

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: **CONTESTED PLAY AND CLEAN WATER:
MCMILLAN PARK, RACE, AND THE BUILT
ENVIRONMENT IN WASHINGTON, D.C., 1900-1941**

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This study focuses on the intersection of the politics and culture of open public space with race relations in the United States from 1900 to 1941. The history of McMillan Park in Washington, D.C. serves as a lens to examine these themes. Ultimately, the park's history, as documented in newspapers, interviews, reports, and photographs, reveals how white residents attempted to protect their dominance in a racial hierarchy through the control of both the physical and cultural elements of public recreation space. White use of discrimination through seemingly neutral desires to protect health, safety, and property values, establishes a congruence with their defense of residential property. Without similar access to legal methods, African Americans acted through direct action in gaps of governmental control. Their use of this space demonstrates how African-American residents of Washington and the United States contested their race, recreation, and spatial privileges in the pre-World War II era.

CONTESTED PLAY AND CLEAN WATER: MCMILLAN PARK, RACE, AND THE
BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN WASHINGTON, D.C., 1900-1941

by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Water Filtration, Horses, and Hygiene.....	25
Chapter 2: The Creation of a Memorial Park.....	45
Segregation and Park Use	55
Chapter 3: Playground Morals: Whites Only.....	83
Conclusion	106
Bibliography	113

List of Figures

Figure 1:	Original plan for McMillan Park by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.	3
Figure 2:	Map showing racial covenants and racial make-up of northwest Washington, D.C.	8
Figure 3:	“General Plan of Washington Filtration Plant Showing Finished Surfaces”, 1906	32
Figure 4:	McMillan Memorial Fountain, November 1916.....	37
Figure 5:	Original McMillan Park Plan with added markings to show boundaries of three different conceptual areas	49
Figure 6:	Black children on roller skates next to McMillan Park Memorial Fountain, November 1916	59
Figure 7:	Map showing location and size of auto garage proposed in 1929	63
Figure 8:	Filtration facilities, McMillan Reservoir, and smokestack, November 1916.....	73
Figure 9:	“Movable Ejector at Work Moving Sand Temporarily Stored on top of a Filter”, 1906	74
Figure 10:	Workers removing sand for cleaning in filtration beds, 1938.	75
Figure 11:	Lillian Evanti by the McMillan Memorial Fountain, ca. 1930-1940	77

Introduction

In 2007, Vision McMillan Partners gained exclusive right to redevelop a portion of McMillan Park, a former public park and slow sand water filtration site which the government fenced off for security reasons in 1941. Since the awarding of the contract, developers, the government of the District of Columbia, and community members have debated over the future of this section of the site and about how much should remain open and how much should be developed. The general themes of this debate are nothing new, for as cities grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, the control and use of the natural and built environment in densely populated areas increasingly became a point of contention. As a part of this overall debate, different groups of citizens and officials in the United States argued over what public parks and other open spaces should look like, who should use them, and what activities should take place in them. In 1901, the United States Senate Park Commission created the McMillan Plan outlining a grand vision for the nation's capital premised on the original L'Enfant plan for Washington and a maximization of green expanses and monuments. Through its slow implementation and the creation and use of other open spaces in the city, the citizens of D.C. continually confronted the issues mentioned above.¹

At the same time, the post-reconstruction era South, including Washington, set up a system of segregation either by law or by practice to maintain spatial division between Black and white people and to maintain white supremacy. Segregation was not limited to

¹ Eugene L. Meyer, "A Reimagining in Washington Divides the Neighbors," *New York Times*, June 23, 2015. Accessed March 25, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/realestate/commercial/washingtons-plans-for-a-historic-site-divides-its-neighborhood.html>

the South with many northern areas having de facto segregation and legal means through like zoning and restrictive covenants that kept African Americans out of white neighborhoods. Often implemented out of a desire to protect property values, health, and safety believed at risk due to Black or minority presence, restrictive covenants were prevalent in Washington. Contention over them led to the D.C. based *Corrigan v. Buckley* case in 1926 which set a national precedent for their legitimacy and the *Hurd v. Hodge* court case in 1947, a companion case to *Shelley v. Kramer*, in which the Supreme Court ruled their use unconstitutional. Considering this divisive atmosphere in the United States and in Washington in particular, where did the politics and culture of open public space intersect with race relations? In this study, the history of McMillan Park will serve as a lens to examine the interplay of these two themes.²

