



Testimony Before the Commission of Fine Arts

**Rebecca Miller, Executive Director
DC Preservation League**

**Case: CFA 21/MAY/26-1
New Monumental Arch. Revised concept.
Memorial Circle, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Washington, DC**

Good Morning, Chairman Cook, and Members of the Commission:

My name is Rebecca Miller, Executive Director of the DC Preservation League (DCPL). Founded in 1971, DCPL has spent over five decades advocating for the protection of Washington's historic and built environment. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Pierre Charles L'Enfant's grand design for Washington, DC, created in 1791, was heavily influenced by the European Baroque tradition. This included features such as radiating avenues and monumental gateways that symbolized power and prestige. However, L'Enfant's vision did not account for the future realities of American history, particularly the Civil War and the later development of the National Mall's western axis.

The view from the Lincoln Memorial to the Custis-Lee Mansion, now known as Arlington House, carries significant symbolic weight. The Lincoln Memorial, dedicated to the assassinated president, serves as a powerful tribute to the ideals of unity, freedom, and equality that he championed. The visual axis extending from the Memorial across the Potomac River to the former home of Robert E. Lee represents a poignant connection between two key figures in American history and reflects the nation's journey through division, conflict, and reconciliation.

Arlington House and the surrounding cemetery symbolize the complex legacy of the Civil War, representing both the Confederate cause and the sacrifices made for the Union. The clear sightline from the Lincoln Memorial to this historic site embodies the aspiration for national healing and remembrance, reinforcing values of perseverance and hope for a united future.

Any obstruction, such as an arch or other structure, would disrupt this vital visual connection, diminishing the intended impact of the design. An arch placed in Memorial Circle would prevent observers from fully appreciating the relationship between these two significant landmarks. This would hinder the symbolic dialogue between them and compromise the aesthetic integrity of the National Mall, which was designed to celebrate these monuments through open vistas and continuous sightlines. The clarity of the view serves as a reminder of the lessons learned from history, making it essential to preserve these relationships in urban planning and architecture.

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This viewshed was intentionally crafted by the McMillan Commission in the early 20th century and highlighted in the Lincoln Memorial Commission Report of December 5, 1912. The report states: “If a memorial bridge to Arlington is built directly connecting, as shown on the general plan, the Lincoln Memorial site with the ground containing the dust of those who gave ‘the last full measure of devotion’ to their country, it will add to the meaning and solemnity of both places. Moreover, linking together the District of Columbia with Virginia, it could serve as a striking symbol of reunion between the North and the South—a most appropriate symbol leading to and from the Memorial of the man who said in his first inaugural address, ‘We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies.’”ⁱ

Finally, the space where the arch would stand was historically a tidal mudflat that did not exist during L’Enfant’s time. The Army Corps of Engineers shaped the island through dredging and piling material to create its current form. Forcing a conceptual 18th-century gateway into a 20th-century landscape overrides the intentional historical design choices made after the Civil War. Plans evolve, and cities evolve; however, the best preservation requires us to honor not only the original blueprints of our city but also its evolution shaped by our history.

For the above reasons, DCPL encourages you to reject this proposal.

Thank you for your time and attention to the views of the DC Preservation League.

ⁱ Lincoln Memorial Commission Report, December 5, 1912