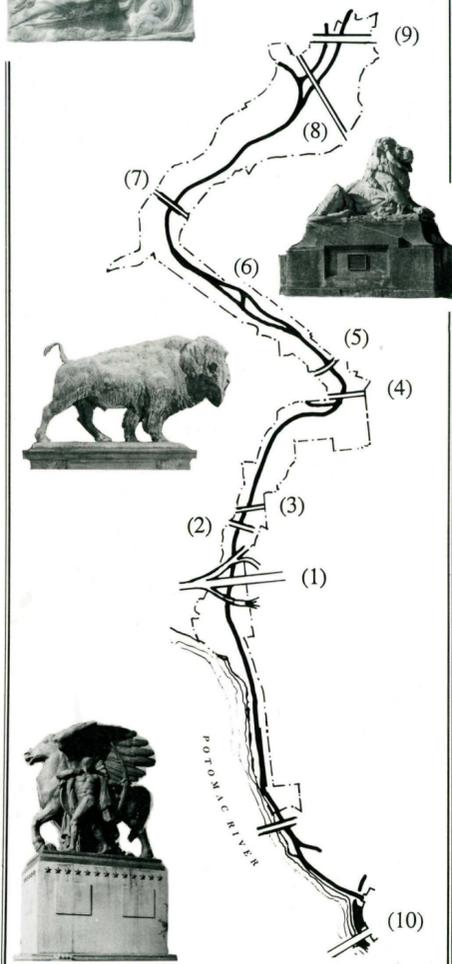


ROCK CREEK AND POTOMAC PARKWAY
Washington, D.C.



Photographs of Bridge Adornments by Jack Boucher/HABS, 1992
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ROCK CREEK'S BRIDGES

The monumental bridges arching over Rock Creek contribute greatly to the parkway's appearance. Partially concealed by the surrounding vegetation, they evoke the aqueducts and ruins found in romantic landscape paintings. In addition to framing vistas and providing striking contrasts to the parkway's natural features, they serve as convenient platforms for viewing the verdant parkway landscape. They also perform the utilitarian function of bridging the chasm of Rock Creek, which serves as a natural boundary between Washington and Georgetown.

The need to establish convenient routes of commerce and communication between Georgetown and Washington ensured that Rock Creek was bridged early and often. The location of most bridges has remained fairly constant over the years, but their forms have changed dramatically in response to improved technology and shifting architectural fashions.

The mouth of Rock Creek was originally much wider than it is today. Boats once brought their cargo as far upstream as M Street. There were no bridges across Rock Creek during the colonial era, so horses and wagons forded the stream where it narrowed near present day P Street. The first bridge over Rock Creek was a wood-frame drawbridge built at M Street in 1788. This was followed by a triple-arched stone bridge constructed at K Street in 1792. Neither structure lasted for long. A number of elaborate iron truss bridges were built across the valley in the nineteenth century to carry wagon traffic, pedestrians, and street cars. These were replaced by concrete and masonry spans between 1897-1941.

The new bridges were designed to withstand the stresses created by modern traffic demands. Arched masonry bridges were also considered more attractive than iron bridges and more harmonious with the parkway landscape. The arched bridge pattern is broken only by the M Street Bridge and by the freeway access ramps near Virginia Avenue and K Street.



Aqueduct Bridge at Pennsylvania Avenue, ca. 1862 (National Museum of American History)

K Street Bridge (1)

After the original K Street Bridge was taken down in 1795, there was no crossing at this site until 1869, when a wood bridge was constructed. This was replaced by a steel girder span in 1907. The current structure was built between 1939-41 and modified in 1947 to accommodate the Whitehurst Freeway. The nearby freeway ramps were built in the 1960s to connect the Whitehurst Freeway with the proposed Inner Loop Freeway, which was never completed.

Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge (2)

The original Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge was designed in 1858 by Gen. Montgomery Meigs, who built the aqueduct bridge at Cabin John, Maryland. The Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge also carried the city's water supply, contained in two large cast-iron pipes that served as arches supporting the bridge structure. This was one of the first large cast-iron bridges in the country. It proved inadequate for twentieth century traffic, however, and was rebuilt in 1916.

