

Vegetation

Introduction

Planting in McPherson Square consists primarily of large deciduous trees placed on six grass panels, whose shape is determined by the walk system (the two large panels to the east and west are bisected by narrow walks, so it could be said that the park has eight panels). Though the roadbed of Vermont Avenue was removed from McPherson Square in 1876, its axis continues to be the main determining factor underlying the park's circulation pattern and spatial organization. The current walk system creates a park that is symmetrical along this diagonal, northeast-southwest axis. Two parallel walks create two half-oval grass panels; together, walks and panels form a loop, or oval, whose centerpoint is the McPherson statue. There is a pair of identical triangular panels to the north and south, and another, longer pair to the east and west, on the park's long sides; these longer triangles are bisected by the narrow mid-block walks. The outer edges of the six panels are lined by square granite curbs (concrete to the south and at curved ends), and their inner edges are flush with the walk pavement.

Landscape architect George Burnap was employed by the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds from 1910 to c. 1917, and in 1916 published "Parks: Their Design, Equipment, and Use," drawing on his experience in Washington. Burnap's ideas may reflect the way vegetation was arranged in McPherson Square and other downtown parks in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Burnap stressed the importance of thinking of the overall composition rather than designing a collection of individual plants. He advised planting fewer varieties in masses, and noted the importance of the correct amount of shade: "Planting is done for two reasons: for shade and for ornamental interest. Shade is usually overdone. The visitor to a park in summer seeks the cool recesses of shady grove, but does not desire subterranean glory." (p. 226) Walks and seats should be shaded, but lawns are best kept free of trees so that they act as "breezeways . . . admit[ting] sunlight" into the park, providing a contrast of light and shade, and framing the green of the lawns. (p. 226) Concerning flower beds he wrote: "Undoubtedly the loveliest way to use flowers, at least the old-fashioned hardy perennials, is in riotous profusion along the edge of shrubbery borders, enlivening the depth of the shadows and accenting the points of high light." (p. 282) Flower beds are best designed in association with the more formal parts of park design, such as walks and lawns – to "repeat or parallel some dominant line . . . or . . . accentuate some existing feature." Flower beds "are particularly suitable for the smaller parks of a town or city, especially those near the center which have been classified as display parks." (p. 284)

Historic Vegetation

A plan published in the 1905 Annual Report, prepared by George Brown, public gardener for the D.C. reservations, records the plants then growing in the square. Trees and shrubs sporadically lined the boundaries, were placed at walk intersections, or were scattered randomly across the lawns. The emphasis was on flowering shrubs and small trees, which seem to have been selected to provide a variety of color and form. A list accompanying the plan includes Japanese snowball shrub, Japanese maple, and Japanese quince; purple-flowered magnolia, purple-leaved plum, and purple hazel; and Spanish bayonet and mimosa, along with the silver maples (*Acer saccharinum*) and American elms (*Ulmus Americana*) that were among the predominant tree species.

A c. 1913 photo gives a hint of this profusion. The viewpoint is from the southwest corner of the park, looking up one of the curving walks towards the statue, almost hidden by heavy vegetation. Large shrubs grow on the small triangular panel near the statue; other shrubs are planted along the walk, along with a spiky-leaved plant where the walk meets the Fifteenth Street sidewalk. ("A Corner in McPherson

Square,” in “National Geographic,” June 1913; copy in MLK Library, Washingtoniana Div., “Circles and Squares - McPherson Square, #2859”)

In 1920, landscape architect Irving W. Payne, working for the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (and later employed by National Capital Parks), prepared two plans, dated May 14 and June 21, that showed a new walk system and planting plan for McPherson Square. One version (“Revised Plan,” May 14) records the new plan on its own, with existing and proposed vegetation; the other (“Tree Plan Proposed for McPherson Square,” June 21, 874/80010) shows it overlaid on the existing picturesque plan with its curving walks, constructed in 1890-91. Payne’s plan was not implemented for another decade.

