

The Landscape Architect's Guide to **WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Tidal Basin (West Potomac Park)

History

1882 — Designed as part of the reclamation of the Potomac Flats, the Tidal Basin was created in the late 19th century, intended both as a visual centerpiece and as a tool for flushing the Washington Channel. The construction of the dry laid stone seawalls began in 1882, and was completed in 1896.

1912 — Three thousand Japanese cherry trees, a gift from the mayor of Tokyo, were planted. The first trees were planted by First Lady Helen Taft and the wife of the Japanese Ambassador. The spreading gnarled character of the trees makes them delightful throughout the year— with pale pink spring bloom, brilliant red fall color, and deep gray bare branches in the winter.

1920s — Concrete walks (8-foot wide) and railings were installed, illustrating that, as uses diversify, a landscape may need to respond to changed use from flushing channel to recreation.

The first memorial in West Potomac Park was the John Paul Jones Memorial (1912 — 17th street terminus). Like the John Ericsson Memorial (1926 — 23rd and Independence) the smaller memorials applied L'Enfant's idea to locate statues to heroes in circles at special road locations.

In the 1920s and 30s, there were segregated swimming beaches on the Tidal Basin. In 1935, the first Cherry Blossom Festival became a precursor of large events that would damage the National Mall's designed historic landscape by heavy use.

In the 1940s, two projects resulted in some changes to the Tidal Basin configuration and size. The construction of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial on the south edge reduced the basin size by four acres. Construction of Kutz Bridge allowed completion of Independence Avenue through the park and city and provided access from the capital to the Pentagon.

1954 — The Japanese Lantern (1651) was given as a gift from the Governor of Tokyo and placed west of Kutz Bridge; in 1957, the Japanese Pagoda (1854) was gifted from the Mayor of Yokohama and placed south of the FDR Memorial. These elements are located where they provide interest for pedestrians and can highlight the previous gift of trees. Lighting the lantern has become part of the National Cherry Blossom Festival.

1968 — The Floral Library, east of Kutz Bridge and south of Independence, displays tulips and annuals, providing visitors a burst of seasonal enjoyment.

New memorials were later added along the basin, including the FDR Memorial (1997) and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial (2011).

2010 — The National Mall Plan, a comprehensive plan, envisioned the Tidal Basin as an informal strolling and viewing experience providing pleasant interludes of enjoyment; separate circulation for pedestrians, bicycles, and vehicles; and the ability to withstand high levels of use.

2012 — Japanese Lantern Enhancement Project, as a centennial gift celebrating the original gift of cherry trees, by the Japanese Commercial Association of Washington.