

*Hypothesis*

# Viewing the Landscape of the George Washington Memorial Parkway: A Cultural History of Scenic Resources and Landscape Ideology

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates several views along the George Washington Memorial Parkway, which runs along the Potomac River between Washington, DC, and George Washington's home, Mount Vernon. It focuses on the role these views have had in transforming the banks of the Potomac into a landscape, and it compares them to a set of landscape paintings that reveal complexities in the ideology of landscape. These dimensions of landscape ideology are used to interpret the parkway as a landscape, a projection of certain values on the land. The paper concludes with a discussion of the values of this approach for the stewardship of visual resources.

**Keywords:** landscape ideology; views; Mount Vernon Memorial Highway; Potomac River; landscape painting; visual resource stewardship



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## 1. Introduction

It is quite striking, really, this view of the Washington Monument. (Figure 1) Looking out your windshield, banks of hundred-year-old shade trees border the George Washington Memorial Parkway, allowing just an index finger of sky to touch the road. Right there, on this bit of framed horizon, stands the white obelisk of the monument. It is at once subtle and dramatic. Subtle, because at seven miles distant the monument is actually rather small. Dramatic, because when you catch it just right, it really does gleam like a captured ray of sunlight set against a blue sky. The view even lasts for a while, since the road runs perfectly aligned with it for half a mile as you head north from Alexandria, Virginia toward the heart of Washington, DC.



**Figure 1.** View of Washington Monument along George Washington Memorial Parkway. [P. Kelsch].

Still, the monument can be hard to see. It helps if the weather is clear and humidity low. You need to drive in the left lane to catch more than a glimpse of it, and a large SUV can block it all together. This points to just how delicate a thing a view actually is, how carefully composed is its design. For as commonplace as views are, especially along scenic roadways like this parkway, they are often explicitly staged scenes, as prescribed as the roadway itself, even though they seem so inevitable as to be entirely natural.

Critical to this view are the trees on either side. Before construction of the parkway in 1932 to mark George Washington's 200th birthday, there were almost no trees in this landscape, and the slight rise of Monument View Hill afforded a wide vista over open fields and the Potomac River (Figure 2). Wilbur Simonson, the landscape architect who designed the plantings for the parkway, called for loosely symmetric clusters of oaks and maples on either side of the road, and these trees transformed the open vista into this framed view of the Washington Monument [1,2]. Simonson's trees would take decades to grow large, but the seeds of the view were planted along with these clusters of young oaks and maples.



**Figure 2.** Open vista from Monument View Hill, 1932. [National Archives, 30 N 32-534, Box 246].

This paper examines this view of the Washington Monument and several other views along the George Washington Memorial Parkway, comparing them with historical landscape paintings that cultural geographers and landscape historians have used to critique the concept of *landscape*. I contend that constructing the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, the first segment of the longer George Washington Memorial Parkway, transformed the mostly muddy banks of the Potomac River from mere land into landscape. That statement deserves some explanation. In ordinary usage, the term landscape is not particularly problematic or controversial, but among geographers and historians, it carries quite a bit of ideological weight. From some perspectives, landscape is a form of imposing control over the land, while from another it is an expression of community values. This is not just academic squabbling among historians. By pairing several views along the parkway with several paintings that scholars have used to critique the concept of landscape, I wish to show that the ideological roots found in the paintings are tangibly present in a landscape experienced by thousands of people every day.

As these writers articulate, landscape is an ambiguous term-but not a benign one. Cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove brought considerable attention to the ideology of landscape, linking it to the rise of linear perspective in the Italian renaissance. "Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world" [3]. He

goes on to clarify that statement, “It represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their relationship with the world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature” [3]. These “certain classes of people” tended to be wealthy landowners who had the power and authority to view their land as landscape, rather than working it the way their laborers would have done. Having the luxury to see the land as composed scenery, as a view, is linked to having ownership and control over it, and this power structure is embedded in the idea of landscape.

My point is not to bash the George Washington Memorial Parkway as an imposition of authoritarian will, even though that is indeed part of the story. Instead, I wish to show that various ways of interpreting the idea of landscape, as illustrated in this set of paintings, reveal qualities of the original Mount Vernon Memorial Highway that are uncommon in many later parkways, even including the northern extension of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. I wish to show just how complex the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway is as a landscape and that it was an important step in transforming the Potomac River from a muddy, tidal river into a “capital river” at the heart of Washington, a sibling of other capital rivers such as the Thames, the Seine, and the Tiber.

