

The History of Resistance at Lafayette Square  
and  
the Black Lives Matter Movement  
Washington, DC



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## A Brief History of Public Protest and Resistance in Lafayette Square<sup>1</sup>

In 2013, George Avery, former chairman of the DC Public Utility (now Service) Commission, reminisced about a time 25 years earlier when 20 taxi drivers protesting a fare determination were picketing at Lafayette Park in front of the White House. Avery recalls that the protestors were demanding his immediate removal as chairman, chanting: ‘George Must Go.’ Amused by the scene and hoping for a photo keepsake, he called a couple of reporter friends at the *Washington Post* to see if they had a photo of the protests. As Avery recalled, “they just laughed. They said, ‘George, we’d only take a picture of the White House if there was *no one* picketing.’”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, hardly a day goes by that *someone* is not protesting in front of the White House or in Lafayette Park.<sup>3</sup> The National Park Service issues about 140 permits for protests there annually,<sup>4</sup> but no permit is required for groups of 25 or fewer persons, so the actual number of protests is much higher.

The history of demonstration at Lafayette Park dates back more than 100 years. On January 9, 2017, suffragist Alice Paul led a delegation from her National Woman’s Party (NWP) headquarters on Madison Place across from Lafayette Park to the White House to ask President Woodrow Wilson to support voting rights for women. When Wilson turned the women down, they decided to implement a new tactic. They started picketing the White House starting the next day.<sup>5</sup> This was their right: The 1914 Clayton Act ensured unions and others the right to strike, picket, and boycott.<sup>6</sup> For months, the women carried out daily pickets at the White House gates as “sentinels of liberty, sentinels for self-government, silent sentinels.” And so began what is now a century-long tradition of public protest at the White House.

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<sup>1</sup> Essay researched and written by Mara Cherkasky, Prologue DC, July 19, 2023. Edited by DC Historic Preservation Office.

<sup>2</sup> Mara Cherkasky 6/20/2013 interview with George Avery.

<sup>3</sup> “Lafayette Park’s Long History of Protest, Yesterday’s America, at <https://yesterdaysamerica.com/lafayettes-parks-long-history-of-protests/>

<sup>4</sup> “Lafayette Park’s Long History of Protest, Yesterday’s America, at <https://yesterdaysamerica.com/lafayettes-parks-long-history-of-protests/>

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Ogle Tayloe House National Register nomination, Section 8 Page 21.

<sup>6</sup> Troy Segal, “Clayton Anti-Trust Act of 1914: History, Amendments, Significance,” Investopedia, 4/18/2023, at <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/clayton-antitrust-act.asp> (accessed 7/3/2023).

Media coverage started out positive, but public opinion turned hostile as the women's tactics became more provocative, especially after the United States entered World War I. In one instance, the suffragists unfurled a "Kaiser Wilson" banner equating President Wilson with Kaiser Wilhelm II from Wilson's lack of concern over the fact that 20 million women were not permitted to vote. Enraged sailors and soldiers and others attacked the suffragists by tearing the banners from their hands. The DC Police asked the suffragists to stop even though they were not breaking any law. After they continued, the police began arresting them, and with no other excuse for doing so, charged them with obstructing traffic. Throughout the summer and fall months of 1917, 500 women were arrested and 168 were jailed, serving 30- or 60-day sentences. Publicity over brutal treatment of the imprisoned women helped soften public opinion.<sup>7</sup>



National Woman's Party picket in front of the White House, February 1917.  
(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

Throughout all of this, the silent sentinels persisted. By early 1918, Wilson had come around to supporting a constitutional amendment ensuring White women the right to vote.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Occoquan Workhouse, National Park Service, at <https://www.nps.gov/places/occoquan-workhouse.htm#:~:text=Occoquan%20is%20also%20notable%20as,These%20activists%20publicized%20their%20experiences> (accessed 7/3/2023).

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Boggs Roberts, *Suffragists in Washington, D.C./The 1913 Parade and the Fight for the Vote* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2017) 99.

