

MOUNT VERNON SQUARE (Reservation No. 8)
Intersection of New York and
Massachusetts Avenues at K Street
between Seventh and Ninth Streets, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-682

HAES
DC
WASH,
622-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MOUNT VERNON SQUARE
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Location: Intersection of New York and Massachusetts avenues at K Street between Seventh and Ninth streets, NW.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service; The library is owned by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: Park, library

Significance: Located on the Eighth Street axis, L'Enfant designated this intersection as a site to be improved by one of the states, this major intersection was the site of a nineteenth century market. Since the market's demolition in the 1870s, this space has served as a public park. In 1899 it was selected as the site of the Carnegie Library which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Original and subsequent owners: Within a portion of tract of land known as Port Royal owned by Joseph Coombs, Jr., the land for this reservation was acquired by the federal government for streets and avenues in 1791.¹
3. First improvement: A market was erected in the reservation in 1846 and was removed in 1872. The area was first improved as a park in 1877.
4. Alterations and additions:
 - 1877: Roads and sidewalks laid out, fountain erected.
 - 1882: Asphalt carriageways removed at the request of nearby property owners.²
 - 1899: Congress authorizes construction of the Washington Public Library.³
 - 1913: New design installed that remains largely in place today (see attached pages).

¹ McNeil, 43, 48.

² Annual Report . . ., 1882, 2736.

³ Annual Report . . ., 1899, 54.

1914: Lights introduced.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan of Washington, this reservation is indicated as a rectangular-shaped open area formed by the convergence of Massachusetts and New York avenues at K Street between Seventh and Ninth streets, NW, and is shaded yellow and labelled No. 2. L'Enfant described these areas created at the intersections of the grid streets with the diagonal avenues in the notes accompanying his plan:

The Squares colored yellow, being 15 in number, are proposed to be divided among the several States in the Union, for each of them to improve, or subscribe a sum additional to the value of the land for that purpose, and the improvements around the squares to be completed in a limited time.

The center of each Square will admit of Statues, Columns, Obelisks, or any other ornaments, such as the different States may choose to erect; to perpetuate not only the memory of such individuals whose Counsels or military achievements were conspicuous in giving liberty and independence to this Country; but also those whose usefulness hath rendered them worthy of general imitation: to invite Youth of succeeding generations to tread in the paths of those Sages or heroes whom their Country has thought proper to celebrate.

The situation of these Squares is such that they are the most advantageously and reciprocally seen from each other, and as equally distributed over the whole City district, and connected by spacious Avenues round the grand Federal Improvements, and as contiguous to them, and at the same time as equally distant from each other, as circumstances would admit. The settlements round those squares must soon become connected.⁴

After L'Enfant's dismissal, Andrew Ellicott retained this area as a rectangular open space on his plan, but removed the shading and L'Enfant's referred uses. Since it was actually located within the rights-of-way of the intersecting streets, it was not among the seventeen parcels purchased by President George Washington for public park land and federal reservations. Rather, it was part of the more than 3,606 acres that would become streets and alleys acquired at no charge from the original proprietors who owned the land when it was selected for the nation's capital. Joseph Coombs, Jr., donated the land for this space in 1791 which was within a large tract of land known as Port Royal. The land surrounding this federally owned plot was acquired in 1796 by speculators Dominick Lynch and Comfort Sands of New York City.⁵

The neighborhood developed rapidly over the next fifty years to become one of the most densely populated areas of the city prior to the Civil War. Known as Northern Liberties, it was near the northernmost limits of the populated area of

⁴ Legend on L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city.

⁵ McNeil, 50.

the city. In 1843, residents of this region petitioned the city government for permission to establish a public market in the unimproved open space, and the first of several brick market buildings was erected in the center of the Seventh Street side of the square in 1846.

The reservation, which was little more than an open expanse at an intersection, also became the site of the Northern Liberties Fire Engine House. Because of its public use and central location, the open space was used as a polling place in the 1857 city elections when the peace of the neighborhood was interrupted by a bloody riot on June 1, 1857. Members of the radical Know Nothing Party gathered in the square to try to prevent Catholics and foreigners from voting in city elections, going so far as to place a cannon at the polling place. The president dispatched Marines from the Navy Yard to the scene to quell the crowd which had by then grown to 1,500 people. When the mob became violent, troops fired, leaving six people dead and twenty-one injured.⁶