Named in honor of Senator James McMillan, whose name is also on the overall park plan mentioned above, McMillan Park was made up of McMillan Reservoir, Sand Filtration Site, and Playground and was open from 1906-1941 and is the general time period for this study. Current day community members and developers alike claim, to various degrees of certainty, that this space was the first de facto integrated park in the District. Was McMillan truly the first de facto integrated park in Washington, as some have claimed? If so, did park creators always intend its integration? This occurrence seems odd because the same period when the government allowed public access to the site mirrors that of the increasing racial tension and segregation in the city. Sitting at the confluence of two segregated neighborhoods, how did relations within the park reflect those in the area surrounding it and change over time? Whether McMillan Park was the

² Jeffrey D. Gonda, *Unjust Deeds: The Restrictive Covenant Cases and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 5, 2.

capital's first de facto integrated park is much more complicated than a yes or no answer. In this study, I will describe the intricacies of both the boundaries and divisions within the site in order to paint a comprehensive picture of the culture of the park.³



Figure 1: Original plan for McMillan Park by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Olmsted Archives. Plan #71: General Plan for McMillan Park (1911), F.L. Olmsted, Jr. Olmsted Job No. 2840, McMillan Park. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. Brookline, MA.

Despite not having clear delineations, McMillan Park is emblematic of the role of public space in the complex working out of race relations in Washington, D.C. in the early twentieth century, the process of how landscapes are claimed and constructed, and the opportunities derived within the interstices of power. Ultimately, the history of the park reveals how whites attempted to protect their racial hierarchy through the regulation of built spaces, the environment, and the control of both the physical and cultural

³ Kirby Vining, "McMillan Park – Washington's First Racially Integrated Park," *Friends of McMillan Park blog*, December 28, 2013, Accessed October 12, 2015. <http://friendsofmcmillan.org/mcmillan-park-washingtons-first-racially-integrated-park>; "History" *Vision McMillan Partners Website*. Accessed October 12, 2015. <http://envisionmcmillan.com/history/>

elements of open space. At the same time, African-American use of this space demonstrates how African-American residents in Washington and the United States could make their “claim to the city” and contested their race, recreation, and spatial privileges.

Historiography and Context

Unlike many cities in the United States that experienced growth through industrialization in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century, the District of Columbia’s economy and population mainly grew due to federal jobs. After the Civil War, many white people came to the capital seeking employment with the government and did so once again with the New Deal programs of the 1930s. Much of this population during the earlier period was concentrated at the city center due to the lack of transportation needed to live in further out areas. With the creation and growth of the streetcar system from 1890 to 1930 and automobiles, whites began moving to more peripheral areas and eventually to the suburbs. During the early twentieth century and pre-World War II era, they remained in a clear majority of 65 to 75 percent out of an overall population of 278,718 in 1900 to that same percentage out of a population of 663,869 by 1940. Despite their consistent demographic majority, whites felt anxiety over the large Black population in the city.⁴

African Americans also came for the federal jobs after the Civil War, establishing communities in Barry Farms, Southeast, Georgetown, Southwest, and areas in the city core. Middle-class and elite African American communities developed from

⁴ Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999): 100, 120, 160; Eric Steven Yellin, *Racism in the Nation’s Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson’s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 19; Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967): 200.

opportunities in the federal government, many gaining prominent positions such as register of the Treasury. Despite white officials reducing opportunities for them in the federal government as time went on, Black people continued to migrate to Washington, especially from the deep south, due to kinship ties and the belief that, while segregated, the city had better opportunities for them. Many worked as domestic servants to white citizens and lived in alley houses (often behind their employer's houses) with other African Americans who could not afford better. These areas were spaces where close knit African American communities could flourish, fostering a conservative estimate of 17,000-19,000 residents in 1897, but often suffered from dilapidated and unsanitary conditions. Almost invisible from the main streets, police officers feared going into these areas due to the community's dislike of outsiders and the enclosed nature of the space. Reformers took these concerns and also associated the area with moral decay and crime. In response to fears, Congress barred the construction of this type of property by 1892 and through a process of condemnation, conversion, and the creation of businesses and automobile garages slowly decreased their number. Despite these shifts and decreasing alley housing, as many as 1,346 alley dwellings remained by 1927 in Northwest and Southwest, D.C., many housing African Americans.⁵

African Americans were also attracted to Washington for the opportunities at Howard University, which had become the top Black secondary education school in the country and a prized teaching location. Other African Americans became business owners and gradually moved into an elite stratum through serving the Black community.

⁵ Sabiyha Prince, *African Americans and Gentrification in Washington, D.C.: Race, Class and Social Justice in the Nation's Capital*. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014): 41-42; Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 84; James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980): 12-13, 42, 47-48, 52.