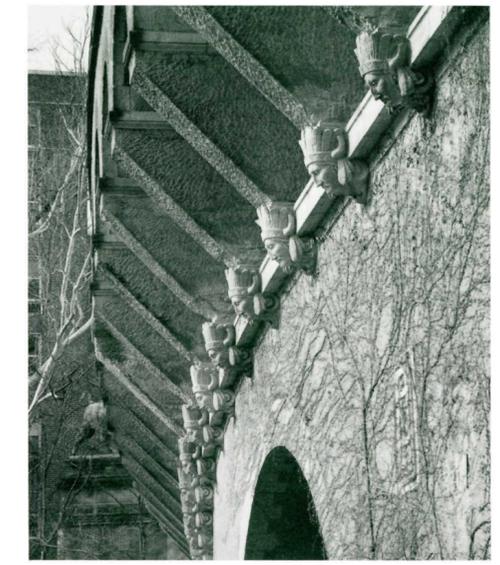
The current bridge is a single span concrete arch structure with granite facing. This bridge incorporates the aqueduct pipes, which are visible through openings on the underside of the arches. They still carry part of Washington's water supply.

Shoreham Hill Bridge, 1993 (Boucher/HABS)

Dumbarton Bridge

Dumbarton Bridge, at Q Street, is one of the parkway's most endearing structures. It was designed by the noted architect Glenn Brown and completed in 1915. Its curving form compensates for the difference in alignment between the Washington and Georgetown segments of Q Street.

The overhanging pedestrian walkways and tall, deep arches give the bridge a massive appearance recalling Roman aqueducts, on which the general design of the bridge is based. The brackets supporting the walkways terminate in rows of sculpted Indian heads, which are purportedly based on the life-mask of a Sioux chief named Kicking Bear. The seven-foot tall bronze American bison on each abutment are the work of sculptor A. Phimister Proctor. Proctor also designed the sculptures at the parkway's terminus behind the Lincoln Memorial and the bronze tigers on the Sixteenth Street Bridge.



Dumbarton Bridge, 1993 (Boucher/HABS)



1913
Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway created by act of Congress

1920s
Parkway land acquired and construction begun

1936
Construction of bridge at P Street completes parkway

1937
One-way rush hour traffic policy instituted to relieve congestion

1940
Rock Creek rechanneled to eliminate wide bend south of P Street, creating "P Street Beach"

1950s
Highway officials try to convert parkway into high-volume expressway

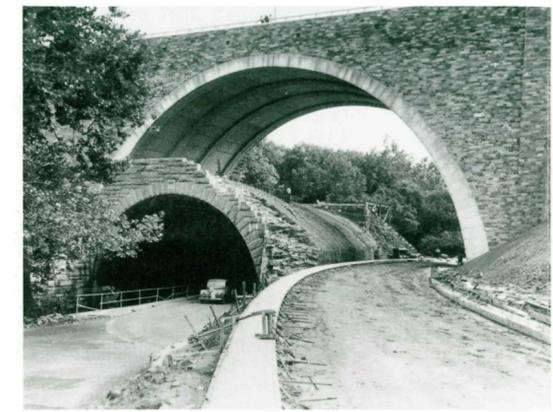
1960s
Theodore Roosevelt Bridge and freeway ramps constructed over south end of parkway

1966
Zoo tunnel completed

1971
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts completed

1970s
Construction of subway to northwest suburbs eases commuter pressure to upgrade parkway

1993-95
William Howard Taft Bridge renovated

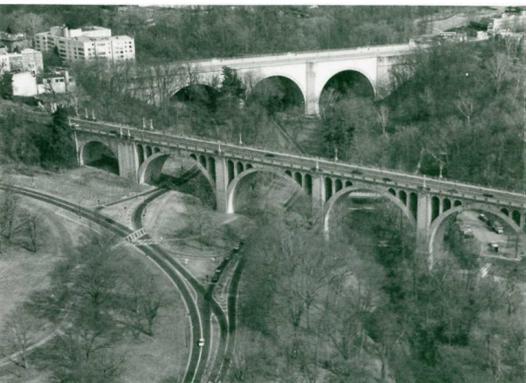


William Howard Taft Bridge (8)