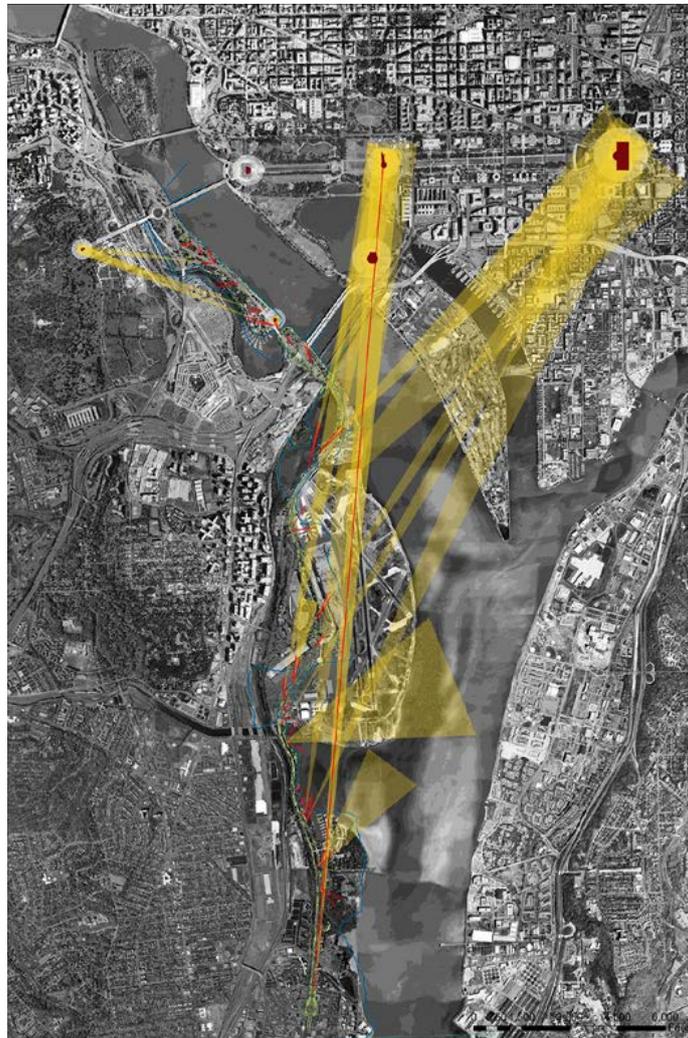
This examination of landscape ideology embedded in the George Washington Memorial Parkway is somewhat unique in this context of writings about visual resource stewardship. I do not claim to be an expert in visual resource management, nor for that matter an expert in the ideology of landscape. Others have demonstrated that level of expertise, and the paintings I discuss here are those used as examples by other scholars to critique the idea of landscape [4,5]. I have selected these paintings and writings because they relate to key aspects of the parkway landscape; they are useful rather than comprehensive. However, by pairing these paintings and the critiques of landscape they inspired, I hope to show how much ideology can be manifested in something as simple as a view. Protecting or stewarding views has tremendous cultural implications, whether we recognize it or not. As I show here, views and scenery are a legacy of landscape painting and the picturesque tradition within landscape architecture [6]. They are not fundamental aspects of living in and on the land, even though they are common enough to seem inevitable or even natural. This paper aims to reveal and discuss the cultural inheritance bound up in a small set of views within one specific landscape. In doing so, I hope it raises questions about what we are actually doing when we are managing visual resources. What cultural legacies are we knowingly or unwittingly carrying forth when we steward the visual resources of a landscape?

## 2. Views along the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway

The Washington Monument view is just one of many composed views along the original Mount Vernon Memorial Highway. We know this because Wilbur Simonson indicated them on his planting plans. This is unusual and shows just how important the views were to Simonson. Planting plans are technical construction drawings that tell contractors the species, size, and location of every tree to be planted in the landscape, in this case, thousands of trees and shrubs along fifteen miles of parkway. Simonson’s plans went further than that. He also drew dozens of small view cones to indicate where trees would *not* be planted, so that open vistas became framed views of the monuments visible from the roadway interspersed with panoramas of the river itself. The cones are remarkably precise; each begins from a specific point along the road and has an equally specific angle. Some are quite narrow, directed toward a particular focus, and others are wide arcs, implying broad panoramas.

All this leads to a bit of a mystery. What did Simonson want us to see in the landscape? What was each view of? Here, the drawings are mute. Simonson does not indicate the subject of any of the views, only their direction and defining vegetation. Yet because each one is so precise, overlaying his planting plan on a satellite photograph of the Potomac River between Alexandria and Washington reveals two recurring subjects—the Washington

Monument and the dome of the U.S. Capitol (Figure 3). Drivers heading north from Alexandria would have seen alternating views of these two major landmarks. The construction of Reagan National Airport eliminated most of the views, so the sequence no longer exists as Simonson envisioned, but mapping Simonson's views shows the rhythm of the sequence as drivers approached the capital [7].



**Figure 3.** 2007 satellite photo with red view cones from 1932 planting plan extended to notable landmarks. [National Park Service #850/100144].

Simonson's sequence of views shows how the design and construction of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway transformed the edge of the river into a landscape. Before 1932, people could only access the river in a few places, most notably at the wharves of Alexandria and at Dyke Marsh, where a handful of small fishing shacks were clustered right on the edge of the river (Figure 4). Otherwise, the shoreline was private land—a mix of disused farmland, woodland, mudflats, swamps, railroad yards, and gravel quarries. Constructing the parkway changed the riverfront entirely (Figure 5). It allowed people to drive along the Virginia side of the Potomac River for fifteen miles from the Lincoln Memorial to George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, experiencing the Potomac as a continuous scenic drive with places to get out of their cars for picnicking, fishing, and other recreation. It literally transformed the shoreline into a picturesque natural landscape featuring a series of views that focused on symbols of George Washington's life and legacy along the river. Presumably, the parkway also changed the way people simply imagined the river. In time, as trees and grass would come to characterize the shoreline, the river

would resemble the scenery in landscape paintings, and it is this similarity that is worth exploring to understand the inheritance that comes with the transformation of the shoreline of the river into landscape.



**Figure 4.** Dyke Marsh and trolley station, 1930. [National Archives, 30 N 30-836, Box 246].



**Figure 5.** Finished parkway near Fort Hunt, 1932. [National Archives, 30 N 32-161, Box 246].

### 3. The Ideology of Landscape

“A beautiful landscape,’ I say, and you do not know whether I mean a picture or an actual view. This linguistic ambiguity between a work of art and what it represents does not occur in other instances—between the person and the portrait, the still life and the objects that the artist has staged in it—and it exists in all the major Western languages. This may seem innocuous enough, but it does imply something peculiar about landscape, as though our reaction to the image was exchangeable with our expectations of the world in a way it is not with other kinds of pictures” [8].

