

SEWARD SQUARE

(Reservation Nos. 38, 38A, 39, 40,
41, 41A, 41B, 42, and 43)

Intersection of Pennsylvania and North Carolina
avenues at C Street between Fourth
and Sixth streets, SE

Washington

District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-685

HABS
DC
WASH,
634-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SEWARD SQUARE

(Reservation Nos. 38, 38A, 39, 40, 41, 41A, 41B, 42, and 43)

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Location: Intersection of Pennsylvania and North Carolina avenues at C Street between Fourth and Sixth streets, SE.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service.

Present Use: Sitting park, traffic divider.

Significance: Indicated as an open space on both the L'Enfant and Ellicott plans, this space has been treated as an open landscaped area since its first improvement in the 1880s. It is located within the National Register's Capitol Hill Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Alterations and additions:
 - 1903: Two medians, Reservation Nos. 38A and 41A, transferred to Office of Public Buildings and Grounds.
 - 1963: Fifth Street closed. Reservation Nos. 39 and 41, and 40 and 42 merged to form Reservation Nos. 39/41 and 40/42.
 - 1975: Metrorail yellow/blue line construction under Reservation Nos. 39/41, necessitating its redevelopment.
3. Condition: Fair. Pedestrian paths worn through Reservation Nos. 38 and 43 were slated for paving in 1988, but have not been improved to date.

B. Historical Context:

L'Enfant shaded the approximate area of today's Seward Square on his city plan and designated it as No. 14. Describing his intentions for the yellow-shaded parks in his notes, he wrote:

The Squares colored yellow, being fifteen in number, are proposed to be divided among the several States in the Union, for each of them to improve, or subscribe a sum additional to the value of the land for that purpose, and the improvements around the squares to be completed in a limited time.

The center of each Square will admit of Statues, Columns, Obelisks, or any other ornaments, such as the different States may choose to erect; to perpetuate not only the memory of such individuals whose Counsels or military achievements were conspicuous in giving liberty and independence to this Country; but also those whose usefulness hath rendered them worthy of general imitation: to invite Youth of succeeding generations to tread in

the paths of those Sages or heroes whom their Country has thought proper to celebrate.

The situation of these Squares is such that they are the most advantageously and reciprocally seen from each other, and as equally distributed over the whole City district, and connected by spacious Avenues round the grand Federal Improvements, and as contiguous to them, and at the same time as equally distant from each other, as circumstances would admit. The settlements round those squares must soon become connected.¹

Andrew Ellicott worked from L'Enfant's general scheme to compose the official engraved plan of the city. At this site, he enlarged the open space, but unlike L'Enfant, made no recommendations for the development of this or any other intersection. Although seventeen parcels were appropriated March 30, 1791, to serve as public parks and federal reservations, this reservation was acquired by the government along with the land designated for streets and avenues since it is technically within the right-of-way of the street system. It was formerly part of a tract of land known as Houp's Addition, owned by Jonathan Slater since 1764 and purchased by William Prout in 1791.²

Although it is located about three blocks from the U.S. Capitol, the city squares surrounding the reservation were still sparsely settled by the time of the Civil War. A few structures faced onto the open space in the 1860s, but the federally owned property at the intersection remained vacant and unimproved.

The area began to develop more rapidly when an experimental territorial government installed in 1871 introduced vast infrastructural improvements throughout the city before it dissolved in debt and scandal in 1874. Orville E. Babcock, the Army Corps of Engineers officer in charge of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) was a close friend of Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, the head of the territorial government's Board of Public Works, so it can be assumed that the two consulted each other when a set of maps was compiled depicting the federal reservations throughout the city. On these maps, this site was indicated as a single, large rectangle, but Babcock described it in his annual report to the Chief of Engineers as "four reservations on Pennsylvania Avenue east of the Capitol." In this report, he also requested funds to improve the reservation comprised of three acres and 9,765 square feet.³ By 1872, the Board of Public Works had paved Pennsylvania Avenue, paving with wood from the Capitol to Eighth Street, SE, right through the open space. Trolley tracks had already been installed down the center of the right-of-way, and thereby through the center of this area intended as a park.⁴ Although most of the rectangular reservations throughout the rest of the city were, and continue to be landscaped as squares, this intersection and one to the southeast on Pennsylvania Avenue between Seventh and Ninth streets, remain fragmented by their cross streets into a set of landscaped

¹ Legend on L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city.

