

THOMAS CIRCLE  
(Reservation No. 66)  
Intersection of Massachusetts and Vermont  
avenues between 14th and M streets, NW  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-687

HABS  
DC  
WASH,  
640-

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

THOMAS CIRCLE  
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Location: Intersection of Massachusetts and Vermont avenues, 14th and M streets, NW.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service.

Present Use: Monument site, traffic direction and underpass.

Significance: Included as open space on both L'Enfant's and Ellicott's plans of the city, this reservation has served as a park since its first improvement in 1871. The equestrian statue of Maj. Gen. George Thomas is listed on the National Register as one of the Civil War statues in Washington.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Original and subsequent owners: L'Enfant placed this intersection within a large tract known as Port Royal, deeded to John Peerce 1687. The land was among that transferred at no cost to the government March 30, 1791, when the original proprietors donated the property within the areas intended for streets or avenues.<sup>1</sup>
3. First improvement: 1871, graded and planted.
4. Alterations and additions:
  - 1872: Park redesigned.
  - 1879: Maj. Gen. George Thomas statue erected.
  - 1911: Grade raised to level of new coping. Eight circular flower beds replaced by four garland-shaped beds. "Candelabra" lamp posts moved so as not to obstruct vistas to the statue.
  - 1940: Massachusetts Avenue underpass tunnel constructed.
  - 1952: Circle further channelled to ease 14th Street traffic.

B. Historical Context:

In L'Enfant's plan of Washington, the area now designated as Thomas Circle is indicated as a circular open area shaded yellow and labeled No. 9. Formed by the convergence of Massachusetts and Vermont avenues with 14th and M streets, NW, it was part of the more than 3,000 acres acquired by the federal

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<sup>1</sup> McNeil, 43, 48.

government for the creation of streets and alleys. Of these numerous open spaces created by the intersections, L'Enfant numbered and shaded fifteen for reasons cited in his references to the 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.<sup>2</sup>

Due to Washington's slow development, this circle remained on the outskirts of the city until the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1843 a prosperous brick maker named Thomas Coltman erected a grand three-story brick mansion on the northeast corner of the circle. It came to be known as the Wylie house after it was occupied by ardent unionist and D.C. judge under Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Wylie. The house remained in the Wylie family until the 1940s, and was used to entertain the socially prominent.<sup>3</sup> By 1860, three structures appear to face the circle; the one on the northwest corner, between Massachusetts Avenue and 14th Street, was reputedly a military hospital during the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after the war, Lutherans in Washington erected a church on the northeast side between 14th Street and Vermont Avenue as a memorial to the return to peace. It wasn't until after the war that any concerted effort was made to convert the open space at the intersection into a park. In 1867, when the Army Corps of Engineers was placed in charge of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G), Chief Officer Nathaniel Michler recommended forming a circular park at the center of the open space.<sup>5</sup> By 1869 Army Corps workers

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<sup>2</sup> Legend on L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city.

<sup>3</sup> Goode, Capital Losses, 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Boschke, 1857-61; Federal Writers' Project, 682.

<sup>5</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1867, 524.

began enclosing the circle with a "light and tasty fence of iron."<sup>6</sup>

In his 1871 annual report, Michler called the intersection Memorial Circle because "several distinguished gentlemen, who occupy beautiful houses surrounding the circle, planted memorial trees to represent the growth of their respective states. The Buckeye of Ohio, the White Pine of New Hampshire and the Hemlock of Vermont, were among the number." A Seneca sandstone walk and bluestone curbs were installed around the circle and flag walks were laid in the roadway to provide pedestrian access from adjacent sidewalks. Trees and shrubs were planted and four ornamental "Candelabra" gas lamps were set near the center where a space was prepared to receive an antique terra cotta fountain. Michler described the park as "a beautiful improvement to that locality where already many fine buildings have been erected" and prominently located on "two of the finest avenues in the city; also on a prominent street leading to the country, which has been for a long time the most fashionable drive."<sup>7</sup>

Between 1871-74, the infrastructure of the northwest quadrant was greatly improved during the short-lived territorial government installed by Congress to govern the city. Under the leadership of Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, the local Board of Public Works was responsible for grading and paving the streets, laying gas and sewer lines, and planting street trees. The Army Corps of Engineers continued to oversee the OPB&G improving the square, circular, and triangular reservations at the intersections. With the installation of the new city government, Michler was replaced by Shepherd's good friend Orville E. Babcock who made great strides during his six-year tenure to improve Washington's parks.<sup>8</sup> Shepherd saw that Massachusetts Avenue was paved with concrete around the circle, while Babcock supervised its maintenance over the next six years.