This ambiguity between landscape paintings and physical landscapes has enticed geographers and historians to investigate landscape paintings to see how they represent the world and give clues to societies’ relationships with nature and with land. Examining several of these paintings offers insights into the richness of the concept of landscape and shows how these ideas are manifested along the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

Giorgione’s *The Tempest* (1506–1508) is among the first European landscape paintings, one that has defied clear interpretation for centuries (Figure 6). In the foreground of the picture, a nearly naked woman nurses a child, seemingly unaware of a dressed man standing on the left looking at her. The figures are obviously and a bit awkwardly posed, and upon closer examination, the landscape contains a variety of potent symbols—a pair of broken columns, a small bird on a roof, civic emblems on buildings—that invite speculation about their intended meaning. Various structures and trees are equally composed in the increasing distance where a river, several monumental structures, and a stormy sky focus

the perspective in the center of the picture. At the peak of this deep perspective, a flash of lightening animates the foreboding sky.



**Figure 6.** Giorgione, *The Tempest*. [Museo Nazionale Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Venice].

Cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove uses *The Tempest* to link the idea of landscape to the development of perspectival drawing in the Italian Renaissance [3]. He points out that the use of perspective in landscape paintings offers an illusion of control over space and time—the lightning has flashed just at the right moment—and all this visual control projects an authority over the landscape. Like Giorgione himself as he painted the picture, the viewer of the painting occupies the single most important ‘point of view’ of the scene and assumes a privileged position over the landscape. From this vantage, the whole scene recedes deep into the distance, enabling the viewer to assert perspectival control and authority over the whole space of the landscape. All this is masked by the implied reality of the picture even though the image is not actually all that real. Lightning never strikes in the same place—forever.

All of this is rather well-trodden terrain in cultural geographic circles, and Cosgrove’s ideas have spawned additional speculation about the ideology of landscape. While he seems to suggest that viewing land as landscape is somehow a sinister or pernicious act, his interest lies in exposing the assumptions of authority and realism so that other values can be given equal recognition.

It is not hard to equate the controlled imagery of *The Tempest* with the framed view of the Washington Monument. Although Simonson could not dictate that the sun would always shine on the monument amidst a blue sky, he and the roadway designers did choreograph the view to enable that to happen. As the parkway heads north out of Alexandria, the road shifts slightly to align exactly with the monument. The shift is imperceptible, but without it, the monument would lie to the left of the road instead of being right in the center of the view, and, of course, the trees on either side emphasize the deep perspective of the scene.

More than this one composed scene, views were at the heart of debate in early planning stages over two potential routes for the parkway. The two routes were fervently debated in official reports, newspapers, unsolicited letters to parkway planners, and editorial cartoons. The upper or western route would run along ridgetops offering broad panoramas over the river and Washington, DC, whereas the eastern or river route would run along the edge of the river for much of its course.

The panoramic views from the upper route were well known to those who traversed the ridges, and many people remarked on them, arguing that the western route was the better alignment. The Washington Star reported in 1926, “Proponents of the [upper] route . . . point most definitively to the scenic possibilities of such a route, which would display a view of Washington in panoramic form from the high level of that road and would give tourists an opportunity to view the Potomac from the heights above it” [9].

Nearly three decades earlier, the Senate Park Commission, which redesigned the National Mall and planned Washington’s entire park system, endorsed a similar route to Mount Vernon along the same ridges. They went so far as to claim that the broad views were just as important as honoring George Washington. “It would present such a series of beautiful views of the broad portion of the Potomac Valley as would give it a priceless recreative value in addition to the sentimental value as linking the Nation’s Capital with the home of its founder” [10]. Getting to the ridge apparently was more challenging at the end of the nineteenth century, but it was worth the endeavor. “No one who has not climbed laboriously by steep hills, bad roads, and crooked, untraveled lanes to the crests along which this line sweeps can fully realize the grandeur of the views” [10].

The lower route would have been inaccessible to most people at that time because extensive railroad yards and private land limited access to the river, so it is not surprising that popular sentiment would have favored the upper route. The potential views along the shoreline of the river were known mostly to the planners from the Bureau of Public Roads who were convinced that the river route had much better and more distinctive views. Their professional report champions the river route and almost literally choreographs the sequence of views that Wilbur Simonson later defined with his plantings.

“The panoramic views on the sweeping curves near the Potomac shorelines are unsurpassed in this locality. The effective river scenery along the route gives this location a distinctiveness not possessed by the existing roads and not elsewhere obtainable in the vicinity. Successive tangents approaching the City of Washington are directed toward the War College, the Capitol Dome, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and other points of interest” [11].

The Bureau of Public Roads’ vision for the memorial highway was much more than a series of views, though the emphasis on scenery is very evident. A key advantage of the lower route was that it allowed for the development of new parks along the river, especially associated with potential lagoons along the irregular shoreline. Whereas others praised the upper route because it would encourage development nearby, the Bureau of Public Roads preferred the river route precisely because it was unlikely to spur much development. They wanted the memorial highway to be focused on its role as a commemorative parkway, and isolating it along the riverfront would allow them to control or prevent other development.

“It would seem that practically all of the area between the highway and the water’s edge should be controlled by the Government. This will be desirable in order to prevent uncontrolled development of the area in such a way as to obstruct views of the river from the highway, and it is believed that all private property involved in such a plan can be acquired at a reasonable price” [12].