² McNeil, 43, 48.

³ Annual Report . . . , 1872.

⁴ Board of Public Works, "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues," 1872.

triangles.

When the space was depicted in a real estate atlas of 1876, it was probably still unimproved but was shown as six individual triangles divided by Pennsylvania and North Carolina avenues and Fifth Street, SE, with double streetcar tracks along Pennsylvania Avenue. Development of the area continued throughout the next decade, and by 1881 all of Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, was paved with asphalt and lined with a double row of maple trees, and North Carolina Avenue was graveled. The OPB&G generally tried to improve parks in areas that were becoming more populous. In keeping with this principle, OPB&G Officer A. F. Rockwell requested \$10,000 in 1883 to improve this square which he referred to for the first time as "Seward Place." He described the square as embracing about four acres, "over two of which are at the present time occupied by street surfaces, mainly on the lines of Pennsylvania and North Carolina Avenues." He proposed removing the streets, avenues, and street railway tracks, and improving and enclosing the park "in a manner similar to Stanton and Mount Vernon squares, with walks through it on direct lines of travel, for pedestrians only."⁵ But by 1884, when the OPB&G published a list of federal reservations, six triangles were described at this intersection, numbered in sequence with those on Pennsylvania Avenue. Clockwise from the northwest corner, the parks were designated as Nos. 40, 42, 43, 41, 39, and 38. By this time, all the fragments had been improved to some extent, and featured cast-iron post-and-pipe rail fences, grass, and flower beds. Reservation No. 43 even featured an ornamental vase.

Rockwell referred to the square as Seward Place as early as 1883, but it was not officially named until Congress designated it Seward Square in 1903.⁶ It is possible this square was informally named after Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward, at the same time its counterpart to the north was named Stanton Place after Lincoln's Secretary of War. One would generally have to pass through either of these two spaces before reaching the large park at the intersection of Massachusetts and North Carolina avenues that was named Lincoln Park in 1867.

Perhaps to ameliorate the nuisance of the streetcars that ran through the center of the Pennsylvania Avenue right-of-way, a wide grassy median landscaped with a double row of trees was formed to separate them from the roadway traffic. These medians were officially transferred to the jurisdiction of the OPB&G in 1903, and the two running through Seward Square were designated as Reservation No. 38A, north of Reservation No. 38, and Reservation No. 41A, north of Reservation No. 41. Streetcar tracks remained in the center of the avenue until the late 1950s when streetcars were gradually replaced by busses throughout the city. The grassy median, however, remains.

Because the vast majority of the reservations in the city are located within legal rights-of-way, reconfiguration to meet traffic needs is an inherent fact. Almost 100 years after Col. Rockwell pleaded unsuccessfully to provide more park and less pavement at this juncture, the Fifth Street roadway through this park was closed to automotive traffic. In 1963, 1,825 square feet were added between Reservation Nos. 39 and 41 merging the two separate triangles into one large park, and similarly, 1,837 square feet were added between Reservation Nos. 40 and 42.

⁵ Annual Report . . ., 1883, 2108.

⁶ U.S. Congress, Statutes, Vol. 32., Public No. 167, 1224

The former road beds were converted to sodded panels while the remainder of the landscape remained largely intact.

The park was altered again for transportation needs in 1975 as the city returned to rail transit. The designers of the Metro subway system logically chose to fashion the underground lines after the above-ground street system, using many of the reservations at intersections as subway stations. The reservation one block south of Seward Square was chosen as the Eastern Market Metro Station and the rail line ran underneath Seward Square. In 1975, Reservation No. 39/41 was entirely excavated for the construction of Metro's orange/blue line. When the line was completed, the park was relandscaped with formal hedges and a circular seating area surrounded by holly trees.

