

# Cultural Landscape Report

## West Potomac Park Lincoln Memorial Grounds **National Capital Parks Central** August 1999

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### **Part 1: Site History, Analysis and Evaluation and Design Guidelines**

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**U.S. Department of Interior  
National Park Service  
National Capital Region  
Cultural Landscape Program  
Washington, D.C**

**Cover Illustration:** Aerial View of the study area, Lincoln Memorial Grounds, as completed, 1934. MRC 1-67.

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*Maureen De Lay Joseph*  
*August 1999*



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# I. Executive Summary

As part of ongoing preservation efforts for the Lincoln Memorial, a cultural landscape report was initiated in March 1996 to gain a better understanding of the landscape surrounding the Lincoln Memorial grounds. A cultural landscape report provides information about the physical development of a site and evaluates the significance and integrity of the existing landscape based on the period of significance. The period of significance is the time in which the property achieved the qualities that make the landscape eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. For the Lincoln Memorial grounds, the period of historical significance is from 1914 to 1933, during which time landscape plans were implemented and completed. A set of general design guidelines, based on the historic landscape and present-day maintenance requirements for the grounds, is also presented. These landscape guidelines provide critical information for park managers to use in making future maintenance and preservation decisions.

Documentation and evaluation of the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial were planned by the National Park Service early on but were accelerated when modifications to historic site features were presented to the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation in 1994. These changes were proposed to bring the site up to current accessibility standards.

Originally, the intent of the cultural landscape report was to focus only on the grounds immediately surrounding the Lincoln Memorial, but after further investigations, it was determined that the study boundaries should be extended. Because the Lincoln Memorial foundation plantings are part of a larger designed landscape within West Potomac Park that includes the Reflecting Pool, Rainbow Pool, radial roads, and Watergate area, the boundaries were extended to include these areas. For this document, this entire area of study will be called the “Lincoln Memorial grounds.”

This distinct formal landscape for the Lincoln Memorial grounds was initially conceived by the McMillan Commission in 1901. Subsequent plans developed by noted landscape architects, architects, and engineers between 1914-1933, the period of historical significance, further defined the simple geometric spaces that would extend the mall axis and honor Abraham Lincoln. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Charles McKim, Henry Bacon, James Greenleaf, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers all made significant contributions to the design and execution of the plans for the Lincoln Memorial grounds.

Implementation of the design and management of the finished landscape was originally under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and then was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933. Soon after the transfer, the National Park Service initiated changes in management and character of the landscape. Since 1933 increases in visitation and changes in land use have adversely affected what remains of the historic landscape from 1914 to 1933. Some of these changes are minor and are reversible, but other changes will take more effort to correct or are simply irreversible due to current needs.

Even with some of the changes, much of the original design for the Lincoln Memorial grounds, as implemented between 1914 and 1933, is evident today. Because of the importance of the Lincoln Memorial and of the potential impacts to the site by proposed

development, it was critical to document the landscape at a level that would satisfy park managers. This cultural landscape report will not only assist park managers, but also guide the Commission of Fine Arts and other preservation groups in their efforts to manage and preserve the historic designed landscape of the Lincoln Memorial for the future.



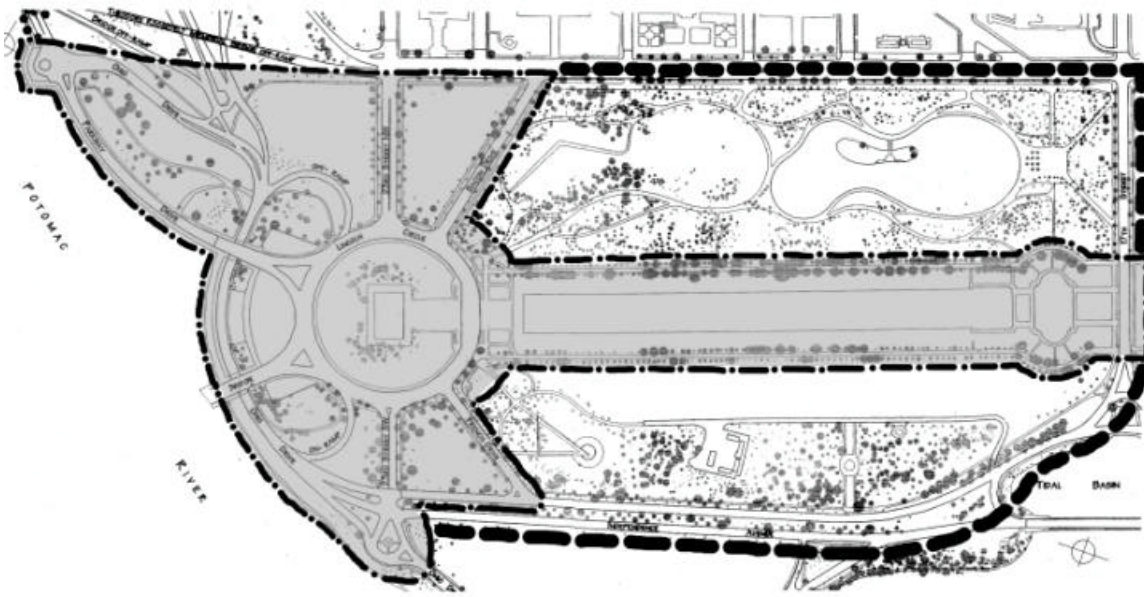
## II. Introduction


## Objectives

The goal of this report is to document historic landscape resources and existing conditions and to analyze and evaluate the landscape resources for the Lincoln Memorial grounds study area. The need to document the changes on this historic landscape was first raised by the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation after a proposal to change the existing nonhistoric handicap ramps adjacent to the main entry of the memorial was presented to the council in 1994. The ramps did not meet current accessibility standards. Several plans had been developed for new ramps, and a preferred plan was selected. Because the preferred plan changed the historic fabric by adding a horizontal element on the front granite kneewall, the proposed design solution was considered an adverse effect on the resource. The council agreed to the preferred plan with a caveat attached - that a historic landscape study be conducted to gain a better understanding of the landscape around the Lincoln Memorial.

