

Physical History

1791-1866: An Empty Square of Unknown Use

The land now occupied by McPherson Square appears on Pierre Charles L'Enfant's 1791 plan for Washington, D.C., as a rectangular open space reserved for ceremonial government use. Part of a tract of land known as "Port Royal," first patented to John Peerce in 1687, in 1791 the land was owned by Peerce's grandson, Edward Peerce. (Port Royal also included the site of Farragut Square.) Edward Peerce donated the western portion of the tract to the federal government and three months later sold the remainder to Samuel Davidson: "because it was considered too small for private development, the area was included with the land donated to the federal government for streets and avenues". (HABS:1).

On his plan, L'Enfant identified by number fifteen sites as state squares. His expectation was that these could be developed by private investors from their respective states and they would then act as nodes spurring further development throughout the city. In addition to the state squares, the L'Enfant Plan "includes more than two dozen additional open spaces in the form of squares, circles, triangles, and other shapes. Nearly all of these can be found at the multiple intersections of radial and grid streets." (Reps 1991:8)

The spaces that would later become McPherson and Farragut Squares appear as unnumbered open areas within the street system, located respectively on Vermont and Connecticut Avenues, near Lafayette Square and the White House. (Reps 1991:23, detail of 1887 facsimile of L'Enfant Plan) Together, the two spaces form a "patte d'oie," or "goose foot," a typical device of Baroque urban plans, in which two angled axes are placed at equal distances on either side of a dominant main axis; the side axes open up secondary views and focus attention on important sites. For decades, both spaces continued to be treated as mere openings within the street grid, as shown in the Ellicott Plan of 1792 and in maps of the city produced over the next fifty years.

The future McPherson Square site was managed under several different jurisdictions from the establishment of Washington, D.C., in 1790 up through the 1930s and its transfer to the National Park Service. Under the Congressional Act of July 16, 1790, President George Washington appointed three commissioners to lay out a district for the permanent seat of government of the United States. Only twelve years later these positions were eliminated, their duties transferred to a Superintendent of Public Buildings, also appointed by the president. In 1816, the Superintendent of Public Buildings was replaced by a Commissioner of Public Buildings, at first acting under the authority of the president and then, after its creation in 1849, the Department of the Interior.

The capital city grew slowly in its first decades. As major public buildings rose in isolated splendor near the National Mall, individual clusters of mostly wooden houses developed to its north: "Here and there, smaller groups of buildings floated in a sea of vacant blocks and empty streets. Not until after the Civil War would these intervening spaces be filled and a more conventional urban development pattern at last emerge." (Reps 1991:57)

An 1802 map for travelers shows small buildings beginning to appear along Connecticut and Vermont Avenues. (Moore and Jones, "Washington City," in Reps 1991:60-61) A British visitor described the scene he encountered in 1806:

"After enumerating the public buildings, the private dwellinghouses of the officers of government, the accommodations set apart for the members of the legislature, and the temporary tenements of those

dependent on them, the remainder of this boasted city is a mere wilderness of wood and stunted shrubs . . . In some parts, purchasers have cleared the wood from their grounds, and erected temporary wooden buildings: others have fenced in their lots, and attempted to cultivate them; but the sterility of the land laid out for the city is such, that this plan has also failed. The country adjoining consists of woods in a state of nature, and in some places of more swamps, which give the scene a curious patchwork appearance.” (Janson, “The Stranger in America,” p. 202ff, quoted in Reps 1991:60, 64)

Even by 1817, almost thirty years after the District was established, the broad avenues envisioned by L'Enfant barely existed. Cattle, sheep, and pigs wandered freely over the dirt roads and weedy reservations. Roaming livestock constituted such a public nuisance that many of the squares and reservations were enclosed with wooden fences.

McPherson and Farragut remained empty squares within the roadbeds of Vermont and Connecticut Avenues until after the Civil War. The roads themselves were probably no more than wide dirt tracks. By the 1830s, the blocks surrounding the two squares had begun to be built up. (“City of Washington,” from Tanner, “A New Universal Atlas,” 1836, in Reps 1991:79) From the city’s early years, prominent citizens built mansions facing Lafayette Square, immediately north of the White House. At mid-century, the isolated clusters of buildings “north of Pennsylvania Avenue had become a single linear community . . .” (Reps 1991:113) By 1851, a “colored” Presbyterian church had been built facing the site of McPherson Square on the east, in the center of the block. This was the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, founded by former slave John F. Cook, who became Washington’s first black Presbyterian pastor. (The congregation was located here until 1918; the famed Francis J. Grimke became pastor in 1877 and served over fifty years, preaching for civil rights and against racism. See Keily, “Map of the City of Washington, D.C.,” 1851, in Reps 1991:125. Information was also taken from the website of “Cultural Tourism DC – African American Heritage Trail,” Aug. 4, 2004; this gives the church’s construction date as 1853.)

