

Meridian Hill Park
Sixteenth Street, north of Florida Avenue, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-532

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MERIDIAN HILL PARK

HABS No. DC-532

Location: Located approximately one and one-half miles north of the White House in Washington, District of Columbia, the park is bounded by Sixteenth Street on the west, Euclid Street on the north, Fifteenth Street on the east, and W Street on the south.

Present Owner and Use: Meridian Hill Park is a Federal park, owned and maintained by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of Interior.

Dates of Construction: 1912-1936

Statement of Significance: One of the first public parks in the United States to be designed as a formal park, generally considered to be in the continental tradition, rather than in the "natural" mode associated with the English park; Meridian Hill Park was constructed over a period of about twenty five years. Horace W. Peaslee, the architect in charge, based his work on a preliminary design by George Burnap, landscape architect. In this formal park the architectural and horticultural elements work together in a symbiotic manner. Under the guidance of the Commission of Fine Arts, the park benefited from the finest criticism of the day. The technologically innovative use of exposed aggregate concrete provided a facsimile of the stone and mosaic masonry traditionally employed in the Italian Garden. The Park represents an effort in a democratic society to match the major European city park. Located just outside of the original city at the first line of hills, and directly north of the White House, the park conforms to the plan proposed by Pierre Charles L'Enfant and his associates, and the plan proposed a century later by the Senate Park Commission, the Plan of 1901 (commonly called The McMillan Commission Plan).

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PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. The Site

1. Setting

Located above Florida Avenue just beyond the boundary of the L'Enfant city at the terminal moraine where the coastal plain gives way to the piedmont hills, the park rises about 75' in elevation from south to north. The designers of the park clearly followed the dictates of the topography in looking primarily to the Italian hill garden for guidance in designing the park. A high retaining wall divides the mall and promenade with its fine views of the city from the changing levels below, where the activity of the fountains and the cascade is resolved in the quiet pools at the southern end of the park. Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) drawing, HABS No. DC-532, Sheet No.5 out of 25, reproduces the topographic survey originally drawn up during early park development ca. 1916.

2. Name

The need to establish an official meridian, or longitudinal base point, for navigational purposes, map making, and scientific work was recognized during the earliest years of the republic, when it was still necessary to base calculations on celestial measurements taken from the established meridian at Greenwich, England. A paper presented to the Columbia Historical Society by John Stewart, a District of Columbia surveyor, in 1895 describes some of the early efforts to establish an official meridian within the District of Columbia from which measurements could more easily be taken. (John Stewart, "Early Maps and Surveyors of the City of Washington, D.C," Columbia Historical Society Records, 2) The 1792 rendition of the L'Enfant Plan, drawn up by Andrew Ellicott, is based on a meridian which Ellicott took at the longitude intended for the Capitol building.

On October 15, 1804, however, D. C. Surveyor Nicholas King reported that the "First Meridian of the U.S. ... which intersects the center of the north and south basement doors of the President's House..." had been established at Virginia Avenue, then a canal, on September 20, 1793. (Ibid., 68) On December 18, 1804 the "Jefferson Obelisk" was constructed to mark that same meridian. However, because it was used not only as a bench-mark, but also as a guy-post for barges,

it soon disintegrated according to Mr. Stewart. It was completely lost during the extension of Executive Avenue in 1872, but relocated and marked again in 1889. (Ibid., 70)

Apparently the Jefferson Obelisk was placed on the meridian which ran through the center of the White House, despite the view of Andrew Ellicott expressed in December of 1800 concerning the location of an appropriate official meridian at Washington. Ellicott is reported to have said: "The Capitol in the City of Washington stands at the intersection of the meridian, and the prime vertical center of North and South Avenue, may therefore be taken as the true meridian". Ellicott added that, "The positions of all leading avenues were determined by celestial observations and will be found in the 4th Volume of the Transactions of our Philosophical Society. February 5th, 1801." (Sally K. Alexander, "Life of Andrew Ellicott," Columbia Historical Society Records, 2:198)

The situation has been further confused by those who have equated the efforts to establish an official meridian at Washington with the placement of the District boundary stone at Jones Point by Mr. Ellicott on April 15, 1791. This stone was placed as a beginning point for the calculation of the lines of the District of Columbia. A meridian taken through this point would not have passed through the White House, although as knowledgeable a reporter as John Clagett Proctor seems to have thought that the longitude of the Jones Point stone would have coincided with a meridian taken through the White House. (See John Clagett Proctor. Articles, Washington Star: 30 September 1928, and 15 January 1939)

When David Porter purchased a farm of 157 acres just north of the White House where Meridian Hill Park is now located (c. 1815), he named his heights Meridian Hill because he thought that the "central meridian of the District passed through it". (Charles O. Paullin, "Washington the Old Navy," Columbia Historical Society Records, 33-34:176) In about 1816, Commodore Porter asked his architect, reputedly George Hadfield, to construct his mansion near the brow of the hill in line with the White House so that, "the entrance door...was directly north of the center door of the President's House. On the edge of the south lawn, in close proximity to the house,...[he] placed the meridian stone." (John Clagett Proctor, "Commodore Porter was dirt farmer in Meridian Hill", Sunday Star, 3 September 1928) The stone was "...wrought and near 2 feet across and of the same height. The north edge of it was

circular, and upon it was afterwards placed a brass sundial. From this stone Meridian Hill records its name." (Ibid.) The stone was removed when Sixteenth Street was extended. At that time it was placed at the southwest corner of Fourteenth and R Streets, N.W., to be used as a carriage step. (John Clagett Proctor, Washington Star, 30 September 1928). Its whereabouts is now unknown. A plaque at the Sixteenth Street entrance to the upper park takes official recognition of the earlier meridian marker, which was located 52'9" west of the present park entrance in what is now Sixteenth Street.

The only official United States meridian was set at the Naval Observatory in Foggy Bottom in 1850, where the instruments for measurement were located. Originally planned for navigational and scientific purposes, the outcry from map and chart makers who had based their measurements on the Greenwich meridian was so great that the Washington meridian was, in fact, used only for scientific purposes, as well as the establishment of the north-south boundaries of the new western states, but not for navigational purposes.

By 1893 when the Naval Observatory moved to Massachusetts Avenue, the idea of having our own meridian had fallen by the wayside. In fact, Greenwich had been accepted as the official meridian for the United States in 1883.

3. Design summary (See Part II for a detailed description of Design Development)

The architectural structure of the park precedes the planting plan, both chronologically and conceptually. The planting plan conforms to the architectural forms, working with the forms in a contrapuntal composition.

Meridian Hill Park is constructed around an axis which runs from a center point at the northern end of the park slightly eastward from a north-south line, across the great terrace, down the cascade, and terminates at the exedra south of the reflecting pool. The axis points in a southeasterly direction for better use of the lower part of the park which is skewed to the east. This divergence from the north-south line, and thus the line of Sixteenth Street, is not readily apparent from within the park. Nor is the symmetry of the axis readily apparent, because the park is designed to avoid situations in which the viewer sees the park directly from the central axis. In this manner the polarity of the central axis is softened.

The open lawn of the upper mall is bordered by two walkways designed to converge at the proposed concert pavilion. The east walkway was named the Monument Vista Walk because originally the axis from that walk provided the best view of the Washington Monument. This is evident in HABS No. DC-532, sheet 1 out of 25, which shows the design of the park within the framework of city streets. The west walkway was called the Concert Promenade. On either side of these formal promenades, two informal pathways pass through the wooded fringes at both sides of the park, and provide quiet spaces and shaded sitting areas.

The rusticated, round-arched doorway of the Sixteenth Street entrance to the mall leads into an elegant, tunnel vaulted flight of stairs. A graceful, wrought iron lantern hangs from the ceiling of the groin-vaulted landing. Ahead a grotto niche encrusted with stalagmite forms contained a trickle of water falling from below a hooded, female face in shallow relief. Light comes in through a high, semi-circular window to the left. Making a quarter turn to the right, one emerges into the upper mall from an open stairway facing south. The stairway was designed to be softened by hanging vines from above. Directly in front of the stairway, a pleached allee of linden trees leads to the great terrace. The great terrace terminates the upper portion of the park, and forms the major cross axis of the park. It is marked at each end by great bowl fountains. The panoramic view from the

terrace was unfortunately diminished as early as 1919 by the construction of the first apartment building south of the park.

The facade of the great wall supporting the great terrace shows a tri-partite central motif reminiscent of the renaissance triumphal arch, but derived originally from the Roman triumphal arch. The fountains in the arched niches and the basin into which they flow, provide the source of water for the cascade below, and bring out the quality of water as it rises from fountains and falls again into the basins. Two niches beyond the central motif provide entranceways to the restrooms and the park service maintenance space, including the pump control room. Near the ends of the great wall, two additional fountain niches mark the entrances to the great paired stairways where the east and west ascents reach the great wall.

Below, the series of basins of increasing size, width and height form the cascade to the lower level. Bordered on either side by stepped walls and walks, the cascade was originally to have been enclosed by high clipped holly walls. Within the informal woods, or boscos, which border the cascade on either side, a straight ascent on the west and a curving path on the east provide alternatives to the paths adjacent to the cascade. A cross-axis, which earlier had included a bridge over the cascade, continues a visual link between the Dante sculpture on the east-ascent and the Sixteenth Street overlook west of the west-ascent.

The large reflecting pool of the lower garden receives the flow of water from the basin below the cascade. A final cross-axis is formed by the entrance to the lower garden from Sixteenth Street on the west, the reflecting pool, and the Buchanan Memorial situated on the east. South of the reflecting pool, the exedra, the former location of the armillary sphere, forms the southern terminus for the major north-south axis. The park is completed on the south by a low wall topped by a balustrade of alternating solid and open panels.

Considered in elevation, a proposed concert pavilion would have stood at the center of the great terrace, high over the cascade. The center of the lower edge of the entablature of the concert pavilion would have formed the meeting point of the projection of the lines of the lower set of paired stairs set against the great wall. Clearly the much smaller statue of Joan of Arc, which occupies that location now, cannot substitute in scale for the concert pavilion.

A double retaining wall was built along Sixteenth Street to support the height required for the upper terrace, and also to disguise the immensity of the wall from Sixteenth Street. The Sixteenth Street elevation shows two entrances and a fountain niche located just below the Sixteenth end of the great terrace. The entrance to the mall area is described above. The lower Sixteenth Street gateway is framed by elaborate urns skillfully cast. The niche which replaced the monumental, mannerist entrance originally planned at the great wall is similar in style to the main entrance from Sixteenth Street to the upper mall. As shown in the early profile drawings, the original Sixteenth Street entrances were mannerist in style. Those elaborately rusticated pedimented entrances became more classical in the final design. The surfaces have been smoothed, ashlar has been substituted for rough stone, and the engaged pilasters have become less muscular.

As the design was modified, the original flamboyant rustication was replaced by more restrained, classical forms. The two decorative niches at the northern end of the park, which mark the northern termini of the formal promenades, were designed in an even purer, more Vitruvian style than the great wall and the Sixteenth Street entrances and fountain.

B. Plans and Planners

1. The L'Enfant Plan, executed by Andrew Ellicott, 1792

The significance of the topography as a determinant of the site plan was noted in a previous section. The park is also well located when considered in the context of the two great plans which have helped to give form to Washington as it evolved: the L'Enfant Plan and the McMillan Commission Plan. The French engineer, Charles Pierre L'Enfant, hired by George Washington to formulate the basic plan for the city, shrewdly followed the dictates of its topography. Located at the junction of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers the city is bounded to the north by an arc of hills. Major focal points and cross axes were determined by the location of the hills, the rivers and the high points within the city. Two high points were chosen as the location for two (of the three) most important governmental institutions: the President's House and the House of Congress. The major axes of the L'Enfant Plan extended west from the Capitol and south from the White House. (Marking the apparent crossing of these axes but actually located just under 500' to the east, the Washington monument would become an important element in focusing the direction of walkways within Meridian Hill Park: because of its off-axis location it would not become a major focus for the park.) The park is located approximately one and one-half miles north of the White House on the east side of Sixteenth Street, which forms the northern extension of the White House axis. (See HABS No. DC-532, Sheet 1 out of 25)

2. Senate Park Commission Plan of 1901 (The McMillan Commission Plan)

Following many years of neglect, a resurgence of interest in city and park planning was probably triggered by the celebration of the city's centennial at the turn of the century. Generated in part by the success of Chicago's beautiful White City, product of the new collaboration between architects and landscape architects at the World's Fair of 1893, the ferment of ideas brought about new plans for the capital city, and especially for the monumental core area. However, the plans proposed at the celebration of the centennial were found lacking by the country's most able architects who were meeting at the same time in convention. United States Senator James McMillan the knowledgeable and able chairman of the Senate Committee

on the District of Columbia, was urged by his secretary, Charles Moore, who would become a key player in the new plan for Washington, to respond to the concern being expressed by the architects at their convention. Influenced by the climate of rising expectations, and apparently, appalled by the prospect of the construction of a new railway station planned for the Pennsylvania Railroad along its tracks which ran in front of the Capitol across L'Enfant's Mall, McMillan persuaded the Committee to establish a new commission to make recommendations for the development of Washington. The commission, officially called the Senate Park Commission, but commonly known as the McMillan Commission, was to be composed of a distinguished architect and a distinguished landscape architect who, together, would appoint a third member. Named to the McMillan Commission were Daniel Burnham, who had been chief architect for the Chicago World's Fair grounds, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., landscape architect and son of the innovative landscape architect who had changed the face of our cities and parks. Architect Charles F. McKim was chosen by the other two members to join them. The sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens was added to the Commission several months later. Charles Moore became secretary to the Commission.