All of this professional control affirms Cosgrove’s claim that the landscape is a form of control over the land and a projection of certain social groups’ values and relationship with nature. In this case, it is the Bureau of Public Roads’ values that are projected on the land. To be fair, their vision for the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway was thorough, and their report is very convincing even if others did not have access to the same information and insights. In addition, memorial highway was extremely popular when it opened in celebration of Washington’s two-hundredth birthday, which would seem to confirm the strength of the bureau’s vision [13]. Still, the imposition of the Bureau of Public Roads’ set of values is undeniable and is part of the transformation of the shoreline into a landscape. As one anonymous writer pointed out in a highly sarcastic and cynical list of Eleven Good Reasons Why The River Route Is The Best Route, “because of pressure for that river route,

the ones who decided knew what was best, and the river roadway was decided on possibly long before either route was surveyed” [14].

Planning and design of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway are quite different activities from composing and painting *The Tempest*, but the impulses for the planning are surprisingly similar to Cosgrove’s reading of the painting. The purchase of almost all the land along the river in order to implement a particular vision of the shoreline imposes control over the landscape in a manner similar to the perspectival control over the landscape in the painting. The framed view of the Washington Monument does indeed resemble the perspectival composition of Giorgione’s painting, but more critically it is emblematic of the level of control of almost the entire waterfront.

#### 4. Descriptive Landscape

For much of the southbound journey from Washington to Mount Vernon, the parkway borders the river, veering away from it in notable stretches—at Reagan National Airport, in the city of Alexandria, and through the residential communities of Wellington and Collingwood. The last segment along the river is the most impressive. The river is wide here and the road just far enough back from the edge to accommodate a few small parking lots, several picnic areas, and a continuous walking and biking path. Passing these, the road veers away from the river one last time, ascending through mature forest on either side of the road, and arrives at the entrance to Mount Vernon (Figure 7). A large grass circle centers the scene, and the roadway divides so drivers can navigate around it. Directly across the circle is the entrance gate to George Washington’s estate, but it is hardly noticeable, outcompeted by a larger concession building to the right and especially a low Mount Vernon sign in the foreground that catches and holds your eye.



**Figure 7.** Terminus of George Washington Memorial Parkway at Mount Vernon. [P. Kelsch].

I suspect few people would identify this as a view, since it does not seem striking or composed like the Washington Monument view. It is just the end of the journey. Siri would announce that you have reached your destination. This unheralded view, though, is akin to Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, a painting from a different landscape tradition than *The Tempest*. Vermeer’s painting appears to be a found image rather than a consciously composed one because its composition is far less obvious. Art historian Svetlana Alpers identifies this northern European landscape tradition as descriptive painting, and it seems to characterize the landscape of the George Washington Memorial Parkway more frequently than the overt composition of *The Tempest* [15].

*View of Delft* (1660–1661) depicts the city from across a river, and its steeples, towers, and chimneys make an intricate profile beneath an expansive sky (Figure 8). The red roofs

of the town are sheltered by a wall, and fortifications protect the watery entrance into the city via a small canal. Half a dozen figures stand on the foreground bank of the river, conversing, it seems, in rather ordinary groupings.



**Figure 8.** Vermeer, *View of Delft*. [Mauritshuis, The Hague].

Whereas *The Tempest* is an obviously staged scene, *View of Delft* has a sense of being a found image, more happenstantial than composed. The painting was unusual in its time because it built on a topographical tradition of depicting cities from afar, often viewed across water bodies, and yet it rendered Delft with an intimacy and presence that makes it believably real. The picture has the distance of mapping but the expression of painting, especially in its contrasts of bright sunlight and shadows from overhead clouds [15]. All this blurs the boundary between the image and the actual terrain, and it is easy to imagine that we are looking at the actual city rather than seeing Vermeer's interpretation of it. The realness seems to invite us in, yet it still keeps us at a distance, quietly watching the town from a detached point of view. Vermeer's painting transforms the city into a landscape, but the ideology is so well-hidden, so naturalized, that we do not realize we are viewing a landscape at all.

*View of Delft* stems from a different idea of what a picture is than *The Tempest* does. *The Tempest* is a narrative painting in the manner of Renaissance architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti's conception of pictures. Alberti conceived of a picture as a composition by the artist within a deliberate frame. Telling the story and crafting the image are dual aspects of making the picture. In other words, such paintings do not merely present the story but produce something new in the world—a composed image. They bear a relationship to ordinary experience, but in picturing the world in this way, narrative paintings actually transform ordinary experience [15]. The Washington Monument becomes a figure in a composed scene, not just an object on the horizon.

*View of Delft* is a descriptive painting, not narrative, and derives from astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler's idea of a picture. Kepler conceived of a picture as a projection of an image upon the retina in much the same way that an image is projected (upside down) into a camera obscura—or in a modern-day camera. In Kepler's idea, a picture is merely a record of the projected image, a found image instead of a composed

one. Like Keplerian pictures, descriptive painting is rather unassertive in that it does not celebrate the making of the image. Finding and making the picture are one act [15]. As such, descriptive paintings seem more real in the way that photographs seem more real. They have a certain immediacy to them and seem uncomposed, though a photographer decidedly composes the image. Cameras do not aim themselves.

Like *View of Delft*, the terminus of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway is a subtle view, and its seeming lack of composition is a conscious decision by its designers, landscape architect Gilmore Clarke and engineer Jay Downer. They recognized that Mount Vernon was not a monumental structure, and that visitors needed to be prepared for its more personal scale after having driven all the way from Washington. For all its importance in American history, Mount Vernon was simply the home of a country gentleman, albeit a quite wealthy and important one (and one whose enslavement of Africans has complicated his legacy today). Clarke and Downer wanted the style of the memorial highway to become more restrained as one neared Mount Vernon.