Unfortunately, the entire circle had to be relandscaped in 1872 because, according to Babcock, nearly all of the vegetation in the park died because only one foot of soil had been laid atop an area formerly used as a roadway. The old roadbed had to be excavated and replaced with "new soil, mixed with compost of canal muck, manure, and lime," before new vegetation was planted. The eleven-piece set of rustic stone furniture ordered by Michler arrived and was set in place, but Babcock had trouble finding terra cotta coping for the base of the fountain in the United States and had to import some from Scotland. The walks were covered with asphalt and the fences were painted a bronze color. Babcock reported that the park was completely improved by the end of the year and any further maintenance would be performed by the watchman who was hired to guard it during the day.<sup>9</sup> The park was embellished each summer with seasonal plants and flowers; in 1876 two ornamental iron vases were installed for additional plantings.

As the surrounding streets were paved and the parks landscaped, the circle attracted prominent and wealthy residents. In 1879, one of the first apartment buildings in Washington was built in the acute angle between Vermont Avenue and

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<sup>6</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1869, 521; 1871, 977.

<sup>7</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1871, 977.

<sup>8</sup> This transition was not a smooth one, however. Michler was given twelve days notice that he was being transferred to the Pacific Northwest and Babcock complained in his 1871 annual report that Michler had left the office with many debts and was tardy in submitting his report for the first portion of that fiscal year.

<sup>9</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1872, 7-8.

14th Street on the south side of the circle. The graciously appointed--and extremely expensive--apartments in the Portland Flats Building were popular among the wealthy and influential.

The same year the apartment building was completed, an equestrian statue honoring Civil War hero Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas was erected in the center of the circle. A congressional commission had chosen the circle in 1877 as the site for a statue to be donated by the Society of the Army of the Cumberland. The society selected John Quincy Adams Ward to sculpt the equestrian monument and held a contest for a design for the statue's base. This job was awarded to architects Smithmeyer and Co., the same firm that would later design the Library of Congress. When the statue was erected, the rustic furniture, fountain, and interior pathways were removed, and the sewer pipe running through the center of the park was rerouted from under the proposed base of the statue. Although it was only one of many equestrian portrait statues honoring Civil War soldiers erected in the 1870-80s, General Thomas is considered by many as the best. In keeping with the Victorian Washington tradition, its unveiling was accompanied by a grand and solemn occasion November 9, 1879, attended by prominent figures, such as President Rutherford B. Hayes.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the central circle, this large intersection included four more federal parcels at the triangular points of the adjacent city squares. Referred to as reservations, these small parcels were officially identified federal property in 1884 and also fell under the jurisdiction of the OPB&G. By 1894 they were all enclosed with either a light iron railing or a post-and-chain fence and planted with grass. The Lutheran church, built before many of the regulations regarding setbacks and land jurisdiction were established, stood some distance from the reservation abutting its property. In 1884, members of the church erected a statue of Martin Luther on their property, just behind the federal reservation. The replica of a statue in Worms, Germany was erected in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of the reformer's birth and was donated by the Martin Luther Society of New York. During its formal dedication, where a crowd of 5,000 sang Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," a high wood platform built for the ceremony collapsed, spilling all of the dignitaries into the group of spectators.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Lutherans chose to erect the statue on their own land, Annie Cole, who lived on the other side of the circle, created controversy in 1888 when she planned to extend an addition to her home over the federal reservation. The dwelling, built by architect and builder Peter Lauritzen around the time the park was first improved, fit in the narrow lot between Massachusetts Avenue and M Street ending at the boundary of Reservation No. 65. A. B. Mullet, the architect Cole commissioned to build an addition to the house, maximized the space available by encroaching upon the federal right-of-way and the abutting reservation. Since 1871, builders had been permitted to extend bays beyond the building line into the federal property, but Cole's neighbors objected to the size of the projections. To show that many other buildings were already in violation, such as the Portland Flats, she hired a surveyor to measure the projecting bays on all of the structures around the circle. Cole lost the battle in court, but her addition was

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<sup>10</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1877, 11; 1878, 1346; Goode, Outdoor Sculpture, 283.

<sup>11</sup> Goode, Outdoor Sculpture, 284.

complete and stood on the federal land until 1970.<sup>12</sup>

Because the federal government often neglected the smaller reservations at the intersection, Cole, as well as the owners of the lots abutting Reservation Nos. 67 and 161, began treating the plots as extensions of their yards. Because their attention to these plots actually saved the OPB&G time and money, after the turn of the century, these and many similar reservations throughout the city were leased each year to the adjacent landowners for a nominal fee.

A streetcar line had been installed along 14th Street in the 1870s and its tracks encircled the park; the southbound line rounding it on the west and the northbound line on the east. A ca. 1890 color postcard, probably representing the view from a window of one of the upper stories of the Portland Flats, shows an electric trolley as well as several horse-drawn vehicles rounding the circle in the wide roadway. The park is surrounded by a wide walk with four ornate "Candelabra" lampposts and features a colorful landscape design with four Camperdown elms at the base of the statue, a fir tree, several shrubs, and four large circular flower beds in full bloom. A photograph in the 1911 OPB&G annual report showing "improvements" made to the circle that year reveals a similar scene except that the fir tree, flower beds, and shrubs have been removed, leaving only the Camperdown elms encircled by garland-shaped flower beds. The lamps were moved so they would not block the views to the statue.<sup>13</sup>

As the pace of city life quickened in the first decades of the twentieth century, philosophies of park use and function prompted change in park designs throughout the city. In a memo to OPB&G chief Col. Clarence Ridley in 1919, landscape architect Irving W. Payne recommended that the flower beds be removed to update the urban atmosphere and ease the cost of maintenance. "The introduction of odd-colored flower combinations is not conducive to restfulness," he wrote, "since bright colors tend to focus the attention on details rather than on the mass composition as a unified whole."<sup>14</sup> The beds were soon removed leaving only the four Camperdown elms at the base of the equestrian statue. An aerial view taken in the mid-1930s shows the sparsely planted circle with simple lamp standards in place of the earlier ornamental ones.