A closely tied group of elites formed and along with many other African Americans started moving to the Northwest quadrant of D.C. near Howard around the end of the nineteenth century due to the availability of more housing. With the creation and expansion of street car lines to further out suburbs as mentioned above and the increasing commercialization of this formerly white area, many white citizens moved out of areas east of 16th street, NW and into areas more west and north. Black residents replaced them in the area around Shaw neighborhood, U Street, 7th Street, Boundary Avenue, and Georgia Avenue. Centered near Howard, this region became a citywide and national cultural center for the African American population into the 1920s. Overall, the Black population of the District fluctuated between one third and one fourth of the total numbers mentioned above during the first half of the twentieth century.⁶

Immigrant groups also diversified the city's populace, but were always a distant third to the native white and African American population, with foreign born residents fluctuating from five to ten percent of the population during the period of study. Although only a small percentage of District residents, immigrants were sizable enough to have their presence felt. Jewish (many from Eastern Europe), Irish, Germans, Italians, Greek, and Chinese, among other groups, all moved into the District at varying levels. Immigrants tended to be better educated or know a skilled trade and go into government positions or own their own small businesses. Irish and German (some of them Jewish) entered the area in the early and mid-nineteenth century, were fairly assimilated, and had lower numbers by the twentieth century. Chinese and Greeks immigrated around the turn

⁶ Ronald M. Johnson, "From Romantic Suburb to Racial Enclave: LeDroit Park, Washington, D.C., 1880-1920." *Phylon* 45: 4 (1984): 266-267; Green, *The Secret City*, 200.

of the century but remained very few in the number. The Italians and Eastern European Jewish people from Russia, Poland, and Romania also entered around this period but eventually came to be the most sizable blocks of immigrants. Jewish people grew to 10,000 residents by 1918 and 40,000 by 1956 and Italians similarly reached 14,700 residents by 1937. Some of these poorer groups lived in alley housing or in areas in Southwest Washington for a time but generally lived in central Washington and eventually followed the native white settlement moving northward and to the suburbs.⁷

⁷ Green, *The Secret City*, 200; Margaret H. McAleer, “‘The Green Streets of Washington’: the Experience of Irish Mechanics in Antebellum Washington” in *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C.*, ed. by Francine Cary, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996): 53; Mona E. Dingle, “*Gemeinschaft und Gemütlichkeit*: German American Community and Culture, 1850-1920” in Cary, *Urban Odyssey*, 115, 130; Christine M. Warnke, “Greek Immigrants in Washington, 1890-1945” in Cary, *Urban Odyssey*, 174-175; Esther Ngan-ling Chow, “From Pennsylvania Avenue to H Street, NW: The Transformation of Washington’s Chinatown” in Cary, *Urban Odyssey*, 191, 195; Hasia R. Diner and Steven J. Diner, “Washington’s Jewish Community: Separate But Not Apart” in Cary, *Urban Odyssey*, 138, 140, 146; Howard Gillette Jr. and Alan M. Kraut, “The Evolution of Washington’s Italian American Community” in Cary, *Urban Odyssey*, 157, 166.