The amendment passed the House of Representatives but was still stalled in the Senate that summer, so the NWP decided to pressure Wilson and the Democrats into action: They organized a national rally around the Lafayette statue in Lafayette Square on August 6, 1918. Even as the Wilson administration had speaker after speaker arrested, the rally continued—for days. Dozens were jailed, and again the abysmal jail conditions caught the public’s attention. Wilson finally gave in. The women were released from prison and were issued a permit—the first one ever—to demonstrate in Lafayette Square. They did so on September 16, 1918.<sup>9</sup>

The National Women’s Party established a tradition of protest at Lafayette Square that would continue to the present day. During the Great Depression (1929-1939), a left-wing group called the National Unemployment Council organized the first National Hunger March on December 7, 1931 to demand unemployment insurance. Described by the *Washington Post* as “an unusual spectacle,” the few thousand demonstrators went first to the Capitol and then to the White House, hoping (in vain) to present petitions to Congress and President Herbert Hoover.<sup>10</sup>

May 1932 saw another White House protest with the arrival in Washington of thousands of impoverished World War I veterans, many of whom had been out of work since the start of the Great Depression. Dubbed the Bonus Army, these veterans were hoping to persuade Congress that the bonus they’d been promised by Congress in the World War Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924, to be paid out in 1945, should instead be paid out immediately. By July 1932, their quest was still unfulfilled, and the Hoover administration was ready to evict them from their encampments.<sup>11</sup> On July 26, 1932, a group of the veterans attempted to picket the White House but were thwarted by police. Nine were arrested after a melee.<sup>12</sup> A few days later, Hoover had the encampments cleared.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1940s, civil rights activists had been demanding federal action to stop lynchings for decades.<sup>14</sup> But, in July 1946, after the mob murder of two Black couples in Monroe, Georgia, the

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<sup>9</sup> Roberts 103-107.

<sup>10</sup> “2 Main Units Greeted by Welcoming Groups,” *The Washington Post*, 12/7/1931; “Marchers’ Orderly as Congress Opens/Garner Made House Speaker as Democrats Take Control; White House Bars Paraders,” *The Evening Star*, 12/7/1931.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/articles/bonus-expeditionary-forces-march-on-washington.htm>

<sup>12</sup> “B.E.F. to Offer Plan to Leave U.S. Buildings,” *The Washington Post*, 7/26/1932.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel B. Maher, “One Slain, 60 Hurt as Troops Rout B.E.F. with Gas Bombs and Flames,” *The Washington Post*, 7/30/1932.

<sup>14</sup> Debra Michals, “Mary Church Terrell,” National Women’s History Museum at <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mary-church-terrell> (accessed 7/19/2023).

National Negro Congress organized a demonstration where more than 100 protestors marched, first, from Union Station to the White House, and then to the Department of Justice and the Capitol.<sup>15</sup>

Another high-profile lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till, occurred in Mississippi on August 28, 1955, while he was visiting from Chicago. That fall about 50 Black Chicagoans came to Washington seeking federal intervention in the case. On October 24 they marched in front of the White House and attempted, unsuccessfully, to meet with Vice President Richard Nixon.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1960s, organized protests became more commonplace. In June 1963, the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) demonstrated at Lafayette Square in response to the death of Medgar Evers and then on September 22, 1963, one week after four young girls were killed in the Ku Klux Klan bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama, CORE organized an inter-faith memorial rally at Lafayette Square.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of protestors convened at All Souls' Church on Meridian Hill and together marched down 16<sup>th</sup> Street to the memorial rally at Lafayette Square.



Demonstration in front of the White House organized by CORE against racial discrimination following the assassination of Medgar Evers in June 1963. (Library of Congress, Prints and photographs Division)

<sup>15</sup> Lina Mann, "Civil Rights Protests and the White House," White House Historical Association, 6/18/2020, at <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/civil-rights-protests-and-the-white-house> (accessed 7/3/2023) 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> "Group Asks U.S. to Act in Till Case," *The Washington Post*, 10/25/1955.

<sup>17</sup> "Alabama Race Victims Are Mourned by 10,000," *The Washington Post*, 9/23/1963.