The “Revised Plan” shows hedges of California privet (*Ligustrum ovalifolium*) used as continuous border plantings along the two main grass panels. Single large shrubs of an unknown species were placed at the interior and exterior corners, at the point where the outer curve of the panel begins; there were to be eight of these large shrubs in all, four in each panel.

Maples (*Acer* sp.) and lindens (*Tilia* sp.) had been planted along the park’s west and east sides, and American elms were growing as street trees along the parking strip of the east side of Fifteenth Street. Norway maples (*Acer platanoides*) were used as street trees along K and I Streets. A red oak in the northeast panel is labeled “Daughters of Veterans Memorial Tree” (this is no longer extant). A six-inch-diameter American elm near the square’s center is marked to be moved about twenty feet south; a beech (*Fagus* sp.) and two American elms are noted as being in poor condition.

The “Tree Plan” records details of the planting as it existed in 1920. The four small triangular panels arrayed around the statue plaza were bordered with dwarf box hedges (*Buxus* sp.), and had larger box shrubs planted at their corners. Growing within the triangles were quantities of *Vinca minor* and *Hypericum moseriatum*. The condition of certain trees is noted. Some are marked for cutting, and others for moving: a few Southern magnolias (*Magnolia grandiflora*) were to be transplanted to the Lincoln Memorial grounds. The circular bed around the statue base has been cut back to form an oval. There is no evidence of the Chinese elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*) that is now such a prominent feature of the south axial panel. This plan shows that English oaks (*Quercus robur*, *Q. pedunculata*) were to be planted in the park along its east and west sides. This was never implemented, and ten years later, the plan was changed.

Nearly ten years later, in 1929, a new survey was made of the planting in McPherson Square (“Survey of Existing Plant Material for McPherson Square,” OPBPP, Oct. 18, 1929, #37-22). None of the changes recommended in 1920 had been implemented. The curvilinear walk system remained in place.

The following year, Payne prepared a revision of his 1920 plan (“McPherson Square General Plan,” approved June 6, 1930; the name of the “Office of Public Buildings and Grounds” had been changed to “Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks”). The grass panels are now much wider than before – a change probably made to accommodate existing trees, perhaps done on the recommendation of the Commission of Fine Arts. The plan depicts existing trees, noting those in poor condition and those to be cut. Only one tree, a three-inch-diameter hackberry (*Celtis* sp.), is shown as to be moved. The locations of proposed new trees, and new locations for moved trees, are also indicated.

The plan also shows hedges clipped to a width of three feet six inches and a height of two feet six inches surround the two main grass panels. The shrub species is not identified. Eight shrubs are placed at the corners of the central panels, as before, and twelve flower beds are created within these panels, along the lines of the hedges.

The 1930 plan still does not record the Chinese elm in the south axial panel, but the huge red oak that today dominates the south triangular panel is shown as having already achieved a diameter of thirty inches. Silver maples remaining from the period when Vermont Avenue ran through the square still line the parallel walks, with trunk diameters of twenty-four, thirty-six, and even forty inches. Silver maples and elms grow along the park boundary on K Street, elms stand along the street on the east, and both maples and lindens grow along the park's west side and I Street. Gas lamps are designated for removal. The bed around the statue remains circular, not oval, and is planted with over a thousand pachysandra surrounding clusters of Japanese yew (*Taxus cuspidata* 'Nana'), juniper (*Juniperus sabina* 'Tamariscifolia'), and euonymus (*Euonymus radicans*).

The Museum Resource Center of the National Capital Region has a series of photographs of McPherson Square taken during the years 1953-1969. These depict the hedges that surrounded the axial panels, the large corner shrubs, and the long, rectangular flower beds that were built within the hedges. The beds held seasonal floral displays; photographs from the mid-1960s depict a succession of spring tulips, summer petunias, and autumn chrysanthemums. The 1960s photos suggest that some alterations may have been made to the beds in size or configuration.