Following careful study of the L'Enfant Plan, and a trip to Europe to learn about European precedents for parks for city-wide use, the McMillan Commission submitted its report in January of 1902. Officially called the Plan of 1901 for Washington, it reasserted the basic authority of the L'Enfant Plan, confirming the classical Mall vista; it extended the concepts of the plan beyond the original city boundaries by joining the park system with the city plan within the city and extended the park plan into the region. The McMillan Commission regarded Sixteenth Street as the northern portal comparable to the Piazza del Popolo in Rome. (Commission of Fine Arts, Tenth Report) The published plan of the McMillan Commission shows a park located above Florida Avenue straddling Sixteenth Street. The creation of Meridian Hill Park would realize at least the eastern half of the proposed park. Henderson Castle then occupied a good portion of the western section. The Commission went out of existence following the completion of its report in early 1902.

3. The Commission of Fine Arts

The McMillan Commission's Plan of 1901 for Washington became the second great formative plan for the capital city. Daniel Burnham and Charles McKim saw the need to protect and implement the recommendations of the plan

following the dissolution of the Commission. Acting as unofficial guardians of the plan, they urged the establishment of an agency to protect and implement the plan. In 1910, the Fine Arts Commission was created "...to meet the growing need for a permanent body to advise the government on matters pertaining to the arts; and particularly, to guide the architectural development of Washington so that the capital city would reflect, in stateliness and grandeur, the emergence of the United States as a world power." (Commission of Fine Arts, A Brief History, 1) In addition to its specific duties, the Commission of Fine Arts became the unofficial guardian and implementor of the McMillan Commission Plan and, therefore, of the L'Enfant Plan. Daniel Burnham was appointed its first chairman. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Charles Moore were also appointed to the first Commission. (Moore would become its chairman in 1915 and remain chairman until 1937, throughout the development of Meridian Hill Park.) The Fine Arts Commission would take a major role in the decision to construct a park on Meridian Hill, would monitor the design development by the U. S. Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, and would oversee construction and development for some thirty years, well into the 1940s.

4. Planning for the Park: Earlier Plans, Land Acquisition, and Mary Foote Henderson

Following the destruction by fire in 1863 of the mansion said to have been designed by George Hadfield, the site was subdivided. A part became the Wayward Seminary for the education of "colored" preachers and teachers. Twenty-five years later a building permit was issued to Senator John B. Henderson for the construction of a dwelling on the west side of Sixteenth Street above Florida Avenue, old Boundary Street. Henderson Castle, the first building of the new era to be constructed in the Meridian Hill subdivision, was demolished in 1949. The site remained vacant until 1976 when 213 row houses were constructed on the former site of the castle. All that remains today of the castle is the boundary wall along Sixteenth Street.

For forty-three years the Hendersons, and following her husband's death, Mary Foote Henderson would direct the development of Sixteenth Street. Mrs. Henderson was engaged in "...buying blocks of real estate, building elaborate residences to sell as embassies, and promoting the construction of Meridian Hill Park. Her scheme was to create a grand Avenue of the Presidents." (Commission of Fine Arts, Sixteenth Street Architecture, 1: 325) George Oakley Totten, Jr., her

architect, designed nearly a dozen buildings on Sixteenth and Fifteenth Streets in the vicinity of Meridian Hill Park to enhance the area for diplomatic uses. In addition, Totten purchased and reconstructed H. H. Richardson's Warder house, originally located at 1515 K Street, N.W., and placed it at 2633 Sixteenth Street in the garden of the residence he had built for himself on Fifteenth Street.

Although Mrs. Henderson promoted the construction of Meridian Hill Park with vigor, the site had been considered for some other, mostly bizarre, projects, some of which received Mrs. Henderson's special support. (ibid., 1:326) For example, in 1900 a colossal Presidential Mansion was proposed for Meridian Hill to replace the existing White House. (ibid., 1:326-327) Later the site was considered, among others, by the Commission of Fine Arts for the construction of a memorial to Abraham Lincoln. John Russell Pope, who would later design two neo-classical neighbors of the park, the White-Meyer residence at 1624 Crescent Place and Meridian House at 1630 Crescent Place was chosen as designer. Pope's 1911 design for the Lincoln Memorial would have recalled the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus as it straddled Sixteenth Street. Mrs. Henderson continued to support that location for the Lincoln Memorial after the Commission of Fine Arts had recommended the Potomac site, even though she had earlier, and would later, support urban park construction for the same site. (U.S. Congress, House, Committee of the District of Columbia, Statement by Mrs. J.B.Henderson in support of S. 5289, 1906)

Meridian Hill Park was acquired by purchase in accordance with the Act of June 25, 1910. (Sec. 36 of Buildings Act, 36 Stat. 700)

Without the persistence and enthusiasm of Mrs. Henderson the park might not have been completed. She was effective in persuading the Congress to complete its appropriation of funds. Following her death the Commission of Fine Arts recognized Mrs. Henderson as a woman who had the vision to see the hill opposite her home as "an American counterpart of an Italian garden." The Report continued: "Persistently she labored during four decades, persuading and convincing Senators and Representatives; single handed and alone she appeared before committees of Congress to urge approval for the work of development. She won." (Commission of Fine Arts, Twelfth Report, July 1, 1929 - December 31, 1934, 84)

C. Landscape Architects and Designers

1. George Burnap

George Burnap, landscape architect for the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, Washington, D.C., designed the first plan for Meridian Hill Park. It was approved by the Commission of Fine Arts for submission to Congress in 1914. (See below, PART IIA, for Burnap Plan.) The baroque design for the upper level of Burnap's plan would later be transformed into an open mall, and Burnap's elaborate design for the lower park would be simplified. However, Burnap's plan was important because it set the form which the park would take. Burnap's plan proposed the great wall, the cascade below, and the quiet pools of the lower level.

Burnap was the author of the classic study, Parks: Their Design, Equipment and Use, which was to be the first volume of a series of four on landscape architecture. Burnap contributed many well-designed parks to Washington, D.C. where his extensive knowledge was put to good use. Although his designs were theoretically based, he was a pragmatic designer, who recognized the importance of acknowledging pedestrian and vehicular traffic patterns, and required that sculpture be suitable to the park as a livable place for park users. As a professor at Cornell University, Burnap became acquainted with his student, Horace Peaslee, and after Burnap left Cornell to join the U. S. Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, he asked Peaslee to join him as an assistant in that office, where Peaslee received an appointment as Landscape Designer. When George Burnap left the OPBG in 1917 due to a conflict which arose between his public and private practice, Horace Peaslee succeeded him as Landscape Architect and as Architect of Meridian Hill Park.

2. Horace Peaslee

Horace W. Peaslee was the primary architect of Meridian Hill Park. After graduating from Cornell University in 1910, Peaslee remained as a resident fellow during the year 1911-1912. Following his appointment to the United States Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, Horace Peaslee accompanied Burnap and members of the Fine Arts Commission to Italy, France, and Switzerland for a study of major European parks in 1914. By 1915 Peaslee was in charge of Meridian Hill Park. Later, he described his responsibilities: "From a beginning as Landscape Architectural Designer in 1915, through successive stages as Landscape Architect, and then Architect of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, and finally as Architect or Consulting

Architect in independent practice, I either personally prepared, or directly supervised the preparation of all drawings for the visible construction of this park and I drafted the specifications covering visible design..." (Peaslee, Affidavit, 3 October 1946. American Institute of Architects Archives, Washington, D.C., RG 804, SR 5, Box 17, Folder 4) Although responsibility for "general and detailed architectural design" rested in Peaslee's hands from 1917 to 1935, the invisible structural and mechanical elements were the obligation of the government engineers.

Horace Peaslee had a broad interest in the design, planning, and development of the capital city. He contributed an enormous amount of time and energy to public issues ranging from saving Great Falls from development into a tamed power falls, to working to provide good housing for all citizens within the city. He was the associate organizer, director and secretary of the Allied Architects of Washington between 1924 and 1934. This group worked to see that architects of outstanding capability were chosen to design public buildings. As a member of the Subcommittee on Architecture of the American Civic Association, he helped form the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, a citizens' group concerned with planning, parks, and design, where he served as vice chairman until his death in 1959. As chairman of its architecture subcommittee, he made the first plea for the formation of an official planning group to protect the federal interest in the federal city. He worked with the American Institute of Architects as chairman of its Committee on the National Capital for more than a decade. He organized and ran a group, called the Architects' Advisory Council, composed of outstanding architects who agreed to volunteer time on a regular basis to review each private application for a building permit submitted voluntarily to them as a jury before submission to the District of Columbia. (The Commission of Fine Arts reviewed applications for the construction of all public buildings.) This free architectural advice undoubtedly produced a beneficial effect on the streetscapes of the District of Columbia, by setting standards for streetscapes and for buildings, and by rating proposed buildings according to those standards during the decade of the Council's operation, 1922 to 1932. (William Bushong, "Fellowship and Fraternity", Chapter 3, Part I, Centennial History of the Washington Chapter, 1887-1987, The American Institute of Architects 52) Peaslee was also deeply concerned with maintaining the building height limits in the District of Columbia. Despite these many public commitments, Peaslee also left a significant legacy of private building and remodeling in Washington.

3. John J. Earley

What made the accomplishment of Meridian Hill Park possible in the Italian tradition where structure and planting worked together to form an integrated architectural landscape was the development of innovative means for using concrete and selected washed aggregate to form surfaces possessing a richness of color and texture comparable to the stonework and mosaic of a sixteenth century Italian garden.

The concrete work was begun by John J. Earley. Mr. Earley was an architectural sculptor, the fifth in line in his family. He had apprenticed in his father's studio in Rosslyn, Virginia, where he specialized in ecclesiastical sculpture. He later entered the contracting business specializing in plaster and stucco work. In 1906 his work led him to study the possibilities of concrete using an exposed aggregate. Attracted by the use of color in Byzantine architecture, he studied the possibilities of what he called "plastic mosaic". He was noted for his artistic sensitivity and a high standard of craftsmanship. Mr. Earley and Mr. Peaslee both insisted upon a high standard of workmanship and both possessed the patience to achieve it. This shared determination was certainly essential to the achievement of the high quality of the exposed aggregate concrete construction of Meridian Hill Park. (obituary, Journal of the American Concrete Institute, January 1946: 8,9. A list of Earley's papers published by the Institute is included in this obituary)

Earley went on to design prefabricated mosaic and relief panels of outstanding quality during the 1930s. The polychrome mosaic panels were regularly incorporated into the buildings of the architectural firm of Porter and Lockie. An example of Earley's mosaic work can be seen (in 1987) at the entrance to the Walker Building at 734 Fifteenth Street, N.W. A large number of Earley panels were incorporated into the U.S. Treasury Building. Earley also designed perforated panels for the Star Parking building, formerly located on Tenth Street, N.W., but demolished in 1984. (Hans Wirz & Richard Striner, Washington Deco: Art Deco in the Nation's Capital, 64,66,78-79)

Like Frank Lloyd Wright and other designers of the 1930s, Earley sought to design a building system which would provide well-designed, low-cost housing within reach of every American family. Earley believed that this objective could be achieved by mass producing prefabricated concrete panel houses of good design and simple maintenance. (ibid., 61)

4. Ferruccio Vitale

Ferruccio Vitale was particularly well qualified to be chief designer for the planting plan for Meridian Hill Park both because of his family heritage as an Italian designer and because of his sustained interest in urban planning.

Born in Florence and educated in Italy, he first came to the United States in 1898 when he was appointed military attache at the Italian Embassy. Within a few years, however, he had resigned his commission in the military and decided to devote himself to landscape architecture. For generations his mother's family, the Barbaros, had been patrons and scholars at the University of Padua and in the vicinity of Venice.

Vitale studied landscape at Florence, Turin and Paris. Following his graduation, he worked in the office of his father who was described as an architect of "distinction and brilliance."

In 1904 he returned to the United States and went into practice in New York City. He became chief designer for the planting plan of Meridian Hill Park in January of 1919. His plan was approved in July of the same year. In 1927 he was appointed by President Calvin Coolidge to the Commission of Fine Arts, where he continued to take an active part in the development of Meridian Hill Park. (obituaries, Dictionary of American Biography; New York Times, 27 February 1933)

PART II. DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

A. Major Phases of Design Development

1. 1914. The Burnap plan

A print of National Archives drawing, RG 79(41-62) shows Burnap's 1914 Plan. NA envelope RG 79(41-71) contains profile sketches of this plan by Horace Peaslee, including a profile sketch in color dated 1913, which already shows the cascade and the great wall.

George Burnap's plan, approved by the Commission of Fine Arts in 1914, set the basic contours for the park. The plan and the sketch profiles show the horizontal upper park extending south to the great terrace. A great wall supports the terrace; below the great wall the ground falls rapidly toward the lower terrace. This form lent itself to treatment in the Italian villa idiom. The baroque design of the upper park includes a fountain within a formal octagonal garden, drives for open carriages, customary vehicles in 1913 for concert attendance, and, depicted in the profile sketches, a concert pavilion located above the upper Sixteenth Street entrance. The great terrace provides a commanding view of the White House, the Washington Monument, the Potomac River and the Virginia hills beyond. The dramatic form of the great retaining wall rises above the descending basins of water, which form the cascade carrying the water down between the areas proposed for boscos to the reflecting pools of the lower terrace garden. A bridge midway down the cascade connects the two boscos with their swirling paths and leads to a small, oval concert space to the east.

In 1914 Mr. Burnap, Mr. Peaslee, and members of the Commission of Fine Arts, notably Charles Moore who would become Chairman of the Commission in 1915, travelled to France, Switzerland, and Italy to study garden design. The Burnap Plan and the sketch profiles, however, must have preceded this trip because as mentioned above the 1914 drawings were already based on Italian design concepts. To implement these concepts, supporting elements had been put in place. For example, a double retaining wall had been developed parallel to Sixteenth Street to support the mall and great terrace. In order to provide screening to reduce the visual impact of a wall reaching almost 50' at its highest, planting space between the walls was provided for screening.

The pleached allee, above, which would become the

Linden walk, would also survive. On the other hand, the monumental Sixteenth Street entrance, which led directly to the great terrace, would later be dropped. This entrance, sketched in many different forms, basically consisted of a great pedimented doorway resting on vigorously rusticated pilasters, framed by two lesser elements. It was a mannerist representation of the ancient triumphal arch motif. The entire baroque design of the upper park, including the circular carriage drive, the fountain and the formal garden which surrounded it, and the music pavilion would all later be eliminated.