Steady urban growth continued around these squares through the 1850s until the Civil War. A man named Hoover, the D.C. Marshall and later the chief usher at the White House, built a house on I Street facing McPherson Square in 1860. The Hoover house was later occupied by Hamilton Fish, Senator and Governor of New York, and U.S. Grant’s Secretary of State. The Boschke map, surveyed in the years immediately preceding the war, shows the density of development in the downtown area, and the large number of buildings that had been built facing the squares. (Albert Boschke, “Topographic Map of the District of Columbia,” 1861, in Reps 1991:138-139.)

A California journalist described the city he found at the beginning of the war: “Before the war the city was as drowsy and as grass-grown as any old New England town. . . . the general aspect of things was truly rural. The war changed all that in a very few weeks.” He also observed:

“ . . . the city of Washington . . . is probably the dirtiest and most ill-kept borough in the United States. It is impossible to describe the truly fearful condition of the streets. They are seas or canals of liquid mud, ranging in depth from one to three feet . . .” (Noah Brooks, “Washington in Lincoln’s Time,” c. p. 4, in Reps 1991:156; Brooks, Dispatch to the “Sacramento Daily Union,” Feb. 28, 1863, in Staudenraus, “Mr. Lincoln’s Washington,” p. 116, in Reps 1991:156.)

It is not known how the McPherson Square site was used during the war. Farragut Square, to the west, and Franklin Park, to the east, were home to Union encampments and barracks, but Vermont Avenue still ran through the McPherson Square land, perhaps obviating its use for any military purpose.

1867-1890: First Improvements

In the decade after the war, several changes occurred concerning the administration of public lands in the District of Columbia. Cumulatively, these had a profound effect on the public reservations and led to the development of McPherson and Farragut Squares as city parks.

In 1867, responsibility for the city's avenues and public grounds was transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPBG) of the Army Corps of Engineers in the War Department. A succession of Chief Engineers served as Officers in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, and produced annual reports that contain invaluable details concerning the construction, planting, and maintenance of the downtown parks. (The reports were usually published at the end of the fiscal year, then occurring in June, but were dated the previous year; it is therefore not always clear in which calendar year a certain action occurred.)

In his initial report, the first Officer in Charge, Nathaniel Michler, offered praise for the

“many public places . . . consisting of circles, triangles, and squares . . . set apart as reservations for the benefit of citizens. . . . Many of these have already been beautified [and add] so much to the appearance of the city [and] at the same time largely contribute to the health, pleasure, and recreation of its inhabitants.” (quoted in Reps 1991:152)

By 1868, the park had been named “Scott Square” in honor of the late Lieutenant General Winfield Scott (1786-1866). Scott had served under every president from Jackson to Lincoln and, in spite of his advanced age, at the outset of the war had been named commander-in-chief of all Union forces.

In 1868, Vermont Avenue was cut through Scott Square. The new roadway was graded, paved with concrete, flanked with sidewalks, and lined by a row of silver maple trees. The grounds extended for twenty feet on K Street and for twelve feet on the other three sides. Other improvements included the grading and paving of walks, the installation of water lines for irrigation and drinking, and the enclosure of the square with a low cast-iron post-and-chain fence. Light was supplied by a single combination gas lamp and drinking fountain. (Annual Report 1868). Within a few years, the park was planted with grass, and had two elm trees and a catalpa, along with several shrubs – two forsythia, two spireas, and thirteen euonymus. (Annual Report 1874)

In the early 1870s, fundamental changes to the urban fabric were undertaken by the District's Territorial Government. Though lasting only three years from its institution in 1871, the Territorial Government and its Board of Public Works under Alexander “Boss” Shepherd nonetheless radically altered the city, embarking upon a vast program of projects. Almost 200 miles of new streets were paved in stone, concrete, and wood; thousands of miles of sewer, water, and gas lines were laid; thousands of street trees were planted; and thousands of gas street lamps were installed, entirely changing the city's nocturnal aspect. From a primitive, backwater town, Washington was suddenly transformed into a modern city. With the exception of the broad avenue of K Street, which was surfaced with wood, the streets surrounding both McPherson and Farragut squares were paved with concrete. (“Exhibit Chart Showing Streets and Avenues – Pavements,” from Board of Public Works, “Report,” Nov. 1, 1873, in Reps 1991:189)

The overall improvement to the city following the Territorial Government's work was striking:

