

THE McMILLAN SENATE PARK COMMISSION

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

NELSON F. RIMENSNYDER

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1976

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BENJAMIN BANNEKER

MATHEMATICIAN, SURVEYOR, ASTRONOMER, AND REFORMER

APPOINTED, IN 1791, ASSISTANT TO ANDREW ELLICOTT BY THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION EMPOWERED TO PLAN AND DEVELOP THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT. EXECUTED THE ASTRONOMICAL AND TERRESTRIAL CALCULATIONS ESSENTIAL TO THE SURVEY AND TRANSPOSITION OF THE OFFICAL PLAN OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL.

Portrait reproduced on the title page of Benjamin Banneker's almanac for 1795, printed for John Fisher

NELSON F. RIMENSNYDER

Historian

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 Washington, D.C. 20515

INTRODUCTION

During the 94th Congress, at the request of Representative Charles C. Diggs, Jr., Chairman of the House District Committee, the Committee staff prepared a report on the legislative and administrative history of building height limitations in the District of Columbia.

The report was designed to serve as a reference and resource document during congressional debate on modification of building height limitations.¹ Initial research for the report involved a review of the L'Enfant, Downing and McMillan Senate Park Commission plans. While it was found that these plans did not discuss the building heights limitation in any detail, the staff took special note of other areas of concern. An additional review of the three historic plans by a Committee task force found that the plans do not address many urban matters that confront the Nation's Capital today.

Staff research on building height limitations indicated that environmental and public safety considerations were the principally stated executive and congressional intent for promulgating regulations or enacting height limitations statutes for buildings in the District of Columbia. The considerations specifically mentioned are: (1) better light and air circulation in the streets, and (2) fire safety.

Since issuance of the *Building Height Limitations Staff Report* over one hundred architects, urbanists, urban design critics, Federal and local officials, city planning practitioners and scholars have been consulted by Committee staff about the impact of these limitations on the Nation's Capital. With a high degree of unanimity, those consulted have argued that at this time the current building height limitations should not be significantly raised. The overwhelming majority of those consulted cited the "unique human scale quality" that the building height limitations have preserved in the Nation's Capital. Many agreed, however, that for aesthetic reasons, historic preservation purposes, and for recreational use of roofs, minor amendments to the congressionally imposed limitations might be advisable.

The staff task force was composed of the following people: Edward C. Sylvester, Jr., Dietra Gerald, Jacqueline Wells, Nelson Rimensnyder and Jack Barthwell. These staff members conducted and made written reports on the over 100 interviews. Michael Nevens, Margi Mosbaek and Dale MacIver joined the Task Force in the last two months.

¹ U.S. Congress House Committee on the District of Columbia, *Building Height Limitations Staff Report*. Committee Print (94th Congress, 1st Session). Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976, 272 pp.

THE THREE HISTORIC PLANS*

The first plan for the Nation's Capital was executed between 1790 and 1791 by the French engineer, Pierre L'Enfant, under the direction of the presidentially appointed and directed Board of Commissioners authorized by a congressional act of July 16, 1790 (1 Stat. 130).

The L'Enfant Plan was confined entirely to the limits of what was to become the City of Washington, whose boundaries were roughly Rock Creek on the west, present-day Florida Avenue on the north, and the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers on the south. This plan embraces not only the initial city design of the French engineer, but its drafting and transposition by the surveyors Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker into the first official planning map of the City of Washington.

While the L'Enfant Plan designated the layout and width of streets, squares, circles, diagonal avenues and canals for the City of Washington and the location, with topographical consideration, of major government buildings and the Mall, the plan did not consider such details as building design and the respective responsibilities to be assumed by the Federal and local governments in the further planning and development of the city. Furthermore, the plan could not anticipate the needs of an urban center approaching the 200th anniversary of its establishment as the permanent seat of the national government.

