
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-13

Lafayette Square Historic District (Additional Documentation and Boundary Increase)

1500 and 1600 blocks Pennsylvania Avenue NW; Madison Place NW; Jackson Place NW; 1500 and 1600 blocks H Street NW; and west side 800 block Vermont Avenue NW

Meeting Date: September 29, 2022
Applicant: National Park Service, Department of the Interior
Affected ANC: 2A & 2B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board adopt the revised nomination for the Lafayette Square Historic District as an amendment to its current listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO recommends that the Board support forwarding of the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the national level of significance under National Register Criterion A with a period of significance from 1791 to the present and under National Register Criteria B, C and D with a period of significance from 1791 to 1970.

Preservation Background

In August 1970, the Lafayette Square Historic District was concurrently designated a National Historic Landmark and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1973, the historic district was granted DC designation. The 1970 nomination provided minimal documentation, but nonetheless recognized the square as “the people’s park,” a place of national symbolic importance and a traditional site of demonstration. As noted in the 1970 nomination, the historic district includes government buildings, residences and other structures associated with many figures in the nation’s political, military, diplomatic and economic life, all representing the period during which the Republic grew from “relative insignificance to world leadership.” The 1970 boundaries encompass the formal public park (Lafayette Square) opposite the White House, together with its surrounding frame of nineteenth and twentieth-century buildings and the statuary within it. Although the White House and White House Grounds are critical features to and adjacent to the historic district, they are legally exempt from listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

This amended nomination, prepared by the National Park Service and reviewed by HPO, provides substantial additional documentation on the history of the district along with an overall modest increase in the historic district’s boundaries. This additional documentation provides historical background from the area’s place in pre-history to the physical shaping of Lafayette Square in the nineteenth century, including through the efforts of enslaved labor, to the square as the scene of daily and important social and political events and demonstrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The amended nomination also emphasizes the role that several presidents and first ladies played in the preservation of Lafayette Square and the historic preservation movement in D.C. and nationally. The revised boundaries, which largely reflect this theme of historic preservation, expand the district towards the northeast edge to include the New

Executive Office Building at 725 15th Street NW and the National Grange building at 1616 H Street NW and slightly reduce the boundaries at its eastern edge to exclude the National Savings and Trust Company building at 1445 New York Avenue. As revised, the historic district boundaries add approximately 1.7 acres to the area. The historic district comprises one contributing site, 35 contributing buildings, 7 contributing structures and 17 contributing objects for a total of 60 contributing resources in addition to 12 non-contributing resources.

Evaluation

The Lafayette Square Historic District meets National Register Criterion A with Politics & Government, Social History and Community Planning and Development as its Areas of Significance. The district's proximity to the White House made and continues to make Lafayette Square and its buildings the center of political activities and pivotal events. Lafayette Square has been the site of many demonstrations, rallies, marches and events over time, including most notably, those of the American Suffrage Movement which contributed to the passage of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote; those of civil rights and peace activists, including being the meeting point of the 1963 March on Washington; those of gay and lesbian rights activists during the 1960s; and those against police brutality and racism (Black Lives Matter) in 2020.

Lafayette Square has deep associations with African Americans throughout its history. Many of the square's private residences and its monuments were built with enslaved labor and many of those enslaved persons lived and worked there, including those who managed the daily operations of the White House. Following the Civil War, Lafayette Square hosted several public institutions dedicated to the advancement of African Americans, including the Freedmen's Savings Bank (demolished) which was established on the southeast corner of Lafayette Square at the close of the Civil War to protect the finances of African American soldiers and to serve the financial needs of Black businesses and individuals.

Lafayette Square meets National Register Criterion B for its associations with influential figures in American political, diplomatic, commercial and artistic history. The amended nomination identifies numerous historical figures linked to the district and provides background narrative on their significant roles in American history. Included in this list of persons are three popular and influential wives of presidents: Dolley Madison who moved to the former Cutts House on Lafayette Square after the death of her husband and on and off until her own death in 1849, and Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson. Kennedy and Johnson both played critical roles in the preservation of Lafayette Square in the face of the proposed demolition of its nineteenth and early twentieth-century buildings for new government office buildings. The campaign to preserve the square and its buildings has, in itself, national significance in the historic preservation movement. This effort helped pave the way for the enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Indeed, as recounted in the nomination, when President Johnson sent the bill to Congress for the National Historic Preservation Act, he attached a handwritten note: "Lady Bird wants it."