A striking new element introduced to the intersection in 1930 was John Russell Pope's National City Christian Church. The national headquarters for the Church of Disciples of Christ, it was erected atop a tall flight of stairs in the lot northwest of the circle, presiding elegantly above the simple little park.

The streetcar line contributed to the gradual commercialization of the area as the population spread farther and farther out from the downtown core. City directories and directories of the socially elite from after the turn-of-the-century reveal that many of the structures built on the circle as single-family dwellings were then used as offices, embassies, and even a fraternity house. As 14th Street became a major automotive route and Massachusetts Avenue became a major cross-town artery, Thomas Circle was seen as no more than an annoying bottleneck to the ever-increasing number of motorists in the city. Finally, in 1941, to ease the gridlock of suburbanites who travelled daily through the interchange,

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<sup>12</sup> Hoagland, 73; Commission of Fine Arts, 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1911, 2968-69.

<sup>14</sup> Payne, 1919.

Massachusetts Avenue was tunnelled under the circle, thereby removing 42 percent of the traffic from the grade level of the park. With the underpass, the park's configuration was changed to an ellipse flanked by crescents to separate the second heaviest flow of traffic along 14th Street.<sup>15</sup>

The park had to be entirely uprooted during the underpass construction, and the National Park Service (NPS), which had gained jurisdiction over most of the parks in the city in 1933, feared that the four Camperdown elms in the park would not survive. Fortunately the trees roots grow sideways with no long tap root, enabling them to thrive in shallow soil. In preparation for construction, the NPS carefully removed the trees and kept them in a nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash solution until they could be replanted after the construction. When the construction debris was removed and motorists learned to wend their way through its new lanes and traffic signals, the park that remained at the center was a shadow of its former self. Carved into a sodded lemon flanked by shrub-covered banana-shaped medians, no crosswalks led to the center park, making pedestrian access equivalent to jaywalking.

These changes to the park and surrounding streets stripped the neighborhood of its residential character, and over the next three decades, all the original buildings but the Lutheran Church were replaced by modern high-rises. The Wylie House came down in 1947, and its site is now occupied by a large hotel; the Portland Flats was razed 1962 for an office building; and Annie Cole's house was demolished 1974 for National Association of Homebuilders building.<sup>16</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: The oval park at the center of the intersection covers approximately one half acre.
- B. Materials:
  - 1. Pathways: The small traffic islands created by the channelization of the intersection are all covered with concrete. The central oval and crescents do not feature any paths since they are not intended for pedestrian use.
  - 2. Vegetation: The crescent-shaped directional islands are densely planted with shrubs. The central oval features three young Camperdown elms and one mature one and is planted with grass.
  - 3. Statue: The 16'-tall equestrian statue of Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas stands on a granite pedestal on a circular granite base. It faces southwest toward the White House.
- C. Site:
  - 1. Character of surrounding structures: A high-rise hotel, two office buildings, and two churches face onto the circle.

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Goode, Capital Losses, 44-45, 180-82.

2. **Traffic patterns:** Traffic flows around the circle in a clockwise direction through two two-lane channels divided by crescent-shaped medians. Through-traffic on 14th Street is limited to the inner lane, while all other streets funnel into the outer lane. Massachusetts Avenue traffic is tunnelled beneath the intersection.
3. **Vistas:** This circle stands on high ground and can be seen from many vantage points. There are uninterrupted reciprocal vistas along Massachusetts Avenue northwest to Scott Circle and southeast to the Carnegie Library in Mount Vernon Square, and along Vermont Avenue southwest to McPherson Square and northeast to Logan Circle. The Potomac River can be seen to the south down 14th Street on a clear day and the Thomas statue can be seen from Reservation No. 140, seven blocks west on M Street.

### 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 for a list of attached plans and early views. Additional plans are located at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

1964: Six sheets showing existing conditions and layout plan; plant identification; details of paving, furniture, fencing; as built; longitudinal cross sections.

#### C. Early Views: See Supplemental Information below for a list of attached plans and early views.

1883: Etching of the park (Oppel, 24).

ca. 1890: Color postcard.