In guiding the Commission of Fine Arts over the ground proposed for the Park, George Burnap had suggested that the park should become a ". . . general congregating point, attracting visitors from all over the city. . . ." The design was to include, ". . . open plazas and easy circulation, -accessibility, - a music concourse similar to that of Pincian Hill, -and an auto entrance with provision for parking motors." Mr Burnap also noted that there could be "no strong axial relation with the Washington Monument, . . . [and pointed out that] the site, with its sharp grades, suggest[ed] formal and architectural design" (Commission of Fine Arts, Minutes, 4 April 1913)

2. 1917 Plan: 30 June 1917

See National Archives drawing RG 79(41-57).

When Mr. Burnap returned to private practice in 1917, Mr. Peaslee became architect in charge of Meridian Hill Park. Mr. Peaslee continued in that capacity in both public and private practice until the park's completion, and beyond in an unofficial capacity. Many changes had been made between 1914 and 1917, but by 1917 the park was beginning to take its final form. Peaslee's 1917 plan shows a vastly simplified upper park, now much more French in ancestry than Italian. The baroque parterres and carriage drive had been replaced by a plain turf mall. On the upper terrace, two formal promenades converge as they approach the great terrace, and enclose the proposed concert pavilion. Below the great terrace, the cascade basins increase in width and height as they approach the lower garden, and the adjacent flanking walks diverge. These convergences, or divergences depending upon the direction from which they are viewed, produce a forced perspective which operates in either direction to increase apparent distances. Cars and carriages had been removed from the upper park, except for the provision of parking along Fifteenth Street opposite Chapin Street. At that time even the provision of a small amount of parking was innovative.

Some features of the 1914 plan, still shown in the 1917 plan, including the cherished concert pavilion, the strong cross axis at the cascade with its bridge, and the small concert oval below the wall on the east near Fifteenth Street, would later disappear. The Buchanan Memorial, which had earlier been located south of the reflecting pool on axis with the cascade, appears here in its final location.

3. Profiles, sections and the concert pavilion

1 March 1918. NA RG 66(33), not included among drawings duplicated for this document.
Design for concert pavilion: NA RG79(41-74)
National Park Service, National Capital Region
drawing, 41-81, FR/1, elevations: Great Terrace

These profiles and sections illustrate the critical role which the proposed concert pavilion played in the park design. Although the pavilion design was based on a tempietto at the Villa Borghese in Rome (see, Design Precedents, PART IIB), it was to serve a much more public function, and was, therefore, a proportionately larger structure with columns measuring approximately one third higher. Placed above the cascade, beyond the grand terrace, it provided a focus from below the cascade. From the northern terminus of the park it also supplied a destination, marked the beginning of the terrace and, by implication, the imminent drop and cascade to the lower garden. This pavilion, had it been built, would have completed the triangle suggested by the lines of the paired staircases against the great wall.

4. The (final) simplified Plan, 30 July 1920.

HABS No. DC-532, Sheet 2 of 25 based on NA RG79(41-6), plan includes the landscape plan of Vitale, Brinckerhoff, and Geiffert, Landscape Architects. See PART IIA7, below.

The original drawing on which HABS Sheet 2 is based shows a handwritten note, dated August 1922, stating that it is understood by all parties that this drawing is "to be followed". The bridge over the cascade and the small, oval amphitheater are gone and the cross axis is diminished. The lower garden and the reflecting pool composition have been simplified, and although changes remain to be made, it can be said that the plan has achieved its final form.

The simplified plan of 1920 had been preceded by intensive work on the part of the architects. In January of 1919 the Office of Public Buildings and

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Grounds had submitted 94 sketches and drawings to the Commission of Fine Arts showing proposed treatments of the cascade and the basins, the hillside gardens, the Chapin Street entrance, the promenade terrace including details of east and west ends, and details of the great wall with its service spaces and toilet rooms, the wall along W Street, the Sixteenth Street entrance and lower garden, the music pavilion, the terminal motifs along Euclid Street. The sketches were carefully studied by the Commission of Fine Arts. Notes were written directly onto the sketches. (CFA, Minutes, 8 January 1919) Meanwhile, the planting plan of Vitale, Brinckerhoff and Geiffert had been approved by the Commission and was incorporated into the 1920 plan.

During the summer of 1919, construction began on the Roosevelt apartment/hotel located just south of the park. Foreseeing the potential damage to the commanding view of the Capitol from the only park located on the ring of hills surrounded the L'Enfant city (a location explained why Congress had purchased the land for park development), Charles Moore, Mrs. Henderson and others had tried to limit the height of buildings fronting on the south side of the park. Bills had been introduced. Building to 85', then allowable, would have, and eventually did, result in an elevation 11' higher than the great terrace. Moore had brought to the attention of D.C. Engineer Commissioner Lt. Col. C. W. Kutz the threat which the construction of a building to 85' would bring, but Kutz parried that since no official request to build had been received, it would be unwise to object and such action would adversely affect establishment of zoning regulations. (Letter 3/10/19, files, National Archives, NA RG66, Entry 17, project files, Box 104)

The Roosevelt was given a permit to build (#819) on August 5, 1919. The permit application had been dated July 29, 1919, and, curiously, a transcript copy of the permit to build was added on October 16, 1922. The permits are printed, but the "number of feet in height from sidewalk to highest part of roof at front", 85', is inked in. The permit apparently originally read 76'. (ibid., Letter, Board of Commissioners of D.C. to Sen. Lawrence Y. Sherman, 9 September 1919, and DC Building Permit # 819)

On September 4, 1919, Senator James D. Phelan introduced S. 2945, a bill to limit the height of the building to 75'. On September 15th, the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia requested Senator Lawrence Y. Sherman to propose an amendment to the bill which would reduce the maximum limit to 67'. About the same time the record contains a number of assertions on the part of the builders that the building would be restricted

to 77'. Senator Phelan had been convinced by the builders that the building would be constructed to 77' as indicated in a letter to Charles Moore dated September 12, 1919. (ibid.) Phalen then suggested that elevating the park by 2' would be better than reducing or limiting the height of the Roosevelt!

On November 1, 1919 House joint resolution No. 197 to regulate the heights of buildings on certain streets in the District of Columbia was referred to the House Calendar having been reported favorably by unanimous vote. It would have held the line at 75', but the bill was not destined to go further. In January of 1920 a final attempt to reduce the allowable height from 85' was made when Senator Sheppard proposed an amendment to H.R. 6863, known as the zoning bill, to include a restriction on the height of the proposed apartment building. Unfortunately, this amendment was withdrawn because Senator Jones stated that he would oppose the amendment and keep the zoning bill from passing if the amendment were included. Mr. Jones then added that it would be more useful to condemn "a building across Sixteenth Street to the west of [the park], which does cut a very great part of the view from Meridian Hill; but [he said] I judge that if Congress were to attempt to do that, those who are opposing the construction of this building would object very strenuously, indeed." (Congressional Record, 27 January 1920, 2226) The Senator from Georgia then proposed that all the walls at Meridian Hill Park be removed to improve the view. (ibid.)

The Roosevelt, a handsome building designed by Appleton P. Clark, was destined to become one of Washington's most elegant residences; it now serves as housing for the elderly. The only concession made to those who wished to restrict the height was the omission of a proposed rooftop pergola and restaurant with seating for three hundred. When in 1964 Meridian Towers apartments, an undistinguished building, was constructed to ten stories in what had been the elegant garden and dining terrace of the Roosevelt, no objections seem to have been raised.

5. Design Development during the 1920s and 1930s

In 1923 following the completion of the upper mall (but not yet the great wall and terrace), attention turned to the lower terrace and garden. However, work did not progress without difficulties. Unfortunately, as early as 1926, Mr. Peaslee had reported that vandals had deliberately disturbed the plantings. (Letter to Gen. U. S. Grant, III, June 3, 1926) This problem would continue to plague those responsible for planning and maintaining the park.

The most pressing problem was, however, the shortage of funds. Commission minutes for 17 February 1927 state that Mr. Moore had been before the Subcommittee on Appropriations of the Senate District Committee with a plea that funds be approved for the completion of the lower gardens. It seems probable that about this time the concert pavilion fell victim to the funding problems. In 1927 the elaborate entrance from 16th Street at the great terrace was eliminated, after Mr. Charles Platt of the Commission of Fine arts stated that the plans for the entrance did not yet show how the entrance would connect with the great terrace. Mr. Platt, Mr Vitale and others decided that ". . . access to the terrace at this place would be detrimental to it rather than an advantage." (CFA, Minutes, 14/15 April 1927).

Members of Congress expressed opposition to the original design for the wall at the south end of the park along W Street, which was perceived as being offensive to pedestrians on W Street. This question was resolved in March of 1927 when the decision was made to keep the wall to 4'6" with an open balustrade above. Corner entrances to the street were provided, which would be joined inside the park by a walkway. The exterior sidewalk adjacent to the park would be minimized. The resolution of this difference with Congress was apparently important to the resolution of funding problems.

Despite its early approval, the Buchanan Memorial had not yet been put in place by the mid-1920s. However, it was hoped that once the framework of the lower garden was complete, the Memorial would be constructed and would add to the prestige of the park. Work had proceeded slowly due to the lack of funds, but by 1928 the structural elements were generally in place for the lower garden including the Buchanan Memorial. Although the Buchanan Memorial had been located, an overall plan and agreement on the location of all other memorials were still lacking. (CFA, Minutes,

28 May 1929)

Beginning in 1928 appropriations were increased to \$92,554 from \$23,130 in 1927. Major structural work including the great terrace, the great wall and the cascade was accomplished between 1928 and 1932 inclusive, when a total of \$500,000 was expended. In 1928 the Commission and the architect were busy working out plans for the great wall and the great terrace, including a design for the fountain motif to replace the abandoned Sixteenth Street terrace entrance.

During the first two years of the 1930s, attention focused on the construction of the cascade (or series of basins as Peaslee liked to think of it). As was the case with all parts of the structural design, many possibilities were considered in great detail. In the case of the cascade, for example, the Commission and the architect considered whether the cascade should be maintained at the original width or be reduced to relate better to the width of the exedra, or semi-circular form, which faced it from across the reflecting pool to the south. Did the level of the lower terrace relate properly in elevation to the source of the cascade and to the fountains of the great wall, providing just the right angle to achieve the optimum view of each from the other? At this time the matter of designing appropriate lighting for the cascade and pools below was also given careful attention. Strong lighting emanating from indirect sources was to become a successful and innovative element of the park design.

In 1933 the park was transferred from the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds to the National Park Service. However, during 1933, 1934 and 1935 there were no appropriations made, and work came to a standstill. Fortunately, additional allotments were provided by the Public Works Administration which made possible the completion of the park by providing \$145,000. Just prior to the official opening of the park in the fall of 1936, Mr Peaslee addressed an important memorandum to Mr. Malcolm Kirkpatrick of the National Park Service stressing the urgent need for improved planting, and stating that he considered the planting plan to be inadequately implemented. Peaslee urged the planting of "interrupting masses" close against the low walls of the west and east ascents to break what he saw as the insistence of the "thin-stepped walls". He wrote, "I feel disturbed about the lack of close relationship of the main lines of design as expressed in the structure and the planting. As I recall Vitale's plan, the hedges enframing the cascade

motif were placed snugly against the walls of the vertical accents in the same line of planting." (Peaslee, Summary Memoranda: July 23rd and August 4, 1936) The close relationship which Peaslee sought between the architectural elements and the plantings was characteristic of the sixteenth-century Italian villas which Peaslee had admired when seeking sources for Meridian Hill Park in Italy.

Faults, particularly in the landscape plan, were evident to the expert eye of Horace Peaslee, and, infact, the landscape plan had not, and probably will never be implemented as originally planned. This is due in part to continuing problems of vandalism, and concern for the public safety, which has discouraged planting of just the kinds of private spaces found in Italian parks. However, the planting program may have reached its apogee by the time the park was officially opened on September 26, 1936. In any case miracles had been accomplished. The complex and innovative architectural work was complete, and as is evident from the description below, the gardens must have been splendid.

The higher portion of the park features a play mall, executed in the French manner - with broad promenades flanked by heavy mass plantings. The promenade is provided with carefully spaced seats, placed against a high hemlock hedge. At the outer edge of the planting mass are walks of lesser importance, paralleling the principal walks. The secondary walks are likewise provided with benches in formal arrangement, but in this instance a pleasant relief is afforded by the trees planted on either side, completely arching the walks and affording a shaded retreat that subdues formality.

The Sixteenth Street entrance to the higher portion of the park is by means of a half-open stairway with overhanging masses of wisteria . . . From [the great] . . . terrace, shaded by American elms and cooled by two great fountains which stand as sentinels at its eastern and western extremities, can be obtained excellent vistas of the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument, the central area of the Federal City, and the Potomac Valley as it finds its way to the South. [Gartside notes the striking effect of the tumbling water of the cascade.] On either side of the cascades are parallel walks, bordered by close plantings of shrubs. Oriental plane trees in sym-

metrical rows shade the hillside, and a ground cover of periwinkle has been substituted for lawn to prevent erosion.