## Study Boundaries

The study area encompasses 94 acres of West Potomac Park and includes the Lincoln Memorial, Reflecting Pool, Rainbow Pool, Watergate area and bridge, and parkway approaches. There are two separate study boundaries: the *contextual boundary* is marked by Constitution Avenue on the north, 17<sup>th</sup> Street on the east, Independence Avenue on the south, and the Potomac River on the west. Investigating the historical development of this greater area will provide an overall context for the Lincoln Memorial. The investigation goes further by examining in greater detail those areas within the *landscape feature boundary* where physical features and relationships around the memorial will be documented. In this core area the circular drive and a portion of the radial roads leading from the memorial are included. Views and vistas extending beyond the physical boundaries of the study area are examined as are those views that fall within. All significant viewpoints, both internal and external, will be documented and analyzed (see Map 1 *Study Boundaries*).



LEGEND	
	CONTEXTUAL BOUNDARY
	LANDSCAPE FEATURE BOUNDARY
SOURCES: U.S. NPS, NACC RESOURCE MANAGEMENT LIVETREE DATABASE 10/96	

STUDY BOUNDARIES	
LINCOLN MEMORIAL GROUNDS CULTURAL LANDSCAPE REPORT LINCOLN MEMORIAL GROUNDS	
PREPARED BY: M. JOSEPH	DATE: OCTOBER 1996

*Map 1 - Study Boundaries Lincoln Memorial Grounds Cultural Landscape Report.*

## General Description

The *Cultural Landscape Report for the Lincoln Memorial Grounds* provides information and guidance for park managers and other preservation professionals. In this document, *Part 1: Site History, Analysis and Evaluation, and Design Guidelines*, includes detailed information about the physical development of the landscape surrounding the Lincoln Memorial; an up-to-date field analysis of existing conditions; an evaluation of the landscape's significance and integrity; and lastly guidance for future management and development of the Lincoln Memorial grounds.

Cultural landscape reports (CLR) are the primary guide to treatment and use of a cultural landscape. A CLR documents and evaluates the landscape characteristics, materials, and qualities that make a landscape eligible for the national register. It analyses the landscape's development and evolution, modifications, materials, construction techniques, geographical context, and use in all periods, including those deemed not significant.

Cultural landscapes are diverse historic resources that provide important information about how people have shaped the natural environment for both subsistence and pleasure. Cultural landscapes can range from large agricultural tracts, to designed public spaces, like the Lincoln Memorial grounds.

Typically *Part 2* of a CLR contains treatment alternatives. However, the park requested additional guidance in making management decisions concerning significant landscape features. Therefore design guidelines are provided as part of *Part 1*. These guidelines are not intended to be *treatment alternatives*, but should be considered when determining what is appropriate or inappropriate for the historic designed landscape surrounding the Lincoln Memorial. The selection of new sites for monuments such as one for World War II Veterans and one to Martin Luther King, Jr., also influenced our efforts to provide a document useful to park management in their decisions.

To fulfill *Part 2* of the report, treatment alternatives are needed. But because of the complexity of the site and other extensive issues, other methods for developing alternatives are recommended. These could include design charettes, development concept plans or other interdisciplinary team efforts, which would develop solutions for issues concerning cultural and natural resources, visitor services, transportation systems, and site development.

This Cultural Landscape Report, *Part 1*, for the Lincoln Memorial grounds is the first step toward understanding the significance of this important commemorative landscape. If we do nothing, present and future development could lessen the integrity of the site and obscure the original design intent of this historic landscape.



## Methodology

Historical research methods included the examination of both secondary and primary sources. Because secondary source material deals mostly with the McMillan Commission Plan, information regarding the role of the Lincoln Memorial Commission, the Commission of Fine Arts, Arlington Memorial Bridge Commission, and National Park Service management, relative to the Lincoln Memorial, was investigated. Resources located at the following repositories were consulted: National Archives Records Administration, Commission of Fine Arts, Library of Congress (Olmsted Associates Records), Historical Society of Washington D.C., Martin Luther King Memorial Library - Washingtoniana Collection, National Capital Region - Museum Resource Center (photographic collection), National Capital Parks - Central (park files and photographic collection), National Capital Region (Lands, Resources and Planning library, report files, and map files), and Denver Service Center - Falls Church office (resource library, map files, photographic collection, TIC files).

During most of 1996, the team conducted on-site investigations of the study area and met with park and system support staff. The team compiled an inventory of site features and documented the condition of the landscape. The majority of the features were photographed using black and white film and color slides.

The Department of Interior authorized the establishment of the servicewide cultural landscape program during the revision of National Park Service *Management Policies* in 1988. Policy now mandates the recognition and protection of significant cultural landscape resources. Cultural landscape preservation encourages a more holistic approach to resource preservation by generating a greater understanding of shared contexts and interrelationships among cultural and natural resources in the park.