“Not only were the streets of the capital covered with the most noiseless and perfect pavements in the world, and embowered in the greenest borders of grass-plots, inclosed with panels of post and chain or

graceful paling, and planted with trees, but at all points of juncture new squares and circles appeared, their verdure relieved with flashing fountains, or bits of statuary . . . The public grounds, swept of their cemetery-like palings and wholly rejuvenated, lay open to equestrian and urchin.” (Townsend, “New Washington,” in “Harper’s Monthly” 1875, 313-22, in Reps 1991:188)

Scott Square was chosen in 1876 as the site for a statue honoring the Civil War hero, Major General James Birdseye McPherson. The former Chief Engineer for General U.S. Grant, and Commander of the Army of the Tennessee, McPherson had been killed during the Battle of Atlanta. At war’s end, his comrades from the Army of the Tennessee formed a monument commission to develop a plan for a suitable memorial. Originally this was intended for his hometown of Clyde, Ohio, but Washington was soon selected as a more appropriate location. The commission hired an Italian-American sculptor from Cincinnati, Louis T. Rebisso, who spent three years creating a model for a monumental bronze equestrian statue.

The unveiling took place on October 18th, 1876, during the eleventh annual reunion of the Army of the Tennessee. The celebration included a military parade led by Generals William Tecumseh Sherman and David Hunter. Senator John A. Logan of Ohio – a former Union Major General who had served with McPherson – delivered the oration, attended by President Rutherford B. Hayes and members of his cabinet.

In preparation for the statue, the OPBG had removed the asphalt bed of Vermont Avenue and filled in the land with soil and sod. The curbing along I and K Streets was replaced, and the site became a unified rectangular park. After the statue’s erection, four semicircular flower beds were laid out at its base. In each stood an ornamental vase containing an assortment of foliage and flowering plants. Four new trees were planted (their species is not known). Scott Square was renamed “McPherson Square,” and a traffic circle at 16th Street and Massachusetts Avenue was named for Scott instead.

Though Vermont Avenue had been removed, the silver maple trees remained in the park, forming two diagonal lines extending from the northeast to the southwest corner. The 1877 Annual Report observed:

“ . . . until removed, [the maples] will effectually prevent the accomplishment of any systematic ornamental planting of the reservation. The line of maples should be broken, and the planting of ornamental trees suitable for a park of this character, commenced some time ago by disposing groups of evergreens and shrubs at the open ends of the park, should be continued.”

After the war, the city grew exponentially. But even during the boom decades, Washington’s typical sporadic development pattern seems to have continued:

“The new buildings have clustered about the Scott [McPherson] Square and Dupont Circle, and the other little squares and circles, forming small settlements, separated from each other by long distances of vacant fields, unbroken except by the asphalt roads and the lines of trees. This scattering of the new building forces has given a very incongruous and ludicrous appearance to some of the most handsome avenues.” (“The New Washington” in “Century Magazine” [1884]:651, in Reps 1991:212.)

As McPherson Square was taking shape, the surrounding neighborhood grew rapidly. In 1868, the luxurious Arlington Hotel was built facing Vermont Avenue, immediately southwest of the park. Real estate developer Archibald H. Lowery, in 1875, constructed a Second Empire mansion facing the park’s northwest corner. The compact yet massive two-story brick structure had bold, heavy details and richly articulated surfaces. The house was usually rented, and tenants included Wayne McVeagh, attorney general under Presidents Garfield and Arthur; Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, mother of William Randolph Hearst;

and the Cornelius Vanderbilt family. (Goode 2003:100-101)

By late in the century, surrounding development had made McPherson Square the center of an elite and fashionable community. The background of a photograph taken between 1876 and 1891 shows a mix of residential structures along K Street facing the park. A small two-story, three-bay clapboarded frame house is overshadowed on the east by a brick-and-stone Second Empire mansion, crowned by a massive balustraded mansard roof. (photocopy in National Mall & Memorial Parks files, no identifying information) A finely detailed view of the city in the mid-1880s appears in a map produced by Adolph Sachse, showing McPherson Square enclosed by the post and chain fencing, lined by regular rows of street trees, and surrounded by houses. The African American church still faced the park on the east, and a couple of large mansarded houses had been built to the north. The line of ornate Second Empire-style rowhouses known as Franklin Terrace are clearly visible, extending along the north side of K Street between 14th and 15th. (“The National Capital Washington City D.C.,” c. 1884, in Reps 1991:213-214)

Improvements to McPherson Square continued to be made throughout the late 1800s. Site furnishings of the types used for other downtown reservations – benches, urns, the combination gas lamps and drinking fountain – were installed. Six new benches were added in 1884. The OPBG requested \$500 to build a lodge and pay a watchman’s salary, but this money does not seem to have ever been allocated.