The second plan² examined by the Committee task force was executed between 1850 and 1851 by Andrew Jackson Downing, a prominent landscape gardener. Downing was retained by President Millard Fillmore to design a plan for the White House grounds and the vast extent of land stretching westwards from the Capitol Building—the Mall. Downing's plan was limited to the Mall area and was not concerned with the whole of the District of Columbia or even the entire old City of Washington.

The third plan examined by the task force is popularly known as the McMillan Senate Park Commission Plan, after Senator James McMillan of Michigan, Chairman of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia and the organizing and political force behind the Commission and its plan.

This plan was also confined largely to the federal core of the old city of Washington and was not intended to address many of the urban realities of today. Therefore, the McMillan Senate Park Commission plan has some of the same limitations of the two previously discussed plans.

The history of the McMillan Commission, its origin, organization, work and published plan, was examined in some detail by the Committee staff. Over the years, the continuing examination and implementation of the Commission's plan has invaluable assisted efforts to fulfill numerous aspects of L'Enfant's original vision for the Mall and the monumental core of the Nation's Capital.

* U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the District of Columbia, *Impediments to the Economic, Functional, and Aesthetic Development of the District of Columbia, the Nation's Capital*, Committee Report, Serial S-3 (85th Congress, 1st session), U.S. Govt. Print. Off., Washington, D.C., 1977, 410 pp.

² A. J. Downing, *Explanatory Notes To Accompany the Plan for Improving the Public Grounds at Washington*, March 8, 1851. Manuscript in National Archives, Record Group No. 42, LR, Vol. 82, No. 1358 1/2.

The Committee staff was impressed by the quality and enduring impact of the work of the McMillan Senate Park Commission. A history of the Commission and its plan are discussed in some detail in the following section. This discussion is presented because certain elements of the operations and history of the McMillan Commission and its plan can provide a model for the development of a future plan for the Nation's Capital.

THE McMILLAN SENATE PARK COMMISSION PLAN

The events that were to culminate in an official comprehensive plan for the federal center of the capital began in 1898. In October of that year a group of citizens of the District of Columbia met to discuss plans for celebrating the centennial of Washington as the Nation's Capital.

A committee of nine was chosen to meet with President William McKinley on the matter. As a result, the President agreed to include a reference to the centennial in his annual State of the Union address to Congress. The President's address contained seven paragraphs on the centennial, concluding with these words:

A movement lately inaugurated by the citizens to have the anniversary celebrated with fitting ceremonies, including, perhaps, the establishment of a permanent memorial to mark so historical an occasion, and to give it a more legal recognition, has met with general favor on the part of the public.

I recommend to Congress the granting of an appropriation for this purpose and the appointment of a committee from its respective bodies. It might also be advisable to authorize the President to appoint a committee from the country at large, which, acting with the Congressional and District of Columbia committees, can complete plans for an appropriate national celebration.³

From the citizens committee came several recommendations for celebrations and proposals for a monumental bridge or various commemorative buildings to be erected in Washington as permanent centennial memorials. A committee of five was subsequently appointed to review the recommendations.

This review group was headed by Senator James McMillan of Michigan, Chairman of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia.⁴ The McMillan group recommended that the centennial

³ Note: The Committee task force acknowledges the extensive assistance of the comprehensive research on this subject found in the following study: Reps. John W., *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital Center*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987, 221 pp.

⁴ Cox, William V. (comp.), *Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Seat of Government in the District of Columbia*, Washington, 1901, p. 197.

⁵ Senator McMillan served on the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia from 1889 until his death on August 10, 1902. For nine years Senator McMillan chaired that Committee and was the force behind the establishment and development of Rock Creek and Potomac Parks in the District of Columbia. Mr. McMillan was also the author of the first congressionally imposed building height limitation law for the District of Columbia, the Building Height Act of 1899.