In 1981, several trees were added. Four red maples (*Acer rubrum* "October Glory") were planted at the southwest and northeast ends of this loop, marking the ends of the U-shaped hedges. Southern magnolias were planted at the corresponding points at the inner edges of panels. All these trees partially blocked the important views along this axis and were removed in 2004/2005.

Existing Vegetation

Historic Trees

None of the silver maples that formerly lined the route of Vermont Avenue remain. American elms once lined the east section of Fifteenth Street, land under city jurisdiction; today, a single elm remains near the south end of the block. A couple of the elms to the north have been removed and not replaced, perhaps because of street widening at this corner. The three elms that were located south of the remaining specimen have been replaced by a linden, a pin oak (*Quercus palustris*), and a willow oak (*Quercus phellos*).

Two large trees in the south triangular panel may date from before 1920: the mammoth red oak in the center of the panel and a ginkgo near the sidewalk. The age of the large Chinese elm in the axial panel south of the statue is not known. Presumably, extensive tree planting was carried out following the walk redesign of 1930-31. Some existing trees may have been moved, judging by the plans prepared ten years earlier, and the Chinese elm may date from this time. Two older trees that stood in the northwest panel were removed in late 2004: a hackberry that may have predated 1920 (perhaps the hackberry designated for moving in 1930) and an American elm that may have been planted c. 1930.

Most other extant trees may date from the 1930s as well, though this is not certain. Some have grown to be very large specimens, particularly on the west side of the park, where a particularly large linden and red oak are situated. Another red oak at the park's southeast corner is also quite large. The enormous red oak in the south triangular panel may have been planted in the 1870s, when the park was first landscaped, since it had already attained a diameter of thirty inches by 1920.

Hedges

Formerly, hedges were located at the inner ends of the two axial panels, adjoining the statue and the plaza. These were composed of a U-shaped holly hedge (*Ilex glabra compacta*) along the outer edge, next to the plaza, fronted by a massing of azaleas. Floral display beds were in front of the azaleas. The

plantings were removed in December 2004 and all the beds were sodded over. Similar plantings at the north and south ends of the axial panels were also eliminated (the south bed a few months previously). A planting bed on the earth mound around the statue's base that was formerly planted with azaleas is now planted with grass. The decision to take out the beds arose out of discussions in the 2003-2004 Downtown Parks Task Force (see History). Their removal is an attempt to simplify the park design and decrease maintenance.



Looking north up the central panel, showing the 1965 fall planting of chrysanthemums. Hedges (now removed) still border these panels. (1965; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/Veg/MRCE 9060-80 1965)



View from southeast of the massive red oak in the south triangular panel, dating from c. 1870s, and the Chinese elm beyond. Note the concrete curbing and the post-and-chain fencing. (2004; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/Veg/two trees")

Characteristic Feature	Type Of Contribution	LCS Structure Name	IDLCS Number	Structure Number
lawns	Contributing			
trees dating from 1930s or earlier	Contributing			
trees dating from later than 1930s that replace trees on 1930 plan in kind and location	Contributing			
trees dating from later than 1930s that do not replace trees on 1930 plan in kind or location	Non-Contributing			

Buildings And Structures

General James B. McPherson Statue

The only structure in McPherson Square is the statue representing Union Brigadier General James B. McPherson mounted on a horse and surveying a field of battle. A committee to erect a monument over the grave of the fallen leader, killed in action during the Battle of Atlanta, was established by Maj. Gen. John Logan, Commander of the Army of the Tennessee, on July 25, 1865, at the time the army was being disbanded. Washington was soon chosen as the more appropriate location over McPherson's burial place in his hometown of Clyde, Ohio.

Louis T. Rebisso of Cincinnati was selected as the sculptor after the first artist failed to meet the terms of the contract. Rebisso spent three years completing the model. Cast by Robert Wood & Co. of Philadelphia, the bronze came from Confederate cannon captured at the Battle of Atlanta. The granite for the pedestal came from the Westham Granite Company of Richmond (suppliers of stone for the State War and Navy Building). Because the Society had run out of funds after paying about \$25,500 for the statue itself, Congress appropriated the \$25,000 cost of the pedestal.

