

Analysis And Evaluation

Summary

Within the plan of Washington, D.C., McPherson Square and Farragut Square occupy important locations along two major diagonal streets – Vermont and Connecticut Avenues, respectively – that are located an equal distance from Sixteenth Street (the White House axis) and Lafayette Park. The parks and the three streets form a “patte d’oie” or “goose foot,” a standard element of Baroque city planning that served to focus attention on important sites and open views out into the landscape.

The park is a rectangular parcel bounded by major city streets and surrounded primarily by mid-twentieth-century twelve-story commercial buildings. The circulation system, installed in 1930-31, determines the way space is organized within the park, comprising a pair of parallel walks along the Vermont Avenue axis, a single walk on the opposite axis, and two narrow curving walks on the east and west sides. The parallel loop walks divide the park into two triangular areas with roughly equivalent elements. All park walks lead to the circular paved area around the central feature of the statue. Large deciduous trees line the boundaries of the park and are placed along the major walks, emphasizing the spatial pattern.

Surrounded by government offices, commercial buildings, hotels, restaurants, and apartment buildings, McPherson Square is heavily used by local residents, office workers, and tourists. Commuters walk through during rush hour. During lunch hours, office workers picnic and sunbathe on the lawns and benches, and listen to concerts in the summer.

The only structure in McPherson Square is the statue representing Brigadier General James B. McPherson mounted on a horse and surveying a field of battle. The twelve-foot-high bronze statue stands on a fifteen-foot-high granite pedestal. McPherson is shown sharply reining in his horse while turning to face west, holding field glasses in one hand. The finely rendered horse stands checked in mid-stride, neck arched and foreleg raised. Presumably Smithmeyer and Pelz, architects of the original Library of Congress building, designed the pedestal, which is composed of moldings incorporating numerous symbolic decorative elements. The pedestal bears simple dedicatory inscriptions on the east and west sides. The statue stands in the center of a circular earthen mound that partially covers the three-step stylobate base.

Planting in McPherson Square consists primarily of large deciduous trees placed on six grass panels, whose shape is determined by the walk system. The park is symmetrical along the diagonal, northeast-southwest axis of the former Vermont Avenue corridor (removed in 1876). On this axis, two parallel walks create two half-oval grass panels; together, walks and panels form a sixty-two-foot-wide loop, or oval, whose centerpoint is the McPherson statue (for convenience, this form is referred to as an “oval” even though both ends are somewhat squared). There is a pair of identical equilateral triangular panels to the north and south, and another pair of triangles to the east and west, on the park’s long sides; these longer triangles are bisected by the narrow mid-block walks.

Trees are placed along the park’s boundaries and at the corners of panels. Most trees are native deciduous species; a few are exotics, such as the large Chinese elm that intrudes into the walk south of the statue, and the three *Sophora japonica*. The only tree that actually stands within a panel rather than near an edge is the huge red oak in the southern triangular panel; this tree probably dates from the 1870s. Another old tree at the south is a ginkgo which stands near the sidewalk. A hackberry that may have dated from before 1930 and a diseased elm that may have dated from the 1920s or 1930s were removed from the park’s northwest corner in late 2004, along with several Southern magnolias and red oaks, most from the center panels.

Presumably, tree planting was carried out following the walk redesign of 1930-31. Some existing trees may have been moved, judging by plans prepared ten years earlier, when the park's redesign was first considered. The date of most other extant trees is not certain. Some have grown to be very large specimens, particularly on the west side of the park.

In 1981, magnolias and crabapples were planted around the statue plaza. Some of the new specimens replaced earlier trees.

Red oaks and American lindens border the park on the east and west. On Fifteenth Street along the east side, where a line of elms formerly provided a continuous canopy, only one elm remains. Several oaks of different varieties have been planted along the street to its south. No street trees remain on the north and south sides.

Hedges were formerly located at the inner ends of the two half-oval panels, the ends near the statue, and at the outer ends, along the sidewalks. All hedges have recently been removed to give the park a cleaner, crisper appearance, and to simplify maintenance. The earth mound around the statue's base, formerly planted with azaleas, now is planted with grass.