Before coming to the Senate, McMillan had, for many years, served as a member of the Detroit Park Commission and had been active in the development of Belle Isle Park and other parks in the City of Detroit. McMillan worked closely with Frederick Olmsted, Sr., the renowned landscape architect. The Senator, therefore, brought the expertise and enthusiasm of his park commissioner background to his chairmanship of the Committee on the District of Columbia.

celebration be held in December, 1900, that commemorative exercises be arranged by Congress, and that the occasion should include orations, a parade, and an evening reception. The group further proposed that the White House be enlarged and that a great boulevard be constructed from the Capitol through the Mall to the Potomac River.

The celebratory events were held, but the other proposals resulted in several plans which failed to receive congressional, presidential, or press support. Senator McMillan's interest in subsequent proposals regarding the Mall would continue, however.

Many of these proposed plans for the Mall were scrapped largely because of lobbying efforts by the American Institute of Architects (AIA). This group, prodded by the enthusiastic Glenn Brown, the newly elected AIA Secretary⁶ and the author of a massive history of the Capitol and grounds,⁷ engaged the assistance of fifty fine arts associations from around the country in support of the AIA's objections to the plans offered.

Brown then directed the resources of the AIA into pressing for the study of the needs of central Washington by a group of experts. At the annual National AIA meeting held in Washington in December, 1900, the same month as the centennial celebrations, a committee on legislation was appointed to impress Congress with the need for a professional commission to consider the subject of improving the federal core of the capital and the development of outlying parks.

This AIA legislative committee, working with the supportive Senator McMillan, succeeded in attaining the appointment of such a commission.

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND MEMBERSHIP OF THE SENATE PARK COMMISSION.

After a meeting between the AIA Committee on Legislation and Senator McMillan and the Senate District of Columbia Committee, Senator McMillan proposed a joint resolution authorizing the President to appoint a commission of two architects and one landscape architect to study and report on the location and grouping of public buildings and the development of the park system in the District of Columbia. The joint resolution did not receive the support of the House, apparently because of Speaker Joseph "The Iron Duke" Cannon's opposition to any spending for the arts, which he characterized as "a raid on the Treasury." Therefore, at an executive session of the Senate on March 8, 1901, Senator McMillan secured the passage of the following Senate Resolution:

That the Committee on the District of Columbia be, and it is hereby, directed to consider the subject and report to the Senate plans for the development and improvement of the entire park system of the District of Columbia. For the purpose of preparing such plans the committee may sit during the recess of Congress, and may secure the services of such experts as may be necessary for a proper consideration of the subject. The expenses of such investigation shall be paid from the contingent fund of the Senate.

⁶ Brown had been Secretary of the local Washington, D.C. Chapter of the AIA and Washington correspondent of the *American Architect*.

⁷ Glenn Brown, *History of the United States Capitol* (2 vols.). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901-1904.

⁸ 35 Congressional Record, 57th Congress, 1st Session, p. 30.

Two features of this resolution should be noted: First, the expenses were to be paid from Senate contingent funds. House approval was not required. Second, the resolution called only for the development of a plan for the District's parks. However, Senator McMillan had nothing less in mind than the development of a comprehensive plan for all of the federal core of Washington, in addition to studies of Rock Creek and Potomac Parks.

After the passage of the resolution, McMillan conferred with the Staff Director of the Senate District of Columbia Committee, Charles Moore. The activities of the past months had been followed closely by Moore. McMillan asked him to suggest whom the committee might employ as experts to carry out the study. Moore proposed Daniel H. Burnham, the well-known Chicago architect who had been in charge of the board of design of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1892-93 and had been the architect for numerous important buildings in Chicago and other large cities. McMillan proposed Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., whom we did not know but whose father had designed Belle Isle Park in Detroit when the Senator was a member of the Detroit Board of Park Commissioners.