The William Howard Taft Bridge, built 1897-1907, is probably the most notable span on the parkway. The elegant arched structure carrying Connecticut Avenue over Rock Creek valley was Washington's first monumental masonry bridge. Its high cost and elaborate ornamentation earned it the nickname "The Million Dollar Bridge." In 1931 it was officially named after former president William Howard Taft, who had lived nearby.

Taft Bridge is renowned as one of the largest unreinforced concrete bridges in the world. Designed by engineer George Morison and architect William Casey, the bridge's main arches and abutments are made of concrete poured inside precast panels without the usual iron reinforcing bars. The four concrete lions on the bridge abutments are the work of sculptor R. Hinton Perry. Taft Bridge is considered a landmark in the structural and ornamental use of concrete.

The District of Columbia Department of Public Works undertook a major rehabilitation project to restore Taft Bridge during 1993-95.



William Howard Taft and Duke Ellington Bridges, 1992 (Boucher/HABS)

Old Calvert Street Bridge, ca. 1891 (DCL)

New Massachusetts Avenue Bridge and Old Culvert, 1941 (DCL)

Waterside Drive Overpass (6)

The Waterside Drive Overpass was constructed in 1932 to provide a means for southbound traffic from Massachusetts Avenue to enter the parkway. The structure housed restrooms for parkway users. These were closed when increasing traffic made access hazardous. The small tower on the west bridge abutment was designed for park police use.

Charles C. Glover Bridge (7)

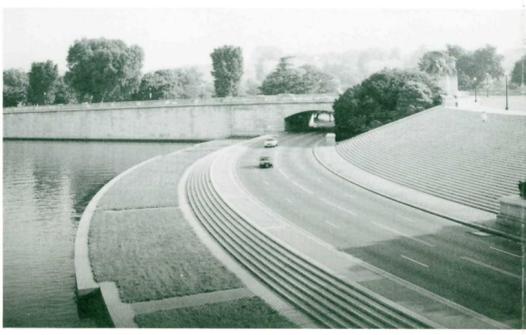
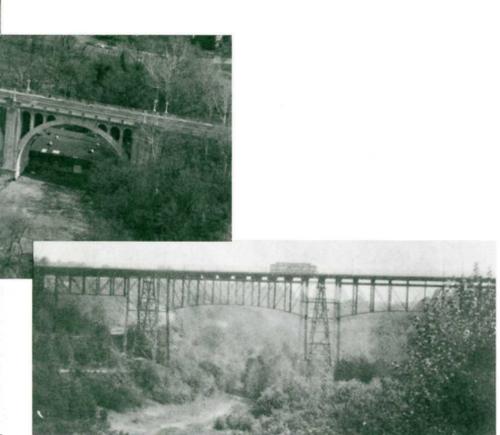
The Charles C. Glover Bridge at Massachusetts Avenue was the last major bridge built across Rock Creek valley. It was constructed in 1939-41 to replace an unsightly earthen causeway that had long carried the avenue across Rock Creek valley. The single, soaring arch provides a dramatic view along the parkway. An unusual feature of this bridge is the large curved planters built into the bridge abutments. It was officially named the Charles C. Glover Bridge in 1949 to honor this influential supporter of Washington parks.

Duke Ellington Bridge (9)

The current bridge at Calvert Street replaced a dramatic iron truss bridge built in 1891 to carry streetcars on the Rock Creek Railway line. When the parkway was built, it was determined that the existing bridge was unable to accommodate the rise in automobile traffic. The utilitarian steel structure was also considered detrimental to the parkway setting.