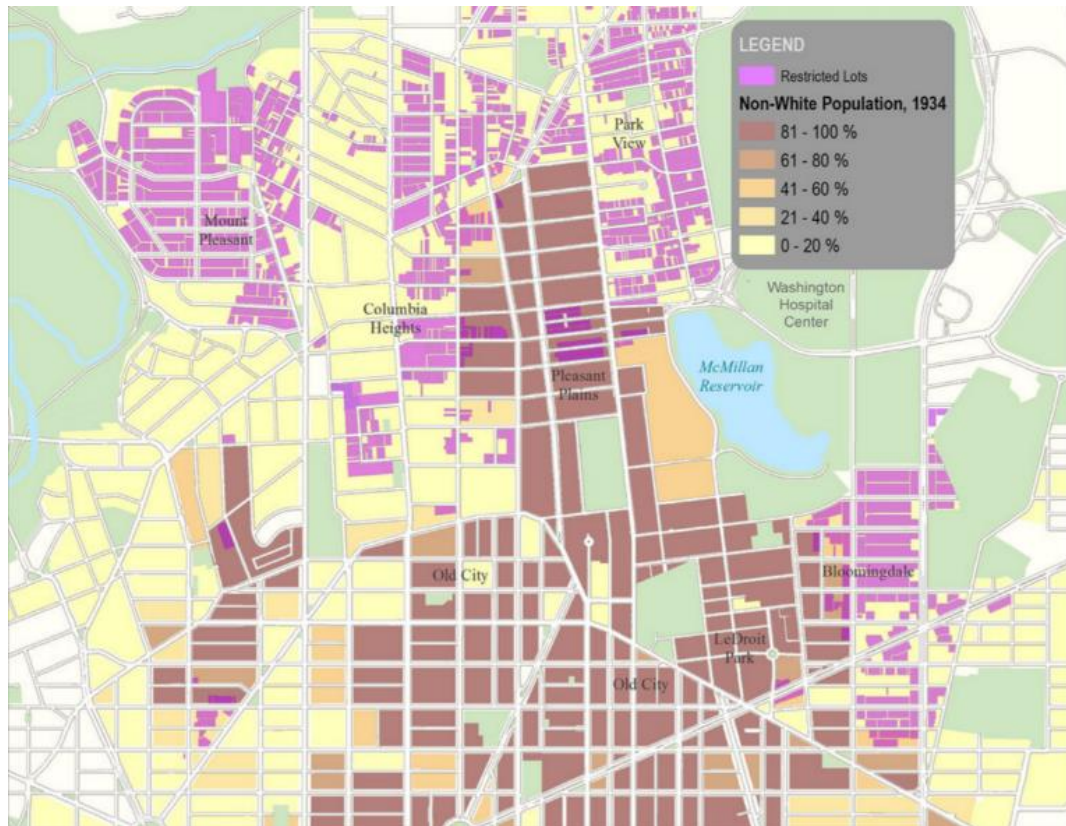


Figure 2: Map showing racial covenants and racial make-up of northwest Washington, D.C. in 1934, including Bloomingdale and LeDroit Park neighborhoods. Screenshot from PROLOGUE DC, LLC, “Mapping Segregation in Washington DC: Legal Challenges to Racially Restrictive Covenants”, <http://arcg.is/1Ztf5Yq>

The two main neighborhoods that surround McMillan Park, Bloomingdale and LeDroit Park, were at the crossroads of racial tensions from the early- to mid-twentieth century and reflected the larger population shifts of the city. Situated to the south of Howard University, LeDroit park was originally an all-white gated community created in 1873, partially outside the original city limits. Eventually incorporated into the city proper, the area measured 55 acres in total and attracted city dwellers with the creation of new streetcar lines. Wealthy government workers, lawyers, doctors and other professional workers and their families lived in this area that was much more suburban at the time. Designers and homeowners erected the gates surrounding LeDroit Park specifically to deter African Americans who lived around the more northern Howard

neighborhoods from entering. Despite the fence, homeowners living to the north passed through the neighborhood, demanding a quicker route to the city core, and eventually tore the fence down multiple times. Once the fence was down for good in 1891, the African-American elite of Washington protested exclusion from the community by gradually moving in overtime. As part of the shift of Black residents' to the northwest quadrant of Washington, a small group of Black families established themselves in LeDroit Park by 1900, only a block away from the main epicenter of African American life mentioned above. By the beginning of the twenties, LeDroit park became a strongly Black middle class and elite community with its own businesses, institutions, and entertainment. At the same time, residents strengthened racial lines in the community directly to the east.⁸

Bloomingdale stood next to the eventually majority Black LeDroit Park neighborhood but was an inverse of the racial make-up of its neighbor. This section started to develop in 1877 around the same time as LeDroit Park, although there was a flour mill and orchard land on the property until the housing crunch began. Much as in the rest of the city, its population increased when the city extended transportation routes outward and with the building of many more houses in the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1910, the Bloomingdale neighborhood was made up mainly of white collar professionals, most of whom were native born with at least a few generations since their family's arrival. Around 1930, the population became more mixed with blue collar Italian and "Assyrian" residents moving in and multiple ethnic business in the south of

⁸ Ronald M. Johnson, "From Romantic Suburb to Racial Enclave: LeDroit Park, Washington, D.C., 1880-1920." *Phylon* 45: 4 (1984): 264-66, 268.

Bloomingtondale on North Capitol Street. The immigrants received a much kinder welcome than Black residents looking to make a home in the area.⁹

Through the early 1900s to the 1940s, Bloomingtondale residents attempted to enforce their all-white standards through restrictive covenants in the deeds and petitions to the neighborhood's houses, preventing most African Americans from buying a home there. Despite their best efforts, renters, block busting realtors, and apathetic homeowners who just wanted to sell their houses, chipped away at the homogeneity of the neighborhood. Stemming from the different communities desiring to move in or a desire to keep others out, numerous court cases, testing the legality of this device of spatial division, involved homes on the western edge of Bloomingtondale, essentially the dividing line between the two neighborhoods. Beyond court cases, violence could also be an effective method of deterrence of African American entrance, with one attempt of a white mob forming to intimidate African Americans in Bloomingtondale in November 1923. Why would there have been any park integration in the midst of such segregation? Were homeowners merely concerned with segregation to maintain their home value and not because of a racist ideology? What does McMillan Park reveal about what happens to public space as the demographics of the neighborhoods they are located in change? Who controlled and could use this park and playground? This space offers a window into the political, cultural, and social character of public open space.¹⁰

⁹ Kelsey & Associates, "Bloomingtondale History," *Bloomingtondale Civic Association website*. Accessed March 29, 2016. <http://www.bloomingtondalecivicassociation.org/about/bloomingtondalehistory>; Gonda, *Unjust Deeds*, 46, 231n.70.