Granite curbs line the outer edges of the park's grass panels on the west, north, and east sides (the curved sections at the entrances to walks are concrete, and the curb at the south is concrete). Installed in 1891 or 1892, these curbs were taken from Pennsylvania Avenue. Sections of modern post-and-chain fencing line the outer corners of the triangular grass panels, and the entrances to the park walks from the sidewalks. The fencing is a type currently used in downtown parks, composed of simple steel posts surmounted by finials known as "acorn caps," with chains attached to steel loops just below the post tops. A decorative cast-iron fence, with scrollwork in the fascia and balusters topped by finials, surrounds the McPherson statue. This was probably installed in the 1930s at the time identical fencing was placed in Farragut Square and Franklin Park.

All light fixtures in the park are Washington Globe lamps made of Lexan (a thermoplastic resin) mounted on modern posts, octagonal in cross section, instead of the typical, classical Washington Standard posts. The lights are placed around the statue plaza and along the main loop walk.

The benches staggered along the park's walks are all designed in a standard NPS style developed for the National Capital Parks and installed here between 1957 and 1963. The benches have cast-iron frames and wood-slat backs and seats. Curved struts join front and back legs, terminating in simple scrolls. The benches stand on concrete pads butted against the walks. Two kinds of trash receptacles are used in the park. Some are the standard type used in the National Capital Region parks, the so-called "tulip style," with cylindrical wood-slat containers holding steel cans and supported on single posts. These probably date from the 1960s, and most are in poor condition. There are also several receptacles that are probably a much older, moveable variety; these have open wire-mesh barrels with separate trash barrels inserted inside.

A single remaining cast-concrete Art Deco-style drinking fountain stands southeast of the statue. A type developed for use in the National Capital Parks, probably in the 1920s, it is in the form of a short octagonal cylinder rising in four tiers, with battered sides. This fountain likely dates from the 1930-31 rehabilitation. Northwest of the statue is modern handicap accessible fountain, which has a dish-shaped basin on a wedge-shaped arm extending from a cylindrical post. A single modern steel-and-Plexiglas bus shelter located at the southwest end of the park serves several busy bus routes. Steel utility boxes are located on the peripheral sidewalks (D.C. jurisdiction), and a variety of regulatory signs stand in and

around the park.

The primary vistas from McPherson Square are along the parallel walks following the line of Vermont Avenue, extending diagonally through the park from the northeast to the southwest. Looking southwest along this axis provides a vista of the northeast corner of Lafayette Park, one block away. Looking northeast affords a vista of Thomas Circle, at the intersection of Vermont Avenue with 15th Street and Massachusetts Avenue. The bus shelter obstructs the vista to the south. Also significant are the reciprocal views between McPherson Square and the surrounding buildings.

McPherson Square retains a high level of integrity to 1931, the year it was rebuilt by the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks. Of the seven characteristics used by the National Register of Historic Places to determine the integrity of structures and sites – location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association – the first six are relevant to McPherson Square.

The park's location has not changed. The design remains the same as in 1931, except for alterations to some of the small-scale features, such as lighting. The setting has changed, though not as drastically as at other downtown parks. Some of the surrounding buildings had been constructed by 1931, including at least one twelve-story structure; others have been built in recent decades. Overall, the park is surrounded by many more tall office structures today.

The materials used to construct walks and other features have not changed. The statue, its base and pedestal, and surrounding fence retain their original fabric. The walks are still made of concrete; it is not known if this has been relaid since 1931. The granite curbs remain, though in some places they have been replaced by concrete curbs of the same square shape. In spite of floral display beds and hedges that have been added and removed over the decades, today the plant palette is much the same as it was in the 1930s, with the exception of hedges that surrounded the grass panels along the diagonal axis: these have been removed. Many trees remain from the 1930s; a few apparently date from the 1870s or 1880s.

Workmanship is good overall. The category of workmanship is relevant to the statue and base, walks, and curbing. The feeling conveyed by the park in 1931 and now is of a green oasis in a dense urban neighborhood.

Landscape Characteristics And Features

Spatial Organization

Within the L'Enfant Plan, McPherson Square and its twin park, Farragut Square, occupy important locations along two major diagonal streets, Vermont and Connecticut Avenues, that are located an equal distance from Sixteenth Street, which runs due north from the White House and Lafayette Square. The three streets, together with the parks, form a "patte d'oie" or "goose foot." Such features were standard elements of Baroque planning, used, for example, at the grounds of Versailles, which influenced the plan of Washington. The symmetry of the patte d'oie arrangement of avenues focused attention on singularly important sites; in Washington, it was chiefly used near the White House and the Capitol building.

The small parks and reservations of the L'Enfant Plan, located at the intersections of various diagonal and gridded streets, provide valuable open space within the intensely developed central business district and nearby residential neighborhoods. These civic spaces give Washington, D.C., much of its distinctive character.

