



May 28, 2026

Mr. William Scharf, Chairman
National Capital Planning Commission
401 9th Street, NW
Suite 500N
Washington DC 20004

Dear Commission Chairman Scharf and Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed Triumphal Arch that would be built at the western terminus of Memorial Bridge. At 250-feet-tall, the arch would be a significant addition to the Monumental Core, which stretches from the [U.S. Capitol Grounds](#) to [Arlington National Cemetery](#), and includes the [White House Grounds](#) and the [National Mall](#). The proposed arch interrupts and severs key visual and spatial relationships that are integral to the Monumental Core's design intent and its inherent symbolism, discussed below, and which have been stewarded by NCPC for more than a century.

There are two critical points in [Washington, D.C.'s landscape legacy](#)—[Pierre L'Enfant's plan of 1791](#) and the [McMillan Plan of 1902](#). The latter was devised by a distinguished group that included the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

Olmsted, Jr.'s impact on the development of the capital city is exceptional. Along with the McMillan Commission, he was a member of the first Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) in 1910, and served until 1918; he was the principal author of the Organic Act that created the National Park Service (which manages much of the city's Monumental Core), a member of the first National Capital Park Commission (1924-26) and National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (1926-32), both predecessors to the current commission, and the principal designer of the White House Grounds plan of 1935, which has guided work on those grounds for more than 90 years. The [CFA's website notes](#): "Olmsted Jr.'s work of many decades on the National Mall created a unified spatial composition from a sequence of disconnected landscapes."

According to the National Park Service's [Cultural Landscape Report](#) (CLR) of 1999 for the Lincoln Memorial and West Potomac Park, "Olmsted exercised a unique influence over the development of the Lincoln Memorial grounds, serving as arbiter of design decisions regarding all aspects of the treatment of the landscape." In addition, "Layout, spatial relationships, planting, and site features were often conceived, shaped, and reviewed by the landscape architect member of the commission prior to approval by the full commission."

Visually connecting the Lincoln Memorial to Arlington National Cemetery is Memorial Bridge described in the [National Register of Historic Places](#) nomination (1980) as "Washington's most beautiful bridge"; it was designed by William Mitchell Kendall, a partner at the architectural firm [McKim, Mead & White](#). Earlier bridge designs include one from 1886 by Paul Pelz that "featured Renaissance Revival Towers and articulated steel arches crossing the Potomac River," and competition winning design from 1899 by Edward Pearce Casey that included "Triumphal Arches on piers [that] emphasized an imperial architectural image" as noted in [Civic Art: A Centennial History of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts](#) (p. 107).

Indeed, as part of the campaign to get this present proposed arch built, its proponents have circulated images of those aforementioned Memorial Bridge designs and others from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that include arches and other tall vertical elements.

All of those proposals were ultimately rejected. To argue that these proposals prove an arch was predestined is fallacious, at best. Similarly, the suggestion that L'Enfant called for the construction of one or more arches in the city is based on an inventive interpretation of [a letter between L'Enfant and Thomas Jefferson in 1791](#). L'Enfant said no such thing.

According to the [National Park Service](#) the present Memorial Bridge was “Symbolically ... designed to show the strength of a united nation by joining a memorial on the north side of the Potomac River (the Lincoln Memorial) with one on the south (Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial).” The architect envisioned an elaborate sculptural program ... including seated figures of the first four American presidents on the D.C. side and reclining statues of oceans and river gods on Columbia Island. The bridge itself was to have forty allegorical statues.” That entire sculptural program was eliminated by the CFA, as some statuary and pylons were seen as too tall in relation to the memorial.

The [Lincoln Memorial](#) is a hinge point (on a bent axis) visually connecting the [Washington Monument](#) and the Reflecting Pool to the east, and Arlington House. The [Historic American Engineering Record report of 1988](#) about Arlington Memorial Bridge by historian Elizabeth Nolin noted: “As the final link in the chain of monuments which start at the Capitol building, the Arlington Memorial Bridge connects the Mall in Washington, D.C. with Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. Designed to connect, both physically and symbolically, the North and the South, this bridge, as designed in the Neoclassical style, complements the other monumental buildings in Washington such as the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Jefferson Memorial.”

Some 110 years ago, [Olmsted, Jr. wrote a letter to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker](#) concerning the proposed Memorial Bridge design; his sage observations are apt today: **“The existing bridge design was the result of a competition held about 1899, before the Lincoln Memorial was even dreamed of... [emphasis added]**

“The bridge plans were carefully studied by members of the so-called Park Commission of 1900, of which I am the sole survivor. As a result of that study certain recommendations about them were made an essential part of our general plan. Among other things we said:

“Such modifications would call for the removal of the central ornamental towers, which would conflict with the proposed Lincoln Memorial.”

“These towers are the most conspicuous feature of the design and are so large and elaborate as to compete with the Lincoln Memorial not only in an artistic sense but in point of cost. To eliminate them from the design would involve its complete restudy as an artistic problem. Not to eliminate them would be like a slap in the face to the Lincoln Memorial and to the [McMillan] plan of which it forms a part.” [emphasis added]

We hope that the words and precedent of a founding NCPC commissioner who greatly influenced the overall design of the city offers this commission valuable insight and worthwhile guidance.

Feel free to contact me with any questions and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' followed by a smaller 'B' and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR
Founding President & CEO