[The lower terrace] features tall hedges with close planting of shrubs and evergreens in the adjacent areas." (Frank T. Gartside, Assistant Superintendent of the National Capital Parks, Parks & Recreation, November 1938)

In an unpublished memorandum, Mr. Peaslee had described the lavish, but economical use of water which characterizes the park:

. . . all of its fountains being operated as a part of a recirculating system. In one of its prototypes, [the Villa d'Este at Tivoli?] no greater display of water involved the diverting of a small river from its course. By virtue of changing levels, the water from the two terrace fountains reappears as three columns of water and two shell spills in five niches in the face of the terrace retaining wall; in two basin and two spout overflows; in a series of thirteen cascade basins, graduated in size with large pools at the top and bottom; in four grotesque mask spouts; in four urn jets; in two dolphin spays; and eight playing jets of white water which freshen the large pool in the lower garden, -as well as in a towering column with three shell overflows and two recieving basins in a great niche facing 16th Street. The 16th Street arched entrance also contains a niche fall and basin. (Memorandum, initialed by Horace W. Peaslee, "Meridian Hill Park", National Park Service files, RG79, Box 47)

This recirculation system was made possible by the location of a control room under the great wall, and a reservoir located near the base of the cascade under the east steps which turn in a curve down to the pool. An elaborate piping system joins the terrace fountains, the water outlets and drains in the great wall with the cascade, and the basin and pool below. Water from the great terrace and the east ascent drains into the system to control flooding.

Following the official completion of the park, Mr. Peaslee and the Commission focused attention on increasing the public use of the park, and in particular on its use as an elegant setting for public concerts. Attention continued to be given to the planting plan and to the completion of the lighting plan.

6. Holding the line: 1939 to present.

Horace Peaslee's Summary Memoranda from the fall of 1939 serve as a convenient measure of the progress which had been made by that time, and the problems and frustrations which remained. These memoranda were based on the discussion and decisions coming out of meetings on the Commission of Fine Arts held on September 28 and 29, and October 24. These memoranda dealt primarily with water, planting, and light, including the lighting of the Sixteenth Street entrance, and the inappropriate placement of the sculpture of Joan of Arc. Peaslee's concern about the inadequacy of the scale of Joan of Arc situated as she was (and is) on the great terrace, would persist throughout his life. (See: PART IIA8 Memorials, and Peaslee, Memorandum, 1939. NPS Files, RG79, Bx 47)

Lighting had been designed to provide a luminous glow, particularly when associated with water features, in such a way that the source of light would not be seen. That is, as Peaslee wrote, ". . . submarine lamps convert the day's fountains of water into fountains of light at night. . . ." (ibid., Peaslee, Memorandum, 19 November 1939) Similiar provision was made for illuminating the rising and falling streams of water in the niches of the great wall, the basins of the cascade, and the niches in the wall at the pool below the cascade.

Lighting was not, however, the only visual effect under consideration. Peaslee recommended that, "...the use of dry ice should be very greatly curtailed. Dense masses of vapor are not desirable and only a "wisp" is wanted...". (Peaslee, Memorandum, 1939, ibid.)

Once again Peaslee lamented the lack of reinforcement between the planting and the structure, particularly along the cascade. For the enframing of the cascade Peaslee suggested a solid holly hedge to be 10' to 15' high. Many other plantings were discussed including the utilization of "over-lapping plantings to conceal the numerous disturbing stepdowns..." at the west ascent. Other problems included the lower garden enframing, trespass barriers, and the upper mall planting. The troublesome lack of an appropriate design for the northern end of the park was raised. As originally designed the north end of the mall had provided a "frontal treatment" for an embassy, which had never located there. The apartment building which was built would certainly require a different

treatment. To meet this problem, Peaslee recommended that the park be made self-contained at the north end, as at the south end.

Deploring the fact that the park had suffered heavily "from depredation and misuse," Peaslee argued that the investment of two and one half million dollars, (which he figured in terms of cash spent, just over one and a half million, and increase in appraised value) surely required supervision and maintenance to sustain the value of the investment, an investment too great to neglect.

On November 17, 1939, the Commission of Fine Arts adopted each of the points which Peaslee had argued before them in September and October. (A Peaslee memorandum of May 7, 1940 lists the Commission of Fine Arts approvals.) Following the Commission of Fine Arts approvals a letter was sent by Gilmore D. Clarke, Chairman, on November 25, 1939, to the Hon. A. B. Cammerer, Director of the National Park Service, suggesting that the Peaslee recommendations be carried out "from time to time" and offering to assist in any way possible. The chairman mentioned specifically the proposal to move Joan of Arc to the west end of the lower terrace, facing Sixteenth Street.

However, most of these approved proposals were never implemented. Undoubtedly the onset of World War II indefinitely delayed implementation. In any case in what may have been his final statement before the Commission in 1954, Peaslee again called for the implementation of the 1939 approvals most of which, he lamented, had not been carried out.

Despite the war, park condition and park utilization had reached a high point during the early 1940s, when the planting was at its best. The Starlight concerts were attended by a city-wide audience. Unhappily, the condition of the park deteriorated during the later years of World War II, and fell to a low during the troubles of the 1960s.

It was not until the mid-1970s that the park again gained official recognition of its outstanding character.* As a part of its celebration in honor of the national Bicentennial celebration, the National Park Service undertook a restoration which is still underway. Ira Hutchinson, Superintendent of the National

* The park is also known as Malcolm X Park, however, that name cannot be officially adopted because the name of a park with a presidential memorial cannot be officially changed under Federal regulations.

Capital Parks, East, described Meridian Hill as a unique park with a long history of service to black and white residents. Park restoration became a personal commitment for Mr. Hutchinson. Plantings were improved, and water was restored to the most important sculptural and architectural features including the great bowls, important niches, and the cascade and pools. Since that time the lawns and plantings have been improved, some vandalized fixtures have been restored or replaced, and the display of falling and rising water has again become the crowning feature of the park design.

As a part of this restoration project, the National Park Service plans to eliminate the present existing, but closed restrooms, which are located near Fifteenth Street in the north end of the park. The structure containing the restrooms, originally called the "Lodge", will be restored to an open pergola as originally designed.

7. The Landscape Plan

HABS No. DC-532, Sheet 6 out of 25, shows the landscape development plan. The original 1919 landscape plan was designed by the landscape firm of Vitale, Brinckerhoff, and Geiffert of New York City. Later, landscape architects of the National Park Service working in close cooperation with Horace Peaslee designed changes and revisions. Sheet 6 gives the dates of revision of the original plans and describes the existing planting.

By mid-1919 the planting plan had been approved. Since then major changes have been made in the original landscape design. Some resulted from shortages of funds, some from the need to minimize vandalism, but the major part were undertaken in the interest of securing a safe environment within the park. The difference between the original concept and what exists today is evident from an examination of the paired drawings of the exedra and the reflecting pool HABS No. DC-532, sheets 20 and 21, and the paired drawings of the Mall, sheets 22 and 23. The profile sketches of 1914 and 1918, NA drawing No. RG 79(41-71) and NA drawing No. RG 66(33) show a much more fully planted landscape composed of high trimmed hemlock hedges, sometimes pleached, or arched overhead, and more densely planted wooded areas either side of the cascade in the fashion of the Italian bosco. Within the context of the more formal European plantings, Peaslee mixed plant materials from native American sources. For the basin at the foot of the great wall, Peaslee proposed the use of rushes and arrowhead to be found in

the Anacostia marches, or yellow lilies from the canal, or bamboo, or cattail to be taken from other local sources.

The 1985 HABS team which documented the existing conditions within the park, developed a series of characteristics of the original landscape design:

1. The park is characterized by a sense of formality in its overall plan and in its detailed design following the Italian precedents.
2. Formal, clipped hedges of specific dimensions were used to provide a sense of enclosure, to form niches for memorial urns, to become backdrops to architectural elements, to form arched gateways, to provide termini for walks, to provide niches for lights, and to provide visual bases for sculpture.
3. Dark green columnar evergreens were to be used to strengthen the sense of an Italian garden and to provide verticality and rhythm, or accents, and to highlight major entry-ways.
4. Symmetrical allees of trees were proposed along the grand terrace and the linden walk. (The large lindens were recently found to be threatening the Sixteenth Street wall, and were, therefore, replaced by young trees, which now form the only remaining allee.)
5. Large trees were proposed to parallel the two converging walks of the upper park on the outer edges.
6. Italianate groves or boscos were to be planted on either side of the cascade.
7. Dense planting was to define the descending basins, which form the cascade, and to define the east and west ascents.
10. The use of vines to climb up and overhang walls at the Sixteenth Street entrance and elsewhere was intended to soften hard lines and complement the harder forms of the architecture in form, color and texture. Narrow planting strips between walls and walks were designed to achieve the same effect.
11. The use of planting boxes on top of walls and the planting of urns was designed to add further ornamentation.
12. The planting was to be completed by the extensive use of low shrubs, vines and ground covers throughout, but especially in the lower park where no lawns were planned. Flower beds, flowering trees, and shrubs were to be used discreetly, but there were to be no parterres.

8. Memorials and Wrought-Iron Embellishments

The earliest and most prominent memorial in the park is the Buchanan Memorial. In 1912 the executor for the estate of Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston, niece of

President Buchanan, proposed to the Fine Arts Commission that a monument to President Buchanan, provided for in Mrs. Johnston's will, be constructed in Meridian Hill Park. Burnap's plan of 1914 showed the Buchanan Memorial on the principal axis of the park, south of the reflecting pool. In 1915 the Commission of Fine Arts recommended that the memorial be placed on axis with the Sixteenth Street entrance to the lower garden on the far side of the reflecting pool where it now stands. The location was officially approved by Act of Congress in 1918, but it was 1930 before the memorial was officially unveiled at a celebration which included an address by President Hoover.

The sculptor for the memorial was Hans Schuler, and the architect for installation was William Gordon Beecher. The Buchanan statue measures 8' high in a seated position and is placed within an architectural context before a white marble slab. The granite allegorical figures, placed on either side of Buchanan, represent Law and Diplomacy.

Horace Peaslee seemed to express displeasure concerning the location of the Buchanan Memorial in a memorandum which he wrote shortly before his death. Mr. Peaslee stated that he "personally designed the architectural features of the park, including walls, walks, fountains, cascades, and the pool - with engineering by park engineers, one exception being the location and setting of the Joan d'Arc statue and the Buchanan Memorial, both of which were superimposed". (Horace W. Peaslee, Memorandum of Record: Landscape Interests of Horace W. Peaslee, 8 January 1959, American Institute of Architects Archives, Washington, DC, RG 804, SR 5, Box 17, Folder 4)

If Mr. Peaslee objected to the location of the Buchanan Memorial, he did not stress the point. However, as mentioned above, the location of Joan of Arc was deplored by Peaslee both for the mishandling of the scale called for at the great terrace, and the abuse of the sculpture, itself, which Peaslee believed required a more intimate location. In 1939 Peaslee wrote: "The two [bowl] fountains should remain the dominant features establishing the length of the terrace. The center of the terrace should be unobstructed. That is not to neglect the need for a transition between the mall sector and the terrace." (Peaslee, Summary Memorandum, 24 October 1939) The link proposed to connect the concert grove of elms and the great terrace was to have been a low concert platform which would have been centered among the four elms where the mall met the terrace, and faced the terrace with broad

steps. The concert platform had been suggested as a substitute for the concert pavilion, originally proposed by Peaslee, Olmsted, and Ferruccio Vitale, but never built. Peaslee continued to favor the original pavilion. (National Park Service, drawing 41-81, FR/1, & FR/2) That pavilion would have provided the major focal point for the vertical composition. Located forward of where the concert pavilion would have been, Joan of Arc both failed to substitute for the concert pavilion as a focus and interrupted the sweep of the great terrace. In 1939 Peaslee again took the opportunity to urge that the original concert pavilion be built, even if, temporarily, in wood. As late as 1954, Mr. Peaslee was still urging that the pavilion be built, and that Joan of Arc be moved to a more appropriate location. "The Jeanne D'Arc [sic] statue is misplaced because from below, looking up the cascade, you see the horse's head looking over a fence as though it were in a barn yard." (Peaslee, quoted in CFA, Minutes, 28 January 1954)

The Joan of Arc sculpture, a gift from the Societe des Femmes de France in New York City, was approved by Act of Congress on March 20, 1922. Under the approval the site for the the pedestal was left up to the Commission of Fine Arts. The sculpture is a copy of a figure by Paul Debois which stands before Rheims Cathedral. The architects for the design of the pedestal were McKim, Mead, and White. On the 11 November 1921 the Commission of Fine Arts approved the location on the great terrace directly above the cascade. In 1922 at the dedication Mme. Jules Jusserand, wife of the French Ambassador, represented France and Mrs. Warren G. Harding, wife of the President of the United States, represented the United States. As noted above Joan of Arc did not rest comfortably. In 1930 the Commission decided to move Joan of Arc to the northern end of the park, but delayed. In 1939 at the request of Horace Peaslee, the Commission agreed to move Joan of Arc to a more suitable location on the lower terrace on axis with the Sixteenth Street entrance on the west side facing the entrance, but, today, she remains at her original site.

The bronze statue of Dante is located in a small, open space which terminates the cross axis at the cascade on the east. Peaslee, himself, designed the space and the pedestal. The sculptor was Ettore Ximenes. The 11'-6" high sculpture depicts Dante Alighieri as a scholar. The figure was given to the city of Washington in 1921 on behalf of Italian-Americans on the six hundredth anniversary of the poet's death. Permission for the erection of the statue on public grounds was given by

Act of Congress on February 14, 1922. (James M. Goode, The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C., 416)

The white marble figure "Serenity", designed by Jose Clara, is located in the upper park on the outer informal walk near Sixteenth Street. Approved by the Fine Arts Commission on March 12, 1924, "Serenity" was installed in 1925. It is one of a pair of sculptures, the other of which is located in Luxembourg. (James M. Goode, *ibid.*, 419) The sculpture honors the memory of Lieutenant Commander William Henry Scheutze. "Serenity" has been scarred by vandalism.

