



The Grant Memorial, with the figure of Grant and the Artillery group, viewed from the south. (CLP file "GM from S" Feb. 24 2006)



The action and complexity of the Cavalry group depicts an unidealized view of war. (CLP file "cavalry group" Feb. 24 2006)

Constructed Water Feature

Capitol Reflecting Pool

L'Enfant had planned to divert the waters of the Tiber Creek into a canal falling into a cascade and pool at the foot of Capitol Hill; this would have been the most important among the numerous water effects with which the designer intended to embellish the city. The cascade and pool would have occupied the same relative position to the Capitol Grounds and the Mall as Union Square does now. Andrew Ellicott simplified this design somewhat but retained it. (Scott 1991:41)

When the Washington Canal was built, in 1815, it did not incorporate any of L'Enfant's basins or cascades. It ran down 3rd Street and crossed over the Botanic Garden site, but it soon became a notorious sewer and was channeled into a sewer line in the early 1870s. The first Botanic Garden, 1820-1837, had one or more artificial ponds. These do not seem to have survived or become features of the revived Garden.

Inspired by European cities, particularly Rome, and estates such as Versailles, the McMillan Commission designed a Mall that was amply furnished with reflecting pools and splashing fountains to provide cooling refreshment for visitors during Washington's sweltering summers. The McMillan Plan depicted eight fountains in Union Square, all placed off the center axis, and a large pool along the Mall's center panel from 3rd to 4½ Streets.

The revised McMillan Plan of the 1930s had a simpler program of decorative water features; even so, most were eliminated in the final version. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.'s final plan for the square did not include any pool or other water feature.

The plans of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for Union Square, from 1966 to 1974, revived the McMillan Plan's concept of a reflecting pool. (interview with David Childs 9/6/2006) The SOM design for the Capitol Reflecting Pool was built as part of the construction of the Center Leg of the Inner Loop Freeway, which passes underneath Union Square along the axis of 2nd Street.

Dramatically mirroring the image of the Capitol, the pool serves as a complement to the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. Built at a large scale, with simple, oversized components, the six-acre wedge-shaped pool occupies over half of the Union Square site. In plan view, the pool's longer west end has a convex curve, and the shorter east end has a concave curve that is broken by a rectangular recess in the center, on line with the Grant Memorial and the center line of the Mall. The pool's angled sides parallel the axes of Pennsylvania and Maryland Avenues. The pool's footprint is actually somewhat asymmetrical, probably to compensate for the fact that the Grant Memorial was centered on the Capitol's west façade, rather than on the dome, with the result that the memorial is several feet off the true center line of the Mall (see CFA Minutes for October 19, 1934, p. 7: "Mr. Olmsted said that the difficulty is that the Grant Monument was placed on a line drawn not from the dome of the Capitol but from the center of the west façade of the Capitol to the Washington Monument. If the dome is taken for the center, the divergence of the axis is quite apparent. He said everything built on the Mall since has been lined up on an axis with the dome, resulting in a discrepancy of about four feet.").

The pool's broad limestone coping is rounded like a bolster on the exterior, and slopes at a 90-degree angle, with a slight concave curve, on the interior. The limestone has a raked finish,

with numerous parallel lines. The bottom of the pool is black concrete, which increases its reflectivity.

The pool is a component of a larger plaza, which incorporates the Grant monument and includes sunken walks along the north, west, and south sides of the pool and a wide plaza on the west side. Three broad steps lead down to the walks, which are sunk about a foot below ground level; the pool's coping rises to about this height, so that the surface of the pool is near ground level. North and south of the Grant Memorial are narrow flights of steps leading down to the pool. These surrounding features are discussed in more detail under Circulation.

The large, shallow pool has no filtration system and is usually partly filled with dirt and trash. Sections of the retaining wall and coping have settled, affecting the seals so that the pool is leaking water.

Because the pool is less than fifty years old, it is not a contributing feature.

List of non-contributing features:

Capitol Reflecting Pool



The reflecting pool and its surrounding walks were designed at a large, simple scale. (CLP file "Grant M from SW BW" Feb. 10 2006)

Vegetation

Tree plantings

It is likely that most or all of the larger trees growing in Union Square date from the Botanic Garden planting. Some might be memorial trees; a comparison of the historic lists of memorial trees with extant specimens suggests that no memorial trees remain, but careful plan analysis would be necessary to determine this. All of the historic (1936 or older) trees in Union Square should be considered of equal importance.