The current triple-arched bridge is made of reinforced concrete faced with Indiana limestone. Architect Paul Cret and engineer Ralph Modjeski designed the new span to harmonize with nearby Taft Bridge. Its bold, simplified form reflects Cret's interest in combining modernist and neoclassical aesthetics. The sculptural panels adorning the bridge abutments were designed by Leon Hermant. Modeled in the bold, simple style of the era, they represent changing forms of transportation: sailing ship, steam engine, airplane, and automobile.

When the new bridge was under construction, the old structure was rolled 100' downstream and reconnected to the streetcar line to avoid cutting off trolley service to Washington's populous northwest suburbs. This feat was accomplished with teams of horses in slightly over nine hours. The bridge was completed in 1935 and rededicated as the Duke Ellington Bridge following the death of the Washington native and famous band leader in 1974.



Watergate Steps, 1993 (Boucher/HABS)

Watergate Steps (10)

While technically beyond the parkway boundaries, the Watergate Steps were designed to link the parkway with the Mall and Arlington Memorial Bridge. The steps were initially conceived as a grand ceremonial gateway to Washington, but traffic concerns resulted in the construction of a roadway cutting the design in two. Audiences sat on the steps to hear the National Symphony Orchestra play summer concerts from a floating band shell anchored nearby. Increasing traffic at National Airport ended the practice in the mid 1960s.



Waterfront Section of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, 1993 (Boucher/HABS)

HIGHWAYS IN HARMONY

Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway
Washington, D.C.



Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway near P Street, ca. 1937 (DCL)

PARK AND PARKWAY

Driving through the attractive, tree-lined valley of Rock Creek, motorists may not realize they are in a carefully planned landscape that has changed dramatically over the past century. Many people do not even know that Rock Creek Park and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway are two separate parks, created at different times and for different purposes.

Rock Creek Park surrounds Rock Creek from the National Zoo north into Maryland. It is nearly a mile wide in places and totals approximately 1,750 acres. The park was created in 1890 to preserve an extensive area of woods and farmland as a suburban nature reserve. It contains numerous picnic grounds, trails, and recreational areas. The roads in Rock Creek Park provide access to the park's scenery and recreational resources. They were designed for slow speeds and light traffic.



Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway in 1933
(District of Columbia Public Library/DCL)

Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway extends from the southern border of the National Zoo to West Potomac Park and the Lincoln Memorial. The parkway is 2.5 miles long and only a few hundred yards wide. It was constructed in the 1920s-30s to restore the polluted lower Rock Creek valley and to provide an attractive drive between Washington's monumental core and Rock Creek Park. The winding four-lane road dominates the parkway landscape, but the parkway also includes a multi-use trail and several quiet park areas.

Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was originally conceived as a pleasure route for recreational drivers, but it soon became a major commuter artery for traffic from Washington's northwest suburbs. The parkway drive was always intended to carry more traffic than the park roads, yet it was carefully designed to surround motorists in a secluded forest setting and provide delightful views of the reclaimed valley's naturalistic landscape.

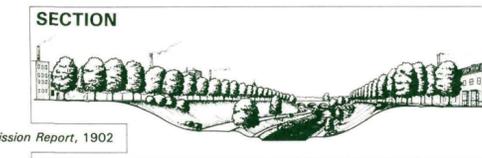
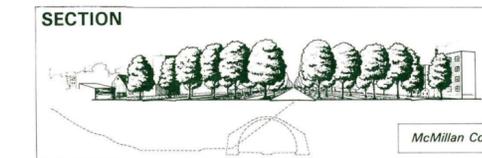


Waterfront Section of Parkway ca. 1915
(Commission of Fine Arts/CFA)

FROM EYESORE TO SCENIC RESOURCE

The idea of turning lower Rock Creek valley into an attractive driveway dates to 1867, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers suggested building avenues along the creek to provide access to a spacious suburban park. When Rock Creek Park was finally created, however, most of the valley south of the zoo remained in private hands. An informal bridle path led from P Street to the zoo, but the only way to reach the park from downtown Washington was through busy and poorly maintained city streets.