The sculpture which contributed most successfully to the architectural design was the 6' high armillary sphere. Money for the construction of the sphere was donated by Bertha Noyes, a well-known Washington artist and founder of the Washington Arts Club, in memory of her father and her sister. Paul Manship had constructed a model for an earlier proposal for an armillary sphere. For lack of funds, that sphere was not realized, later when the Noyes Armillary Sphere was constructed by Carl Paul Jennewein, he based his design on the earlier Manship model. The sphere was located in the exedra on axis with the cascade, south of the reflecting pool. This location was proposed by Ferruccio Vitale, and the foundation was designed by Horace W. Peaslee. Congress approved the location within Meridian Hill Park on June 10, 1932, subject to the final approval of its location within the park by the Commission. The sphere, which was of great interest conceptually as well as visually, was described by historical James Goode as follows:

In spite of its seemingly contemporary design, the armillary sphere is, in fact, an ancient astrological instrument. The armillary sphere was frequently used in Europe in the seventeenth century to illustrate the Ptolemaic theory of a central earth; it used metal rings which illustrated the nine spheres of the universe. The usual device, a skeleton of the celestial globe with circles arranged into degrees for angle measurement, represents the great circles of the heavens. The latter includes the horizon, meridian, equator, tropics, and polar circle. The Noyes Armillary Sphere includes a series of bronze rings on which are also found the symbols of the zodiac and the hours, given in Roman numerals. A bronze arrow forms the axis, and, in the center, a small winged genie greets the sun. (James M. Goode, *ibid.*, 413-414)

The armillary sphere suffered serious damage during the late 1960s and was removed for repair. Its whereabouts is presently unknown.

The armillary sphere was worked in bronze, and placed on a green granite pedestal. Other significant park embellishments were wrought in iron. For example, at the north end of the park, a wrought-iron fence is decorated with small armillary spheres, reflecting the significance of the Noyes Armillary Sphere. These small spheres top the hexagonal posts set at intervals in the fence. At the upper Sixteenth Street entrance a lantern of octagonal design hangs within the entrance. The eight sections of the lantern, made up of small tangent circles, meet at corner supports which terminate at the top in arrows, and near the bottom in a knot, which reflects the central point above where the vertical element hanging from the vaulted ceiling separates into the eight parts securing the lamp below. At the great wall, the window grills measuring approximately 2' by 3', and 2' by 4-1/2', are constructed in a pattern of circular elements of approximately 6" in diameter. These circular elements are connected by arrows and bands. A semi-circular ironwork grill is set over the bathroom door. It measures approximately 6' across, and 3' in height. The design of arrow-like elements, concentric semi-circles, and curved elements provides a graceful ventilation screen.

Each of the memorials described in this section had been approved by Congress for location on government grounds: sometimes within Meridian Hill Park, sometimes on public grounds within the city of Washington other than those of the White House, Capitol, or Library of Congress. Whether the sculpture was deemed appropriate or not, the Fine Arts Commission and the architect were required to find a place for it. George Burnap, and later Horace Peaslee, both urged that monuments should be designed for particular places and uses within the park, rather than vice versa. Burnap had written in 1916, "[a] park is a park and should not be made into a setting for a statue." (Burnap, Parks: Their Design, Equipment and Use, 172) Burnap feared that an imposed memorial sculpture would go from "bete noir" to "white elephant." The most successful sculptures at Meridian Hill Park were those which function as a part of the architectural landscape. The graceful bowl fountains were designed as such and are essential to the expression of the scale of the great terrace. (See: NA RG66(10) for a section through the bowls.)

Concerned that the park would come under increasing pressure to locate all sorts of memorials within its boundaries, Peaslee included a proposal for the more orderly location of memorials among his memoranda of the fall of 1939. He restated his position that memorials be consolidated within the upper mall park into a series of large urns to be set against the 6' hemlock hedge. These urns, evident in the very early profiles and sketches, would be placed on pedestals measuring as high as the hedge. The urns themselves would be 5' in diameter. (He cited examples of urns used in a similar fashion in Padua, Verona, and Versailles.) Limiting memorials within these green niches to urns (and prohibiting portrait busts or other sculptures) would, he believed, add scale and interest to the mall area, and provide continuity of treatment. (Letter, Peaslee to General Grant, 22 January 1930)

Among the same memoranda, Peaslee noted that the east and west niches at the foot of the great wall stairways, were appropriate locations for "generous" sculptural displays and, further, he proposed that at least twenty figures similar to the figure of Hermes at the Villino Farnese at Caprarola should adorn the enframing walls of the cascade. These proposals indicate that today's park has attained only a barebones version of the kind of sculptural adornment which Peaslee had in mind.

9. Appropriations and expenditures

In his memorandum on Meridian Hill Park, dated 11 November 1936* (NPS RG 79, box 47), to which he added an initialed comment, "for reference but not for release prior to publication", Peaslee described expenditures for the park as follows:

The park site cost the government \$490,000 in 1912. Annual appropriations of \$50,000 were made during the period 1915-1918, inclusive, for the construction of exterior walls and grading. The features of principal interest and importance from a structural viewpoint were accomplished during the period 1928-1932 inclusive, when a total of more than \$500,000 was expended. Additional allotments totaling \$145,000, granted by the Public Works Administration in 1936, made possible the completion of the project at a total development cost, in addition to the land cost of \$1,156,000--the only justification for the appellation "The Million Dollar Park".

* As intended, this memorandum became the basis for the article in Parks and Recreation, November 1938 by F. T. Gartside & E. Kelly.

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Included with the Peaslee memorandum is the following list of "costs of improvements" at Meridian Hill Park,

1912 purchase of land	490,000
1912 plans	2,500
1913 commencing development	25,000
1914 continuing development	25,000
1915	50,000
1916	50,000
1917	50,000
1918	50,000
1919	25,000
1920	30,000
1921	30,000
1922	30,000
1923	25,000
1924	25,000
1925	27,440
1926	22,890
1927	23,130
1928	92,554
1929	97,612
1930	100,000
1931	130,000
1932	100,000
1933, 1934, 1935	----
1936	<u>145,000*</u>
Total	1,646,126**

* Allocated by the Public Works Administration.
All other allocations appropriated directly by the
United States Congress.

**There is an unsigned hand written correction on
this list which says, "figures corrected to conform
to Reservation List, 8/1/45". This correction
reduces the total expenditure to \$1,536,209.

B. Design precedents

1. General Statement

George Burnap, Horace Peaslee and members of the Commission of Fine Arts toured gardens in Italy, France, and Switzerland in 1914. Peaslee returned again in 1929.

The Italian precedents are clearly evident in the park design. The site, itself, almost dictates a close resemblance to the Italian villa, including of course the garden, of the sixteenth century with which it shares:

- A high terrace above a great retaining wall capped by a balustrade from which one could enjoy a distant view. This aspect of the site is often compared to that from the Pincian Hill gardens in Rome, but could be compared to almost any other Italian villa garden visited by Peaslee in his trips abroad.
- Paired but opposite stairways, which followed precedents going as far back as the Roman villa of Praeneste, are set against the great wall to provide a route from one level to the other.
- A profuse use of water rising in fountains and falling from spouts, descending through a cascade of basins from the base of the great wall down between the more informal wooded areas, or boscos to the formal pools of the lower level garden.
- A park design in which the architectural structure and planting are integral and symbiotic. In sixteenth-century Italy the term "villa" included not only the residence but the gardens. Spaces and structure within the villa and the garden were closely interrelated.
- A park design which included formally designed areas as well as natural, wooded areas or boscos. At Meridian Hill Park, the wooded areas are limited to the small boscos on either side of the cascade, and the wooded areas surrounding the outer, winding paths at the upper mall level. (The boscos to either side of the cascade have been thinned as the need for safety surveillance within the park became necessary.)

In 1893 the well-known American landscape architect Charles A. Platt published a small volume, Italian Gardens, following a study trip to Italy with his brother, William. Platt emphasized that the word "villa" in the Italian sense implies "...all formal parts of the grounds arranged in direct relation to the house, the house itself being as much a part of it as the garden or the grounds." (Platt, Italian Gardens, 6)

(Platt later became a member of the Commission of Fine Arts and dealt directly with Meridian Hill Park.) There had been remarkably few earlier studies of Italian villas and their gardens. Giovanni Falda had published a series of drawings devoted to the design of Italian (Roman) gardens in 1675. According to H. Inigo Triggs, author of The Art of Garden Design (1906), Falda's was the earliest work to deal exclusively with garden design. It was not until the early 1800s that the next important study, Choix des plus Celebres Maisons de Plaisance de Rome et de ses environs, was published in France by Percier and Fontaine. These authors found Falda's study to be lacking in not having included plans and details of the entire "habitation", that is, villa and its garden. Charles A. Platt's study constituted the first major American work on Italian gardens. In his book Design on the Land Norman Newton states that he considers Platt's book to be "epochal." According to Newton, Platt appreciated the Italian villa as "a marvelously integrated combination of indoor and outdoor space, of architecture and landscape architecture, fitted with consummate felicity to its site and its role in the life of the time." (Newton, Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture, 373) Newton points out that Platt was drawn to "the organized structure of space" in the Italian villa. (ibid., 375) Space was organized by a sight line which served to connect spaces one with another, or in a series, which, he finds, "imparts to the beholder an appreciable and satisfying psychological sense of clear inter-relationship, of structure, of strength." (ibid., 375-376) Such spaces could then be grasped as a whole, and visually defined.

Edith Wharton's book, Italian Villas and their Gardens was originally published as a series of articles in Century Magazine during 1903. Wharton looked for the composition of the Italian garden in the use of water, marble, and perennial verdure. (This nineteenth-century view of Italian gardens is still generally accepted. It is, however, challenged by Georgina Masson who believes that the original, colorful flower gardens planted in the seventeenth century had been lost by the eighteenth century. (Georgina Masson, in The Italian Garden, 63)) Noting that the Italian country house designer included the adjoining landscape within the garden design, Wharton pointed out that the garden must be adapted to the lines of the villa, to the requirements of the inmates for outdoor living spaces, and to the landscape around it. In other words, she realized that the whole, including architecture, enclosed and

exterior; and gardens, formal and wild, formed a single composition.

In 1923 two young Englishmen, J. C. Shepherd and G. A. Jellicoe, began a survey of Italian country pleasure villas, farm villas and city villas, analyzing them in terms of color, light and shade, sculpture, the use of water, of the Italian, or clipped-hedge parterre, of framed views, and the manipulation of perspectives to achieve distance, unity and climax. The rendering of the villa plans, in addition to drawings and photographs, was unusual and provided the basis for a truer understanding of the nature of the villa. Published in a folio edition in 1925, this study was republished in 1986 with a foreword by Jellicoe, which he dedicated to his early partner, Shepherd. This foreword places the work in its historical context and views the Italian garden as an expression of the collective aspirations of its time, namely, "confidence in the nobility of man as centre of the universe and faith in his future". (Shepherd and Jellicoe, Italian Gardens of the Renaissance, 5)

These books, then, provided the major clues to Italian Renaissance garden design with which George Burnap, Horace Peaslee and the members of the Fine Arts Commission would have been familiar. The design elements described by these authors constituted the kinds of design principles which Americans might apply to garden design.

George Burnap's influence was undoubtedly very important to the formulation of Horace Peaslee's philosophy of landscape design. Harlean James, executive director of the American Planning and Civic Association, confirms this influence. James stated that he "...always said that he was greatly influenced by his association with George Burnap..." (Landscape Architect, Summer 1959, 257-8) In 1909 Burnap described what he wished to convey to the student of landscape architecture. The student must aspire to:

. . . the fundamentals of the profession he has chosen, to analytical appreciation of the elements of landscape and the elements of architecture. He must acquaint himself with the history of the landscape work that has been done in the past, with the chronological development of gardening art . . . with the modifications and innovations resultant from the applied talent of the Italians; He must be familiar with the genius of LeNotre and the master mind of English landscape, Sir Humphrey Repton. He must study and examine American

conditions, climatic, geographic and temperamental, and with a mind well prepared to select and synthesize from a vast fund of well organized information garnered from all the annals of the past, he must develop and create what the architect is working for in architecture, a type of landscape art that shall fare forth as essentially and individually American. (George Burnap, "Landscape Architecture From the Standpoint of Instruction", Cornell Countryman, December 1909, vol 7, No. 3:83-85)

A philosophy which provides for the incorporation of images of the past into an American context is consistent with the process of design undertaken at Meridian Hill Park. However, no precedent can be found for the native and innovative ingenuity with which these images were incorporated into a harmonious whole, nor, probably, for Burnap's concept that parks be open to all persons, however much this American objective may have conflicted with the implementation of the Italian villa design.

Since these early years of the twentieth century when the basic pattern for Meridian Hill Park was set, the design of the Italian villa garden has been re-examined, and the gardens are now seen in a somewhat different perspective. The well-known architectural historian, Nicholas Pevsner, was one of the first to use the expression "mannerist" in reference to what he considered the "deliberate attack on the Renaissance ideal of isolation and balance of parts." (Egon Verheyen, "The Palazzo del Te: In Defense of Jacopo Strada", in The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 31 May 1972, 133) Put in a different way, mannerism can mean the use of an accepted vocabulary of forms (the classical forms here) taken out of its symbolic, structural or functional context to make an expressive statement. Many of the gardens which interested Peaslee, as we know from his notes and photographs, are now considered mannerist. The Villino Farnese at Caprarola, generally considered to have been designed by Vignola, provides an example of the distortion of classical forms in an expressive manner. It appears, however, that when Peaslee used forms from the mannerist gardens he visited, he used those forms in a more classical manner to form a harmonious composition which Burnap would have applauded. (Burnap, Parks: Their Design, Equipment and Use)

In her article "Ars Hortulorum: Sixteenth Century Garden Iconography and Literary Theory in Italy" published following Dumbarton Oak's first Colloquium on the

History of Landscape Architecture, in The Italian Garden, Elisabeth MacDougall discusses the conceptual basis for the mid-sixteenth century garden. Gardens were composed of formal elements designed by man as art and natural, or wild woods, which in their artfully designed "natural" state would evoke sentiments of the wild and idyllic. The relationship between the two was complicated by their juxtaposition. MacDougall points out that art and nature were sometimes rivals, sometimes joined, or reconciled. "The paradox was heightened by the contrast; formal gardens created from the materials of nature, and natural settings created by the skill of the designer." (Elisabeth MacDougall, The Italian Garden 52) The late sixteenth century garden was replete with the allusion and association of late antiquity.

