

1925-1932: Final Park Design

The Office of Public Buildings and Grounds had developed a plan for the redesign of McPherson Square's circulation in 1920. However, it was not implemented, with changes, until 1930 or 1931, by the OPBG's successor, the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks (created in 1925). The new design featured a parallel set of walks on line with the axis of Vermont Avenue, running southwest-northeast, essentially replicating the park's first plan of 1876. The central panel was sixty-two feet wide, rather than the fifty feet specified ten years earlier; the width was increased to allow existing trees to remain. The new walks were paved with concrete instead of bituminous asphalt. A cast-iron fence identical to ones built in Farragut Square and Franklin Park in 1936 was placed around the McPherson statue. A plan to install terrazzo paving around the statue was probably never carried out.

Following this work, McPherson Square was nearly the mirror image of Farragut Square. Few major changes have been made to the park since the 1930-31 redesign. Its surroundings have been transformed, however, as the last mansions were destroyed for commercial and institutional buildings.



View into park from southwest, 1913. Note curvilinear asphalt walk, brick sidewalk along 15th Street, shrubs, perennials, and variety of benches. (CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/history/DSCF004")

1933-2005: Stability in a Changing Downtown

On June 10, 1933, the duties of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks were transferred to the Department of the Interior, to the Office of National Parks, Buildings, and Reservations, renamed the National Park Service in 1934. Since then, the National Park Service has overseen the National Capital Parks, a name first officially used in the D.C. Appropriations Act of June 4, 1934. (Olszewski, Franklin Park, 1970:1-3)

Few major changes have been made to the park since its transfer to the National Park Service. Its surroundings have been transformed, however, as the last mansions were destroyed for commercial and institutional buildings.

One major alteration was the loss of the McLean House, which had so long dominated the view south from the park. In 1935, Evalyn Walsh McLean leased the mansion to the government for use by three New Deal programs: the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and the National Bituminous Coal Commission. The McLean House was sold for \$2 million and demolished in 1939 to make way for the Lafayette Office Building, which houses the Import Export Bank along with Veterans Administration offices (architects Holabird and Roche; Goode 2003:152-153).

Almost no information has been found concerning McPherson Square during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Minor changes were made to the plantings and the furnishings, detailed in the Analysis and Evaluation section, below. In the mid-1970s, the Washington subway system, Metro, was constructed, with lines running beneath the park and one entrance, called the McPherson Square station, opening across from the park's southwest corner.

The McPherson Square Business Association was organized in the 1980s to improve the park and public areas of the McPherson Square neighborhood. The association worked with the National Capital Region of the NPS to select new lighting and develop new paving options for the park. Mushroom lights, probably installed in the 1960s, were replaced in about 1993 by Washington Standard posts supporting Washington Globe lanterns.

The association no longer exists, but some of its role has been assumed by the Downtown Business Improvement District (BID), which works with the NPS to recommend and implement park improvements. The BID also performs some regular maintenance tasks, such as daily removal of trash from their receptacles on the sidewalks around the park. McPherson Square has been the focus of a rehabilitation effort jointly undertaken by National Capital Parks – Central, the support office of the National Capital Region, and the Downtown BID. A Downtown Parks Task Force composed of representatives from these groups as well as the D.C. Historic Preservation Office, the Commission of Fine Arts, the National Capital Planning Commission, and Green Spaces for D.C. met from March 2003 through April 2004. Among the task force's accomplishments was a thorough assessment of McPherson Square's trees, and the development of a new planting plan based on a analysis of the historic landscape and determination of a Period of Significance for the park. Other work may include the removal of hedges and flower beds at the ends of the loop panels (the south beds have already been removed), and the reconfiguration of the north end of the loop panel as a continuous curve.