By the end of the nineteenth century, lower Rock Creek valley had become an eyesore and public health hazard. The area between the zoo and Q Street remained attractively wooded, but below P Street the valley served as a sewer and public dumping ground. Towering banks of ashes, construction debris, and rubbish choked the valley. Cheap wood houses and tenements crowded the banks between M and P streets. Coal heaps, gas tanks, and small factories lined the Potomac waterfront between the creek mouth and Potomac Park.



"Closed" and "Open" Valley Treatments (Sections Based on Senate Park Commission Report of 1902)

1777-1600s

Native Americans fish, camp, and quarry stone along Rock Creek

1608

Captain John Smith exploring the Potomac River is first European to sight Rock Creek

1751

Georgetown established

1788

First bridge over Rock Creek constructed at M Street

1791

Rock Creek serves as border of Pierre L'Enfant's plan for the Federal City

1828

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal begun; completed from Rock Creek to Cumberland, Maryland in 1850.

1858

Construction of Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge carrying Washington aqueduct over Rock Creek

1867

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first proposes to build avenues along Rock Creek

1890

Rock Creek Park created to preserve woodlands surrounding upper Rock Creek valley

1890s

Increasing pollution spurs proposals to improve conditions along lower valley

1901

Senate Park Commission includes parkway along Rock Creek in its plan for beautifying Washington

1907

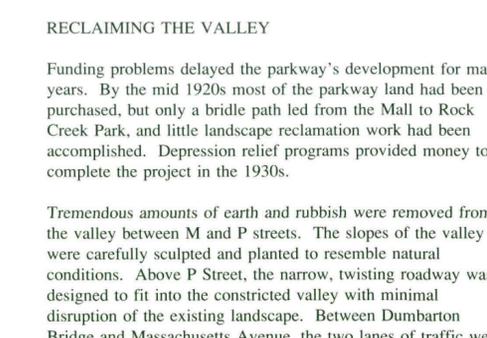
"Million Dollar Bridge" at Connecticut Avenue completed



Rock Creek, Looking North from M Street Bridge, ca. 1900 (DCL)

Beginning in the 1880s, a group of Georgetown citizens promoted the idea of enclosing Rock Creek in a tunnel and filling in the valley between Washington and Georgetown so that a formal boulevard could be built over the old creek bed. At the same time, the Washington Board of Trade and other park supporters advocated restoring the valley to create a picturesque parkway containing a bridle path and winding carriage drive. The 1901 Senate Park Commission examined both schemes and recommended the restored valley plan "on the grounds of economy, safety, and beauty."

The commission's opinion did not end the argument, however. After several more studies and lengthy congressional debates, Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was finally created by Congress on March 14, 1913, making it the first federally authorized parkway.



Excavations Between M and P Streets, 1933 (DCL)

The *Washington Evening Star* rejoiced, "Nowhere else in the world is there a drive of such length and beauty of scenery." The *Washington Post* called the parkway "one of the most magnificent drives in the world," and proclaimed, "More than ever, Washington will be entitled to the distinction of being 'a city of parks.'"

The long delay between the parkway's conception and completion coincided with America's transition from horse and buggy to automobile. The changing proposals for Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway reflected the nationwide transformation from the nineteenth-century view of parkways as elegant boulevards linking parks and civic centers to the modern idea of parkways as pleasantly landscaped motor roads dominated by commuter traffic.



Excavations Between M and P Streets, 1933 (DCL)



Intersection of Parkway and Whitehurst Freeway, 1992 (Jack Boucher/HABS)

Surrounding development, together with the wider, straighter roads required by automobiles, resulted in the elimination of the border roads and a general simplification of the parkway landscape. The number of entrances from Georgetown and Washington was also reduced. Proposed bridges at N and S streets were eliminated. These changes helped preserve scenery and minimize disruptions from entering and turning traffic, but they made the parkway function less like a local park and more like a thoroughfare between northwest Washington and the downtown. Still, when the parkway was completed, it contained numerous picnic areas and a well-used bridle path. The bridle path was converted into a multi-use trail in the 1970s.