“Restraint, dignity, charm, and restfulness to match the calm beauty of the countryside along the Potomac were the impelling motives. The designers sought to prepare the mind of the traveler for the climax of a trip of fifteen miles from Washington to the most sacred shrine in the possession of the Nation at Mount Vernon” [16].

Wilbur Simonson had a similar intent for his plantings at the terminus, and he saw a less-composed scene as a higher aesthetic ideal.

“The entrance to the Home of George Washington merits the highest ideals of artistic expression. The simple dignity and permanence of the design in maturity will be in harmony with the plans originally laid down by George Washington and will lure the visitor within the walls of this national shrine, there to breathe in its charming beauty and sacred atmosphere” [17].

All of this is consistent with Henry Hubbard and Theodora Kimball’s *Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design*, the leading guide to landscape architecture at the time. The farther a landscape was from a city, they argued, the more it should relate to its surrounding context. Yet it still should be a composed scene. “[The landscape architect’s] designs must be, as far as humanly possible, both interpretations of natural character and effective pictorial compositions” [18].

A 1945 photograph, taken thirteen years after the dedication of the memorial highway, shows the effectiveness of the composition (Figure 9). With scattered trees loosely bounding the open lawn of the circle and with nothing in the foreground to interrupt the view, the gate is clearly visible in the center of the scene. It is presented as if one just happened upon it, like Delft seen from across the river. It bears the imprint of Simonson’s and Clarke’s stylistic intentions, yet it feels descriptive like *View of Delft*. A found image, not a composed one.



**Figure 9.** Terminus at Mount Vernon, 1945. [National Archives, 30 N 45-1568, Box 246].

## 5. Communal Landscape

A few miles south of Alexandria, a bend in a tributary creek almost touches the roadway before joining the waters of the Potomac. This is part of Dyke Marsh, the most important tidal marsh this far up the Potomac, and it is also the former site of the Dyke stop on the electric trolley that brought visitors to Mount Vernon before the memorial highway replaced it. A handful of fishing shacks clustered along the shoreline here, and this was the only place where people could access the river, except in Alexandria which was mostly a working waterfront at the time. Today, the Mount Vernon Trail, a paved trail for walkers, joggers, and bicyclists, runs between the edge of the marsh and the roadway, and a small turnout allows motorists to pull over and park on the opposite side of the road. A couple of benches along the trail give people a place to stop and enjoy the view of the marsh, but relatively few people do. The pull-off rarely functions as a scenic overlook (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Dyke March Overlook, Google Maps, retrieved June 2022.

Just to the south of Dyke Marsh and up a gradual hill are the neighborhoods of Wellington and Collingwood. Along this stretch of the parkway, a long, narrow strip of parkland separates a secondary road that runs parallel to the main roadway and was constructed as part of the original design. Dozens of homes face the parkway here across this strip of parkland, and the Mount Vernon Trail weaves through it among a distinctive stand of mature cedars and pines.

The impact of this is subtle, and it is also quite unusual for a parkway. Along the rest of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, private property adjoins the parkway, but only the backs of houses and fences are seen. The homes in Wellington and Collingwood, by contrast, show their faces. They are a part of this landscape. Bicyclists, joggers, and parents pushing strollers populate the trail, bounded by fast-moving cars on one side and the parkway's neighbors on the other. Along the river, there are numerous places for picnicking, fishing, exercising, or just enjoying the waterfront. The parkway even carries city buses to and from Alexandria so residents can use it to get to work, go shopping, or for any other reason to head into town. Originally, there were rustic bus shelters, but now there are just modern signs marking the stops. All of this conveys a sense of domesticity and community that is not often associated with a highway.

This sense of community is similar to that depicted in Pieter Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), a remarkably different scene from either *The Tempest* or *View of Delft* (Figure 11). A group of hunters is returning home at the end of a cold winter day, apparently a poor hunting day, since only one carries a small animal over his back. The men and dogs appear tired as they plod through the snow atop a small but steep hill. Nearby, a group of women work around a hot fire, and in the village below, numerous other townsfolk skate on a pair of ponds. Many are playing sports; hockey players and curlers are visible, and others go

about their daily work. The roofs of the village houses are all snow-covered and blend in with a landscape that recedes far into the distance.



**Figure 11.** Peter Brueghel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow*. [Kunsthistorisches Museum—Museumsverband, Vienna].

Unlike *The Tempest* or *View of Delft*, this landscape is saturated with people—people going about the tasks and joys of living on a very ordinary day in their community. Peering over the shoulders of the hunters, the perspective might be that of another hunter in the party or from a neighbor’s house on the hillside. Whereas the figures in *The Tempest* are awkwardly posed in the foreground, and in *View of Delft* they give scale and balance to the picture, here, they are truly inhabitants of the landscape. This is their home.

According to geographer Kenneth Olwig, this combination of community and territory is fundamental to the origins of *Landschaft*, the German root of the English word landscape [19]. In the borderlands of Denmark and Germany, *Landschaft* referred to territory where people had a communal form of government reinforced with customary laws and cultural traditions. A *Landschaft* was more akin to current New England townships governed with democratic town meetings than it was to a German county ruled by a count (*Grafschaft* ruled by a *Graf*). In these northern territories, *Landschaft* referred to the land itself combined with the customs, laws, and cultural identity of the community living on it. Given this intertwining of people, customs, and terrain, it is not surprising that Brueghel’s painting would depict so many people going about so many different activities (Olwig 1996).

