

LAFAYETTE SQUARE

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Lafayette Square is approximately two city blocks in size and is probably the most famous unimproved plot of ground in the United States. From the early days of the Republic it has been in the center of its history, surrounded by the homes of many of the leaders of our nation and its government.

Like most of downtown Washington, Lafayette Square was laid out in the 1790s by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the Parisian architect of the city, who worked with President George Washington to locate sites for the principal federal government buildings. The Square came into being as part of the White House grounds, the site having been selected personally by Washington. It was not separated from the White House grounds until the presidency of Thomas Jefferson when Pennsylvania Avenue was opened directly in front of the President's mansion, severing the Square from the White House. It had been referred to as the lobby of the President's House and later was called the President's Park. A few years after Lafayette's final visit to this country in 1824, it was named officially for him.

Background

In 1790 Congress approved as the capital city of the United States that area which straddled the Potomac River and which President Washington desired, including the ports of Georgetown and Alexandria. It was to be "ten miles square " as provided in the Constitution, and was to "become the Seat of the government of the United States. " Reports from that era showed the land was heavily forested, the southern and eastern portion of which fell into the Coastal Plain, geologically speaking, and the northern and western portion of which fell into the Appalachian Plain. The Coastal Plain included the low land which became the downtown section of the city. The Appalachian Plain was more elevated and contained thicker and taller foliage, The former was swampy and bug-infested, also very humid. Lafayette Square is in this Plain.

That portion of the new capital city which lay north of the Potomac River including the river itself, was part of the State of Maryland in 1790. This had been so since 1633 when a land comprising the colony of Maryland was owned by Cecilius Calvert, second Lord Baltimore, under a feudal seigniorship from King Charles I of Great Britain. The Calverts then deeded, over the years, certain parcels of land as they saw fit. There is a deed on record showing that on September 23, 1685, the land, including what we call Lafayette Square, was conveyed to one John Pearce. It was still in the Pearce family in 1790 when the government started buying up land for the new capital. A deed in 1792 from the heirs of John Pearce conveyed the land, then known as Port Royal, to Samuel Davidson, a speculator, in trust, reserving to the Pearce family

the right to occupy the farmhouse and to use the family burial grounds. Shortly thereafter the reservation of occupancy and usage was removed and fee simple title passed to the federal government. The White House grounds then consisted of 18 acres including what is now Lafayette Square amounting to about seven acres.

The following quotations appear in a book entitled, not surprisingly, Lafayette Square by Gist Blair, published in 1926:

"When President Washington first proposed to acquire ... land in Lafayette Square * it was owned by Edward Pearce whose farmhouse was located near the northeast corner of the Square, and the graves of several generations of the Pearce family were in their little cemetery in that part of the Square on its north side nearly opposite the White House. Edward Pearce's apple orchard covered the Square."

"Lafayette Square while a part of the grounds of the White House was used on September 18, 1793, as the meeting ground for Masonic Lodges, just before the cornerstone of the Capitol was laid. President Washington with his suite met Lodge No. 15 of the city before the ceremony. " (Lodge No. 15 was one of the five founding lodges of the Grand Lodge FAAM of the District of Columbia in February 1811, after which it became Federal Lodge No. I and continues to exist today).

The Early Days

In the 1790s, while the White House was under construction, a brick kiln and workmen's quarters were built on Lafayette Square and building supplies were stored there. In 1797, while construction was still in progress, a race course for horses was laid out along the west side of the Square (now Jackson Place). Thereafter, a market was located on it and, during the War of 1812, soldiers were encamped there.

No building was undertaken around the Square, other than the White House, until after President Madison was forced out of the President's House when the British burned it in 1814. By the time he moved back for the last days of his term in 1817, St. John's Episcopal Church on the north side of the Square (16th and H Streets) had been completed (1816) and some residences were under construction. (Members of the Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction will recognize this church as where the Vesper Service is held prior to opening the Supreme Council Session.)

The Square Today

Today, as it has been since the early 19th Century, Lafayette Square has remained an unimproved park landscaped with attractive trees and interlaced with walkways and floral displays. In the center has stood since 1853 a statue of General Andrew Jackson, hero of the Battle of New Orleans and seventh President of the United States.

At each of the four comers of the Square stands the statue of one of four foreigners who served as generals in our Revolutionary War. They are as follows: Lafayette on the southeast comer, dedicated in 189 1; Rochambeau on the southwest comer, dedicated in 1902; von Steuben on the

northwest comer, dedicated in 1910; and Kosciuszko on the northeast comer, also dedicated in 1910.

Lafayette Square, while not a Masonic Park is certainly filled with outstanding examples of Masons in prominent leadership roles, who helped forge the new nation. -Editor

Andrew Jackson: Seventh President of the United States; Past Grand Master of Tennessee; member of Harmony Lodge 1 Nashville, Tennessee.

Marquis de Lafayette: French statesman and officer; hero of the American Revolution. Known to be a mason although his Blue Lodge membership is not known. Received the Royal Arch Degrees in New York City in 1824.

Jean Baptist Comte de Rochambeau: French general of the American Revolution, and later Marshal of France. Masonic membership not known but he, LaFayette, and nearly 100 others were listed as visiting brothers at the institution of the Lodge of St. John de Candeur at Paris in 1775.

Baron Von Steuben: Major General of the American Revolution. Apparently received his degrees in Europe and was a member of Trinity Lodge #10 (now # 12) New York City.

Thaddeus Kosciuszko: Polish Patriot and General of the American Revolution. Although he is generally referred to as a Mason, no proof of his membership has been found.

(Source: Penstocks 10,000 Famous Freemasons)