FROM "PARK" TO "WAY"

Early plans for the parkway called for an elaborate network of carriage drives, pedestrian promenades, and bridle paths surrounded by an open, park-like setting. The wide bend south of P Street was to be developed into a public garden with benches, foot bridges, and picturesque overlooks. Designers believed this area was destined to become "the most beautiful park in the world." Stately formal avenues would parallel the parkway on both sides of the valley.

Newspaper coverage of the parkway's opening reflected the changing function of urban parkways in general and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway in particular. The *Washington Post*'s report characterized the parkway in its original role as a link between Potomac Park and Rock Creek Park. The *Post* rejoiced that motorists would be able to "drive through two famous parks without once leaving their natural grandeur." The *Evening Star*, however, emphasized the parkway's new function as a commuter route declaring:

Motorists from the Chevy Chase-Bethesda area will have the privilege of riding downtown through a veritable fairyland, a natural setting for nature's own worship, and not so much as a traffic light to impede progress. There is, perhaps, no city in the world offering so much beauty for those going to work.



Parkway South of Massachusetts Avenue, ca. 1937 (DCL)

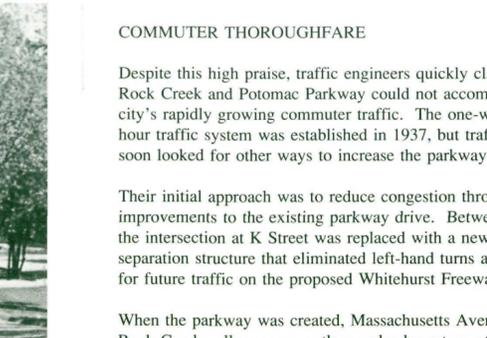
When the parkway was created, Massachusetts Avenue crossed Rock Creek valley on an earthen embankment constructed in 1900. This caused a severe bottleneck where the four-lane parkway drive shrank into a two-lane causeway that had been squeezed precariously into the culvert carrying Rock Creek under the embankment. Safety concerns and commuter complaints led to the erection of a handsome masonry-faced concrete bridge in 1941. The bridge solved the traffic problem and improved the parkway landscape by eliminating the unsightly embankment.

COMMUTER THOROUGHFARE

The biggest obstacle to smooth traffic flow occurred at the boundary between the parkway and the zoo. Since motorists used zoo roads to pass between the parkway and Rock Creek Park, this major link in the city's traffic system was cut off when the zoo closed at night. In addition, the road into the zoo crossed Rock Creek through a ford rather than on a bridge. This meant the link between the park and the parkway was also closed by heavy rains. Zoo officials long opposed plans to build a full-time roadway or connect the park and parkway with a tunnel under the zoo. An agreement was finally reached in 1960. The tunnel was completed in 1966.

These minor improvements did not increase the parkway's carrying capacity enough to suit District traffic officials. During the 1940s-50s they advanced various proposals for widening Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway into a major expressway and extending it through Rock Creek Park into Maryland. At the same time, they contemplated using the waterfront section of the parkway as part of an Inner Loop Freeway that would encircle downtown Washington with a ring of high-speed expressways.

Citizen protests and changing planning priorities defeated most of these proposals in the mid 1960s. Construction of the Washington subway system helped reduce pressure to expand the parkway into a high-volume expressway. The megalithic freeway ramps around K Street and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge are the two major artifacts of this era of transportation planning.

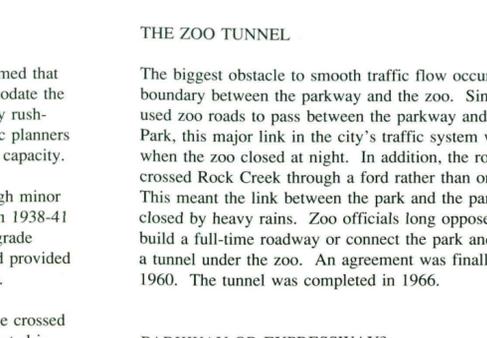


Zoo Tunnel, 1992 (Boucher/HABS)

Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway is one of America's best-preserved examples of early motor parkway design. Unlike most contemporary urban parkways, it survived the freeway-building era virtually intact. Its intimate scale, narrow roadway, sharp curves, slow speeds, abrupt entrances, and minimal median strips provide a rare glimpse of the transitional stage between yesterday's meandering carriage roads and today's efficient but visually bland modern motorways. The road itself may not satisfy modern expressway standards, but the present parkway landscape is even more heavily wooded than its designers had planned, and the multi-use trail is extremely popular with runners, walkers, and bicyclists.