The circulation system largely determines the way space is organized within McPherson Square. At its

most basic, the park is a rectangular parcel bounded by major city streets and surrounded by mostly mid-twentieth-century twelve-story commercial buildings. Formerly, between 1868 and 1876, Vermont Avenue divided the land into two right triangles. In 1876 the McPherson statue was erected and the roadbed filled. Trees lined the pair of walks constructed along this diagonal and also lined the edges of the park. The spatial arrangement was altered in 1891-92, when the walk system was changed to a pair of intersecting S-shaped walks built along both long diagonals.

In 1930-31, the circulation was changed once again, to a system more or less replicating the original, with a pair of parallel walks along the Vermont Avenue axis, a single walk on the opposite diagonal axis, and two narrow curving walks on the east and west sides. The statue provides a central focus, and all park walks lead to the small paved area circling around the statue. The major diagonal axis, the parallel loop walk along the alignment of Vermont Avenue, divides the park into two triangular halves with roughly equivalent elements. Large deciduous trees line the boundaries of the park and are placed along the major walks, emphasizing the spatial pattern defined by the circulation.

Land Use

McPherson Square has been used as a public park since it was first landscaped in 1868. Local residents, office workers, and tourists are the primary users. Typical activities include sunning and picnicking on lawns and benches, feeding the birds, and, in recent years, enjoying summer concerts and other programs presented on a stage set up at the park's southern end. Indigent people frequent the park, and participate in an evening food service program supported by a local charity, which parks a van along the west side of the park. Street parking surrounds the park, and motorcycle parking is provided along the southwest side.

The park lies in the heart of Washington's central business district, surrounded by office buildings and hotels. Hundreds, if not thousands, of commuters walk through in the mornings and evenings, many on their way to the Metro station or one of the bus stops around the perimeter. In recent years, dozens of new high-rise apartment and condominium buildings have been built downtown, so that today McPherson Square is beginning to serve as a neighborhood park again.



Looking north up 15th Street from the southwest. Along the 15th Street sidewalk, indigent men and women line up to receive free meals each evening. Hedges and flower beds have been removed. (2004; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/Laund Use/homeless meal")

Circulation

Introduction

The first walk system in McPherson Square (1868-1876) was the pair of sidewalks built along either side of Vermont Avenue. The second pattern (1876 through 1890/91), created after the roadbed was removed, had double parallel walks forming a loop along the former road axis, with a single diagonal walk crossing in the opposite direction. In the third system (1891 through 1930/31), two curving, S-shaped walks were built on the two long diagonals. The fourth and final system (1930/31 to the present) recreated the second pattern: the loop walk along the route of Vermont Avenue was rebuilt, along with the opposite diagonal walk and with the addition of narrow mid-block walks on the east and west. This system acknowledges the importance of the Vermont Avenue axis and provides a simple geometric framework for the circulation.

First Design, 1868-1873

McPherson Square originally formed part of Vermont Avenue. It is not known whether there was any demarcation of the avenue's route through the square in the decades before 1868; in this year, this section of Vermont Avenue was graded, paved, and lined with curbs. Parallel walks were built flanking the street, and were intersected by a single walk laid out along the opposite, northwest-southeast diagonal. The intersection of the avenue and the walk resulted in four triangular areas, which were planted with grass.

Second Design, 1876-1891/92

This section of Vermont Avenue existed for only eight years before the erection of the statue to General James B. McPherson in 1876 necessitated its removal. The statue was located in the center of the rectangular site. A parallel pair of walks was constructed along the former road alignment, connecting the northeast and southwest corners and intersecting with the single walk on the opposite diagonal, which was retained. Two grass panels were installed between the parallel walks. At the east and west sides were four triangular grass panels – two different pairs of identical triangles.

Third Design, 1891/92-1930/31

The park's circulation was again changed in 1891 or 1892. The reason is unknown; perhaps it was to accord with the fashion for curvilinear walks in picturesque landscapes evident in such prominent parks as Lafayette and Franklin.