- ca. 1900: Photograph of one of the "Candelabra" gas street lamps (Goode, Capitol Losses, 452).
- 1903: Photograph of Thomas statue (Annual Report . . ., 1903).
- 1911: Photograph (Annual Report . . ., 1911, 2968).
- ca. 1927: Survey photographs of Reservation Nos. 65, 66, 67, 161, and 162 (NPS Reservation Files).

D. Bibliography:

- Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers. 1867-1933.
- Commission of Fine Arts. Massachusetts Avenue Architecture II. Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1975.
- Federal Writers' Project Works Progress Administration Washington, City and Capital, Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1937.
- Goode, James. Capital Losses. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.
- Goode, James. Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974.
- "Government Reservations within the City Boundaries." City Lots. Real Estate Directory, NARA RG42 230.
- Harrison, S. R. "Modern Street Intersection Design, Washington, D.C." Washington, D.C: American Road Builders' Association, Municipal Bulletin No. 131, 1948.
- Hoagland, Alison K. "Nineteenth Century Building Regulations in Washington, D.C." Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Vol. 52, 1989.
- McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 34-51.
- Oppel, Frank and Tony Meisel, eds. Washington: Turn of the Century Treasury. Secaucus, N.J.: Castle, 1987.
- Payne, Irving W. to Colonel Clarence Ridley. Letter. April 11, 1919. NARA RG42.
- Record Group 42, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA RG42).
- Reservation files. Office of Land Use. National Capital Region Headquarters. National Park Service.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold  
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National Park Service  
1993

**PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:**

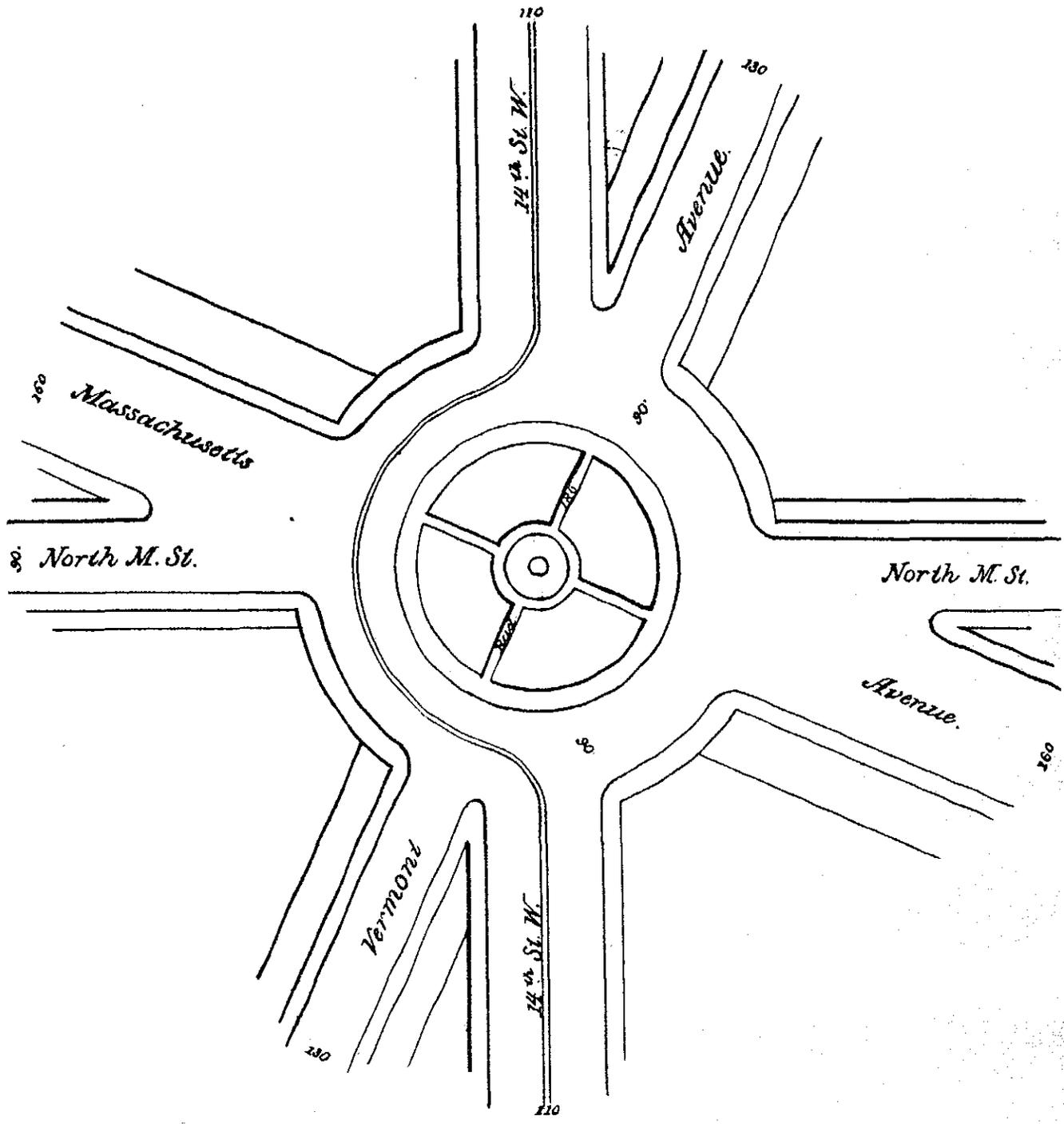
The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic 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.