A rally on Sunday, March 14, 1965, brought about 15,000 people to Lafayette Square. Organized by Rev. Walter Fauntroy, this one was triggered by the recent murders of two voting rights activists—Rev. James Reeb, former associate minister at All Souls,<sup>18</sup> and Jimmie Lee Jackson—in and near Selma, Alabama, and the brutalization of others. The rally followed services at, and processions from, All Souls Unitarian Church, the DC Public Library, and other locations.<sup>19</sup>

The first organized White House rally for gay rights, on April 17, 1965, was led by [Frank Kameny](#), co-founder of the Mattachine Society of Washington, the city’s first gay-activist group.<sup>20</sup> Homosexuality was a firing offense in the Civil Service, and the marchers were demanding an end to the discrimination.<sup>21</sup>



The Mattachine Society leads the first gay rights picket in front of the White House, 1965 (“White House Picket Photos,” *The Early LGBT Movement in Washington, DC* <https://jsturje2.omeka.net/items/show/32>, accessed September 23, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Clarence Hunter, “Heart of Nation Feels Pain of Race Suffering, Rally Told,” *The Evening Star*, 3/15/1965.

<sup>19</sup> Mann 11-15.

<sup>20</sup> *District of Columbia Office of Planning Historic Preservation Office Historic Context Statement for Washington’s LGBTQ Resources* 2-20.

<sup>21</sup> “This Day in History/Frank Kameny Leads White House Picket,” Library of Congress, at <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/april-17/> (accessed 7/3/2023); Sarah Fling, “LGBTQ+ Protests in Lafayette Square, White House Historical Association, at <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/lgbtq-protests-in-lafayette-square> (accessed 7/3/2023).

The first large national anti-Vietnam War rally took place the same day, April 17, 1965, organized by Students for a Democratic Society. Before the 16,000 demonstrators moved on to the Washington Monument and the Capitol, they picketed the White House as much smaller number of counter-protestors, representing Young Americans for Freedom and the American Nazi Party, rallied in Lafayette Square.<sup>22</sup>

Another large anti-war rally, this one on June 8, 1967, brought more than 30,000 people from New York City, traveling in 400 buses. From inside the White House, the Johnsons could hear their chants, including “Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”<sup>23</sup>

In 1976, members of the American Indian Movement organized a caravan from the Yakima Nation in Washington state to Washington, DC, carrying a set of demands: economic self-determination, the protection of land rights, and total authority over the natural resources on tribal lands. That July 4, about 300 AIM members and supporters converged at the White House, asking to meet with President Gerald Ford. Instead, he and his administration had more than 50 of them arrested. The activists continued demonstrating through July before heading home.<sup>24</sup>

Members of the DC Political Women’s Caucus marked the 51st anniversary of woman suffrage on August 26, 1971, with leafleting in Lafayette Square. A rally sponsored by the National Organization for Women (NOW) took place later that day at the National Presbyterian Center.<sup>25</sup>

On June 30, 1982, NOW marked the end of the 10-year, unsuccessful battle to adopt the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) with a rally in Lafayette Square. The 2,000 ERA supporters sang “We will never give up.”<sup>26</sup>

The longest-running White House demonstration started on June 3, 1981, and continues to this day as a sort of encampment. The Vigil for Peace was organized by Proposition One, a group

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<sup>22</sup> “Viet-Nam War Protest Is Staged by 16,000,” *The Washington Post*, 4/18/1965; H. Bruce Franklin, “The Antiwar Movement We Are Supposed to Forget,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/20/2000, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090210074305/http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i08/08b00701.htm> (accessed 7/3/2023).

<sup>23</sup> Lindsay M. Chervinsky, “Vietnam War Protests at the White House,” *The White House Historical Association* 6/15/2020, at <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/vietnam-war-protests-at-the-white-house> (accessed 7/3/2023).

<sup>24</sup> Jessica Brodt, “Native American Delegations, Diplomacy, and Protests at the White House,” *White House Historical Association*, 9/25/2020, at <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/native-american-protests> (accessed 7/3/2023).

<sup>25</sup> “Women’s Rights Rally,” *The Washington Post*, 8/26/1971.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra R. Gregg and Bill Peterson, “Backers, Foes Mark End of ERA Battle,” *The Washington Post*, 7/1/1982.

opposed to nuclear weapons.<sup>27</sup> One member, Concepcion Picciotto, remained in the park for 35 years, until at age 80 she fell during a snowstorm and died a week later, on January 25, 2016.<sup>28</sup>

Like peace, many causes are never permanently resolved, and new causes arise; thus the constant presence of protestors at the White House.