The market continued to prosper during and after the Civil War as the city population expanded and Seventh Street became a major traffic corridor. But as makeshift additions were made to the aging market, and the neighborhood grew more prosperous, it began to be viewed as an eyesore and a nuisance and residents petitioned for its removal. As the city recovered from the war, in 1867 the Army Corps of Engineers was assigned to oversee the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G), in charge of, among other things, the improvement of federal land within the street and avenue rights-of-way. Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Michler was the first officer appointed to head the office and in his lengthy description of the work needed throughout the city, he focussed particularly upon this reservation:

In planning the city, a large reservation known as Mount Vernon place was laid out at the intersections of K Street North with New York and Massachusetts avenues. Most unfortunately for the ornament and health of that part of the city, the original design has not been perfected. Eighth Street has not only been opened through it separating it into two parts, but on one of these divisions has been erected a most unsightly building for a market house. The latter, with its attending annoyances, forms an intolerable nuisance, which should be abated at once. On market days the most offensive matter thrown from the wagons of the hucksters, and the offal from the stall of the butcher mingle with the filth created by many animals which are brought and allowed to stand around the place, causing a most disagreeable stench, especially in summer, and thereby engendering sickness. By what authority the market stands on this public reservation cannot be ascertained. It should be removed, and arrangements similar to those in all our large cities be adopted to supply the wants of the community. The grounds could then be improved and become what they were originally intended to be.⁷

Despite Michler's intentions, the market remained in the reservation until 1872 when it was torn down amid great controversy and, as in 1857, bloodshed.

⁶ Topham, 43-66.

⁷ Annual Report . . ., 1867, 524.

As part of the effort to improve living conditions in the federal capital, Washingtonians were granted home rule in 1871, and responsibility for improving the city's street and avenues was transferred from the Army Corps of Engineers to the local Board of Public Works headed by Alexander "Boss" Shepherd. Allegations of overexpenditure and graft led to the downfall of the territorial government in 1874, but not before the board had graded and paved miles of streets, laid sewer and gas lines, and planted thousands of street trees. The board also oversaw the removal of many of the city's nuisances, including the Northern Liberties Market; its demolition was one of Shepherd's most controversial acts, and one that contributed to the local government's demise.

In September 1872, the Board of Public Works dispatched workmen to the reservation to tear the market down. Although residents of the neighborhood favored its destruction, Shepherd feared that the stall owners and merchants, who opposed the removal of their livelihood, would get an injunction against the demolition order. To prevent this possibility, on the day of the demolition, Shepherd invited the only judge in the city who could grant such an injunction to dine at his home on the outskirts of the city. After the building was razed, the bodies of a small boy and a butcher who had a stall in the market were found in the debris. Shepherd was blamed for the fatalities, and was accused of destroying the market for personal gain since it had been in direct competition with the Central Market, about one-and-one-half miles to the south, in which he had a considerable personal financial investment.⁸

Although the Board of Public Works was charged with improving city streets, the Corps of Engineers retained jurisdiction of the federal land at their intersections. The same day the territorial government was installed in 1871, Michler's office was reassigned to Orville E. Babcock, a close friend of Shepherd's. Over the next three years, Shepherd and Babcock worked in tandem, as the OPB&G followed the board, improving the parks in the areas with paved streets, sewer and gas lines. In his report of 1872, Babcock wrote of his intention to second Shepherd's actions by creating a park where the market had been, writing:

It having been decided by the District authorities to remove the Northern Liberty Market from its present site, the ground reverts to the care of this department, and being situated at the intersection of Massachusetts and New York avenues on Seventh Street and in a locality densely populated and far removed from any improved reservation, an estimate is submitted for its improvement, and the reservation immediately west of it.⁹

Both groups contributed to the improvement of this square in 1872. The Board of Public Works paved concrete roadways in line with the four intersecting avenues and streets, and the OPB&G improved the triangular parcels at their intersections. These triangles were planted with grass and shrubs and surrounded with paved sidewalks with benches along them and post-and-chain fences. An ornamental iron fountain "of artistic design" was placed in the center of the

⁸ Maury, 41.

⁹ Annual Report . . ., 1872, 13.

intersection upon a circular mound.¹⁰ The OPB&G continued to maintain the six triangular parcels over the next few years, planting them with a variety of trees and shrubs.