1891-1924: Second Park Design and Neighborhood Growth

The Park

In 1891 or 1892, McPherson Square was almost entirely redesigned. While the McPherson statue remained as the focal point, the post-and-chain fencing and the asphalt walks were removed, and the grade of the entire square was raised. Two curving S-shaped asphalt walks replaced the diagonal walks. Near the park’s center, each walk divided into a pair of narrower walks that led to a central diamond-shaped plaza around the McPherson statue. Around the statue’s base, earth was mounded and covered with sod. Twenty-one large shade trees and seventy shrubs were removed to allow room for the improvements. (Whether any of these were replanted within the park is not known; Annual Report 1892)

Other changes soon followed. The combination drinking fountain and gas lamp was moved to Seaton Park – the east section of the National Mall, between Third and Sixth streets, N.W. In turn, two such structures in Seaton Park were moved to McPherson Square and placed north and south of the statue at walk intersections. Nine-hundred and sixty linear feet of granite curbs, taken from reservations along Pennsylvania Avenue, were redressed and used along the outside edges of the grass panels in place of the post-and-chain fencing.

In 1892, the Washington “Evening Star” compared the current state of the city’s reservations with their condition before the war:

“The reservations and parking, then neglected and unkempt, the browsing place of the cow and the wallowing place of the hog, have been improved and adorned, and now in a number of them the statues of men who were then struggling to save the Union and the capital . . . stand out in marble or bronze in a picturesque setting of flowers and rich foliage.” (Theodore W. Noyes, Washington “Evening Star,” Sept. 19, 1892, in Reps 1991, p. 226)

In 1894, the park totaled 29,216 square feet and was deemed “highly improved”. A pair of large, ornamental iron vases containing “stable” summer-flowering plants stood on the lawns. The park was lit

by gas lamps “around and throughout”. (Annual Report 1894)

The Neighborhood

According to historian James Goode, by 1900, K Street was “considered the Park Avenue of Washington”. Wealthy men and women flocked to Washington after election to Congress or to take part in the winter social season, and they began building imposing houses in the neighborhoods along K Street and Connecticut Avenue. Soon a line of mansions designed by some of the nation’s leading architects ran along K Street, displaying a richly eclectic array of innovative historical styles.

The four-story Georgian Revival Elkins House stood at 1626 K Street (c. 1892/96-1937, architect Paul J. Pelz), between Farragut and McPherson Squares. Built by Senator Stephen B. Elkins, a former Secretary of War under President Benjamin Harrison who had amassed a fortune from real estate, railroad, mining, and timber interests, the house was designed for entertaining. Next door, at 16th and K streets, the Hale House was built in 1891 by a senator’s wife as a wedding present for her daughter (architects Tilden and Rotch). The seven-bay-wide, three-story-high Italian Renaissance villa, in buff brick with limestone trim, served as a “social center . . . for 50 years”. Destroyed in 1941, the site is now occupied by the Capital Hilton. Next to the Hale house on K Street stood a large French Renaissance-inspired residence, designed in 1894 by the famed Philadelphia architect Frank Furness for a wealthy widow, Mrs. George W. Childs, who had moved to Washington to enjoy the “social whirl” of the capital. The Childs House was destroyed in 1930 to allow room for a parking lot, and its former location now also forms part of the Capital Hilton site (Goode 2003:142-144.) Beyond the Childs House stood the Second Empire Lowery House.

Further east on K Street, between McPherson Square and Franklin Park, stretched the thirteen Second Empire rowhouses known as Franklin Terrace. The terrace was built in two sections. The three-story mansarded houses of the east row, with their succession of projecting bays and dormers, were built by the prominent German-American architect Adolph Cluss in c. 1875 and were destroyed gradually over the years between 1890 and 1934. The west row, attributed to the firm of Starkweather and Plowman, featured their characteristic Romanesque Revival towers, mansard roofs supported on bold Italianate brackets, and windows covered by heavy hood moldings. Also built about 1875, this row was demolished between 1916 and 1934. (Goode 2003:186)