### **The Black Lives Matter Movement and Lafayette Square<sup>29</sup>**

#### An organization and a movement

Black Lives Matter (BLM), founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, began as a hashtag in 2013 after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin. The hashtag garnered more attention in 2014 after Michael Brown was shot and killed by police in Ferguson, MO and became a rallying cry against racial injustice, and particularly police brutality against Black people. The monumental protests in Ferguson led to the creation of Black Lives Matter as an official global network with local chapters spanning the country and the organization of numerous political demonstrations over the course of the years since.<sup>30</sup>

In the summer of 2020, the BLM movement would reach new heights as millions of Americans nationwide marched for Black lives and against police brutality.<sup>31</sup> These protests were ignited after video footage spread of a Minneapolis, Minnesota police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck for over eight minutes in May, killing him.<sup>32</sup> The unjust death of Floyd, coupled with the numerous other deaths of Black people at the hands of the police, such as Breonna Taylor, drove people to action. Within the next two months alone, an estimated 15 to 26 million people took to the streets in protest in the, marking it to become the largest protests in the U.S. since the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>33</sup>

While major BLM protests took place globally, with Minneapolis serving as the epicenter, Washington D.C. and Lafayette Square emerged as one of the most crucial sites of protests. The nation's capital has long been a demonstration destination for those looking to protest racial

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<sup>27</sup> "1601 Pennsylvania Avenue/Proposition One Committee, at <http://prop1.org/1601frm.htm> (accessed 7/19/2023).

<sup>28</sup> Mona Megalli, "The Protest Goes On," *Houston Chronicle*, 3/13/1983, at <http://prop1.org/conchita/vigil/830313hc.htm> (accessed 7/19/2023).

<sup>29</sup> Essay researched and written by Bryan Jenkins, July 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Black Lives Matter, n.d.; Freelon et al., 2016; Ince et al., 2017; Ray et al., 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Wenei, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Hill et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2020; Wenei, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Buchanan et al., 2020; Silverstein, 2021; Wenei, 2020.



injustices on a national stage. Lafayette Square has stood as a site of national protest for generations and the BLM movement stands on the shoulders of those that came before it. Such as those who took to the Square nearly 60 years prior to protest “Bloody Sunday,” when police committed violence against people advocating for voting rights in Selma, AL.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it is fitting that what grew to be the largest movement in the U.S. would at some point make this stage their own.

### BLM in DC Before 2020

Before 2020, Lafayette Square was not a primary focal point for BLM. Although the movement emerged at the national level as a fast-spreading social media hashtag, the BLM organization operates on a grassroots level, empowering the communities where its chapters are located. Various cities across the nation, such as Ferguson, Minneapolis, Sacramento, and Baltimore, became key sites that took center stage in the BLM movement due to high-profile police brutality cases that occurred there. BLM protests are often, at least initially, aimed towards local officials, such as police departments, state Attorney Generals, local legislators, etc., who are primarily responsible for making sure that accountability and justice is carried out within a community. Therefore, bringing the fight to D.C., especially to Lafayette Square that traditionally and symbolically is known for grabbing the attention of the president, holds a different level of intent.<sup>35</sup>

This same logic applies even to D.C., whose local BLM chapter’s early protests and demonstrations were primarily concerned with significant locations for D.C. residents. Locations where police violence occurred or in which they could be the most visible and disruptive for daily D.C. life. These protests were targeted at Mayor Muriel Bowser and other local, D.C. specific institutions and included marching through Chinatown to the intersection of U St. and 14<sup>th</sup> St.; shutting down I-395; and disrupting Mayor Bowser’s police agenda press conference in Congress Heights.<sup>36</sup> However, this is not to say that BLM protests near the White House and other D.C. locations popular for national demonstrations never occurred. BLM activists

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<sup>34</sup> Klein, 2015; Mann, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Costello, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Cohen, 2015; St. Martin, 2015; Shapiro, 2014.