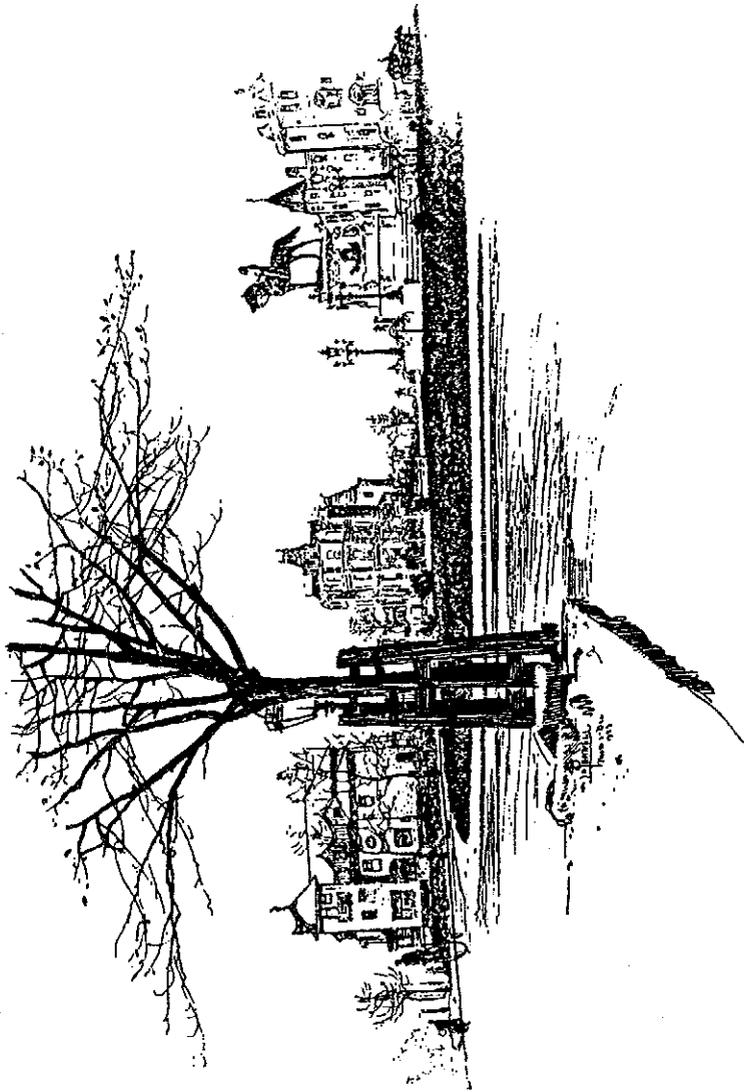
HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz 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 10 | 1876:     | Plat of intersection ( <u>City Lots</u> . NARA RG42 230).                                       |
| Page 11 | 1883:     | Etching of the park (Oppel, 24).  |
| Page 12 | 1886:     | Park plan showing gas and water pipes, lamps, and drains ( <u>Annual Report . . . , 1886</u> ). |
| Page 13 | ca. 1900: | Photograph of one of the "Candelabra" gas street lamps (Goode, <u>Capitol Losses</u> , 452).    |
| Page 14 | 1903:     | Photograph of Thomas statue ( <u>Annual Report . . . , 1903</u> ).                              |
| Page 15 | 1911:     | Photograph ( <u>Annual Report . . . , 1911</u> , 2968).   |
| Page 16 | 1942:     | Traffic diagrams showing road configuration and proposed underpass (Harrison, 8).               |