The kind of allusion and association of forms and motifs which Meridian Hill Park displays are specific, and refer to the images found in the Renaissance garden rather than to the poetic concepts of antiquity, which had evoked deep associations and implications for the Renaissance man.

However, the specific images which attracted Horace Peaslee and George Burnap in designing the walls, the fountains, the urns, the obelisks, the balusters, the pathways were not, as has been said, replicated, but rather created within the framework of precedent. In this way, the landscape architects were able to achieve a unified whole in which the scale and detail of parts worked in harmony with each other, and with the whole, in a classical Renaissance manner which did not imply the ironies of the sixteenth-century design, even though particular design elements were literally picked out of the mannerist sixteenth century.

So far nothing has been said about the French precedents for the upper mall area. Certainly the influence of the Italian garden is paramount at Meridian Hill Park, however, the open lawns and the straight lines of the converging walkways of the upper mall can be traced to French, rather than Italian precedents. Le Notre's Versailles gardens, for example, like their renaissance predecessors in Italy, sported trimmed hedges marked by urns, obelisks and sculptures. In his A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals, the architectural historian Spiro Kostof identifies open-endedness as a contribution of the French Renaissance garden. This kind of open-endedness characterizes the upper mall.

2. Specific Precedents

In the course of his official trips to Europe in 1914 and 1929 Horace Peaslee visited the Villa Lante at Bagnaia, the Villa d'Este at Tivoli, the Villa Torlonia at Frascati, the Villa d'Este Cernobbio at Lake Como, the Villino Farnese at Caprarola near Viterbo, the Villa Isola Bella at Lake Maggiore, the Borghese Villa in Rome, the Villa Corsini in Rome, and the Villa Falconieri in Frascati. Some photographs and sketches of these villas remain in the National Archives collection and in the archives of the American Institute of Architects. Many of the photographs and sketches are not, however, identified by Peaslee.

At Meridian Hill Park as at the Villa Lante in Bagnaia, the garden is designed to be experienced as a series of perceptions, which Charles Platt would have applauded, rather than from a single point of view in the fashion of the early Renaissance. As in the Villa Lante garden where a cascade forms the central axis, the garden is viewed from off axis and, thus, the design is not sensed as strongly axial. (Norman Newton, Design on the Land, 101)

The great terrace is terminated at each end by large bowl fountains similar to bowls to be found in a number of Italian villas. In discussing these fountains before the Commission of Fine Arts, Horace Peaslee referred to those of the Villa Medici in Rome. (CFA, Minutes, 5/27/32) They might also be compared to fountains at the Borghese Villa which serve, as do those of Meridian Hill Park, as focal points. (Paola della Pergola, Villa Borghese) Typically, no exact precedent has been found: rather, Peaslee has designed a bowl fountain in keeping with the Meridian Hill Park design in the spirit of its Italian precedents.

The great terrace is supported by a high retaining wall with paired stairs set against it, and articulated by seven niches, the three central of which form the fountain source for the cascade below, and recall in form the triumphal arch motif. Similarly featured great retaining walls are frequently used as a part of the villa designs. The great retaining wall at the Villa Falconieri was photographed by Peaslee. (AIA Archives, RG 815 SR1, # 83025, and also #83024 for Italian wall motifs, and NA RG 79(41-68) for the wall motif at the Villa Corsini.)

As early as October 7, 1913, a color sketch signed by Peaslee showed a cascade flowing down to the lower

garden from the great wall. (NA RG 79(41-71) Peaslee preferred to describe this striking and central architectural feature as a series of descending basins. The cascades at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, the Villa Lante and the Villa Caprarola are characterized as "waterchains" forming as they do an almost continuous sparkling descent of water. Others such as the cascade at Torlonia, separate still water from flowing water. At Torlonia three basins are separated from each other by roughened, inclined planes, and broad enframing stairs loop around the basins on either side. Adjacent planting including mosses, ferns and lichen provide what Norman Newton described as an "intensified wetness." Two narrow waterways of sculptured basins enclose a walkway at the Villa d'Este in Cernobbio. The whole was enclosed by an avenue of cypress trees.

The cascade at Meridian Hill is unique, but can be compared, in part, to other cascades. The individual basins somewhat resemble those at Cernobbio and those at the Villa Corsini in Rome. Further, the succession of lipped basins of increasing size framed by stepped walls and adjacent stairways at Meridian Hill can be compared to those at the Villa Corsini, although the number of basins is much greater at Meridian Hill Park. In both cases the resulting forced perspective results in a perceived increase in distance. (R. H. Willcox, "Villa Corsini, Rome: Cascade", in Landscape Architecture, April 1921, 119-123) The play of water at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli is so complex and extensive as to be incomparable. Wharton said of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli that, "...the gardens were to be, as it were, an organ on which the water played." (Edith Wharton, Italian Villas and their gardens, 147) (For Peaslee photographs of water treatments, see AIA Archives, RG 815, SR1, #83025 and #83026a, and RG 831, Box 3 which contains a few photographs by Peaslee, B:1-1.31, and also a few sketches, 1-1.5)

At Meridian Hill Park, Peaslee wanted to see the cascade enframing walls backed by solid hedge walls, which might have provided a location for as many as twenty sculptural figures comparable to the figure of Hermes at the Villino Farnese at Caprarola. (Commission of Fine Arts, Minutes, 11/17/39)

Two rusticated, monumental entranceways were originally proposed for Sixteenth Street. Similar, but smaller entrances were proposed for Euclid Street on the north. See the profile sketches dated March 1, 1918 (NA RG 66(33), and RG 79(41-71), profiles signed by Burnap and dated 1913) The Sixteenth Street entrances were vigorously rusticated, and spatially compressed. Such entranceways resemble those designed by the architects of the sixteenth-century mannerist

period, for example Giulio Romano at the Villa del Te or Michele Sanmichele. The entrance at the great terrace was later eliminated. And the main entrance at the upper mall became less mannerist in its final version where we see less vigorous rustication and somewhat less spatial compression.

The open stairway at the entrance at Sixteenth Street has been compared to the Stairway of Hercules at the Villa Isola Bella in Lake Maggiore. Usually, the comparison is made with regard to the proposed planting of overhanging foliage which was to weave in and out of the balustrade and hang down into the stairwell. Peaslee proposed "...masses of wisteria overhanging the open stairway." (Horace Peaslee, letter, 3 June 1926, and also Commission of Fine Arts, Minutes, 3 April, 1919).

In 1928 Ferruccio Vitale, Charles Platt and Peaslee had met and submitted plans to the Commission of Fine Arts for the lower garden. The exedra, located at the foot of the cascade, was to be developed as a site for the armillary sphere. It was proposed that alternating solid panels with seats and open balustrade panels similar to those found at the Villa Borghese in Rome frame the exedra. At the same time, it was suggested that the reflecting pool be enriched by urns as at the Villa d'Este at Tivoli. The latter suggestion was never implemented. (Commission of Fine Arts, Minutes, 24 May 1928)

Mosaic designs on walls and walkways are commonly used in Italy. Called mosaico veneziano, this pebble work was sometimes combined with shell work, or with stuccoed surfaces. This precedent is particularly important for Meridian Hill Park, where the park is constructed of exposed aggregate concrete of a quality seldom, if ever achieved elsewhere. This concrete process achieves the effects similar to mosaic work. (See: PART IIC, below, Innovative Technology) In addition, pebbled pathways varied in color and texture according to the color and size of the pebbles chosen from the bed of the Potomac River. The variety of color and texture added interest, softened the effect of the walkways, and incidentally discouraged roller skating. Thomas Wright Dolan observed that some pathways, particularly those on the cross axis at the cascade, are surprisingly art deco in quality. (Thomas Wright Dolan, Meridian Hill Park, Washington, D.C., Thesis, 48, see bibliography)

The one design element taken quite directly from an Italian source is the concert pavilion. The design submitted in 1918 and revised in 1920 (NA RG 79(41-74) shows the elevation of a circular pavilion with eight Tuscan columns and a complete, but simplified,

entablature above terminated with a cornice. A short drum above is terminated in a band of antifix. The domical roof is covered in petal-shapes set in a diagonal pattern. A pineapple crowns the building. The building measures 36'-9". The precedent for the concert pavilion is the Temple of Diana at the Villa Borghese in Rome. This small temple had long been a favorite, even before John Ruskin painted it in 1867. The proportions of the Temple of Diana differ from those of the concert pavilion. The dome is a little higher, the pineapple is much larger, but the temple, itself, is smaller, designed to serve a more private function, as a focal point in a private garden. The columns appear to be 12' high or less, as compared with the 18' columns of the concert pavilion. (Holland A. Forbes, Architectural Gardens of Italy, 1902:1, plate 52)

C. Innovative Technology: "architectural concrete"

Horace Peaslee wrote: "The outstanding feature of Meridian Hill Park is its use of concrete of interesting texture and surface for all its walls, walks, and decorative work." (Landscape Architecture Quarterly, October 1930) Peaslee was fascinated by the architectural landscape constructions in Italy as well as the pebble mosaics, as is evident in his Italian photographs, and drawings. Searching for a material which would substitute for expensive stonework, the architects sought the help of architectural sculptor John J. Earley of the Earley Studios in Washington, D. C. Together they worked to develop a proper substitute for stone. Also working with them were officers of the Charles H. Tompkins Co. and, later of the Fred Drew Co, the contractors, who helped to develop techniques for implementing the specific requirements which the architects specified.

Following initial experimentation with surface treated reinforced concrete resulting in a stucco effect, this approach was abandoned because it was found that this method of finish did not convey the strength and size of the massive retaining wall at Sixteenth Street, the first architectural feature to be constructed. It was decided that it would be necessary to develop a method of using the material which would bring out the qualities of the concrete itself, rather than reading as applied stucco.

After careful and painstaking experimentation during which forms were discarded over and over again, a system was devised which, it was hoped, would meet the architectural specifications in terms of texture, color, and form. Earley then asked the architects to submit design requirements without restriction as to material. It was found that by varying the ratios of cement, sand and aggregate, and the color of the sand, and the color and size of the aggregate, a material could be created which would meet architectural specifications in fine detail. An early ratio of cement to sand to aggregate of 1:1:3 was changed to increase the proportion of sand but particularly of aggregate. More aggregate was used so that the entire surface of finished concrete would consist of evenly distributed aggregate pebbles of graded sizes. The Potomac River pebbles were sized by sieves which would eliminate pebbles of over and under specified sizes. The forms were built to be sealed on the interior to diminish the suction effect which sometimes pulled the concrete off with the forms. When the concrete was judged to be sufficiently dry, forms

were removed and the concrete was scrubbed with steel brushes dipped in a solution of muriatic acid to eliminate the mortar "skin" and achieve a brightness in the pebbles which would have been obscured by a covering of concrete. After the forms were removed, and the concrete was scrubbed, it was washed down with water. During the drying period, the concrete was carefully watched and washed down again if it appeared to be drying too quickly during the curing period.

Earley compared the intensified color which resulted from the mix of pebble colors reflecting the sun from polished surfaces to the color effects achieved by the impressionists or by cross-hatching with pastels. The color was determined almost entirely by the color of the pebbles rather than the concrete itself, a cold gray, perhaps due to the greater reflecting power of the pebbles.

The exposed pebble textures were used on wall panels, the face of copings, on rusticated blocks, on balustrades, urns, and obelisks, as well as the sculptured seating. A few areas, such as borders around wall panels and rusticated grooves on piers, were finished by using chiselled forms in order to heighten the articulation of the composition by contrast.

The exposed aggregate concrete was first used to construct the immense, double retaining wall along Sixteenth Street. In this case, the concrete was poured in place, starting at the northern end of the park. On the first parts of this wall, it is possible to find areas where the aggregate is not uniformly distributed, and is sparse. Following the construction of the wall, the process was further refined to provide greater coverage and more even distribution of evenly-graded aggregates. The arched entrance-way on Sixteenth Street which is flanked by rusticated pilasters, and surmounted by a complete entablature, and the adjacent open stairway were constructed shortly thereafter. Parts of the entryway were poured in place; the pilasters were precast. The decorative niches at the northern end of the park were poured in place in one pouring and present four different textures in close association. The technique improved with practice and the 300' balustrade at the upper terrace was poured as an extensive, monolithic structure,

To achieve variety and richness, other techniques were also used. Mr. James W. Mann who was associated with the firm of Charles H. Tompkins, major concrete contractor for Meridian Hill Park, described other concrete textures in an undated memo:

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- Texture 1. A trowelled surface shall be used for top and drip of wall coping, for back of post joints and for top of base; matching work now in place in 15th Street wall.
- Texture 2. A tooled surface shall be used for panel border; matching work in place in 15th Street wall.
- Texture 3. A fine aggregate surface shall be used for moulded coping, balusters, and panelled piers, for obelisks and vases; matching work in place on the niches of the Euclid Street wall.
- Texture 4. A coarse aggregate surface shall be used for the panel centers and for bases of walls; matching work now in place in 15th Street wall panels.
- Texture 5. A crushed stone aggregate surface shall be used for walks within the park walls; matching the cross walk at the point of joining.
(Memo. Meridian Hill Park. James W. Mann, included in Field Notes)

The pathways required special attention. Here it was found that crushed stone provided a better surface for walking, particularly with high heels or thin soles. Pebbles were used, however, for borders and between panels where they served as design elements, and also to discourage roller skating. The path colors are vivid and include red quarry tile, and black crushed trap stone.

D. Critique: Successes and problems

At Meridian Hill Park, the architecture and the plantings work together as an integrated composition in which each supports the other, forming what Thomas Wright Dolan called an "architectural landscape." (Thomas Wright Dolan, Meridian Hill Park, Washington, D.C., Thesis, 16) It was no coincidence that the sixteenth-century Italian garden, the prototype for Meridian Hill, achieved the same synergy between architecture and planting. Although Peaslee, an architect, had also studied landscape design, he always made it a policy to work with a landscape designer. Peaslee said that he found architecture and landscape to be closer as disciplines than architecture and engineering. Peaslee emphasized that plantings and structures must support each other in texture, form and color. The successful accomplishment of this kind of harmony represents a major innovation for American park design in its time, since previous park design had generally been patterned after the "naturalized" English landscape.

