The Mall as it is today

The original idea for the Mall—a grand, tree-lined avenue flanked by imposing buildings—goes back to the very origins of the capital city, Pierre L'Enfant's plan conceived for George Washington. But in Washington, plans rarely go as planned, so the Mall has been a work in progress for more than 200 years. At times, in the 18th century, it was a free-for-all of ruined walls, and far from a civic showplace. Later, it hosted elegant parks, a market and a train station. In the 18th century, it was cleared—though this took a long time—to make the space we know now. But today, there are fears that it has become too full, diminished, and needs more care, more money, better governance and perhaps a new plan for a new century.

Defining the Mall

The Mall is a long green space for the public lands around and between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol. Here are three distinct ways the National Park Service defines the area:

- **“The Mall”**
  - The land was once the “Mall Field,” the parade ground of the United States Army’s 3rd Artillery Regiment.
  - The Mall is a two-mile-long, 2.5-block-wide strip of land between the Washington Monument and the Capitol Building.

- **“The National Mall”**
  - The National Mall is one of the oldest urban parks in the United States.
  - It is a vibrant cultural center that includes museums, gardens, and cultural centers representing a range of cultural and historical experiences.

- **“Reserve”**
  - The area reserved for the Mall is the land reserved for the Mall by the District of Columbia.
  - The Reserve is the area that includes the Mall and the National Mall.

How the area evolved

How the area looked before 1800

Before the capital city

In the beginning, before Washington had been designated the nation's capital, much of the Mall was an empty stretch along the Potomac, studded with marshland and swamps. The land that once stretched between the Washington Monument and the Capitol building in the 18th century was part of the soil that had been cleared to make way for the city's first major buildings—such as the White House, the Embassy of Great Britain, and the War Department—as well as some of the city's earliest gardens.

As the city grew, the land between the White House and the Capitol became part of the National Mall, a public space where citizens could gather to celebrate milestones or mourn the fallen. The Mall served as a symbol of national unity and a place to honor those who had served their country in war.

Over time, the Mall evolved to become a more modern and functional space, complete with public art, cultural institutions, and green spaces. The National Mall today is one of the most visited public spaces in the United States, drawing millions of visitors every year to enjoy its beauty, history, and culture.