¹⁰ Clement E. Vose, *Caucasians Only: The Supreme Court, the NAACP, and the Restrictive Covenant Cases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959): 75; Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 200.

Scholarship on public parks and other types of open space have focused on key definitional issues in understanding the difference between the political and cultural elements of these areas. In the political sense, these areas are public property, open to the community but owned by the government who manages the land under the assumption that it represents the will of all the people. At the same time, the officials are at the behest of the political system over what to fund, who decides what behavior is acceptable, and who can participate in decisions over the land. This is in contrast to common property where in the perfect scenario everyone has public access. Those that claim access to the space represent the area's "cultural public" which may or not align with what the government deems as the users of the space. Both public and private property are rooted in the legal tradition and have fairly strict definitions. Conversely, communal property is relative, with various degrees of control shaped by culture, economics, and politics. These can be structural factors, formal rules, and cultural and social norms that determine whether one has access and what one can do once there. The history of McMillan Park illustrates these trends as park advocates, playground employees, different groups of residents, and the government struggled to enact their own vision of space and employed competing definitions of both public and common space.¹¹

The control of both public and private space was a particular concern of the Progressive era at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when a diverse range of reformers came together to address the issues caused by the unsettling of established order that arrived with industrialization and urbanization. In hope of regaining control of many facets of life they considered to be in disarray, reformers worked through

¹¹ Roy Rosenzweig, and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992): 5-7.

government to regulate business, create relief for the poor, reform government bureaucracy, establish new professions to deal with urban ills, among a large list of other causes. This group of diverse progressives can be found throughout this study. The new professional middle class established occupations in designing parks, playgrounds, city planning, and sanitation in order to maintain status and tame cities with growing populations and social patterns. In particular, the progressive ideals of efficiency, health, and reform intersected and often were premised on policies of segregation and the supposed negative effects of the intermingling of racial and gender groups, which became increasingly codified during this period.¹²

Racial segregation is one method that the state, citizens, and reformers employed in the regulation of both public and private space. Whether de facto or de jure, Black people across the South and the North, risked harassment, intimidation, injury, and death for violating the lines of racial division. Racial segregation was a de facto policy but rarely codified into law through legislation in the nation's capital from the turn of the nineteenth century until the mid-century point when activists ended its blatant practice through court cases and protest. The strong contingent of African American federal workers, mentioned above, lost a large amount of support in the beginning of the twentieth century as Republicans like Taft began to reign in patronage appointments and move the Republican Party away from a southern strategy based on African American voters who were prevented from voting by southern whites. With the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson in 1913, the new Democratic administration (many of them southerners) attempted to gain control of what they saw as an out of control city without a

¹² Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997): 166-171, 112-113; Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 7, 94.

large amount of segregation, with African Americans as symbols of Republican bad governance, and usurpers of their place in a white racial hierarchy. Through segregation in federal government offices based on the ideals of scientific management, efficiency, and supposed meritocracy, white leaders and bureaucrats, with President Wilson's strong backing, dismantled African American access to jobs through patronage and severely curtailed those still holding positions from advancement. Segregation and its associated regime confined workers to separate spaces with poor conditions, limited necessities (like bathrooms), and reduced Black worker's dignity, reputation, and social status. This program diminished a once vibrant middle-class and elite community and confined many African Americans to working-class positions and lifestyles.¹³

Many Black people in Washington did resist this fall from prominence through various methods. Workers themselves, often women, created petitions and documented conditions in offices in attempt to expose these the practices. Furthermore, some attempted to work through party systems and connections or pass as white. However, most did not overtly protest due to the equation of their complaints as part of inefficiency, causing "friction" in the government machine, and further proof that white and Black people needed to be separated. By dismissing the Black worker's claims, white bureaucrats called upon the supposedly neutral tenets of efficiency to make protesters seem unruly and lazy rather than having a justified dispute. With the decreased effectiveness of these methods, African Americans increasingly relied on groups outside of the government like the NAACP to push for fair treatment to African American workers. However, by the end of the 1920s, this advocacy group deemphasized fighting

¹³ Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 61-64, 82, 87-89, 94, 192, 2.

segregation in the District after its reification from Republican administrations under Harding and Coolidge that determined segregation was a natural part of efficient management. Thus, much of the progressive reform of government was contingent upon racism and a belief in racial hierarchy.¹⁴