The lavish use of water gave the park drama, and provided coolness for the hot Washington summer. Yet, unlike the Italian garden which required a natural supply of water or in some cases the diversion of a river to achieve such water effects, engineers at Meridian Hill Park were able to design an economic system which provided for the reuse of water by recirculation and changing levels. The subtle and varied ways in which Peaslee illuminated water for nighttime displays without disclosing the source of light provided a successful and innovative contribution to the park design.

The development of new methods for using reinforced concrete in such a way that it would express visually the strength appropriate to its function as a monolithic material was innovative and foretold "modern" attitudes towards materials. At the same time, the newly developed material met the design requirements in terms of color, texture, and form which were essential to the construction of the park when stone construction would have been too expensive. Not only were the walls poured in exposed aggregate concrete, but urns, obelisks, balusters and bowls were precast or cast in place. Further, the pebble mosaics of the path areas, also cast in exposed aggregate concrete, approximated the Italian mosaics and gave a subtlety of color by careful choice of pebbles. The color effects approximated those achieved by the

impressionists, as the sun reflected colors from the polished pebble surfaces. This specialized concrete provided the means for articulating the architectural structure by refining and differentiating textures.

Although the renaissance antecedents are strong, the park, nevertheless, is distinctly American in character. The technology developed for the exposed aggregate concrete, for the plentiful use of water, and for the dramatic lighting of water displays, all derive from new world techniques and attitudes. In addition, although the forms of urns, obelisks, bowls, and the use of mosaics derive from European sources, exact replicas of existing vessels were not used. Rather, each form was individually designed specifically to function within the context of the whole park. More difficult was the job of incorporating those sculptures which were thrust upon the park rather than designed for it. The patterns used in the pebbled, mosaic paths were original and distinctly American, even Art Deco, as in the case of the patterns at the cross-axis midway down the cascade. (Dolan, *ibid.*, 48) The introduction of an Art Deco pattern was not surprising given the fact that John J. Earley, designer of the exposed-aggregate process, later became a leading Art Deco designer. (PART IC3)

In 1983 Thomas Wright Dolan concluded that Horace Peaslee had aligned himself with moderns such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe in emphasizing the closeness of structure and landscape, and moving away from the older Beaux Arts stress on form and ornament toward an emphasis on the importance of space and function. (Dolan, *ibid.*, 17 & 18)

Twenty-five years of development preceded the official opening of the park in 1936. Horace Peaslee, chief architect, continued monitoring the park until his death in 1959. From the beginning, many demanding challenges and problems faced the designers. Not the least of these was the fact that the designers and the Commission of Fine Arts had set themselves an impossible task, namely, to build an open park for city-wide public use in the image of a controlled European park. The Italian villas which Burnap and Peaslee admired were often owned by individual families, or by the church, and even such an immense park as Versailles was surrounded by walls and subject to controlled access.

During construction, the park was subject to the scrutiny of Congress as it was called upon to appropriate funds annually. Congress was lobbied by interests not necessarily sympathetic to the objectives

of the designers. The tight rein which Congress held over the expenditures of monies resulted in simplification, redesigning, and the loss of certain critically important features such as the concert pavilion. The loss of the concert pavilion was unfortunate, but the same cannot be said for the elimination of the vigorously-rusticated mannerist gateway which had been proposed as an entrance to the great terrace directly from Sixteenth Street.

Unfortunately, the Commission of Fine Arts did not control what happened adjacent to the park. For example, the builders of the Roosevelt succeeded in overriding the interests of park proponents and constructed the Roosevelt to the height of eight stories plus a first floor "basement": much higher than the Commission and Mrs. Henderson had argued was appropriate to preserve the view of the Capitol. To the north of the park, the designers had expected and planned for the location of an embassy. The northern mall was originally designed as a kind of forecourt for that embassy. Following the construction of an apartment building instead, it became necessary to redesign the northern end of the mall in order to make it more self-sufficient. However, not all the battles by opponents were lost: early on the builders of Meridian Mansions, the elegant apartment building to the west of the park, now called the Envoy, objected to the construction of the Sixteenth Street wall. Fortunately, they lost their battle.

Probably the greatest difficulties have resulted from vandalism. Horace Peaslee early and often pointed out that the expenditure of more than a million and a half dollars on any other city investment, a building, for example, would certainly have required maintenance to protect the investment. Investment in a park, however, was not given that protection. The protection of the investment in Meridian Hill Park was always insufficient.

Finally, the park plans seem to have suffered from a lack of follow through. This is particularly evident in reading the Memoranda which Peaslee wrote in 1939, and in his formal statement before the Commission of Fine Arts in 1954, in which he laments the fact that despite Commission approval of the many proposals made in 1939, the proposals had not been implemented. Following the 1939 approvals, Chairman Gilmore D. Clarke had written to the Hon. A. B. Cammerer, Director of the National Park Service, noting that the Commission had considered in detail Mr. Peaslee's memorandum, and that, "[t]he Commission commends the items contained in this memorandum to [Mr. Cammerer's] attention for consideration in the embellishment of this important park area." The Commission commended in particular the

proposed' location of Joan of Arc to the west of the reflecting pool of the lower terrace, facing Sixteenth Street. "The Commission hopes that the suggestions made in [Peaslee's memorandum] may be carried out from time to time and proffers you whatever assistance rests within its power to render." (Letter, from the Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts to the Director of the National Park Service, 25 November 1939, CFA files) These words do not seem to render a ringing endorsement. In any case, judging from Mr. Peaslee's subsequent statement in 1954, little was done to implement the proposals. World War II and the difficult post war years no doubt took their toll.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Historic American Buildings Survey, measured drawings, 1985

In 1985 a team of architects and landscape architects from the Historic American Buildings Survey recorded existing and historical information in a series of measured drawings of Meridian Hill Park. The HABS drawings listed below provide the basic data for a study of the character, history, development and the then current condition of the park.

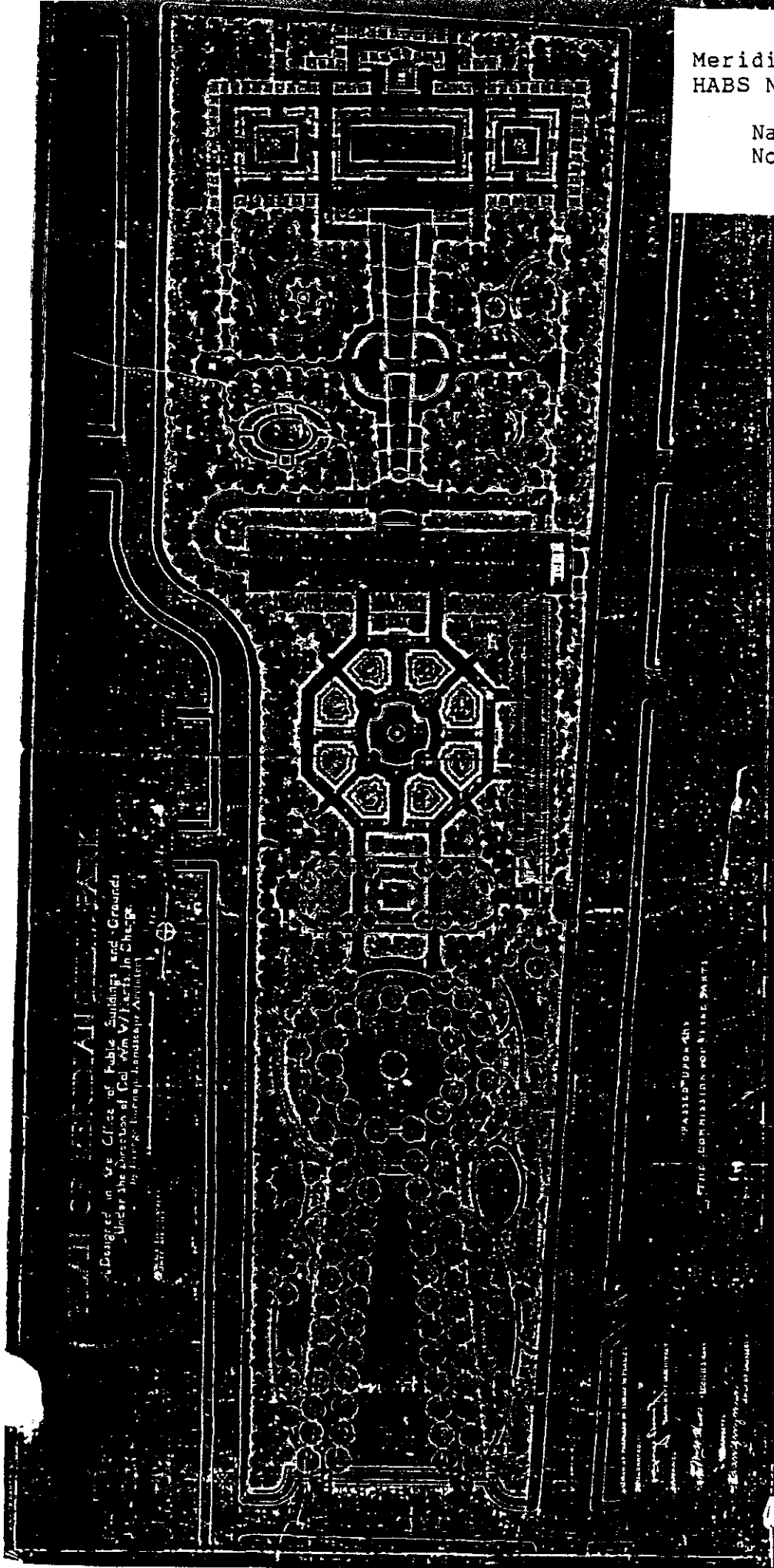
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 1 out of 25, provides two site plans: one within the neighborhood, and the other showing the park in relation to the city of the L'Enfant Plan.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 2 out of 25, is the basic 1920 Site Plan.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 3 out of 25, is the "as is" site plan, 1985.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 4 out of 25, shows the structures existing prior to the park.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 5 out of 25, illustrates the topographic survey made during park construction, ca. 1916.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 6 out of 25, illustrates the land development concept for the planting composition.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 7 & 12 out of 25, show the north end upper mall with and without existing planting.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 8 & 13 out of 25, show the central mall area with and without existing planting.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 9 & 14 out of 25, show the great terrace area with and without existing planting.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 10 and 15 out of 25, show the Cascade of the Lower Park with and without planting.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 11 and 16 out of 25, show the Lower Park with and without existing planting.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 17 out of 25, shows section and plan of the Exedra and drawings of the urns, balustrade, and obelisk at the Exedra.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 18 out of 25, gives details of Sixteenth Street water fountain, and water shell.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 19 out of 25, shows the elevation of the central motif of the Great Wall below the Great Terrace.

MERIDIAN HILL PARK
HABS No. 532 (page 54)

- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 20 & 21 out of 25, show the Reflecting Pool and Exedra as photographed in 1985 and as a reconstructed view based on documentary sources.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheets 22 & 23 out of 25, show the Mall as photographed in 1985 and as a reconstructed view based on documentary sources.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 24 out of 25, is based on a photographic view of the Linden Promenade, 1985.
- HABS No. DC-532, sheet 25 out of 25, is based on a photographic view of the entrance to the west ascent.

B. Selected Drawings: National Archives (NA), and National Park Service, National Capital Region (NPS). (Duplications of five of the following drawings follow, below)

1. NA drawing RG 79(41-62), the Burnap Plan, 1914.
2. NA envelope RG 79(41-71), includes profile sketches of the Burnap Plan drawn by Horace W. Peaslee, 23 January 1914, and 1913 sketches in color pencil, which already show the cascade, the great wall and an elaborate, mannerist entrance at the great terrace. (Materials from this envelope not duplicated for this report)
3. NA drawing RG 79(41-57), the 1917 Plan
4. NA drawing RG 66(33), profiles and sections of the park, shows a concert pavilion just north of the great terrace, 1 March 1918. (Not duplicated for this report)
5. NA drawing RG 79(41-74), elevation of the concert or music pavilion, 11 December 1918.
6. NPS drawing on microfilm, Meridian Hill Park 41-81, FR/1, elevation of great wall showing the concert pavilion above, 8 January 1919.
7. NA drawing RG 66(10), profile and sections through bowls at great terrace, 1932.