Construction of the subway was an effort to alleviate the city's massive traffic problems and revitalize the central core of the city, which had been steadily declining since the 1940s. In the neighborhood around Seward Square, streetcar lines first promoted residential development of the area, then encouraged commercial uses. As the automobile allowed middle- and upper-class settlement in the suburbs, this section of the city remained a lower-income residential and commercial neighborhood. Depressed and remote from the White House and executive offices, it was bypassed by the high-rise office and commercial buildings that began to fill much of the city's northwest quadrant in the 1950-60s.

As a result, many of the original nineteenth-century structures still face onto the square, now accompanied by a modern church, bank building, service station and apartment building. All the buildings in the vicinity are under five-stories, however, maintaining the open atmosphere that once characterized all of the circles and squares in the city. This historic quality gained popularity in the late 1960s during a rising nationwide effort to preserve historic areas and led to the National Register designation of the neighborhood as the Capitol Hill Historic District in 1976. This designation has led to the preservation and restoration of the historic character of the neighborhood through such efforts as replacing modern light standards with historic replicas and repaving concrete sidewalks with brick, which was done along Pennsylvania Avenue in 1989.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: The combined area of all the reservations at this intersection is about 2.47 acres.
- B. Materials:
 1. Perimeter walks: All the reservations, except the two medians, have perimeter walks. Those adjacent to Pennsylvania Avenue were recently repaved with brick. Older brick walks are on the south side of Reservation No. 39/41, the southeast and southwest side of Reservation No. 38, and the east side of Reservation No. 43. All other perimeter sidewalks are concrete. The medians, Reservation Nos. 38A and 41A, have sidewalks continuing along the line of those around the perimeter of the adjacent reservations. Reservation No. 38A is divided at the west end by a road, the smaller disconnected triangle is covered entirely with brick. All perimeter walks have concrete curb cuts leading to the street for handicap access. All of the perimeter sidewalks also feature evenly spaced openings along the curbs for shade trees.

2. Interior pathways, paving: Two parallel brick walks run from north to south through Reservation No. 40/42 continuing along the lines of the sidewalks on Fifth Street. In addition to formal paths, pedestrians have worn desire paths from the east side of Reservation No. 43 to Pennsylvania Avenue, and in Reservation No. 38, from the northwest corner to the center of the southeast side and from the northeast side to the west side. Reservation No. 43 features a central area paved with brick approached by brick pathways from the northwest and northeast sides. Reservation No. 39/41 features a central round sodded area surrounded by a circular walk of Belgian blocks.
3. Vegetation:
 - a. Grass: Each reservation is sodded within the sidewalk boundaries.
 - b. Trees, shrubs, hedges: Large shade trees are planted in the openings along the perimeter sidewalks of each triangle, and the two medians feature parallel rows of young trees. Reservation No. 38A also includes two older shade trees. One tree grows in the disconnected triangle at the east end of Reservation No. 41A. Reservation Nos. 38 and 43 are landscaped similarly with flowering shrub beds placed at the three corners, and three large shade trees adjacent to the beds toward the centers of the reservations. Reservation No. 40/42 is landscaped into two connected right triangles divided by a brick path. Flowering shrub beds are planted at each corner of the two triangles. One lone tree stands on the eastern side of the turf area within the sidewalks.

Formal hedges form the perimeter of Reservation No. 39/41. Large shrub beds are planted at the corners of the two triangles formed on each side of the central patio and along the northern sides of these triangular panels are evenly spaced young shade trees. In the obtuse angle at the north end of the reservation is a large shrub bed with ornamental evergreens.
3. Structures:
 - a. Fences, coping: Reservation Nos. 38, 40/42, 43, and 39/41 have pipe-rail fences at each corner between the corner shrub beds and the adjacent sidewalks. None of the reservations have coping, so the turf grows into the brick sidewalks.
 - b. Benches: Reservation Nos. 38, 40/42, and 43 feature metal-frame, wood-slat benches. Evenly spaced along the park perimeters, they face the street. A long semicircular backless bench constructed of wood slats and concrete supports surrounds the north side of the central paved area in Reservation No. 39/41.
 - c. Grates: Ventilation grates for the Metrorail orange/blue line are located along the south side of Reservation No. 39/41.