The twelve-foot-high statue stands on a fifteen-foot-high granite pedestal. McPherson is shown sharply reining in his horse while turning in the saddle to face west, holding field glasses in one hand. His uniform is creased and blown by the wind. The finely rendered horse stands checked in mid-stride, neck arched and head tucked, with one foreleg raised.

It is frequently stated that the pedestal was designed by Engineer Officer General Orville E. Babcock, but an undated, unsigned typescript page of facts found in the files of National Capital Parks – Central, gives the names of architects Smithmeyer and Pelz, designers of the original Library of Congress building. Considering the artistic skill evinced by the pedestal, this attribution seems much more likely, though no further information has been located. (Babcock is also recorded as the designer of the pedestal for the statue of Admiral David G. Farragut, in Farragut Square, a work of very different character.)

Many of the molding bands ornamenting the pedestal are composed of symbolic decorative elements. For example, the plinth has a base molding comprising a continuous row of globes, probably representing cannonballs. In the cornice, laurel wreaths are carved in the metopes, and a band of fasces (bundled rods, a Roman symbol of authority) forms the cornice molding.

The west face of the pedestal bears the following inscription: "Major General [sic] James B. McPherson/Atlanta/July 24, 1884". On the east face is carved: "Erected by his comrades of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee". The pedestal includes empty space intended to serve as McPherson's tomb, but plans to reinter him from his grave in Ohio were blocked.

One night in the summer of 1962, a couple of boys vandalized the McPherson statue, stealing the sword and scabbard. The pieces were recovered the same night. The reins, damaged in the incident, were soon repaired.

(Information from "Evening Star," Oct. 18, 1876 [ts], "Washington Times," Nov. 22, 1922, and "Trio Held after Raid on Statue," in "Washington Post," June 28, 1962, all from NCP-C files, and Goode 1974: 281.)



A view of the General James B. McPherson statue from the west. The lowest step of the base is covered by earth. (Plantings on the mound were replaced by grass in late 2004.) (2004; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/B&S/statue from west 2004 BW bc adj")

Characteristic Feature	Type Of Contribution	LCS Structure Name	IDLCS Number	Structure Number
statue of Maj. Gen. McPherson, including pedestal and pedestal base	Contributing	McPherson (Gen. James B.) Square - Statue - Res 11	007306	01110001

Small Scale Features

Curbing and Fencing

McPherson Square is an anomaly among the downtown parks and reservations, a distinctive feature of which is their use of concrete quarter-round curbing to define the outer edges of their grass panels. Such curbing was originally installed in 1904-1905 to replace the cast-iron or post-and-chain fences that had surrounded them for decades. Instead, McPherson Square has granite curbs lining the outer edges of the grass panels on the west, north, and east sides (the curved sections at the entrances to park walks are concrete, and the curb at the south is concrete). These were installed in 1891 or 1892: “Nine hundred and sixty linear feet of granite curb, removed from the reservations at Pennsylvania Avenue, 14th and E Streets, NW., and Pennsylvania Avenue, 20th and I Streets, NW., were redressed and set in place around the square and a sod border laid on the inner side of the curb.” (Annual Report 1892). Some sections of the granite curbs have sunk, so their height is irregular.

The post-and-chain fencing installed around McPherson Square in 1868 would almost certainly have been the standard type used by the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. These had short heavy bollards in the form of fascas, or bundled rods, a classical Roman symbol of authority, and molded bases and capitals. Capitals either bore the initials of the “U.S. OPBG” or a finial. The post-and-chain fences were removed from McPherson Square in the early 1890s.

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, installed in 2002-2003, is a type currently used in downtown parks, composed of simple steel posts surmounted by finials, with chains attached to steel loops beneath the tops of the posts. The posts are coated with black vinyl, the chain is plastic-coated steel, and the caps are aluminum “acorn cap” style. (The concrete footers were too crude and had to be reworked.)