As other intersections in the city were improved as rectangular parks, a majority of the property owners and residents around this intersection petitioned the OPB&G to remove the roadways through the park to create a single large space for recreation and resort. In response to the petition, the roadways were removed in 1882, creating a spacious rectangular park off-limits to vehicular traffic. Gravel pedestrian paths were laid along the lines of the old roadways, and 200 ornamental trees and 600 flowering shrubs were planted. The park was also equipped with drinking fountains and illuminated with gas lanterns.¹¹

The OPB&G oversaw routine improvements throughout the following decade, replacing the gravel walks with asphalt in 1884 and embellishing the park with a variety of trees. When an inventory was made of the park's trees in 1886, it featured 176 deciduous trees representing thirty-five different varieties, 613 deciduous shrubs of forty-six different varieties and forty evergreen trees representing sixteen different varieties.¹² The rectangular park was also flanked by four smaller trapezoidal parks at the acute angles of four of the neighboring city squares. These reservations, Nos. 70 and 175 on the west side and 176 and 71 on the east side were also landscaped with trees, fencing and flower beds. A watchman was assigned to the square to discourage crime and perform routine maintenance on the large square and the neighboring trapezoids. In 1885, funds were requested to erect a lodge to shelter the guard and provide bathroom facilities for visitors. The lodge was not built until the next decade, and soon after, the park was approved as the site for a public library.

In 1899, Andrew Carnegie agreed to donate funds for a long-awaited public library in Washington and discussion began concerning an appropriate site. When Mount Vernon Square was suggested, several congressmen vehemently opposed, fearing that using a federal reservation for a public building could set a dangerous precedent that could deplete the city of much of its open space. But due to increasing land prices, and the desire to minimize construction costs, the square was approved for the building and a special congressional committee was formed to oversee its construction.¹³

As plans were made for the construction of the building, the OPB&G prepared the site, transferring the fountain and other reusable materials to other parks in the city. Construction ensued, and the library was ceremoniously dedicated January 7, 1903, with an address by President Theodore Roosevelt. Despite the fact that Carnegie had donated \$375,000 for what he considered "one of the handsomest, if not the handsomest library building in the world," the federal government allocated little for the improvement of the ground upon which it

¹⁰ Annual Report . . ., 1877, 10.

¹¹ Annual Report . . ., 1882, 2736.

¹² Annual Report . . ., 1886, 2106.

¹³ Olszewski, 17.

stood.¹⁴

Piecemeal but unsatisfactory improvements were made over the following decade, until finally, in 1913, the park was entirely redesigned with the plan that remains largely in place today. Soon after the library was built, the character of the neighborhood began to change as the roads around it became major commuter routes. Seventh Street became an artery to the north and New York Avenue linked up with a road that led to Baltimore. Meanwhile, fashionable residential development shifted farther northwest. As a result, commercial development began in the surrounding neighborhood in the form of automobile garages, laundries, warehouses, and later, liquor stores and saloons. With the Depression, transients found a place to sleep on benches in the park and began congregating there in large numbers, much to the dismay of library staff. In 1933, librarian George F. Bowerman wrote a letter to the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks complaining of the worsening condition of the neighborhood:

The park has for some time been infested with gangs of people who are pretty annoying to visitors to the library, members of the library staff, etc. I wish that more police protection could be given. I suppose it is not practicable, especially during this time of depression to clear people out, but I wish that a little more order and decorum could be maintained.¹⁵

A similar request was made in 1934, when seven occupants of four of the homes that faced the square requested that a police officer be assigned to the square to control the "unnecessary gatherings of unemployed people, loafers, gangs and beggars, both colored and white ringing our door bells, parading up and down the streets, rattling our gates, and committing nuisances on our premises and generally disturbing the peace and quiet of this community."¹⁶

Conditions did not improve, and as the neighborhood continued to decline, the park also deteriorated. Noting this, Bowerman wrote to the National Park Service, which took on responsibility for most of the reservations in the city in 1933. In a 1936 letter he requested improved park maintenance despite the degenerated state of the neighborhood. "It is pretty discouraging for one who has been head librarian for thirty-one years to see a neighborhood go down as this has and now to see the park which was once a place of beauty become as disreputable as the neighborhood."¹⁷ Despite the condition of the neighborhood, the Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church built in 1917 facing the northwest corner of the square boasted the largest congregation in the city throughout the 1930s.

Although the Works Progress Administration had improved many other parks in the city in 1935-36, Mount Vernon Square was largely ignored. The workers did not improve the park due to plans posited in 1929 to enlarge the library, which had outgrown the 30-year-old building. The situation was

¹⁴ Olszewski, 21.

¹⁵ Olszewski, 26.

¹⁶ Olszewski, 28.