These various signs of community—parents pushing strollers and bicyclists sharing the Mount Vernon Trail, fishers casting a line into the Potomac, people waiting for a bus, and neighbors overlooking the parkway—do not compose into a single view. That is the point. *Landschaft* did not refer to a composed scene nor did it represent a controlled view or an imposition of a particular perspective on the land. The landscape manifested at Wellington and Collingwood, along the Mount Vernon Trail, and at numerous places on the shoreline of the river, pushes back at the notion that landscape is an imposed set of particular social values. At least not all the time.

If there is a single place along the parkway that embodies Cosgrove’s sense of landscape displacing one set of values with another, the Dyke Marsh overlook is it. I suspect this overlook is a direct response to the previous popularity of the place, but it no longer offers the same opportunities. The fishing shacks are gone, and instead, a more sanitized

and scenic landscape replaced them. Where presumably the place once had a community of fishermen, their families and friends, and others enjoying the camaraderie of the locale, today there is not much to do except look at the scenery. It is an appealing view, but there is not much that could be considered a community anymore. However, there are different communities along the parkway today with as much diversity of inhabitants as is depicted in *Hunters in the Snow*. It is unusual along most parkways and one of the most important aspects of the design of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway. On a warm summer afternoon, the parkway landscape is as saturated with people as is *Hunters in the Snow*.

## 6. Narrative Landscape

Wilbur Simonson's sequence of views that began with the first view of the Washington Monument is ir-retrievably lost due to the construction of Reagan National Airport and the subsequent realignment of the parkway. However, immediately north of the airport, at Gravelly Point, there is a tantalizing remnant, an almost-view of the Capitol. Judging from the view cones on Simonson's planting plans, this would have been the crescendo of the northbound approach to Washington. Much has changed since then. The river has been dredged and filled, and the former point of land is now a heavily used, broad, and open expanse of grass. The airport has expanded and dominates this part of the parkway, and many people come here to watch planes land right overhead. More trees were added over time and grew to obscure the Capitol entirely, but most of them were cut down when they grew too tall and threatened to interfere with the descent of planes. The dome of the Capitol is visible again amid the remaining trees, but it bears no resemblance to the design of the original view (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Gravelly Point with U.S. Capitol visible in the distance. [P. Kelsch].

In the original design, this location was quite dramatic. The memorial highway broke free of the shoreline here, curving out into the river on a new causeway with water on both sides (Figure 13). The Washington Monument rose prominently on the left above the waters of Roaches Run, and as the causeway connected to a small gravel island, converting it to Gravelly Point, the Capitol would have appeared right above the roadway. Clusters of elms on either side of the road framed the Capitol like the oaks and maples frame the first view of the Washington Monument, and more elms extended along the point to direct the perspective toward the dome. If it existed today as originally designed, it presumably would be as dramatic a scene as the view of the Washington Monument.



**Figure 13.** Causeway at Roaches Run, 1937. [National Archives, 30 N 37-5391, Box 246].

Why was so much emphasis placed on the Capitol and the Washington Monument? The most obvious answer is that they were central to the parkway's commemorative purpose [13]. George Washington laid the cornerstone for the Capitol, and the Washington Monument is the most recognized memorial to him, so viewing these two structures made considerable sense. They also are the two most prominent structures rising above Washington's low skyline, and it is hard not to see them from many places in and around the city. However, I suspect there was more at stake. Although the Senate Park Commission and numerous others had praised the panoramic views over the Potomac valley, the Bureau of Public Roads' planners selected the river route in part because of the potential for views of the capital's monuments as the roadway wound along the shoreline.

The desire for views of monumental structures traces back to the first proposal for a commemorative roadway, Mount Vernon Avenue, put forth in 1888 by the Mount Vernon Avenue Association. In their vision, Mount Vernon Avenue would have been more than a route to Mount Vernon and would have included memorials to important figures in American history. They envisioned the avenue as an American version of ancient Rome's Appian Way or London's Westminster Abbey, where great national figures were buried and honored with architectural monuments. The avenue was to be a memorial for the whole nation, not just a tribute to George Washington. Unlike those older European monuments, these new memorials would be set in nature in the same way that commemorative statues were placed in parks across the nation. It would be an explicitly American interpretation of the memorials in those European capitals.

"We have no Westminster Abbey; we have no Pantheon; we have no vast Cathedrals through the country as memorial places for the great dead. The nation was founded after the era of such institutions, and nearly every important statue of a distinguished American stands not beneath a dome made by the hands of man, but beneath the clear and unobstructed dome of heaven itself. They stand in a free, open air that is symbolical of the independence, liberty, and enlightenment which constitute the distinctive character of our country. How truly American would be Mt. Vernon Avenue, with its borders lined with statuary in bronze and marble, representing the men who have contributed conspicuously to the Nation's prosperity and glory" [20].

George Washington of course was the most distinguished American, and acknowledging his direct presence along the river was critical to the proposal. The avenue would have passed right through Alexandria because it was Washington's hometown. In a lengthy passage, summarized in its opening paragraph, the committee listed the ways in which Washington participated in the life of the city. It became a litany of sorts that was repeated in subsequent arguments for the memorial highway.

“There is more at Alexandria to call up the memory of Washington than any other place in the world, except Mt. Vernon. Alexandria was Washington’s own town. It was his market-place, his post office, his voting place. It was the meeting-place of the lodge of Free-Masons to which he belonged. He was a member of its Corporation Council, and owned property within its limits. He was the commander of its local militia, and was a member of its volunteer fire company. He slept in the houses of many of its leading citizens, and danced the minuet with its fairest daughters” [20].