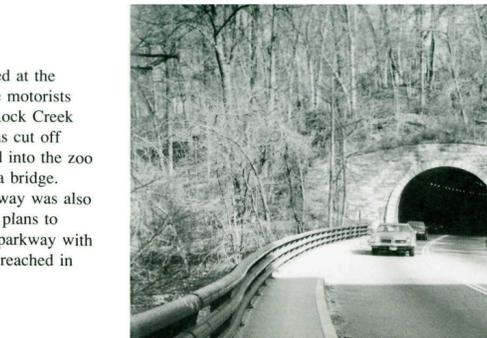
THE ZOO TUNNEL

Balancing the needs of commuters with the desire to preserve the parkway's scenic and recreational resources remains a formidable challenge for park managers and city planners.



P Street Bend Drawings by Robert Harvey and Robert Arzola, HABS 1992-3

PARKWAY OR EXPRESSWAY?

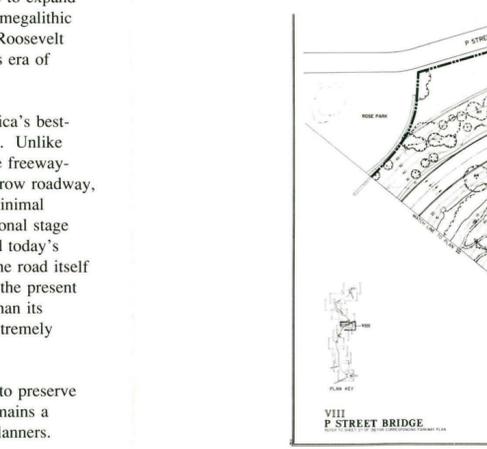


Zoo Tunnel, 1992 (Boucher/HABS)

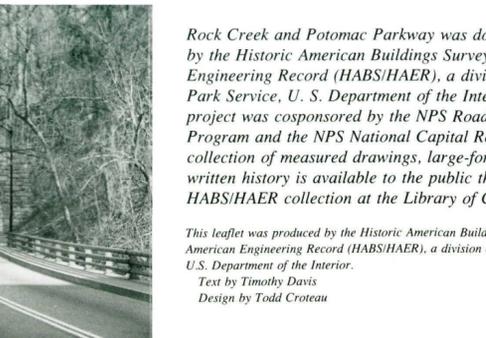
P STREET BRIDGE, 1935

HAER No. DC-48

P Street Bridge Drawing by Anthony Arcaro, HABS 1992



P Street Bend Drawings by Robert Harvey and Robert Arzola, HABS 1992-3

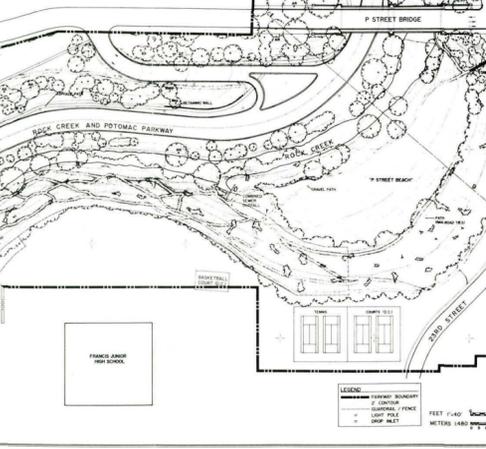


Zoo Tunnel, 1992 (Boucher/HABS)

P STREET BRIDGE, 1935

HAER No. DC-48

P Street Bridge Drawing by Anthony Arcaro, HABS 1992



P Street Bend Drawings by Robert Harvey and Robert Arzola, HABS 1992-3