In addition to segregation in offices through de facto means, residential housing was another area where white people in the United States attempted to control racial division through more explicitly legal devices. Two methods, zoning and racial covenants, were prevalent in the pre-World War II period throughout the country. Zoning established and defined public powers to regulate private property while racial covenants governed interactions between private individuals and their own property. Despite these differences, each operated and held up in courts on similar principles. Zoning from its outset had racial intent. The emphasis for zoning developed in part from the early city planning profession movement to create efficient, orderly, and safe cities by controlling where different aspects of the city were located, with its emphasis on what could be adjacent or in residential areas. Beyond these goals, zoning also became a tool to protect property values. An essential part of this was the belief that African American people and other “less white” ethnicities brought down property values by moving into white neighborhoods as much as industrial or commercial business. Additionally, these progressive and other segregationists mirrored a larger societal belief that separating whites and minority groups was a necessary measure in order to prevent an inevitable conflict and also maintain their goals of order and efficiency. Through the use of

¹⁴ Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 133-137, 140, 162-165, 171-172, 185.

nuisance doctrines, property rights, and the protection of public health and safety, zoning effectively became a neutral and scientific basis for clear discrimination.¹⁵

Racial covenants were restrictions that private citizens wrote into the deeds of their houses or created by petition declaring racial limitations of habitation and sale to African Americans and certain other minority groups. As mentioned, these were particularly used and fought over in the Bloomingdale neighborhood. These covenants had legal standing based on the same grounds as zoning, with the claim that the ability to segregate was necessary because certain groups and land development threatened property values and the health and welfare of the white community. By 1948, some estimates say that at least fifty percent of the homes in the United States had this sort of restriction. Covenants became intrinsic to the property itself, with the original owners deciding what restrictions future owners would have to follow. Proponents of the covenants held up property rights as incontestable but only certain people could decide what those property rights from the outset. As seen with the segregation of office space, the inherent racism of this method of control was aligned with a “neutral” goal that aligned with progressive principles.¹⁶

Government offices and housing were not the only spaces the white government workers and local residents tried to segregate. In the majority of the country, whites restricted public and private recreational spaces. Much like in the cases above, white people often justified segregation due to a belief that that races must be kept separate to protect public safety. African Americans faced harsh reprisals for entering these

¹⁵ David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 46, 54-56, 66-68.

¹⁶ Freund, *Colored Property*, 92-98.

prohibited areas, whether harassment, mob intimidation, arrest, injury, or death. In the public recreation facilities of Washington, D.C., spaces under this form of racial control included park, recreational, and leisure facilities to a large degree. Public parks and playgrounds fell within both federal and local jurisdictions (albeit still overseen by the federal government). Federal recreation sites were open to the public regardless of race or national origin but de facto segregation prevailed in these areas. At the municipal level, administrators placed parks into a Jim Crow system with some for whites and some for Blacks only.¹⁷

Although these racial policies were in place and despite the consequences, it did not mean that the citizenry did not transgress and contest the rules of these spaces much like government employees at the time. Kate Masur has also shown that Black residents claimed access to many rights and spaces in the post-Emancipation Washington, often despite government unwillingness to litigate on matters of “social equality” like public space and public accommodation. Did this continue in the twentieth century as government looked to reign in the newly obtained freedoms of African Americans?¹⁸

Marya McQuirter demonstrated in her dissertation that “as African Americans participated in leisure throughout Washington they were making explicit claims to the city... the fluid and ever-changing racial boundaries of the city, then, made use of city spaces a continuous site of contestation and negotiation.” McQuirter claims that this

¹⁷ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 15, 23, 29; Martha H. Verbrugge, “Exercising Civil Rights: Public Recreation and Racial Segregation in Washington, 1900-1949” in *DC Sports: The Nation’s Capital at Play* edited by David Kenneth Wiggins and Chris Elzey (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015): 106.

¹⁸ Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 89-90, 124-125, 261-262.

fluidity prevents Washington, D.C. from being a segregated city at all and that leisure activity, such as library use and reading, going to the movies, and frequenting amusement parks were essential to African Americans shaping their own spatial boundaries and racial identities.¹⁹ I agree that African Americans were able to assert their claim to the city, however, saying that D.C. was not segregated removes the notion that whites could exert their power over cultural and geographical interaction and diminishes the action of contestation by Black citizens. Therefore, I conceptualize Washington as segregated, but that the lines of segregation were not static. McMillan Park was very much a part of this ever-changing make up of race relations.

While McQuirter and others have examined leisure space on private property, other than swimming areas, contemporary historical studies focus much less on public recreational facilities. In *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, Jeff Wiltse examined these water recreation areas from the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of the 1950s. His book examines the changing role of swimming pools in American life and demonstrates the active African American effort in northern cities to integrate municipal city pools in this period. While he focuses mainly on northern pools, he does mention Washington as one of the Southern cities which African Americans were content to push for equal facilities rather than integration.²⁰ Was this the same with Southern parks and playgrounds?

¹⁹ Marya Annette McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902–1957" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2000): 3-4, 8-11.