The committee’s proposal for Mount Vernon Avenue was grander than the subsequent design for the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, but the vision of public monuments placed in nature set the tone for the parkway forty years later. The parkway does lead right through Alexandria, and the views from the road included numerous views of classically inspired monuments to Washington and other ‘great men’.

The Mount Vernon Avenue Association believed their proposal was uniquely American, but it had much more in common with European landscape traditions than they seemed to realize. Claude Lorrain’s *Landscape with Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus and Mercury Stealing Them* (1645) illustrates this legacy. It is a narrative painting in the tradition of *The Tempest* but painted almost 150 years later (Figure 14). The imagery and perspective are more naturalistic and believable than in *The Tempest*, but the setting and composition are remarkably similar. The narrative again unfolds in the foreground with one figure oblivious of the other, and they have little apparent relationship to a distant town across the river. Whereas the story depicted in *The Tempest* is unclear, in Claude’s painting the narrative is evident in the title: Mercury is stealing cattle that Apollo is supposed to be guarding.



**Figure 14.** Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus and Mercury Stealing Them*. [Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome].

The story of Mercury and Apollo is typical for a painting by Claude. As landscape historian Mirka Benes explains, Claude painted pastoral landscapes in Rome at a time when agricultural production was shifting from cultivating grain to grazing livestock [21]. At the time, the actual fields around Rome were overgrazed, and the shepherds and cattle

herders lived in pretty miserable conditions. Claude studied the land closely, drawing animals grazing so that he would have a vivid understanding of the terrain and grazing practices, but his finished paintings did not depict the actual conditions of the land. They were idealized landscapes populated with mythic figures and people in ancient attire.

*Landscape with Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus and Mercury Stealing Them* fits this pattern well. The cows are believably painted, one or two have stopped to graze despite Mercury's efforts to hurry them along the path, and the bridge and defensive structures are presumably like those outside Rome. The story is an ancient myth, however, and by setting it in the 17th century Roman countryside, Claude consecrates and transforms the overgrazed lands, rendering them as an idealized landscape, the inheritor of ancient traditions. He gives his artistic blessing to the new grazing practices and the newly wealthy papal families that owned the land [21].

This narrative of ancient traditions set in idealized nature parallels the intentions of the Mount Vernon Avenue Association, and it carries over into the design of the memorial highway. In addition to Simonson's sequence of views of the Washington Monument and the Capitol, views from the memorial highway included the Lincoln Memorial and the newly built George Washington Masonic Memorial in Alexandria. A few years later, the Jefferson Memorial was built and added to the monumental sequence. Collectively, these structures all harken back to the classical world. The Washington Monument is modeled after Egyptian obelisks, which were stolen and moved to ancient Rome and then revived again in 17th century Rome. The capitol dome also traces back to the ancient Roman Pantheon, the first monumental dome and the model for any number of descendants. The Lincoln Memorial is derived from the Parthenon in ancient Athens, and the Masonic Temple was modeled after the Lighthouse in Alexandria, Egypt, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The views of these classically inspired monuments overlay a mythic narrative on the actual memory of Washington and underscore his status in American history. I suspect few Americans actually know what Washington accomplished in his eight years as the first president, yet we all know that he was the Father of the Nation. Although the river route of the memorial highway does indeed draw attention to the actual places associated with Washington, the frequent views to classical monuments elevate his historical presence in this landscape to mythic status. The parkway does pass through Alexandria and near other places in Washington's history before arriving at Mount Vernon, and in this way, it stitches these separate properties into a storyline of his literal presence along the river. By framing this story in an idealized landscape marked with so many views to classical monuments, the parkway further consecrates his status in American history, just like Claude's painting consecrated the new grazed lands as the inheritors of ancient traditions. Even though Washington voted, danced, and went to the post office in Alexandria like other residents of the city, his status has become so exalted that his one-time presence here is more akin now to Mercury going to the post office or Apollo casting his ballot.

Landscape theorist Susan Herrington explains that this is how picturesque aesthetics work [6]. With a certain distance from the original situation and with exposure and association to a new set of images, viewers of picturesque landscapes can make associations between the initial content of the landscape, the details of Washington's life, and new evocative and emotional responses to the landscape, the grander themes evoked by the classical imagery of the monuments. Furthermore, by viewing these monuments "beneath the clear and unobstructed dome of heaven itself" and amidst the "free, open air that is symbolical of the independence, liberty, and enlightenment which constitute the distinctive character of our country," drivers along the parkway would likely come to see this monumental imagery as part of nature, the foundation of the American nation. This classical narrative was not new; most of the monuments existed before the parkway. However, by extending that narrative along the Potomac all the way to Mount Vernon, the memorial highway transformed fifteen miles of the river into a natural landscape with a grand narrative inspired initially by the Mount Vernon Avenue Association.

## 7. Landscape and Visual Resource Stewardship

How might this reading of the George Washington Memorial Parkway inform visual resource stewardship? In the beginning of this paper, I suggested that a cultural geographic approach to interpreting the landscape of the parkway might raise questions about the values embedded in other landscapes, and that it might ask us to think about what we are actually doing when we are stewarding visual resources. In this regard I see three issues.

The first has to do with the stewardship of specific views. Should the view of the U.S. Capitol at Gravelly Point be revived? This question first exposes a difference between visibility and a view. The Capitol is indeed visible, but it is not a view, and replanting vegetation to frame it again might restore it to something of its original intention. Visitors to Washington arriving at Reagan National Airport, and travelling into the city via the parkway, would immediately encounter the Washington Monument seen across the waters of Roaches Run followed by the view of the Capitol across the waters of the Potomac. It would be an impressive introduction to the capital.