On March 19, 1901, a subcommittee of the Senate District of Columbia Committee consisting of McMillan and Senators Jacob H. Gallinger of New Hampshire and Thomas A. Martin of Virginia met with the legislative committee of the American Institute of Architects. The Institute committee chairman, William A. Boring of New York, was asked to recommend persons to undertake the contemplated studies. Boring suggested that two architects should be selected, one of whom should be Daniel Burnham. He also put forward the name of Olmsted as landscape architect. McMillan agreed, saying "I think that is a very practical suggestion, and I may say that you could not suit me better personally. The men you speak of would be the men I myself would have selected, if I were asked to select them."⁸

On March 21, 1901, Burnham met with Moore and accepted the directorship of this expert group with the understanding that the other members would consist of Olmsted and a third man to be selected by them. Burnham and Olmsted chose Charles McKim, a New York architect of growing reputation.

EARLY PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT AND INITIAL WORK OF THE COMMISSION

In early April, 1901, Senator McMillan, District Committee Staff Director Moore, Burnham, McKim and Olmsted held their first organizational meeting and developed an outline and agenda for the Commission's study.

After that initial meeting, Secretary of War Elihu Root took the Commission members to the White House to discuss the Commission's plans with President William McKinley. About this meeting, McKim wrote to an associate:

The Washington business opens with great promise, and the probable support of the President and [Secretary of War, Elihu] Root and [Secretary of the Treasury, Lyman J.] Gage. Opposition will doubtless develop as work proceeds,

⁸ Informal Hearing Before the Subcommittee of the Committee of the District of Columbia, United States Senate, in Moore, Park Improvement Papers, Park Improvement Papers No. 5, p. 4.

but I am satisfied that we will have strong friends. . . . The President received us cordially and spoke without hesitation in favor of preserving the works of Washington's time.⁹

The Commission knew that White House interest and support were essential to any ultimate success envisioned. The interest of Cabinet officers in the work of the Commission would continue to be most helpful in maintaining White House support.

At that first meeting of the Commission, Burnham decided to ask Senator McMillan's permission for the Commission to travel to various European national and provincial capitals. Senator McMillan agreed to the travel proposal.

Before departing on what was to be a seven week European trip, the Commission visited various sites, estates, and gardens in Virginia known to L'Enfant, Washington, Jefferson, and others involved in the planning of the Capital City. Lyman J. Gage, Secretary of the Treasury, arranged for the Commission's party to use the lighthouse tender *Holly* for this purpose.

Visited were Stratford Hall on the Potomac River, Carter's Grove near Yorktown, Williamsburg, and Westover, seat of the Byrd family.

THE COMMISSION TRAVELS IN EUROPE

The Commission, from a long list of proposed cities, chose to visit the following: Paris, Versailles, Vaux-le-Vicomte, Vienna, Budapest, Rome, Venice, Frankfurt, Berlin, and London. Reluctantly, at the last moment for reasons of time, St. Petersburg (Leningrad) was dropped from the itinerary.

The Commission was in Europe from June 19 (arrival in France) to July 26, 1901 (departure from England). Travel was by steamship, which permitted extensive consultations among the Commission members, as did the inter-city train travel in Europe.

Senator McMillan did not go on the trip, but sent his trusted aide, Senate District Committee Staff Director, Charles Moore. Throughout the Commission's work, Moore was to be Senator McMillan's confidant and adviser to the Commission. The other travelers were Burnham, McKim and Olmsted.

Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the noted sculptor, had been added to the Commission on June 1, 1901, but was unable to make the trip due to illness. Burnham, McKim and Saint-Gaudens had worked together on the Chicago World's-Columbian Exposition in 1892.

In Europe, the Commission met with local officials and representatives of the fine arts, including scholars of architecture, design, and the landscaping arts. Extensive tours were made of the cities, particularly, parks, and public buildings. The overall purpose of the trip was, according to Burnham—

to see and discuss together parks in their relations to public buildings—that is our problem here in Washington and we must have weeks when we are thinking of nothing else.¹⁰

More recently, a scholar summarized the purpose of the trip as follows:

⁹ Letter from McKim to Wendell Garrison, April 10, 1901. Charles F. McKim Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Letterbooks, 1900-1901.

¹⁰ Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham*. Boston, 1921, p. 142.