²⁰ Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 142-146.

Wiltse decries how historians have overlooked the racial contest over aquatic public space in northern cities post 1920, instead focusing on “housing, work discrimination, and schools.” Indeed, this statement can be applied to the class and racial contest over parks and playgrounds in the United States in general during this period. There have been few studies that have looked at park and playground use, other than focusing on design, to understand the cultural and political struggle for these areas. Most of the recent historical research centers on the post-1940 efforts to integrate these spaces and the culture within them at that point. One of the foremost studies on this subject is *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* by Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar. In this work, Rosenzweig and Blackmar expertly chronicle the continuing debate over the park’s creation, elite, government, and community control of the space, and differing types of recreation from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1970s. Most of the analysis focuses on segregation by class and the differing notions of how the park could be used. The African American population was relatively low and mostly accepted in the park during the time before World War II. Without a large population of users, Central Park leaves a hole in understanding how African Americans interacted with park space in the first half of the twentieth century.²¹

One study that is similar to Rosenzweig and Blackmar’s, but that does address racial as well as ethnic and class perspective, is *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago*. Colin Fisher attempts to build on *The Park and the People* and understand whether workers found park space a natural escape from the city rather than simply a space for recreation as Rosenzweig and Blackmar asserted. In

²¹ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 4; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 9-10, 338, 390.

his findings, Fisher determined that many immigrants and African American workers used parks to escape the artificial elements of the city even though they defied elite recreational norms and found nature in places that were not typically considered natural, like polluted areas. They “sought out, appropriated, and defended” what they defined as urban green spaces and utilized them as a part of their own identity formation. African Americans in particular defied attempts to segregate and continued to appropriate park space and demand equal access. They continued even after the 1919 race riot caused immense violence stemming from African American use of a recreational swimming area. While Fisher’s study is focused on the Northern Midwest and more on the meaning of nature, the findings are key to showing the congruence and differences with Washington and its similarly large African American population. While a few other studies have examined African American park and playground use in the North, most point to ineffective protest or eventual tolerance segregation.²²

Studies of public recreation of the South during the pre-World War II period, or those that mention it in relation to private leisure, mostly align with Wiltse’s assertions that African Americans largely advocated for segregated spaces, used make-shift land vacant areas, or created their own private areas. In Michael Worth Ervin’s study of Charlotte, NC, there is mention of African American children entering white recreation spaces but police enforcing segregation of these spaces caused them to move to vacant

²² Colin Fisher, *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 2-6, 97-98, 103-104; James Roland Coates, “Recreation and Sport in the African-American Community of Baltimore, 1890-1920.” (PhD Diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1991): 165-172; Brian E. Alnutt, “African-American Amusement and Recreation in Philadelphia, 1876-1926” (PhD Diss., Lehigh University, 2003): 1.

lots where they were further disciplined if caught playing with poor white children. Yet the author just uses this as background for the main discussion of protest after World War II. Most of these studies demonstrate that southern areas had few if any recreation facilities for African Americans and due to this lack of options they preferred to have at least some sort of facility rather than none. Beyond local Black activism, the Playground and Recreation Association of America began a campaign in the 1920s for municipalities to create more segregated playgrounds for Black people. However, none of these studies take look in-depth into white areas to see how often the lines of segregation were being crossed before the war.²³ Keeping in mind the assertions of McQuirter, did Washingtonians only advocate for segregated parks and playgrounds in Washington? Wiltse does mention that some Black children defied the rules of segregation on Parkview playground (an area north of Howard University) in 1940 because it was easier than accessing the tightly controlled pool on the site.²⁴ Is this what happened in McMillan Park?

As a border city, the District of Columbia straddled the line between North and South but its culture was very much southern during this period. After the Civil War, officials attempted to make D.C. into a place of reconciliation between the North and the South. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Washington went through a

²³ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 4-6; Kevin McQueeney, "Playing With Jim Crow: African American Private Parks in Early Twentieth Century New Orleans." (Master's Thesis, University of New Orleans, 2015): 5-7; Michael Worth Ervin, "'Public Order Is Even More Important than the Rights of Negroes': Race and Recreation in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1927-1973." (Master's Thesis, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2015. Gail Anne D'Avino, "Atlanta Municipal Parks, 1882-1917: Urban Boosterism, Urban Reform in a New South City." (PhD diss., Emory University, 1988): 141-150; Jearold Winston Holland, *Black Recreation: A Historical Perspective* (Chicago: Burnham, 2002): 133-134, 137-141, 152, 172-173.