But what are the implications of reinforcing George Washington's role in American history in this manner? To revive this view (and others that are currently dormant) is to reinforce George Washington's mythic status. Does Washington deserve this status? Or should he be remembered as a real person, one who went to the post office like other citizens? Many of Simonson's views are ir-retrievably gone, but others are merely masked by vegetation. Should these be recovered too, or should still more be allowed to disappear behind vegetation?

To be fair, the decision to revive one or a handful of views in this landscape is unlikely to change Washington's status in the nation's mythology, but the imagined debate over the restoration of these views illustrates that landscape does carry certain ideologies, as Denis Cosgrove argues. It is not a neutral concept. Stewarding or managing visual resources no doubt carries similar agendas. Failing to acknowledge the ideological agendas risks carrying them forth uncritically. Which classes of people and whose social agendas are being reinforced when stewarding or preserving visual resources? Perhaps professional insights like those of the Bureau of Public Roads prove to be well-founded even if they are authoritatively imposed. The popularity of the parkway seems to validate the bureau's decisions, but that validation cannot be assumed without at least questioning the authority and control that are embedded in the concept of landscape.

A second, important critique of visual resource stewardship comes from Pieter Brueghel's depiction of the community in *Hunters in the Snow*. Even though his painting is a composed scene of a northern European landscape, communities like the one it depicts are not always visible as a view like this one is in Brueghel's painting. Sometimes the emphasis on scenery is antithetical to community like it was with the transformation of Dyke Marsh from a fishing community to a scenic overlook. The northernmost segment of the George Washington Memorial Parkway emphasizes modern highway design and flowing space with little or no emphasis on community. As a scenic drive it is remarkably beautiful, but the emphasis on scenery comes with a loss of the sense of community that is so present in the original memorial highway.

The idea of *landschaft* as an expression of a certain kind of community calls attention to the ways that the design of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway cultivated a diverse community along its length. It is important to acknowledge that emphasizing scenery may be antithetical and disruptive to building community. At the same time, the idea of *landschaft* raises questions about other attributes of landscapes that may be overlooked by placing emphasis on visual resources.

A final painting offers a different perspective on the ideology of landscape and another consideration in visual resource stewardship. Albert Bierstadt's *Yosemite Valley, 1868* (Figure 15) depicts a westward view down Yosemite Valley with the setting sun casting El Capitan in silhouette while washing Cathedral Rocks in golden light on the opposite side of the valley. The Merced River winds through the foreground reflecting bright sky and leading us deep into the perspectival space of the painting. As with *View of Delft*, this

picture allows us to imagine we have just happened upon the scene, and it seems we could walk right into the grassy foreground. Unlike Vermeer, Bierstadt includes no evidence of people at all. The foreground is only populated with trees and rock outcrops that appear real enough to sit upon and enjoy the view.



**Figure 15.** Albert Bierstadt, *Yosemite Valley*, 1868. [A64.26 Oil on canvas, 36 × 54 in. Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, public domain.].

With its lack of obvious composition or evident signs of inhabitation, it is easy to imagine *Yosemite Valley* as a scene of pristine nature, free from human influence. It seems, in other words, not to be a landscape at all. Yet the painting is clearly a landscape, and as historian Simon Schama contends, the countless acts of photographing and painting the valley, as well as naming the mountains and making pilgrimages to see them, are all part of a transformation from land into landscape [22]. While some might think this is an act of despoliation, he sees it as a positive act because it indicates the extent to which the landscape has become part of our collective consciousness and cultural memory. Whereas from Cosgrove’s perspective, the transformation from land to landscape seemed a somewhat sinister change with its imposition of authority over the land, for Schama, it is cause for celebration.

“Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product. It is the argument of *Landscape and Memory* that this is a cause not for guilt and sorrow but for celebration. Would we rather that Yosemite, for all its overpopulation and over-representation, had *never* been identified, mapped, imparked? The brilliant meadow-floor which suggested to its first eulogists a pristine Eden was in fact the result of regular fire-clearances by its Awahneechee Indian occupants. So while we acknowledge (as we must) that the impact of humanity on the earth’s ecology has not been an unmixed blessing, neither has the long relationship between nature and culture been an unrelieved and predetermined calamity. At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape” [22].

Constructing the George Washington Memorial Parkway did indeed transform the banks of the Potomac River into a landscape (Figure 16). The informal fishing shacks at Dyke Marsh no longer exist and are no longer permitted. The whole landscape has an aura of formality and authority, applied through the agency of the National Park Service and consistent with the authoritative aspects of landscape painting. However, the views along the river that were only visible to the parkway planners are now public views, and the parkway allows for far greater public inhabitation of the shoreline. It elevates fifteen miles

of the river to be part of the national imagery of the capital city, complete with classical monuments to George Washington and other presidents deemed to be important enough to be memorialized along the river.



**Figure 16.** Panoramic View of the Potomac River along George Washington Memorial Parkway [P. Kelsch].

In this regard, it does indeed seem worthy of celebration as Schama suggests, and it holds a final lesson in visual resource stewardship. While sediment and driftwood still accumulate along the banks of the river as they did before construction of the parkway, the Potomac River is a different place now, physically and in the imagination of the nation. It can be experienced today in a way that it could not before, and it conjures up images of the capital city that were not previously possible. This perspective reminds us that landscapes are not just a collection of views but are deeply embedded in cultural memory. Visual resources are also not just views, but are part of a rich—and problematic—landscape inheritance.

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