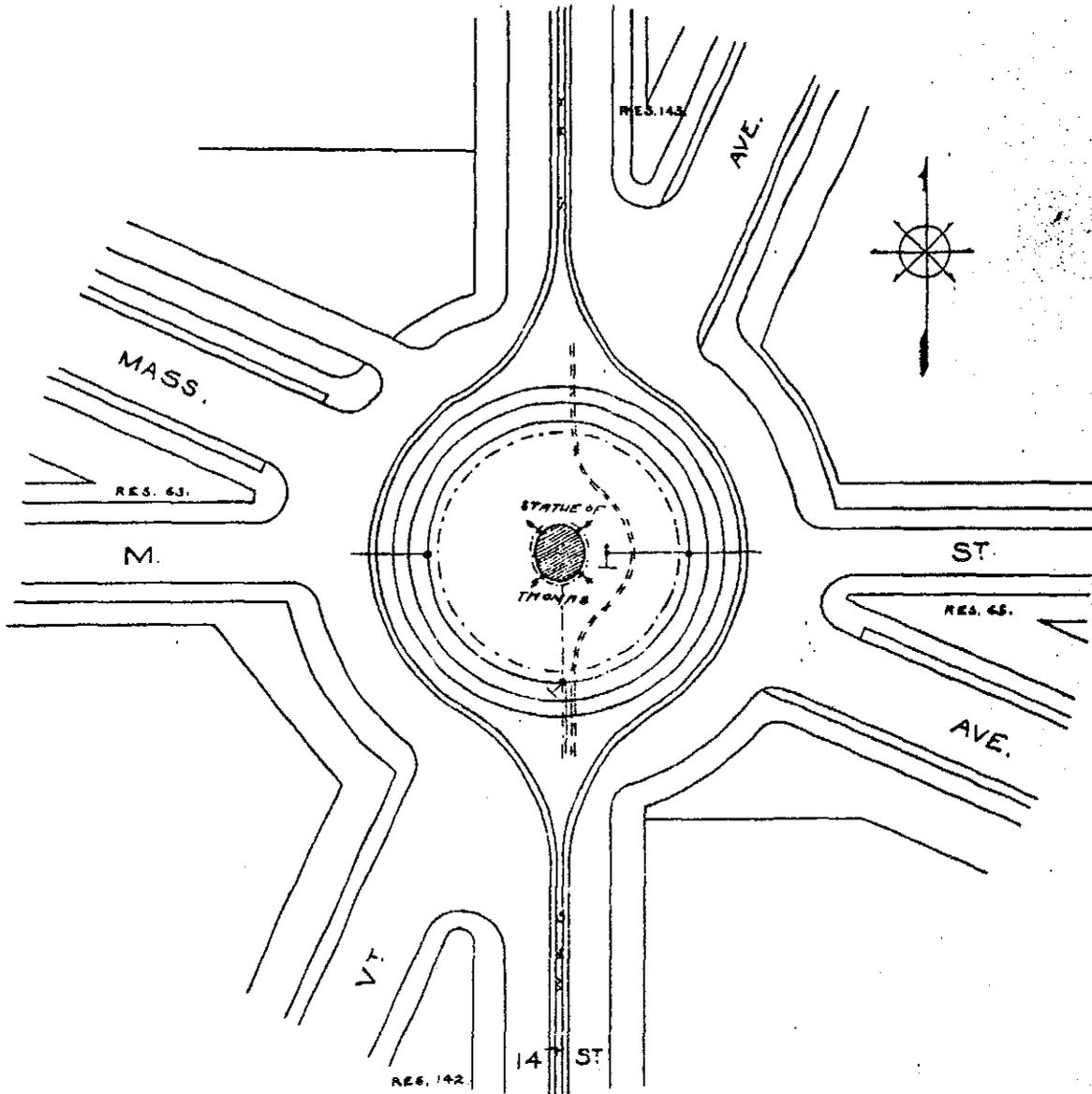
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THOMAS CIRCLE.