The Botanic Garden administrators – primarily William R. Smith, in charge from 1853 until 1912 – seem to have taken a somewhat random approach to selecting tree species for planting. Specimens included a variety of exotics and rare native species as well as typical eastern trees. The arrangement of trees did not show any clear overall design. Trees lined walks and the garden's boundaries and were planted informally within lawn areas. Memorial trees were sometimes planted singly or in pairs by an entrance or flanking a walk. Three memorial trees were moved within the garden in 1908 to provide room for construction of the Grant Memorial platform (see History).

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. tried to retain as many of the garden's trees as possible. All were surveyed and mapped. Working with National Capital Parks staff, Olmsted chose to save trees that could be transplanted successfully. In April 1934, in a statement accompanying his first design plan for Union Square, he wrote:

“All of the trees which are known to have special historic interest, such as the memorial trees, and which cannot remain indefinitely in their present locations, it is proposed to move [with two exceptions noted; see History]. . . . In addition to the Memorial Trees all other trees within the central open space which are in condition and of a size and kind to be worth moving should now be prepared for moving at the proper season.” (Olmsted “Statement” 4/19/34 FRC3 and FRC4, p. 8)

Olmsted designed the lines of trees in Union Square to connect with the Mall elms and to visually merge with the trees growing on the west Capitol Grounds. These had been designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. to focus views on the Capitol's west façade, and were planted flanking the diagonal walks that continued the lines of Pennsylvania and Maryland Avenues and led up to the West Terrace stairs. The lines spread out into larger planting groups at the intersection of the walks with the 1st Street sidewalk. In Union Square, Olmsted Jr. lined walks and roads with elms, clustered trees closely around the Meade and future Navy memorial sites, and placed groups of trees behind the Grant Memorial to frame it, while leaving the central vista open.

The construction of the Capitol Reflecting Pool in 1969-71 damaged the integrity of the Olmsted planting. Many trees were removed from the middle of the site, and the continuity of the lines of trees was interrupted. Today, isolated groups of trees occupy the square's four corners, many of them appearing to date from the Botanic Garden era. For example, northeast of the Grant Memorial stand a large catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides*) and a large *Zelkova serrata*. Southeast of the memorial is a group composed mostly of oaks, including some large bur oaks (*Quercus macrocarpa*). Many large horsechestnuts and buckeyes (*Aesculus* sp.) grow in the northwest panel and an old, rare *Zelkova carpinifolia* and an old ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) can be found in

the southwest. When trees die in Union Square, they are typically replaced in kind and in the same location.

Shrub Plantings

Little information has been found concerning the planting of the beds at the Grant Memorial. Olmsted's landscape plan included six beds arranged symmetrically in three identical pairs around the statue: two semicircular beds at the north and south ends of the marble platform, two beds at the northeast and southeast corners of the new paved plaza surrounding the platform, and two rectangular beds at the east entrance, on either side of the central walk leading from 1st Street.

A plan by Olmsted dated February 27, 1935, depicts shrub massings labeled as "box" in all of the beds (TIC 802/89046, Olmsted, "Planting Plans," February 27, 1935 – identification number cut off on CRP copy). A plan of two months later, prepared by the Branch of Plans and Design, shows plantings of boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* "Suffruticosa") and Japanese yew (*Taxus cuspidata*) in the two entrance beds and the beds at the northeast and southeast corners (NCP 1585, "Supplementary Planting at Grant Memorial," April 20, 1935, sheet 3 of 3, CRP copy). Boxwood shrubs in four different sizes, ranging from five-feet high by eight-feet wide to seven- or eight-feet high by ten-feet wide, were interspersed with yews, all of which had a height and spread of five to six feet. The planting beds at the ends of the memorial, however, were shown as empty.