The new system is recorded in a plan dated 1905, published that year in the Annual Report of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. The linear diagonal walks were replaced by two long S-curved walks. Near the park's center, these divided into Ys that then joined to form a diamond-shaped plaza, oriented north-south, around the McPherson statue. The walk system created two pairs of grass panels: four large grass panels at north, east, south, and west, each having one flat and one curved edge; and four small triangular panels in the park's interior, grouped around the center plaza. A 1913 photo of McPherson Square depicts the view looking from the southwest corner towards the statue, and shows a portion of this curvilinear walk system. At this time the sidewalk along Fifteenth Street was still made of brick, laid in a herringbone pattern. ("A Corner in McPherson Square" in "National Geographic," June 1913; copy in MLK Library, Washingtoniana Div., Circles and Squares - McPherson Square, #2859)

Fourth Design, 1930/31-Present

The final design for McPherson Square, dating from the early 1930s, reflects contemporary notions of city park planning. Landscape architect George Burnap worked for the Office of Public Buildings and Public Grounds from 1910 to about 1917. In 1916, he published “Parks: Their Design, Equipment, and Use.” (Philadelphia: Lippincott) This volume of observations and recommendations regarding urban park design drew heavily on Burnap’s experience working for the OPBG, and he used many of his Washington park projects as illustrations. It is not known if Burnap had any direct influence on the management of McPherson Square in these years, but many of his general comments seem applicable to the park. It is presumed that his work and writings may have exerted some influence on design decisions, or, at the least, reflected prevailing ideas concerning the layout of walks, the placement of vegetation, and so on.

Burnap distinguished between what he termed “passing-through parks” and “passing-around parks.” Passing-through parks are smaller, and “their design and composition should be such that the quick impression given may be a forceful and expressive one.” (Burnap 80) Commuters should be able to hurry through them following direct lines of circulation to surrounding streets. Their design should be formal and regular, like the architecture that surrounds them, and simple, so that such features as plants and statues can be observed quickly. (Burnap 80) Passing-around parks, on the other hand, are located at street intersections. As focal points, passing-around parks are better suited as locations for statues, fountains, or architectural features. (Burnap 92) McPherson Square appears to be a good example of what Burnap meant by a passing-through park.

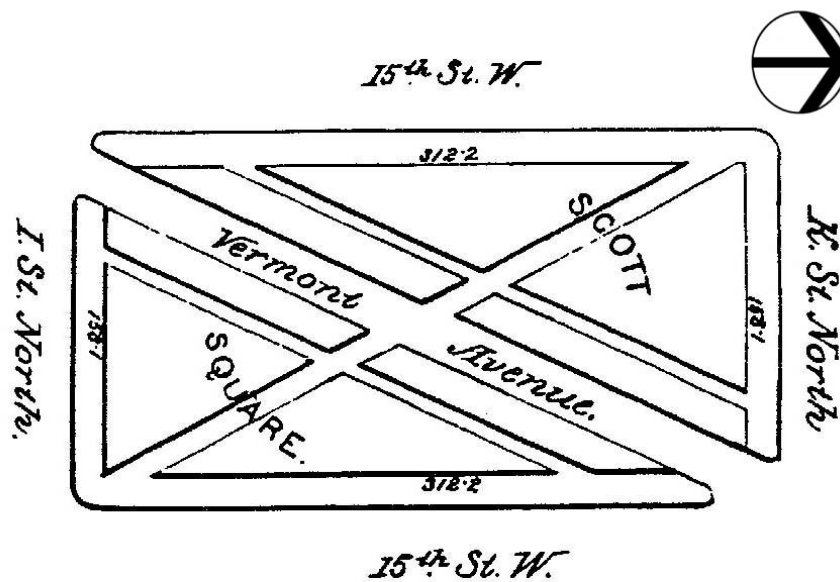
In the 1920s, a plan had been developed to eliminate McPherson Square’s curving walks and return to the more direct routes of the earlier system. This plan was not implemented, with modifications, until 1930 or 1931. Once again, a pair of parallel walks formed a looping route along the Vermont Avenue corridor, crossed at the center by a single corresponding diagonal walk. The north end of the north grass panel was not curved, but angled to follow the line of the street curb. The south end of the south panel was somewhat more rounded, but still had an awkward, irregular curve to allow for existing trees, which have since died.

The only feature of the new plan which had not appeared previously was the two narrow curving walks located at mid-block on the east and west sides. These cut across the centers of the triangular grass panels to join the paved statue plaza with the perimeter sidewalks. They may have been constructed to replace, or to avoid the creation of, social trails in these locations.