Lafayette Square meets National Register Criterion C with Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Art as its Areas of Significance. The district reflects important design and planning trends from the 1791 L'Enfant Plan through the 1901 McMillan Plan to implementation, in 1970, of the Warnecke Plan for the square and surrounding public buildings. Lafayette Park is one of the first large-scale public park plans to be implemented in the United States. It encapsulates landscape

trends of the mid-nineteenth century Romantic Movement and of the early twentieth century City Beautiful Movement. Its buildings surrounding the square provide excellent examples of nineteenth and twentieth century high-style design and are the works of known master architects and builders, including buildings by Robert Mills, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, James Renwick, Cass Gilbert and others. The district also incorporates important works of American artists, including the Clark Mills' equestrian statues of Andrew Jackson. Mills' statue of Jackson was the first equestrian statue to be designed and cast in the United States and is the first equestrian to have two feet raised.

Lafayette Square also meets National Register Criterion D. The district contains archeological evidence of Andrew Jackson Downing's nineteenth-century landscape design in the form of Seneca stone foundation piers that formed the base for a perimeter fence around the park. Although note noted in the nomination, the district also contains proven archaeological evidence of enslaved life at the Decatur House and holds the potential to yield similar archaeological evidence at the Cutts-Madison House at a minimum.

For all of the reasons noted above, the Lafayette Square Historic District also meets D.C. Designation Criteria A, B, C, D, E, F and G.

Period of significance

The Lafayette Square Historic District reflects two overlapping periods of significance. Under Criterion A, the period of significance extends from 1791 to the present. The district has historically and continues to serve as the backdrop and setting for nationally significant events and trends. Under Criteria B, C and D, the period of significance extends from 1791 to 1970. This period captures the district's design significance up to implementation of the Warnecke Plan.

The Lafayette Square Historic District meets National Register Criterion Consideration G for properties that have achieved significance within the last 50 years. The significance of Lafayette Square is derived not only from the past, but from its ongoing role as a center of activity and events including being the site of demonstration and protest that continue to shape American history.

Boundaries

As noted above, the amended nomination revises the district boundaries towards the northeast edge to include the New Executive Office Building at 725 15th Street NW and the National Grange building at 1616 H Street NW. The boundaries have been slightly reduced at the eastern edge to exclude the National Savings and Trust Company building at 1445 New York Avenue. Although architecturally distinctive and built within the period of significance for the district, the National Savings and Trust Company building has been removed from the district because it does not frame the park as the other buildings do and it is not directly related to the significance of the district. The imposing Queen Anne-style bank, built in 1888, is more reflective of the city's banking history, and as such, is included in the National Register-listed Financial Historic District.

The inclusion of the New Executive Office Building at 725 15th Street is critical to the full appreciation of Lafayette Square and the survival of its historic buildings. The 1901 McMillan Plan called for the complete demolition of historic buildings around the square, while later mid-

twentieth century plans preferred partial demolition for new construction. Although opposition to demolition began early on as individuals and government recognized the history and architectural dignity of certain buildings around the square, Congress had authorized construction of new office and court buildings and the hired architects struggled to design the massive new buildings and conserve the historic ones. In 1960, as the debate over preservation versus demolition heated up, President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy joined in on the planning. In 1962, Kennedy asked John Carl Warnecke to develop an entirely new plan for the square. Warnecke's plan differed from the previous plans in that it proposed retaining all the extant nineteenth-century buildings and introducing new infill rowhouses with nineteenth-century massing framing the square, with a contextually sensitive and taller modern office building (the New Executive Office Building) behind them. President Kennedy approved the conceptual design in 1962, President Johnson and First Lady Lady Bird Johnson championed the plan, and in 1967, the National Capital Planning Commission approved the Warnecke Plan. Due to funding, the plan was not implemented until 1970.

The eleven-story National Grange building at 1616 H Street is also included in the boundaries, not only because it is located between the historic buildings of the west side Lafayette Square on Jackson Place and the new Executive Office Building, but because its location there is directly tied to the planning history of Lafayette Square. In 1922, the Grange, a fraternal organization for American farmers, built an eight-story headquarters building on the west side of Lafayette Square. In the 1950s, the government sought to purchase the nine privately held properties on the square, including that of the Grange, to erect its new office building. The National Grange threatened to oppose the plan until a compromise was reached whereby in exchange for its building on Jackson Place, the General Services Administration (GSA) would donate the organization the site at 1616 H Street on which it could build its new headquarters. This agreement pre-dated the Warnecke preservation plan.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the amended nomination for the Lafayette Square Historic District and forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.