. . . to systematically explore the sources of inspiration that guided L'Enfant's original plan and to examine the current European treatment of civic architecture and its relationship to open spaces.¹¹

All made extensive notes during their travels, and Olmsted was the Commission's well-equipped traveling photographer.

The Commission used its seven-week travel time productively. Working papers were written during the trip and a general plan was already outlined by the time the Commission returned to the United States, about August 1, 1901. The remaining months of 1901 would be used to revise and add detail to the plan. The Commission projected a January, 1902 deadline for the final report to be submitted to the Senate by the Committee on the District of Columbia.

AN EXHIBITION IN THE CORCORAN GALLERY

In September, 1901, the Commission decided that more publicity was needed. Press coverage had been scanty and not always favorable. The Commission suggested to Senator McMillan that the best commercial artists and illustrators be engaged to prepare large color renderings showing the Commission's proposals. Such illustrations, the Commission surmised, would be more readily understandable by government officials and the public than the standard architectural plans and drawings.

The Senator agreed. More than a dozen artists were eventually drawn into the project. Editors of magazines for which they worked were asked to release them during working hours for this project of national importance. Many of these drawings were reproduced in the printed report of the Commission as well as in newspaper and magazine stories. They did much to render comprehensible the nature of the Commission's proposed plan for the federal core of the Capital City.

In early October, 1901, the Commission resolved to hold a public exhibition of its plans. Former Senator John B. Henderson arranged with the trustees of the Corcoran Art Gallery for exhibition space. It was decided that the exhibition, in addition to the drawings and art work, would be designed around two topographic models, at a scale of 1 foot to 1,000 feet, especially prepared for both study and public display. One model would show central Washington as it then existed, while the other was to demonstrate the Commission's recommended development plan. Each model, to measure 9 by 17 feet and be complete and accurate down to every building and tree, was executed by George C. Curtis of Boston. A third, and smaller model of the Commission's proposed plan for the Washington monument area, was executed in McKim's office.¹²

On January 15, 1902, Senator McMillan submitted the Commission's report¹³ to the full Senate. That same evening, the Commission's ex-

¹¹ John W. Reys, *Monumental Washington*. Princeton, 1967, p. 95.

¹² Some of these models have survived and are currently part of an exhibit to run through 1977 at the Smithsonian Castle building, Washington, D.C. The exhibit, entitled *The Federal City: Plans and Realities*, focuses on the history of the planning and development of the monumental federal core of the City of Washington from 1790 to 1976. A 170-page catalog of this exhibit is offered for sale to the public by the Smithsonian.

¹³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the District of Columbia, *Report of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia on the Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia*, Senate Report No. 166, 57th Congress, 1st session. Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902.

hibition previewed for a select group of Washington officialdom. President Roosevelt, his White House staff, and members of the Cabinet attended. Also present were the members of the House and Senate District of Columbia Committees and the members of the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners. Charles Moore and Glenn Brown acted as guides for the preview.

On January 16, 1902 the exhibition opened to the public and to the favorable acclaim of the press. Said one Washington newspaper:

All of those who saw the exhibit yesterday were greatly pleased at the manner in which the commission had executed the big order given it for fulfillment. District Commissioners McFarland and Biddle . . . expressed themselves as pleased with what they had seen. This view was also taken by Senators McMillan, Clark of Montana, and Foster of Washington, members of the Senate District Committee, and Representative Babcock, of Wisconsin, chairman of the House District Committee.¹⁴

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMISSION'S PLAN

On January 15, 1902, Senator McMillan presented the report of the Park Commission to the Senate. The Senator pointed out the necessity of following a long-range plan for the capital's development as individual buildings would be approved over time. Bowing to reality, McMillan stated that "the task was a stupendous one; it is much greater than any one generation can hope to accomplish." But, if the plan were adhered to over the years, McMillan continued, "the city which Washington and Jefferson planned with so much care and with such prophetic vision will continue to expand, keeping pace with national advancement, until it becomes the visible expression of the power and taste of the people of the United States".¹⁵

McMillan's prophesy that the task would take generations was indeed accurate. The plan is still being carried out and will continue to be executed into the 21st Century.