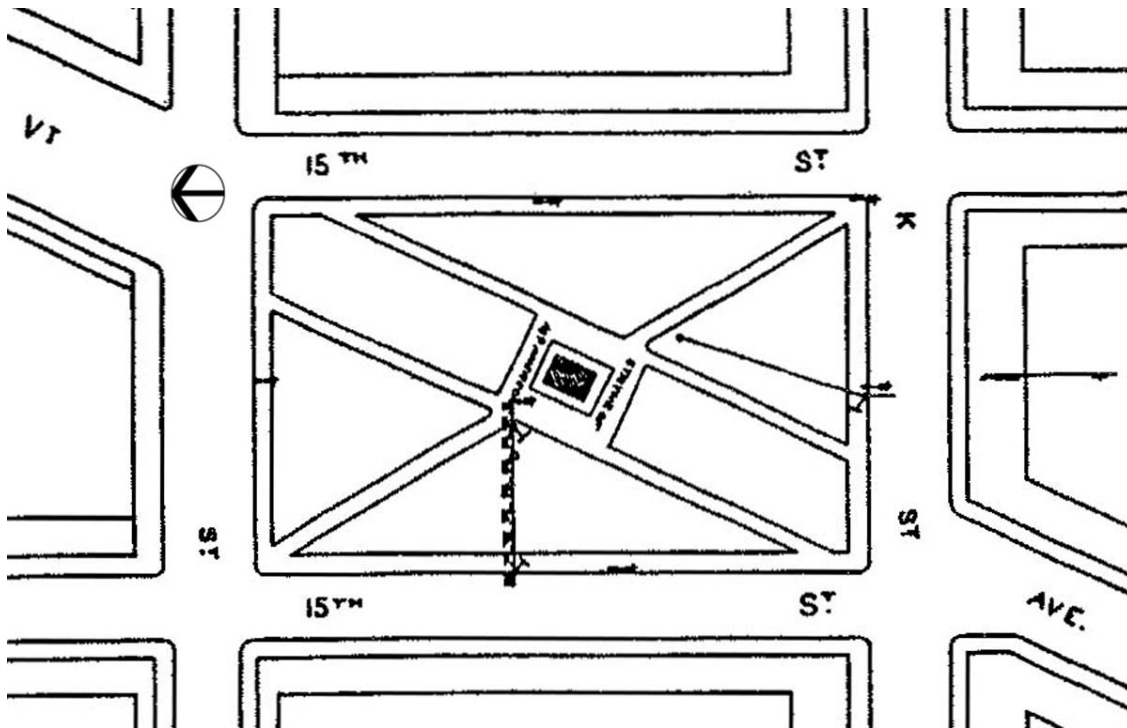
McPherson Square still retains the 1930-31 circulation system. Concrete sidewalks surround the park on all four sides. These are very narrow along the north side and at the northeast corner, where they have been cut back for street widening.



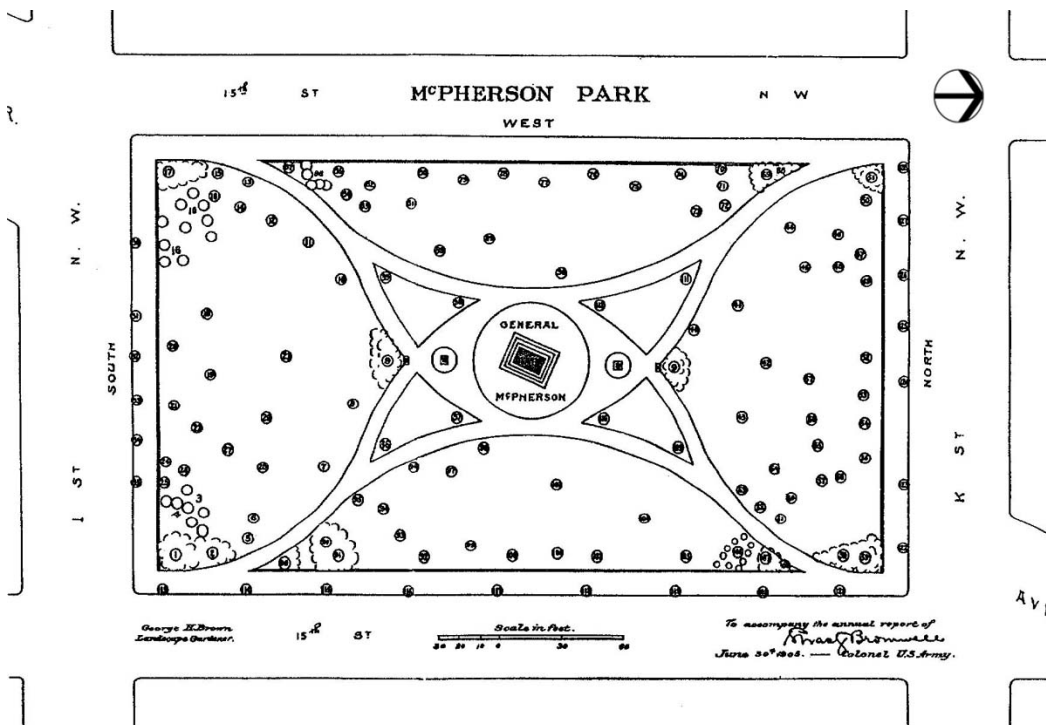
One of the parallel walks along the central diagonal axis. On right, Chinese elm intrudes into walk. In distance, view of NE corner of Lafayette Park. (2004; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/Circ/diagonal walk and tree")