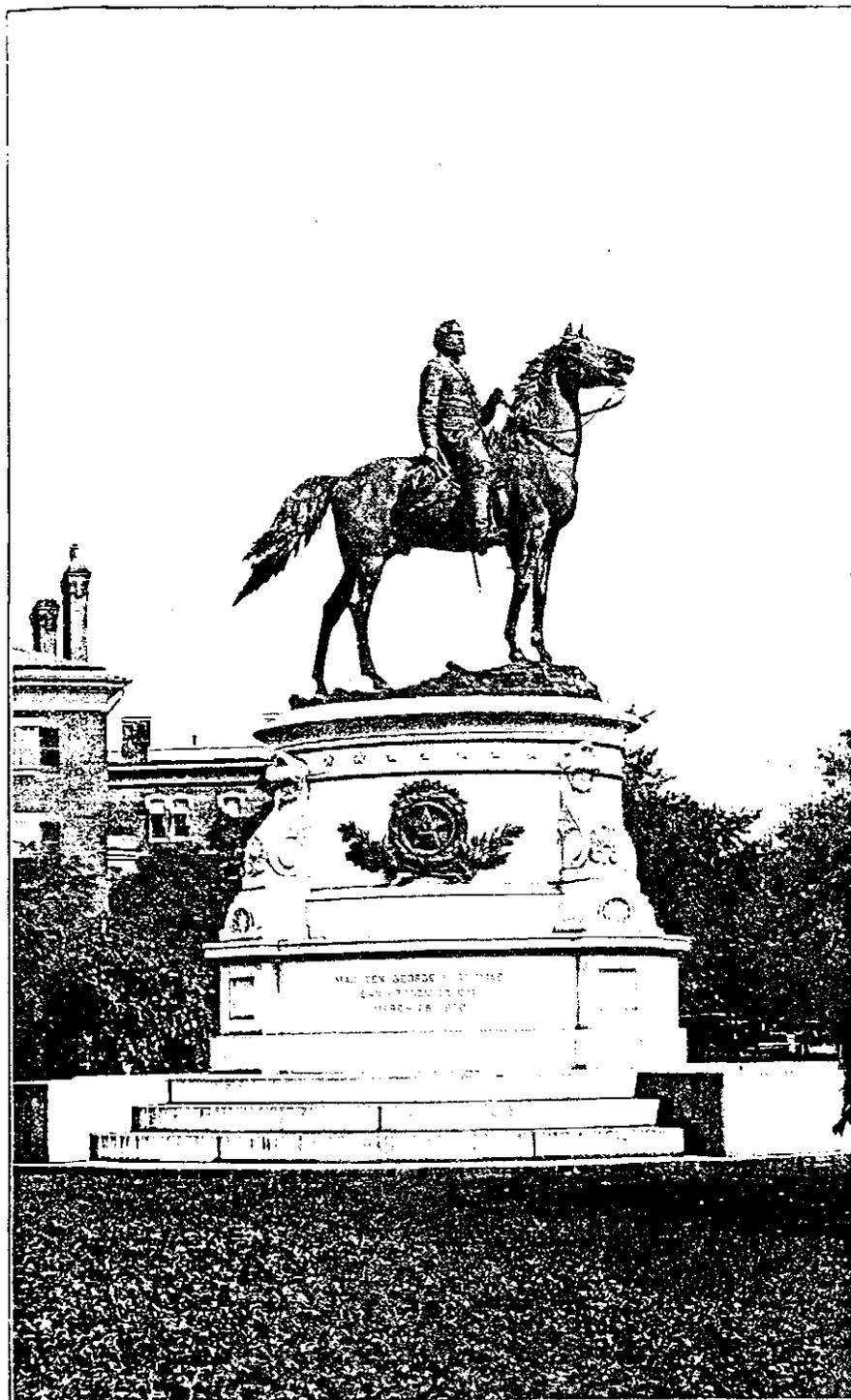
EXPLANATION

- GAS PIPES & LAMPS - - - - -
- SEWER DRAIN - - - - -
- STOP COCK . . . . .
- WATER PIPES & WASHER - - - - -

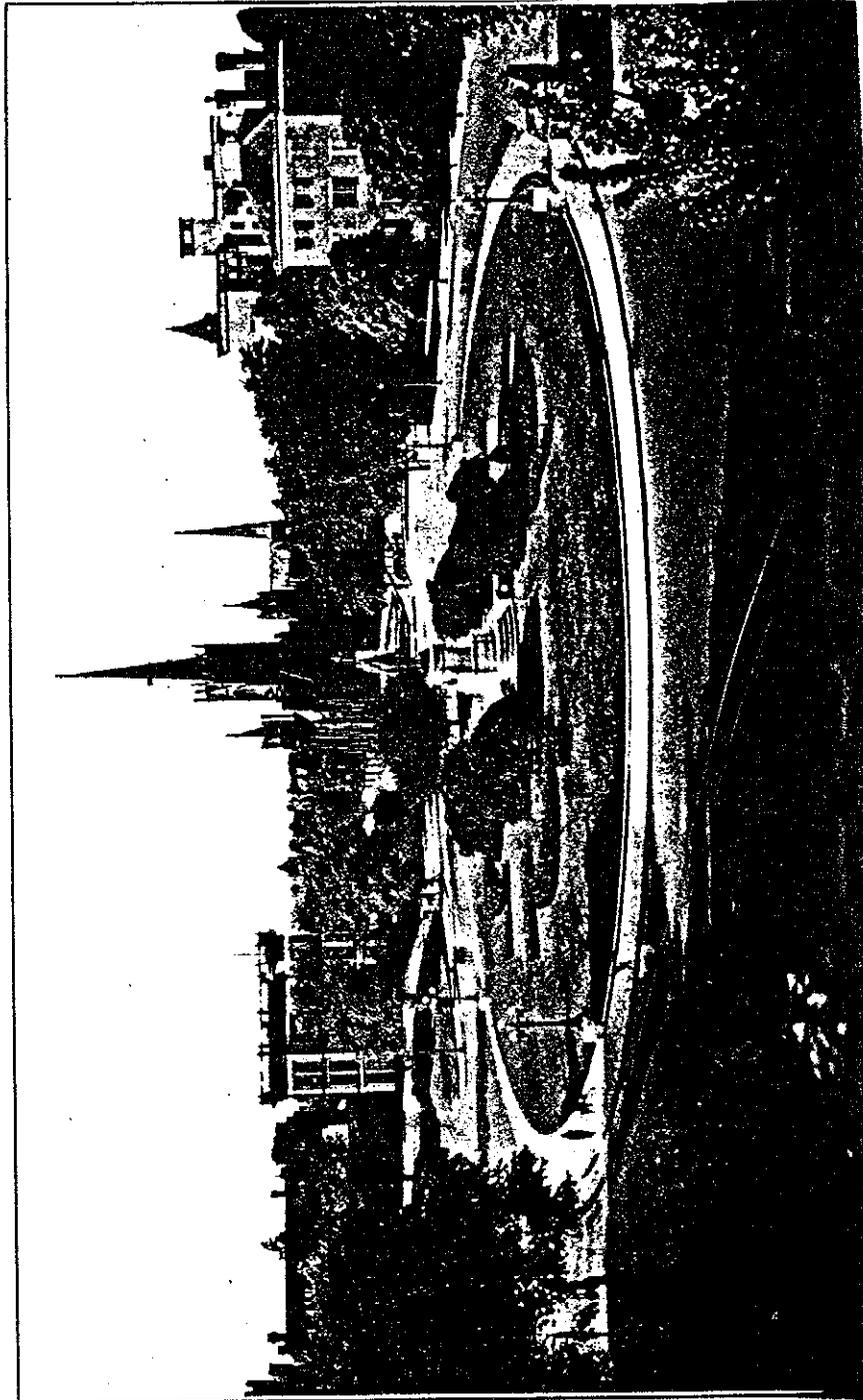
*To accompany Annual Report of Officer  
in charge of Public Buildings and Grounds  
for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1886.*