In 1910 Congress established the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts as the principal instrumentality for overseeing the implementation of the McMillan Senate Park Commission plan. To assure implementation, Presidents for many years appointed persons to the Fine Arts Commission who had been members of or associated with the Park Commission's plan.

For example, Senator McMillan's confidant and adviser, Charles Moore, the Staff Director of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, would serve on the Fine Arts Commission from 1910 to 1940 and chair the Commission from 1915 to 1937. Daniel Burnham would serve as the Commission's first chairman, from 1910 to 1912. Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr. would serve from 1910 to 1918.

These members were appointed and reappointed to the Commission by Presidents of both political parties, demonstrating that partisan affiliation or activity was not to be a test for appointment to the Fine Arts Commission. The service of these members began a tradition of distinguished appointments to the Commission, a tradition that some claim has been eroded in recent years.

¹⁴ The Washington Post, January 16, 1902.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the District of Columbia. *Report of Senate Committee on the District of Columbia on the Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia*. Senate Report No. 166, 57th Congress, 1st session. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902, p. 19.

The Mall and Union Station were discussed in the McMillan Park Commission Plan of 1901 (S. Rept. 57-166). The Commission recommended that the design for the Mall be developed along the design outlined in the original L'Enfant Plan of 1791. This meant the relocation of the tracks of the Baltimore & Ohio and Pennsylvania Railroads which bisected the Mall and moving the two railroad stations into a new monumental "Union Station" off the Mall. Legislative action by the House Committee on the District of Columbia resulted in the expeditious authorization and execution of both projects.

On December 9, 1902 (57th Congress), Chairman Joseph W. Babcock of Wisconsin reported (H. Rept. 57-2788) legislation from the House Committee on the District of Columbia to accomplish the basic recommendations of the McMillan Commission regarding the Mall. The legislation was subsequently passed and signed into law (32 Stat. 909-918) by President Theodore Roosevelt, a continuing supporter of the McMillan Commission Plan. The death of Senator James McMillan of Michigan, Chairman of the Senate District of Columbia Committee and congressional patron of the Commission and its recommended plans, seemed for a time to jeopardize the passage of the legislation in the House in view of Speaker Joseph Cannon's adamant opposition to any public expenditures for implementation of the Mall and Union Station plans. However, House District of Columbia Chairman Babcock was able to obtain the support of a majority of his House colleagues and the legislation passed.

The act authorized, directed, and reaffirmed portions of an earlier act of February 12, 1901 (31 Stat. 767, 768) that the railroad tracks on the Mall be relocated underground with costs to be shared by the railroads and the Federal government. In addition, the act transferred certain land to the railroads for inclusion in a site for a "Union Station" to be built for "not less than four million dollars and shall be monumental in character and the plan thereof shall be subject to the approval of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia . . . and the Secretary of War (32 Stat. 911, 915). The House Committee on the District of Columbia and Congress, therefore, had intended the erection of a building of significant proportion and acclaimed design.

The legislation also required that the building be set in a prospect befitting the nation's capital. A "plaza" of widely acceptable and monumental design was specified for Massachusetts Avenue (32 Stat. 913, 914).

Union Station was designed by the renowned architect, Daniel Burnham, a member of the McMillan Commission. Union Station became operational in 1908. Soon thereafter, in 1910, Congress expanded the Capitol Grounds to include most of the area between Constitution and Massachusetts Avenues to insure a "reciprocity of sight" between the Capitol and Union Station. This was a further implementation of the McMillan Commission's intent and Burnham's desire to make Union Station "The Gateway to the Nation's Capital."

These legislative actions in the House by the Committee on the District of Columbia helped open the way for the erection of additional planning mechanisms that would culminate in the development of the Mall into the centerpiece of monumental Washington that it is today—L'Enfant's vision.