The McPherson Square neighborhood also was home to many of the city’s leading hotels, including the Shoreham, at 15th and H Streets (1887, 1890, 1892; destroyed 1929) and the chateausque Richmond Hotel, 17th and H Streets (1883, 1887, torn down 1922; Goode 2003:214-215). Foremost among these was the Arlington Hotel, which occupied much of the block southwest of the park, along Vermont Avenue and extending onto I Street. Built in 1868 by banking magnate William Wilson Corcoran, the mansarded Renaissance Revival structure, with its projecting pavilions topped by curved mansard roofs, somewhat resembled the Louvre, and incorporated the exterior walls of three earlier Greek Revival mansions. A wing at the corner of I Street and Vermont Avenue was added in 1889, and replicated the façade’s design. The Arlington Hotel was “home to dozens of senators”; financier J.P. Morgan maintained a suite there, and it was the favored lodging for royalty from Europe, Russia, and South America. Its celebrated manager, Theophile E. Roessle, “supervised the laying of the first asphalt in the city, on Vermont avenue in front of the hotel, to ensure quiet for his guests.” (Goode 2003:209; Goode does not mention the year this was done.)

The distinguished structure was demolished in 1912 with the expectation that a new, larger hotel would be built in its place, but funding never came through. Instead, the federal government purchased the land in 1918 for \$4.2 million as the site for the headquarters of the Veterans Administration. The massive

stripped classical building of 1921 still occupies the site. (Goode 2003:209)

A watershed event in the planning history of the District of Columbia occurred in 1902, with the publication of the Senate Park Commission Report, commonly known as the “McMillan Plan.” This landmark comprehensive planning document set forth an overall park system for the city, and may have provided some impetus for across-the-board improvements made to the downtown parks in these years. However, their only specific recommendations for the existing small L’Enfant parks was that they be continually adapted to the needs of their neighborhoods. It is not known if the McMillan Plan had any direct effect on the design of McPherson Square.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, regular maintenance was performed in McPherson Square – asphalt repairs, resodding, and repainting of iron drinking fountains, lamp posts, benches, and vases. Small alterations continued to be made. New water pipes were laid in 1905, expanding the existing system. (Annual Report 1905) In 1911, the shape of the four flower beds around the statue were changed from circular to triangular. (The Annual Report for 1912 clearly states that this action occurred in the previous fiscal year; however, a park plan reproduced in the 1905 report shows the beds as already triangular. The reason for the discrepancy is not known.) Twelve boxwood shrubs were planted at the corners of these beds the following year. In 1919, twenty-two deciduous shrubs and 250 perennials were planted, and 300 more perennials were added in 1920.

By 1907, the community surrounding McPherson Square was changing from an upscale residential enclave to a bustling commercial district. The former house of Senator Palmer was sold and converted to a hotel in 1887. This building was subsequently demolished in 1924, and the Rust office building was constructed in its place. The Justice Department purchased the Lowery House around the turn of the century and converted it into office space. The house was ultimately razed in 1936 for a parking lot.

Perhaps the most notable house near McPherson Square was the McLean House, which occupied the entire block of I Street south of the park. The McLean House incorporated the 1860 Hoover House, purchased in the 1880s by the notorious financier, John McLean, who made additions in 1886, 1891, 1894, and 1896. Finally, in 1907, McLean hired architect John Russell Pope to completely alter the structure into an Arts and Crafts fantasy of a Florentine Renaissance palazzo. (Still at the beginning of his professional career, Pope would be responsible for some of the grandest mansions in Washington, as well as the National Gallery of Art West Building and the Jefferson Memorial in the 1940s.) In the McLean House, Pope created a mansion for life in high society: the interiors were designed by the fashionable Elsie de Wolfe and all the first-floor rooms were “used for entertaining” (Goode 2003:153). When McLean died in 1916, he left the mansion to his alcoholic son Ned, married to the socialite Evalyn Walsh McLean. The house became the scene for functions attended by President Warren G. Harding and his cronies, many of whom, like Ned, became embroiled in the Teapot Dome scandal.

The University Club (architect George Oakley Totten, Jr.), a small, five-story Renaissance palazzo, was built across from the park’s southwest corner in 1911. The restrained Art Deco Southern Railway Building (begun in 1928) and the Coal Miner’s Union Building were built on the west side of the square. (HABS, 4-5)

Alterations made to McPherson Square in the early decades of the twentieth century reflected the changing nature of the community. Throughout the downtown parks, straight walks were replacing meandering, curvilinear walks, probably because it was believed businessmen would only walk through a park if it provided a shortcut to a destination (HABS:5). Such design concepts had been promoted by George Burnap, a landscape architect with the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds from 1910-c. 1917, in his 1916 book, “Parks, Their Design, Equipment, and Use.”

In 1920, many of the silver maples that had lined Vermont Avenue remained in the park. Four American elms, a gift from a citizen, were planted along the east side of the park in 1930. Hedges were planted on the borders of the grass panels, and rectangular flower beds were installed along their inside edges, emphasizing the linearity of the parallel walks.