¹⁷ Olszewski, 33.

described in a 1936 WPA guidebook:

During the years in which the library has been occupied, the disparities between its architectural pretensions and its functional inadequacies have produced conditions of acute crowding and inconvenience. The choice between enlargement and remodeling or replacement, under consideration by the trustees of the institution, will no doubt result in an improvement that the public has long awaited.¹⁸

National Park Service Director Conrad Wirth adamantly opposed sacrificing any more park land to expand the library facility, so plans were made to build a larger, new library at a different location. After this facility, designed by Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, was built at Ninth and G Streets, the park was once again beset by violence in 1968 when riots broke out in response to the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King. In the aftermath of the riot, much of Seventh Street was set fire, and all of the buildings north of the square were demolished, leaving two empty lots that now serve as parking lots.

In an effort to revitalize the decimated neighborhood in the 1970s, a convention center encompassing four city squares was built south of New York Avenue, facing the southwest corner of this park. The Washington, D.C., Convention Center spawned a myriad of new hotels and office buildings in the blocks south of the square including, perhaps the most controversial development of the decade, Techworld. Designed to attract high-technology industries to the downtown area, this mirrored-glass structure built between Seventh and Ninth streets features an enclosed pedestrian bridge crossing over the Eighth Street axis. Realizing that the proposed bridge would violate the planned vista between Mount Vernon Square and one of the original seventeen reservations set aside in 1792, preservationists sued the developers, unsuccessfully. Construction of Techworld was supported by Mayor Marion Barry, the D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, and the D.C. Zoning Commission. Its opponents included two ex officio members of the D.C. Board of Commissioners representing the interests of Congress and the National Park Service, the Commission of Fine Arts, the National Capital Planning Commission and a variety of preservation groups.¹⁹

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: This rectangular park covers about 2.5 acres.
- B. Materials:
 1. Pathways, paving: The park is surrounded by a walkway. Curved paths lead from the four corners of the park to an interior walkway encircling the entire building several yards from the building foundation. Two additional paths, the north and south sides and one each from the center of the east and west sides, lead from the perimeter sidewalks to the interior walkway.

¹⁸ Washington, City and Capital, 400.

¹⁹ Colyer, 268, 283.

2. **Vegetation:** Grass is planted in the large panels defined by the walkways. Shade and ornamental trees are planted throughout the grassy panels, while lower shrubs are planted near the foundation of the building.
3. **Structures:**
 - a. **Benches:** Metal-frame wood-slat benches face the walkways.
 - b. **Lighting:** The park is illuminated by Washington Standard lamps.
 - c. **Miscellaneous:** Entries to underground lavatories and their affiliated ventilation systems remain in the southwest corner of the park, although public access is blocked by chain-link fencing.
4. **Buildings:** The library designed by Ackerman and Ross encompasses 18,524 square feet of the park. It is located in the center of the reservation with entrances on the north and south facades (See HABS No. DC-457).

C. **Site:**

1. **Character of surrounding structures:** The neighborhood around this block is mixed. The two squares to the north are devoid of buildings and are used as parking lots; The southeast corner of the lot to the east houses several mobile units used as temporary shelters for the homeless. The Techworld complex fills the two squares south of the park. A mirror-glass enclosed overhead walkway connects the two massive buildings and the roadway between them is closed off. East of the square, the northern block features buildings that probably date back to the era of the Northern Liberties Market, while the block to the south features a late twentieth century high-rise office building. West of the park, the southern block is devoid of buildings and serves as a parking lot, while the block to the north is the site of the Neoclassical Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church built in 1917.
2. **Traffic patterns:** Four lanes of one-way southbound traffic pass the park on the west, and four lanes of one-way northbound traffic pass it on the east. Four eastbound lanes pass it on the north and two-lanes of two-way traffic travel along the south.
3. **Vistas:** The most magnificent vista from this square was south along Eighth Street to the Patent Office. Within the past five years, however, this view has been interrupted by the erection of two high-rise glass and metal office buildings encompassing both of the blocks to the south. After a great deal of controversy, an overhead enclosed walkway was built between the two buildings, thereby encroaching upon the former vista. A view of the White House would probably be possible from the southwest of the square along Pennsylvania Avenue, but trees and overgrown shrubs planted in the median of that roadway also obscure the view. Thomas Circle, five long blocks away on Massachusetts Avenue, is just visible from the northwest corner of the square.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

District of Columbia Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Street and Avenues." 1872.

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

B. Park plans: See Supplemental Information below.

C. Early Views:

ca. 1927: Photographs of Reservation Nos. 8, 70, 71, 175, and 176 taken as part of a survey, located in the files at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

D. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers. 1867-1933.

