to connect the city of Rockville with the Potomac River.<sup>43</sup>

The two linear parks that contain the Anacostia River branches are served by minimal abutting roads, although they are not identified as parkways proper. A similar parkway is found in the Cabin Branch tributary (between Sheriff Road and Central Avenue), located in Maryland near the Eastern Avenue District boundary. In 1927 the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission recommended that land in the creek's floodplain "be acquired for park purposes to serve the growing communities of Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant." Oxen Run, flanking the Southern Avenue D.C. boundary, was also slated to "be developed with a parkway and recreational facilities" in the 1920s. Today the upper valley portion contains a golf course and lands that connect with the Suitland Parkway, and the lower valley consists of a park; neither includes a designated parkway.<sup>44</sup>

Planning for these parkways had quickly become a regional concern, one taken up by the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (NCP&P, founded 1926) and Maryland National Capital Park & Planning Commission (MNCP&PC, 1927). To protect Rock Creek's watershed to the north, an extension of the park was idealized, but "to inspire the District's neighbors to substantive action, the carrot of federal aid was deemed necessary."<sup>45</sup>

The vehicle for the expansion of Rock Creek Park into Maryland, the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway and other parkways was the Capper-Cramton Act, approved 29 May, 1930. This act provided \$16 million "for the acquiring of such lands in the District of Columbia as are necessary and desirable for the suitable development of the National Capital park, parkway and playground

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Eliot II and NCP&PC, "Preliminary Report: Park System for the National Capital Washington Region" (February 1927), p. 16. RG 328.

<sup>43</sup> Eliot and NCP&PC, "Park System. . .," p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Eliot and NCP&PC, "Park System. . .," p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Mackintosh, p. 67.

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system. . . .” It provided that the government would grant one-third, and advance two-thirds, of the cost of these constructions, with a \$1.5 million ceiling for the federal contribution and \$3 million more for the advance.<sup>46</sup>

MOUNT VERNON MEMORIAL HIGHWAY: 1928–1932  
GEORGE WASHINGTON MEMORIAL PARKWAY: 1930–1965

The George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP) on the Virginia shore includes the parkway from Mount Vernon, about twelve miles south of Washington, to Great Falls, fifteen miles to the north. The oldest portion--from the estate to the site of Memorial Bridge--was built as the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway (MVMH) from 1928-32; and the northern parkway leg, as the GWMP, from the 1930s-65. Buffering the District shore, the parkway is composed of Palisades Park, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal [National Historical Park], and the B&O railway right-of-way as far as the Montgomery County line.

The MVMH was legislated on 23 May, 1928, to commemorate the bicentennial of George Washington's birth--an idea dating to a citizen's group organized in 1886. In 1930 Congress concluded the parkway should extend even farther: north to Great Falls on both shores, and down to Fort Washington in Maryland. Two years later, all existing and future components were renamed the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

Gilmore Clarke, consulting landscape architect for the MVMH, attested that the Bronx River Parkway (1923), a thirteen-mile thoroughfare in New York designed exclusively for pleasure motoring, set the precedent for the Virginia parkway:

I doubt whether the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway would have been built in the manner in which it was, had those in charge not seen and profited by the work of the Westchester County Park Commission. And so Washington has one example of the type of motorway that should. . . extend out from every portal of the city.<sup>47</sup>

Even before the MVMH/GWMP was begun, this New York parkway was cited as a model for a

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<sup>46</sup> Mackintosh, p. 67-68.

<sup>47</sup> Gilmore Clarke, "D.C. Need of Modern Parkway Cited by Fine Arts Chairman," The Sunday [Washington] Star (5 June, 1938).

United States Department of the Interior  
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Parkways of the National  
Capital Region, 1913-1965

similar thoroughfare leading north from the nation's capital. The proponent was "keenly interested in the subject of trying to work out a parkway between Washington and Baltimore on lines somewhat similar to the Bronx Parkway--a parkway which will average perhaps a thousand feet in width, but vary according to local conditions, topography, etc."<sup>48</sup>

Clarke was responsible for designing bridges and small architectural elements of the parkway, as well as heading the design team made up largely of Westchester County Parkway Commission alumni: besides himself, engineer Jay Downer, landscape architect Wilbur Simonson, and plantsman Henry Nye. Clarke's MVMH bridges are characteristically romantic and rustic, low-slung segmental-arched concrete with rough-faced stone cladding--nearly identical to those he designed for Westchester.

The fifteen and one-half-mile MVMH was built by the federal Bureau of Public Roads and was one of the first facilities planned using aerial photography, which afforded much greater detail of topography, drainage patterns, the existing road, and options for the new parkway. These novelties generated a more sinuous and irregular roadway than did traditional, tangential curves.<sup>49</sup>

From Mount Vernon to Alexandria, the four-lane, undivided road clings to the shoreline it protects, from thickly wooded sections to open, grassy embankments and marsh; occasional overlooks and park/parking areas provide points for picnicking and occasional views to Fort Washington across the river. In contrast, the route from Alexandria to the bridge is divided by a median, open and manicured. This portion also contains several formal monuments--the Columbia Island Circle at the junction of the bridge, the Navy-Marine Memorial, and the LBJ Memorial Grove--the backdrop to which is an ongoing vista of the magnificent Washington skyline. In recent years the parkway has been augmented by a bicycle/pedestrian path of complementary winding character.

Federal acquisition of land northward continued from the 1930s to 1966: The 9.7-mile north leg of the Virginia parkway from Memorial Bridge to the interstate Beltway was completed in 1965 at a cost of \$30 million. The 7.7-mile Maryland section on the opposite shore (renamed the Clara Barton Parkway in 1989) cost \$18 million. The entire parkway is composed of 7,146 acres, of which 44 percent are developed (road, pavement, lawn) and 42 percent are natural woodlands; about 300 acres of scenic easements offer additional protection.

<sup>48</sup> Letter to Joseph T. Shirley (17 November, 1927), RG 328.

<sup>49</sup> Department of Transportation, *America's Highways*, p. 329, 396.





