C. Site:

1. Character of surrounding structures: Two- and three-story residential and commercial structures surround the park.
2. Traffic patterns: The busy six-lane avenue with center medians breaks the rectangle into its distinct sections.
3. Vistas: The U.S. Capitol dome is clearly visible from both of the medians.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

District of Columbia Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

B. Park plans: See Supplemental Information below for a list of attached plans. Additional plans are located at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

1975: Restoration plan for reservation 39/41 (NPS Reservation Files).

C. Early Views:

1927: Survey photographs of each reservation (NPS Reservation Files).

D. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers.

"Government Reservations within the City Boundaries." City Lots. Real Estate Atlas. (NARA RG42 230).

McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 34-51.

National Register Nomination, Capitol Hill Historic District.

Record Group 42, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA RG42).

Reservation Files, Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

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1993

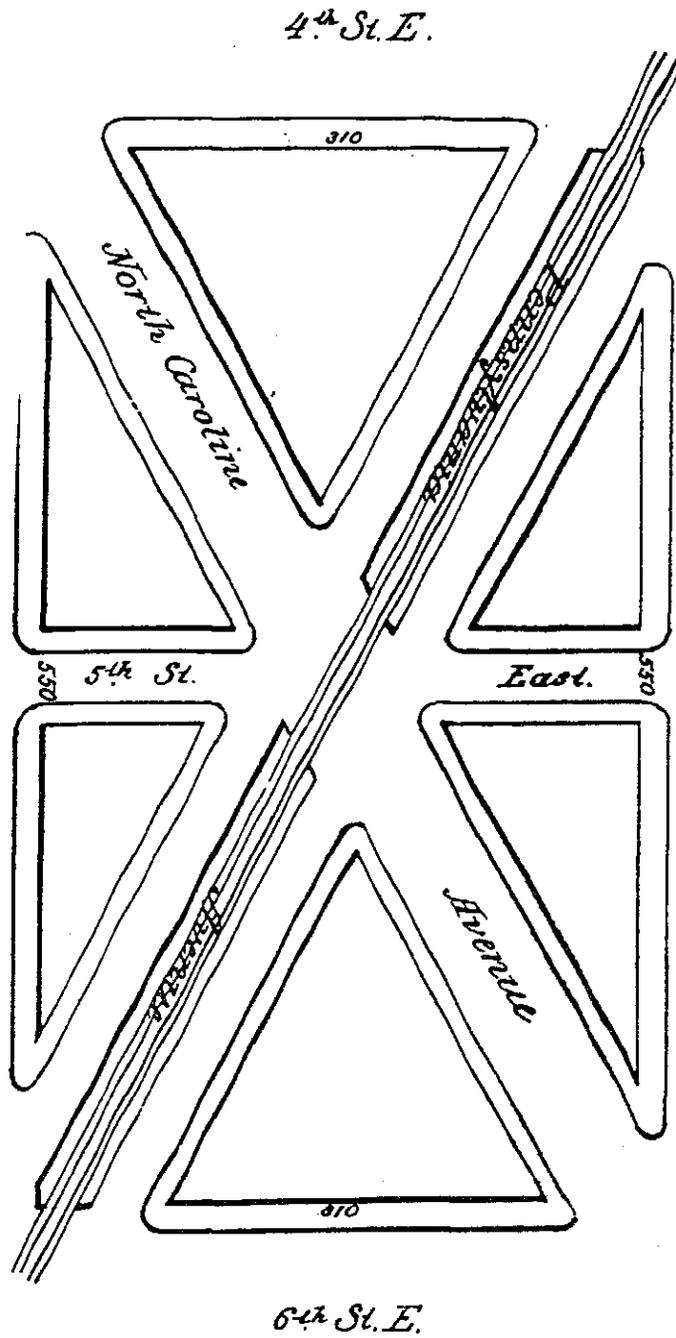
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.