Colyer, George Speer. "The L'Enfant Plan in Downtown Washington: Its History and Prospects for Survival." Master's Thesis, George Washington University, 1987.

Federal Writers' Project Works Progress Administration Washington, City and Capital, Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1937.

Hoagland, Alison K. "The Washington Public Library on Mount Vernon Square." Washington History 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1990-91), 74-89.

Maury, William M. Alexander "Boss" Shepherd and the Board of Public Works, (Washington, D.C., George Washington University, 1975), 41.

McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991), 34-51.

Olszewski, George. Mount Vernon Square. Washington, D.C. National Park Service, 1970.

Record Group 42, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA RG42).

Reservation files. National Capital Region Headquarters, Land Use Office.

Topham, Washington. "Northern Liberty Market." Records of the Columbia Historical Society 24, (Washington, 1922).

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
Project Historian
National Park Service
1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

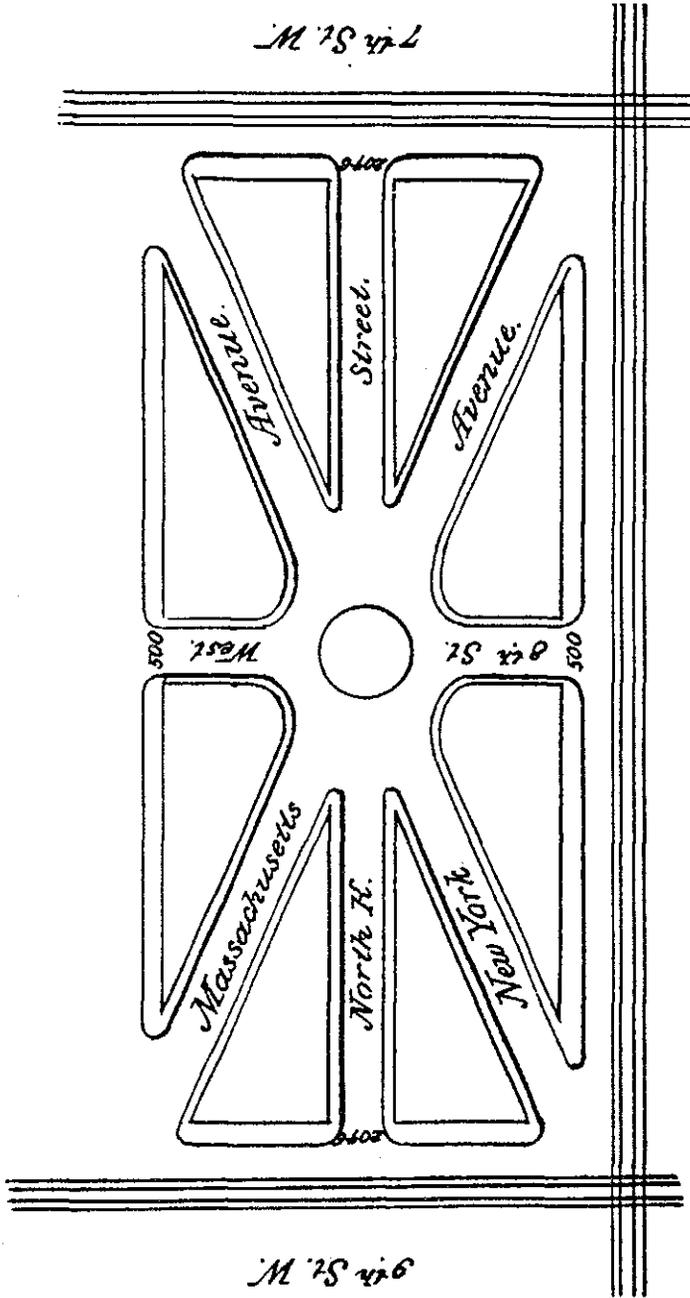
The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