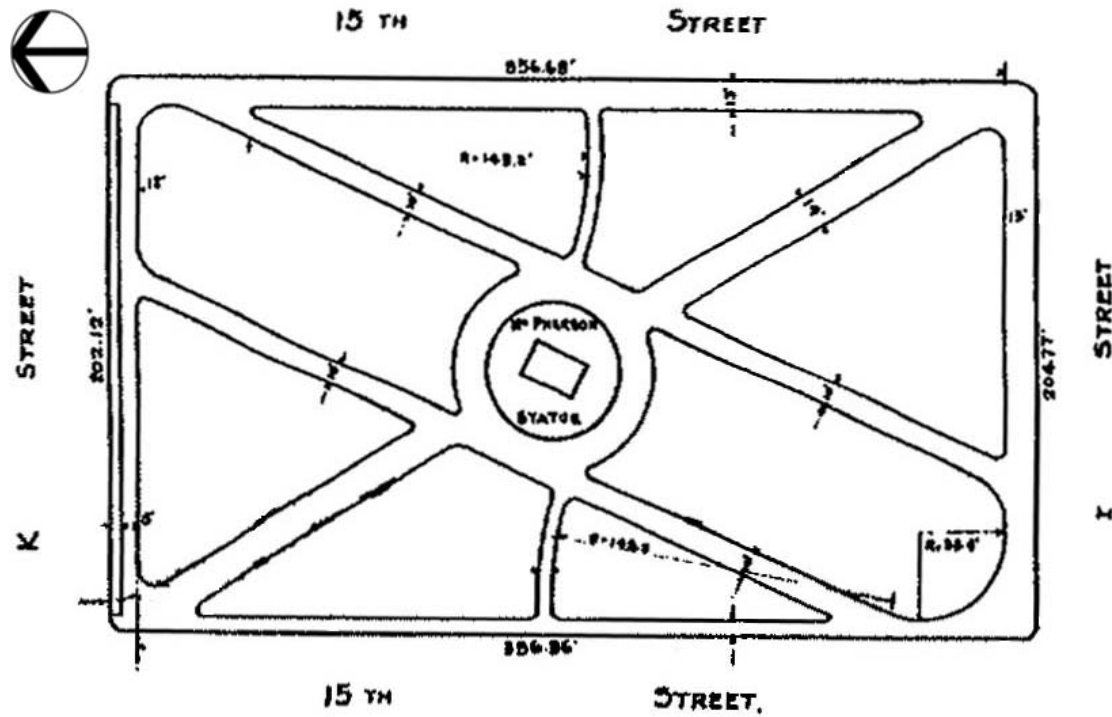
For five years after McPherson (then Scott) Square was created in 1868, Vermont Avenue passed directly through it. (from HABS, p. 9)



When the Brig. Gen. McPherson equestrian statue was erected in 1876, the roadbed of Vermont Ave. was removed. The square was graded and planted in grass, and walks were laid out. (from HABS, p. 9)



The park's first design, installed in 1891 or 1892, reflected current taste for picturesque curving walks and lush plantings. (Annual Report 1905, and reproduced in HABS, p. 10)



The final plan of McPherson Square reinstated the parallel walks along the Vermont Ave. axis. Conceived in 1920 and installed, with revisions, in 1930/31, this plan still exists. (from HABS, p. 12)

Characteristic Feature	Type Of Contribution	LCS Structure Name	IDLCS Number	Structure Number
walk system	Contributing	McPherson (Gen. James B.) Square - Pathway-Res. 11	046805	01110000