A decorative cast-iron fence surrounding the McPherson statue was probably installed in the mid-1930s, at the time identical fencing was placed in Farragut Square (around the Farragut statue) and in Franklin Park, in 1936 (behind the Barry statue and around the lodge). This type of fence still exists in many other reservations as well. The fence is composed of panels defined at both ends by relatively heavy posts, with thinner balusters in the center. Along the top runs a simple, open fascia element, containing scrollwork in some panels. Balusters are topped by finials. At least in the case of Franklin Park, the fencing is known to have been manufactured by the Anchor Fence Company of Baltimore.

Lighting

A photograph dating from between 1876 (the time the statue was erected) and 1891/92 (when the earth mound was created around its base) includes a detailed image of the elaborate combination gas lamp-drinking fountain fixture. This type of fixture was among the first furnishings used in the downtown parks and was installed when the parks were first laid out, which was usually in the 1870s. (Photocopy in National Mall & Memorial Parks files, no identifying information)

The short iron lamp post, in the form of a classical column, supported a large octagonal lantern crowned by a curving cap and a ball finial. The post stood on a high square pedestal, also probably made of iron. From the pedestal’s south face projected what appears to be a lion’s head medallion, holding a spigot above a small basin. The fixture, standing perhaps twelve feet high, was located near the McPherson statue, at the intersection of the walk leading from the southeast with the plaza.

In Washington, as in other American cities, electric arc lights (in which a filament was suspended between two wires) began to be installed in the 1890s. Lights of the newer technology existed alongside the older gas lights for many years. In the type of arc light most commonly used in the District, a classical, fluted post was surmounted by a translucent glass globe. Several of these appear in twentieth-century photographs of McPherson Square, from as early as 1913 and as late as the 1960s (by which time another type of electric fixture would certainly have been used in the historic globe). Two of these lamps stood by the plaza east and west of the statue; others were placed along sidewalks (1913 photo "Twelve-story Office building on SE corner of K St. and Vermont Ave.," WHS, CHS 01247A). Photos from the 1960s show a double globe Bacon Washington streetlight on I Street (MRCE photos).

It does not appear that McPherson Square ever had the Washington Standard light, with its post shaped like a simple classical column, and its urn-shaped Washington Globe lamp. This light was developed in 1923 and is still the standard light used throughout the District. Modern so-called "mushroom" lights, simple fixtures with projecting diffusers, were installed in the 1960s and remained until at least the early 1990s (they were recorded by HABS in c. 1993).

All lights in the park today are composed of Washington Globe lamps made of Lexan, a thermoplastic resin, supported not on the typical Washington Standard posts, but on more modern posts that are octagonal in cross-section with concave faces. The lights are placed around the statue plaza and along the main loop walk.

Benches

Two bench types are visible in a photo of McPherson Square dating from about 1913, placed on the grass along the curving asphalt walk and near the fountain. One variety with a heavy iron brace connecting the legs and the other had a continuous seat and back made of wood slats arranged in a graceful S-curve. ("A Corner in McPherson Square," National Geographic, June 1913; copy in MLK Library, Washingtoniana Div., "Circles and Squares - McPherson Square, #2859.")

The benches staggered along the park's walks are all of a standard NPS style developed for the National Capital Parks and originally installed here between 1957 and 1963, judging by historic photos (MRCE 2850-IC 1957 j and MRCE 7832-B 1963 j).

What proportion of the current benches are replacements in-kind, or include replaced materials, is not known; probably at a minimum most of the wood slats have been replaced over the years. The benches have cast-iron frames and wood slat backs and seats. Curved struts join front and back legs, and the struts terminate in simple scrolls. The iron frameworks are painted black, and the slats are stained dark brown. The benches stand on concrete pads set into the lawns along the walks.