In his April 1934 statement about the park's design, Olmsted wrote about the challenge presented by the "close proximity of First Street to the back of the Grant Monument":

"The best means of meeting these difficulties appears to be the planting of two blocks or panels of clipped shrubs, of just sufficient height, behind the low parts of the base and between it and First Street. The monument is too long to be appreciated as a whole from so short a distance as First Street, and the arrangement proposed would permit separate effective views from the street of the central figure and of each of the sculptural groups at the two ends." (Olmsted "Statement" 4/19/34 FRC3 and FRC4 p. 8)

The National Park Service prepared planting plans for Union Square, which they sent to the Commission of Fine Arts in April 1935. One plan depicted the planting between the Grant Memorial and First Street. Malcolm Kirkpatrick, Resident Landscape Architect of the NPS Eastern Division, wrote that it showed

"sufficient additional planting to feather out at either end. The thought is that there will be provided a willowy mass of evergreen planting, somewhat of the nature of that on the east side of the Lincoln Memorial; of such size as to screen the traffic on First Street from observers west of the Grant Memorial." (Kirkpatrick to Clarke 4/12/35 FRC6)

Olmsted Brothers approved this plan, with one exception:

"We believe the large plants of *Buxus suffruticosa* and *Taxus cuspidata* as indicated will make a fine and satisfactory mass without the filler of *Taxus cuspidata nana*. In other words, this filler seems to us to choke up the planting unnecessarily and in the end undesirably, and we do not think that it would look particularly well planted underneath and around the box bushes."

They advised using pachysandra as a filler instead. (Whiting to Kirkpatrick 4/22/35 FRC6) If this was planted, it no longer exists.

In 1985, the two entrance beds were replanted with azaleas ("Blaauw's pink") with a background hedge of holly (*Ilex crenata* "green luster"; 802/80014A, "Rehabilitation Plan," September 1985, designer: Roise). The same species were similarly arranged in the two end beds. The evergreen planting at the northeast and southeast corners of the plaza remained, with six English yew (*Taxus baccata*) added at the northeast. The plan notes that, with these additions, there was a total of twenty-six *Taxus baccata* in these beds, suggesting either that this variety had been used instead of the *Taxus cuspidata* in the 1930s, or had replaced the *Taxus cuspidata* in the intervening fifty years.

Currently, massings of large, spreading yews with a few small boxwood remain at the northeast and southeast corners of the Grant Memorial, behind and to the sides of the Cavalry and Artillery groups. They frame the monument and soften the transition between the structure and its surroundings, and also help block views of traffic on 1st Street. In the southeast massing, the huge yews overshadow the few remaining small boxwood. Young oak trees have been planted by the National Park Service within the inside edges of the south and north hedges. Though overgrown, these shrubs are remnants of the Olmsted planting and retain historic integrity.

The azaleas and ilex in the other beds have recently been replaced, the azaleas by miniature crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica* cv.) and the ilex hedges by low clipped hedges of yew (*Taxus* sp.). Azaleas proved to be an inappropriate choice for the environmental conditions of these beds, which are in full sun. The entrance beds have lost historic integrity; there is not sufficient historical evidence to evaluate the integrity of the plantings in the beds at the platform ends.

Lawns

The lawns flanking the Grant Memorial curve to the north and south around the west plaza. These lawns have many bare patches, including social trails, worn from heavy visitor use. Along the east side of 3rd Street is a grass planting strip between the walk and the street curb. No street trees are growing here.

List of contributing features

older trees
trees that replaced older trees (1935 or earlier) in species or location
yew and boxwood plantings
grass panels

List of non-contributing features

planting beds of crape myrtle and holly
trees that have not replaced older trees (1935 or earlier) in species or location



Large old oaks, including a bur oak, in the center of the photo, stand southeast of the Grant Memorial. The bur oak, and perhaps some others in this group, is a remnant from the Botanic Garden. (CLP file "trees SE of Grant M" Feb. 10 2006)



Trees in the southwest grass panel of Union Square include an unusual *Zelkova carpinifolia*, center right in the photo, retained from the Botanic Garden. (CLP file "trees SW corner" Feb. 10 2006)



Several trees have recently been planted in the west grass panels of Union Square. (CLP file "young trees" Feb. 10 2006)



Semicircular planting beds at the north and south ends of the Grant Memorial contain dwarf crape myrtle and hedges of clipped *Ilex crenata*. (CLP file "GM planting bed N end 2" Feb. 24 2006)