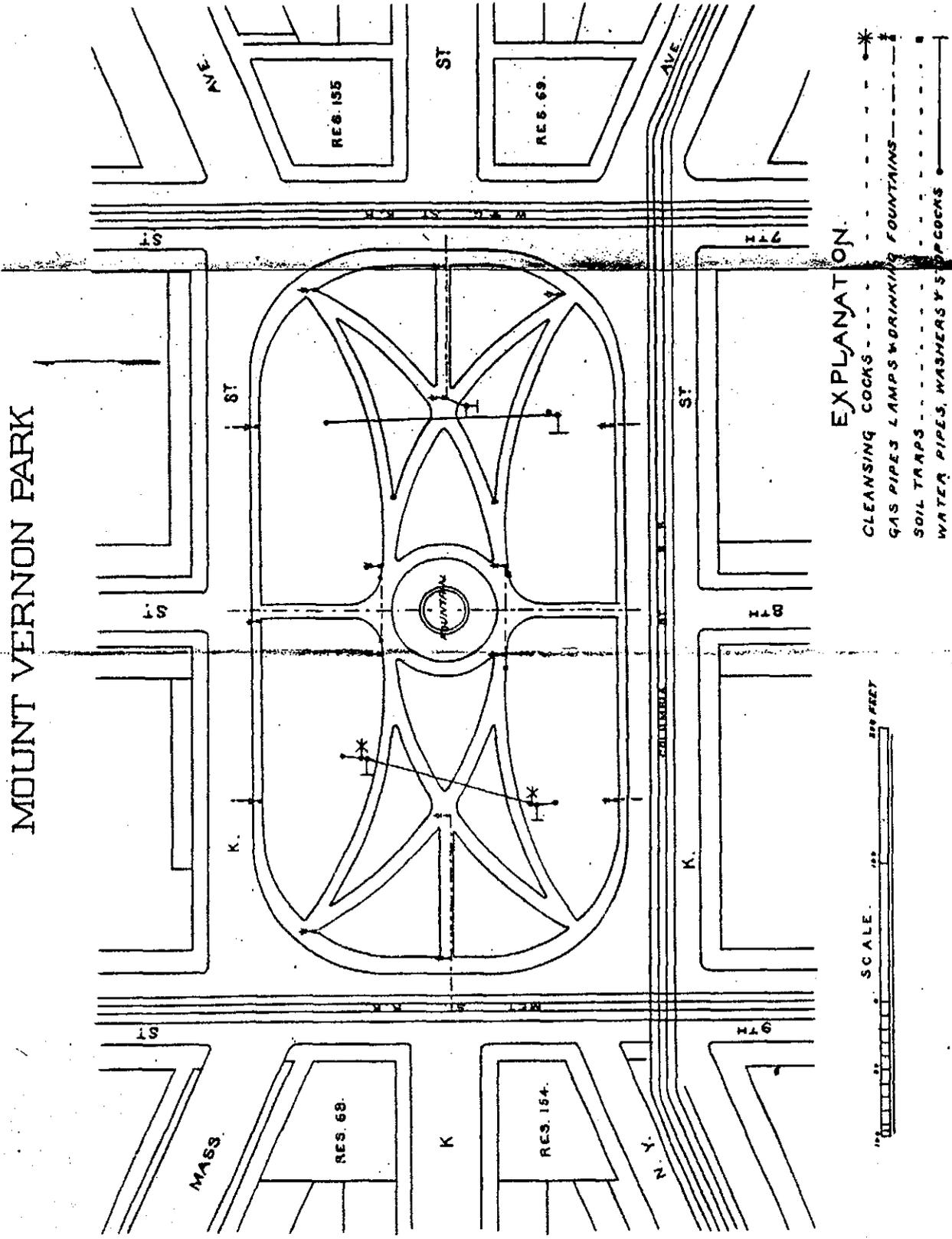
HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.

PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

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| Page 11 | 1876: | Plat of parks in "Government Reservations in the City Boundaries." <u>City Lots</u> . Real Estate Atlas (NARA RG42.) |
| Page 12 | 1882: | Park plan showing paths and central fountain (NARA RG42). |
| Page 13 | 1886: | Park plan showing locations of gas and water pipes, lamps and drinking fountains (<u>Annual Report</u> . . . , 1886). |
| Page 14 | 1912: | Revised landscape plan with cross section detail of coping and walks (Office of Land Use, National Capital Region). |
| Page 15 | ca. 1925: | Plan of Reservation No. 176 showing walks and tree types (Office of Land Use, National Capital Region). |
| Page 16 | 1966: | Planting plan (Office of Land Use, National Capital Region). |

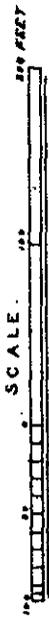
MT. VERNON PLACE.





EXPLANATION.

- CLEANSING COCKS
- GAS PIPES LAMPS & DRINKING FOUNTAINS
- SOIL TARPS
- WATER PIPES, WASHERS & STOP COCKS



To accompany Annual Report of Officer
 in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds
 for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1886.

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