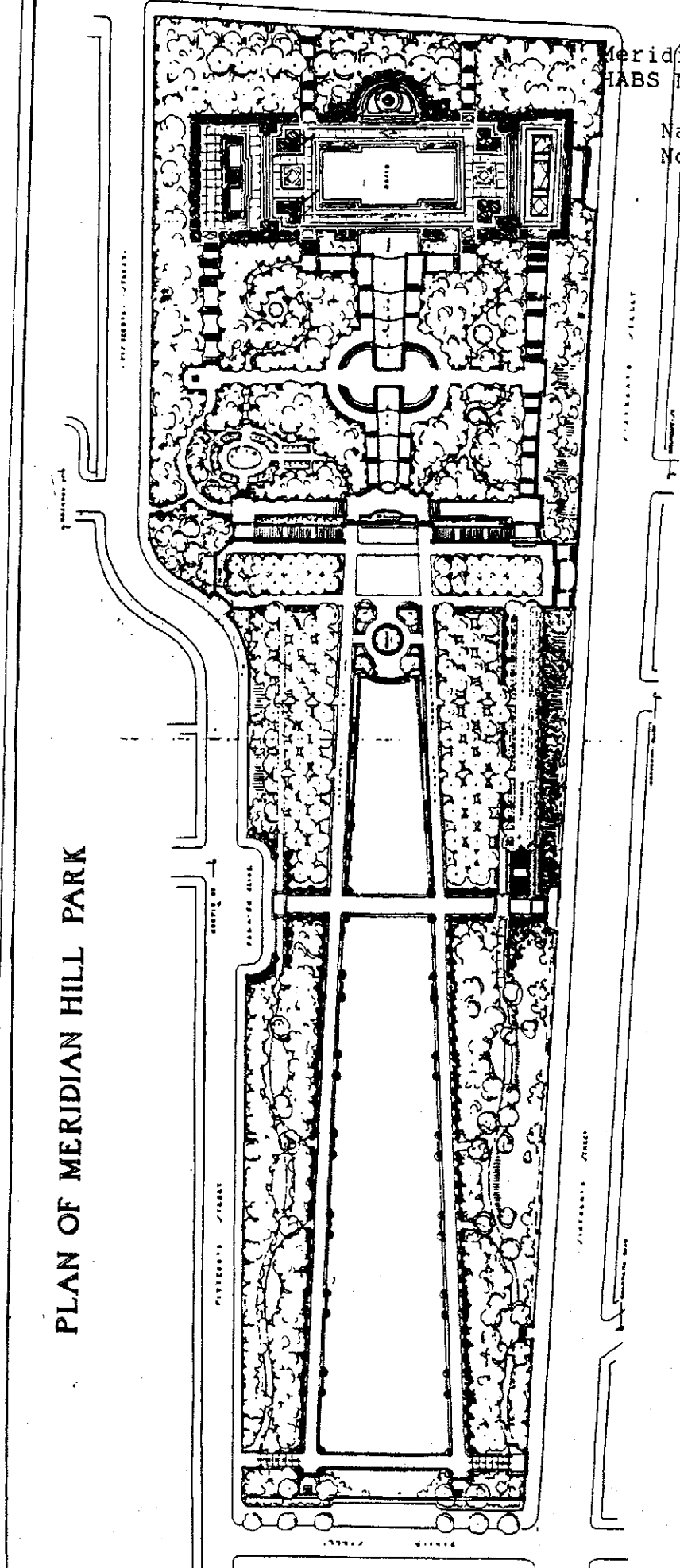
MERIDIAN HILL PARK

Designed in the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds
Under the Direction of Col. Wm. W. Latta, in Charge
by James Burnham, Landscape Architect

PASSED UNDER THE
ACT OF CONGRESS APRIL 20, 1906

THE COMMISSION FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

PLAN OF MERIDIAN HILL PARK



Meridian Hill Park
HABS No. 532 (page 56)

National Archives
No. 79(41-57)

TO ACCOMPANY THE PLAN
FOR THE USE
OF THE ARCHITECT

DATE OF APPROVAL

APPROVED

APPROVED BY THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

Drawn by [unclear]
Scale: 1 inch equals 10 feet.

41-57

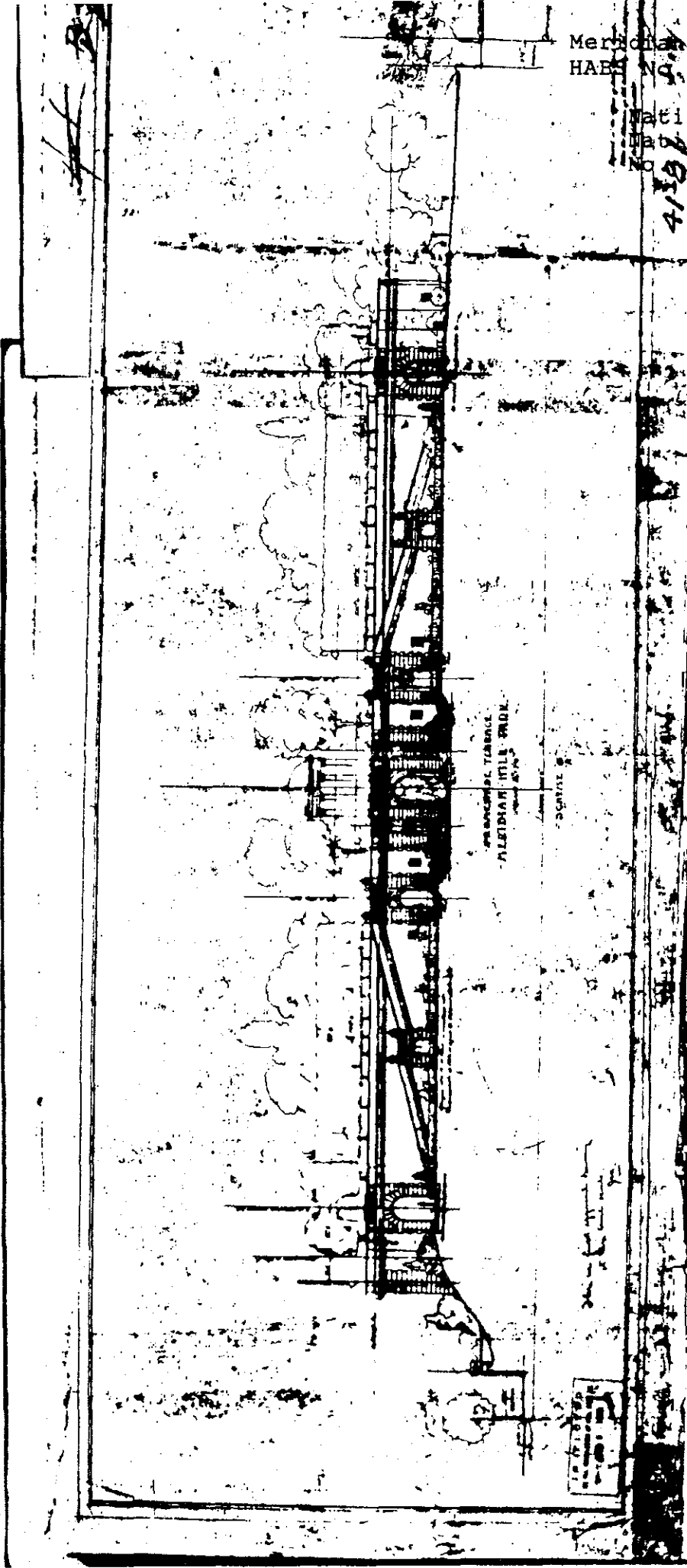
National Park Service
National Capital Region
Form 79(41-81) FR/1

4131

2

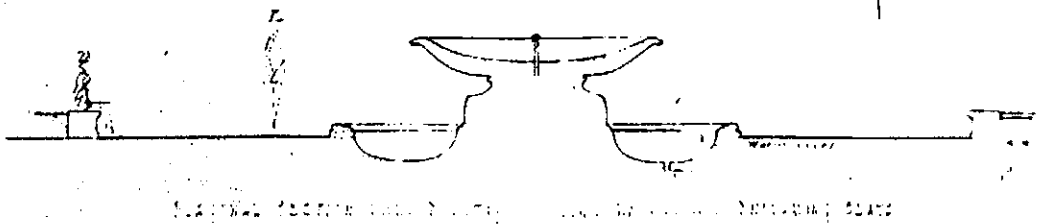
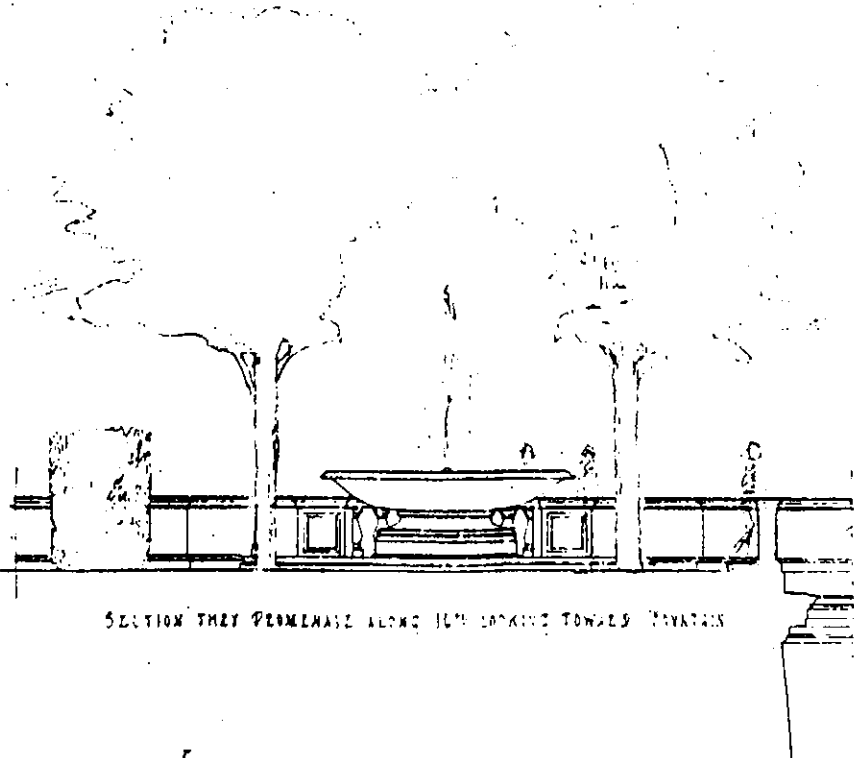
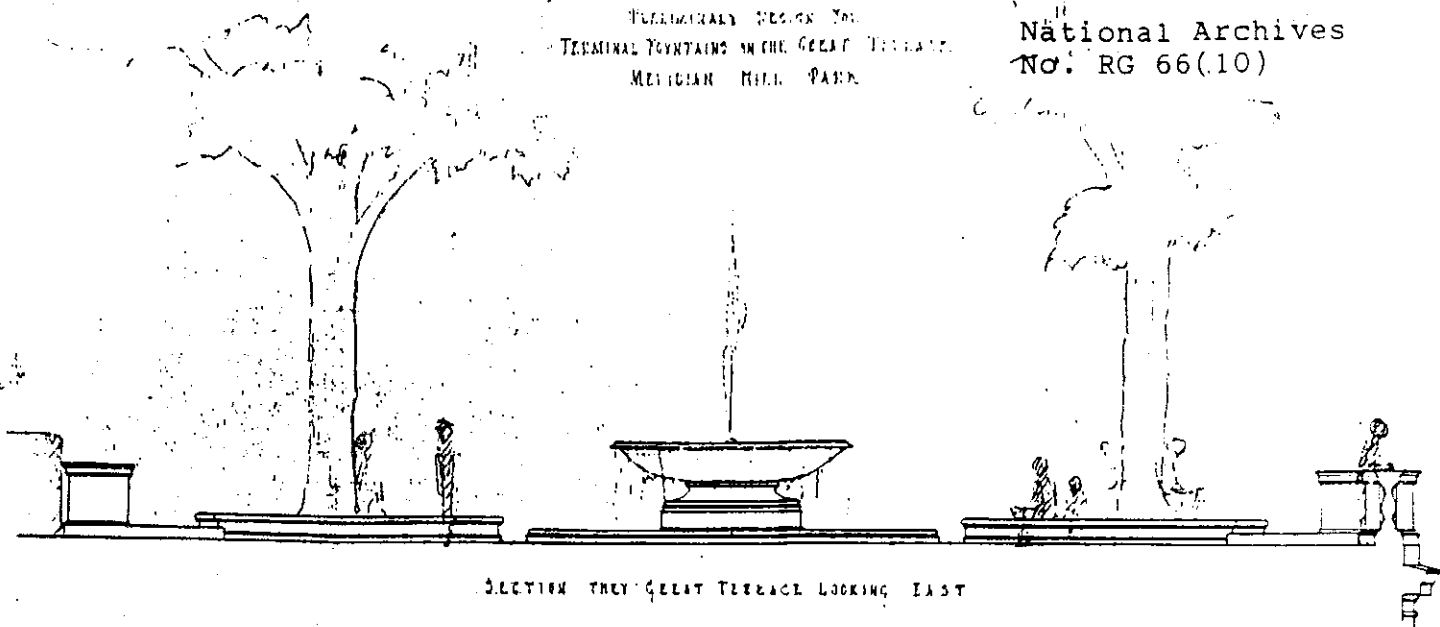
FR/1

41-81



PRELIMINARY DESIGN FOR
TERMINAL FOUNTAINS IN THE GREAT TERRACE,
MERIDIAN HILL PARK.

National Archives
No. RG 66(10)



244 11 32

B. Selected, annotated bibliography

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Works Committee, 1924-30, 3) Architects' Advisory
Council, 1922-42, Citizens' Council for Community
Planning, 1945-47, 4) Committee of 100.
RG 801, SR 5, Boxes 1-4

Horace Peaslee Collection, Photographs and Graphics.
RG 815, SR 1.

See especially folders Nos. 83022-83027
including photographs of Meridian Hill Park
during construction, as well as Peaslee
photographs and sketches of European garden
features, many unidentified, including water
treatments, and garden architecture from Italian
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MERIDIAN HILL PARK
HABS No. 532 (page 64)

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Meridian Hill Park project was undertaken as a pilot project for the development of standards and techniques for the documentation of landscape architecture. The project was jointly sponsored during the summer of 1985 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the National Capital Regional office of the National Park Service. Principals involved were Robert J. Kapsch, Chief, HABS/HAER; Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal Architect, HABS; and Paul D. Dolinsky, HABS Staff Architect who gave overall direction and supervision for the project. The project was directed by Field Supervisor Robert R. Harvey, ASLA (Iowa State University) and architectural technicians Harlen Groe (Iowa State University), Daniel Spohn (University of Oregon), and Lauren Gruszecki (Carlton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada - International Council on Monuments and Sites - US- ICOMOS). Photography was undertaken by Jack E. Boucher, HABS Staff Photographer. The historical and landscape architectural information was compiled and written by Marion K. Schlefer, Historic American Buildings Survey, 1987.

ADDENDUM TO
MERIDIAN HILL PARK
(MALCOLM X PARK)
Sixteenth Street Between Euclid and W Streets, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-532

HABS
DC,
WASH,
486-

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013