Trash Receptacles

The park has two varieties of trash receptacles. Some are the standard style used in the National Capital Region parks, the so-called "tulip style," with cylindrical wood-slat containers holding plastic cans and supported on single posts. These probably date from the 1960s, and most are in poor condition. There are also several receptacles of a type that is a moveable, open wire-mesh barrel with a separate trash barrel inserted inside. Examples of this type appears in early twentieth-century photographs of other parks. These receptacles offer no protection from pests.

On the perimeter sidewalks, which are under city jurisdiction, stand trash receptacles supplied and maintained by the Downtown Business Improvement District (BID). These have an outer structure made

of iron slats with a flared top and a removable inner can. Cigarette receptacles that are a smaller version of the same design are placed next to some of the trash receptacles.

Drinking fountains

McPherson Square has a single remaining cast-concrete Art Deco-style drinking fountain, in the form of a short octagonal cylinder rising in four tiers with battered sides. The fountain may date from the 1930-31 rehabilitation, since it appears on this plan and is a standard type that had been developed for use throughout the National Capital Parks. The spigot has been removed and the fountain no longer works.

Formerly, the same type of fountain stood in the corresponding location northwest of the statue. This has been replaced by an enameled steel handicap-accessible fountain, which has a dish-shaped basin on a wedge-shaped arm extending from a cylindrical post. Both fountains are located on concrete pads at the tips of triangular grass panels.

Other – Signs, Utility Boxes, Etc.

A single modern steel-and-Plexiglas bus shelter located at the southwest end of the park serves several busy bus routes. The shelter creates a major obstruction to the important vista southwest to Lafayette Square.

Steel utility boxes are located on the perimeter sidewalks. A variety of regulatory signs stand in and around the park. A large blue enameled sign, apparently supplied by the city, mounted on a heavy, but moveable, black post on the south sidewalk gives the park's name.



A view of the statue from the southeast shows the concrete drinking fountain, cast-iron fence, and a tulip trash receptacle. (2004; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLI/SSF/statue from SE, historic drinking fountain 2004 BW")

Characteristic Feature	Type Of Contribution	LCS Structure Name	IDLCS Number	Structure Number
benches	Contributing	McPherson (Gen. James B.) Square-Bench(37)-Res. 11	046804	01110000
cast-iron fence	Contributing	McPherson (Gen. James B.) Square - Fence -Res. 11	046803	01110000
concrete curbs	Contributing			
concrete drinking fountain	Contributing			
granite curbs	Contributing			
handicap accessible drinking fountain	Non-Contributing			
lights	Non-Contributing			
post-and-chain fencing	Non-Contributing			
signs	Non-Contributing			
trash receptacles - tulip type	Non-Contributing			
utility boxes	Non-Contributing			
trash receptacles - open mesh	Undetermined			

Views And Vistas

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 affords a vista of the northeast corner of Lafayette Park, one block away, which can be considered the beginning of President's Park and the White House grounds. Looking northeast along this axis provides a vista of Thomas Circle, at the intersection of Vermont Avenue with 15th Street and Massachusetts Avenue. The red sandstone tower of Luther Place Memorial Church (1870-1883) dominates this vista.

Formerly, red maples and Southern magnolias planted on the diagonal grass panels north and south of the statue obscured these vistas. These trees were removed in late 2004, and the only remaining impediment to this critical view is the busy bus shelter on the south sidewalk, placed squarely in the view zone towards Lafayette Park.

Also significant are the reciprocal views from McPherson Square to and from the surrounding buildings. Most of these date from the mid-twentieth century and give the park a different ambiance than found at Farragut Square or Franklin Park, where the majority of flanking buildings were constructed within the last thirty years.



Looking northeast on the Vermont Avenue axis towards the McPherson statue. Magnolias and maples partially block the view to Thomas Circle. (2004; CLP digital photofile "MS/CLIV&V/view NE")

Characteristic Feature	Type Of Contribution	LCS Structure Name	IDLCS Number	Structure Number
reciprocal views between park and surrounding sidewalks and streets	Contributing			
view down Vermont Ave. corridor to southwest	Contributing			
view up Vermont Avenue corridor to northeast	Contributing			