organized and participated in protests along the national mall and in other parks, such as Franklin Square, only a few blocks away from Lafayette Square.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most significant pre-2020 BLM protest in Lafayette Square occurred in 2018. On August 12, 2018, BLM participated in counter protests of White supremacist groups' "Unite the Right 2" rally, an anniversary event for the protests in Charlottesville, VA. Counter protests, including BLM D.C.'s "Rise Up Fight Back" protest that began near Lafayette Park before marching over to it, dwarfed the Unite the Right protests.<sup>38</sup>

### BLM in Lafayette Square 2020 and beyond

In the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, Minnesota, massive protests erupted. As with other key protests in the history of the BLM movement, Minneapolis—the city where the injustice occurred—became a key site and national stage for the protests. However, unlike in the past, protests erupted not just in Minneapolis, but worldwide. Washington D.C. emerged as one of the most significant sites of protests with Lafayette Square at the forefront.

Protests across the city, organized by various activist organizations, erupted in days following Floyd's death and continued throughout the Summer and into the fall. Lafayette Square was already a significant site as many of the protests were also aimed at then-President Trump. However, June 1, 2020, marked the day that would etch both BLM and Lafayette Square into each other's history. On this afternoon, peaceful protesters in Lafayette Square were, without warning, tear gassed and forced out of the area by police in riot gear who shot rubber bullets and used other military grade weapons such as flash grenades. Shortly afterwards, President Trump would walk through Lafayette Park to take a photograph with a bible outside of St. John's Church.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Krieg, 2017; Stein, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Delgadillo, 2018a; Green, 2018a; Green, 2018b; Lockhart, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Gjelten, 2020; Slisco, 2022.



On June 1, 2020, at the direction of federal authorities, police officers cleared protesters from 16<sup>th</sup> Street in front of the White House with no warning and against protocol. (*Photo credit: Stephen Voss, photographer*)

While coverage of the incident framed it as the crowd was cleared out for Trump to take the photo-op, in 2021 the Interior Department inspector general released a report suggesting that the Trump photo-op and the clearing were unrelated. The report stated that the clearing had already been planned to make way for contractors to enter the area to put up fencing. While the photo-op may have not been the initial cause of the clearing, the report did confirm that BLM protesters were not given proper warning beforehand. Additionally, it also revealed that Park Police shot pepper balls towards the crowd, which was against protocol.<sup>40</sup> In April 2022, the Department of Justice announced that they would be settling the civil lawsuits, one of which was brought forth by BLM D.C., that came from the incident.<sup>41</sup>

Four days after the clearing incident, June 5, 2020, Mayor Bowser renamed the two-block stretch of 16<sup>th</sup> Street NW between K and H streets NW leading into Lafayette Square, “Black Lives

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<sup>40</sup> Lefebvre, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Slisco, 2022.

Matter Plaza.” She also revealed a mural she commissioned, along with DC Murals and the Dept of Public Works in which “Black Lives Matter” and the DC flag were painted on this section of the street.<sup>42</sup>



On June 5, 2020, DC artists and government workers organized by DC Mayor Muriel Bowser, painted the protest hashtag “Black Lives Matter” on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in front of the White House. (*Photo credit: Carlos Vilas Delgado*)

In October 2021, the mural was re-made into a permanent monument. DC’s mural inspired several other cities to create similar murals. Some cities, such as New York and Tulsa, OK, even followed DC’s lead and renamed streets to “Black Lives Matter.”<sup>43</sup> However, the investment in making the murals into permanent structures appears to be novel to DC.

The renaming of the street and commissioning of the mural made a bold statement from Mayor Bowser about where DC stands in the BLM movement, as well as with, then-President Trump. There are mixed feelings about the monument and Mayor Bowser, as some found it to be performative, especially given the city’s own policing issues.<sup>44</sup> Despite mixed feelings, the

<sup>42</sup> Barnes & Finch, 2020; Dwyer, 2020; Washington D.C., n.d.

<sup>43</sup> Butler, 2021; Canal, 2022; Grantham-Philips, 2020; Sgueglia, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Grannan, 2020.

building of the BLM monument marks Lafayette Square as a major landmark in BLM movement, and the BLM movement as leaving a significant impact on the history of Lafayette Square.