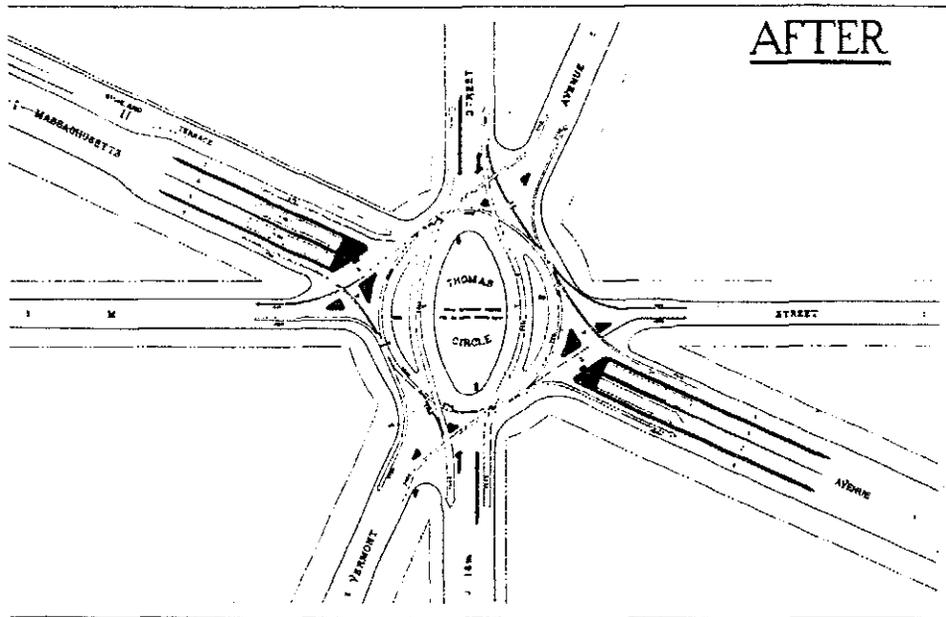
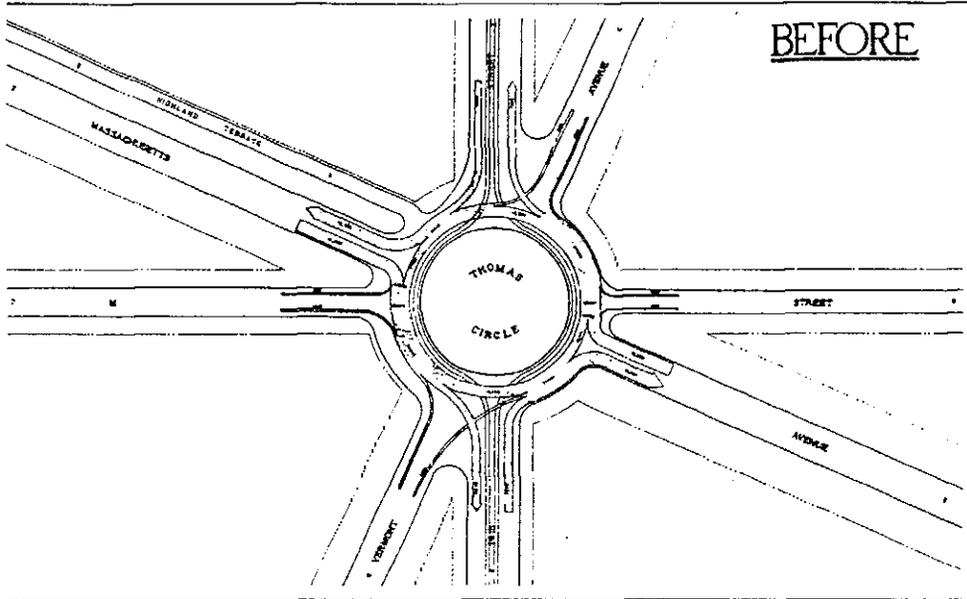
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MAJ. GEN. GEORGE H. THOMAS, THOMAS CIRCLE, FOURTEENTH AND M STREETS NW.





THOMAS CIRCLE