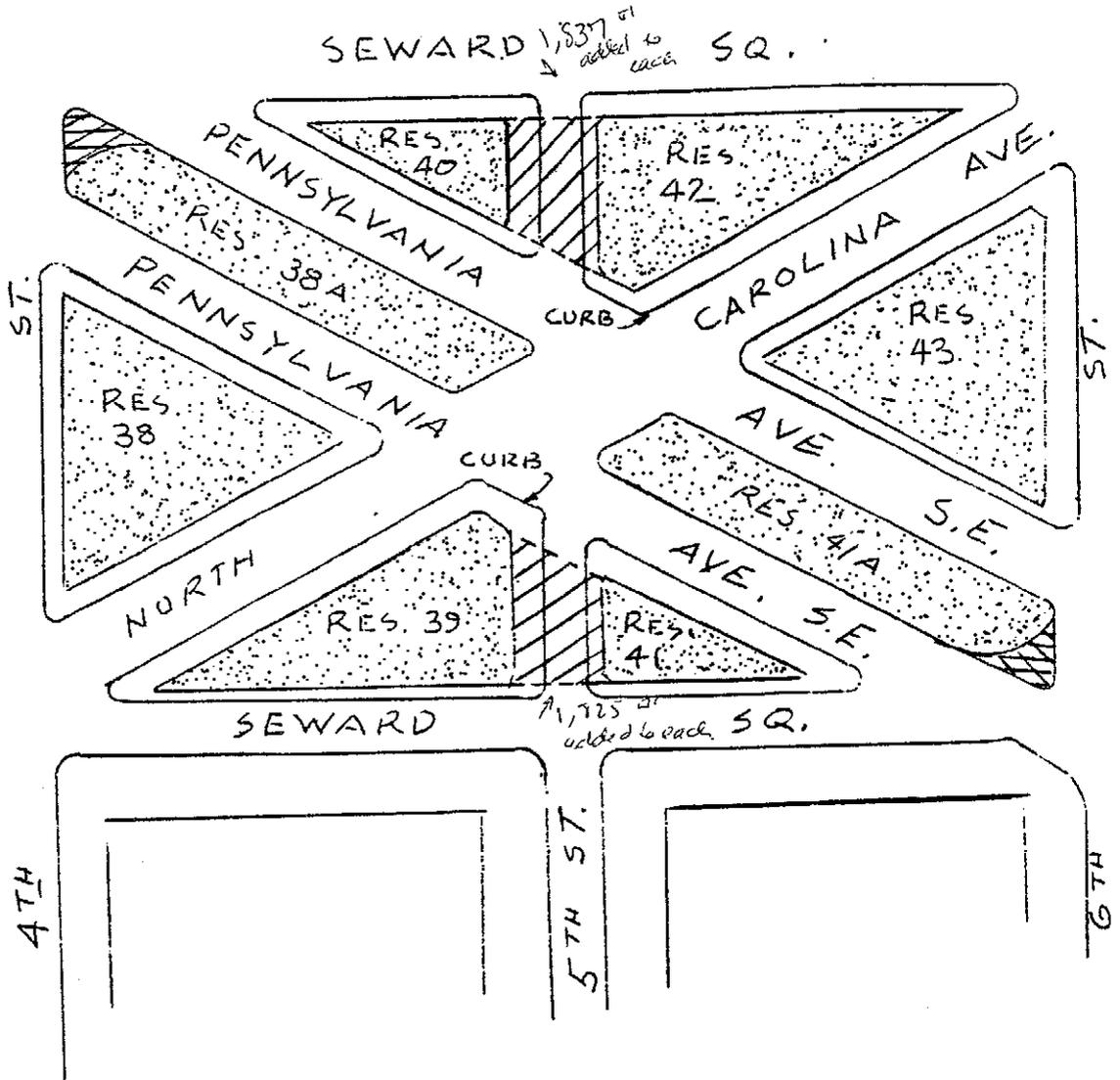
PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

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| Page 8 | 1876: | Reservation plan showing area divided into six parcels with streetcar tracks running along Pennsylvania Avenue (<u>City Lots</u> , NARA RG42 230). |
| Page 9 | 1963: | Park plan showing transfer of land relating to the closure of Fifth Street through the reservation, (Land Record No. 441). |
| Page 10 | 1988: | Walk construction design. |



NO. 5, 38, 38A, 39, 40, 41, 41A, 42 AND 43
SEWARD SQUARE

FEB 18, 1963



-  AREA ACQUIRED BY THIS ORDER
-  AREA TRANSFERRED BY THIS ORDER
-  AREA PREVIOUSLY ACQUIRED

LAND RECORD NO-441