²⁴ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 145-146.

reassertion of southern values and affiliations. For a time, the city became a center for southern literary societies and associations. The population of southerners (both white and Black) also had the largest growth rate during the period between 1870-1930. Additionally, with the increased segregation in D.C. (alluded to above about government offices) and overt racism align it more with the South. Finally, the Washington Board of Trade attempted to create Washington into a southern banking center and gateway into the South at this time as well. However, the northern or western congressmen hindered many overtly southern policies such as outright Jim Crow legislation. The overlapping federal nature of the city prevents Washington from being completely southern but ultimately provides a framework to examine many southern cultural elements in relation to recreation, while at the same time having the ability to understand a federal influence as well.²⁵

Martha H. Verbrugge does consider the Black population in Washington, D.C. in the first half of the century in “Exercising Civil Rights: Public Recreation and Racial Segregation in Washington, 1900-1949.” The coverage of these early years primarily provides background for her main focus of desegregation of these spaces starting in the 1940s. Verbrugge explains that the unique place of Washington as both a federal and municipal entity as a reason for why tension arose over segregated recreation during this period of time, as arguments over race naturally led to arguments over jurisdiction and vice versa.²⁶ The history of McMillan Park demonstrates that, in an earlier era, the inability or confusion of the two levels of government to work in unison often prevented

²⁵ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 77-92.

²⁶ Verbrugge, “Exercising Civil Rights,” 107.

each from implementing their legal control of public space, thus leaving room for those not in seats of power to assert their agency in these spaces.

McMillan Park was not open to the public long enough to experience the later era of protest. However, it was clearly within the overlapping jurisdictions of federal and local type that Verbrugge described. It was in this jurisdictional anomaly that African-American residents made their “claim to the city” and contested their race, recreation, and spatial privileges. This, of course, merited push back from other groups and those in power that wanted to maintain current cultural norms and racial hierarchy. Overall, the examination of McMillan Park will build upon the ideas of the scholars mentioned above by developing ideas on public leisure space further. This study will take into account the activities within these spaces and how playground and park leaders attempted to influence behavior and racial and gender identity formation of park users. Furthermore, McMillan Park also offers the chance to examine how park designers, physical factors, and spatial factors influenced park use. This study will also add to other studies on how race and class intertwined with ideas about the natural environment during this period, affecting not only those allowed in but also where those in power placed green spaces. In all, McMillan Park’s history will add greater regional diversity to the study of park use and segregation.

This study utilizes many types of sources to understand the role that culture, environment, race, and segregation played in green open city spaces. I rely heavily on historic newspapers as my main source. They are invaluable being one of the largest bodies of evidence surviving on use of the park. Unfortunately, with the few African American newspapers that existed, and none of them yielding information on these

grounds, the articles cited all come from the white newspapers of the period. Beyond the news, I draw from the diverse fragments of information of photographs, department reports, yearbooks, sociological studies, and magazines, found in various archival repositories, to cobble together a more nuanced picture of how the area functioned. Building off all of these sources, I utilize the few interviews of neighborhood residents who frequented the park, found online and in previous historic preservation reports, to try to create as complete of a picture as possible.

In this thesis, I will discuss the questions and ideas raised above through a number of themes while contextualizing specific neighborhood details on a national scale. Chapter 1 focuses on the original physical functions rather than recreational functions of the site and lays the groundwork for the understanding of racial attitudes later on. It demonstrates how whites conceptualized McMillan park, how they tried to control it, their environment, and how environmental racism played a role in the politics of open space. In chapter 2, I focus on park aspects of the site and its use by African Americans. In the first portion, I discuss the greater park movement, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, and go on to describe the general history of green spaces in Washington during the time when the public had access to McMillan Park. I bring these ideas into a discussion of the design and creation of the park and its lasting impact on the spatial divisions and use of the grounds. In the next portion, I discuss the actual use of the park, first focusing on African Americans and segregation, and posit possible explanations for why whites did not strongly object to African-American use in some areas. In chapter 3, I return to white recreational use in the segregated playground section and describe the role

it played in the development of civic notions in children, the attempts to Americanize and inculcate whiteness to immigrants, and how African-Americans disrupted these norms.

Chapter 1: Water Filtration, Horses, and Hygiene

From conception and before it earned its moniker, McMillan Park was first and foremost a filtration plant and reservoir created for hygienic purposes. Starting in the nineteenth century and continuing with the explosion of population in cities during the industrial revolution, many nations became concerned over the growing amount of waste and filth produced in their cities. The sanitary movement, intersecting with the City Beautiful movement, sought to combat the excesses of waste and uncleanly conditions in the United States. Beyond creating better health and living conditions, sanitation and the transforming notion of what it meant to be clean became tenets of racism and cultural discrimination during this period. While Washington did not feel the pressure of industrialization, the population increased with the growth of the federal government, as mentioned above, and raised similar sanitary concerns.

The sanitation movement increased in size and momentum after the Civil War when urban centers gained a large increase of population. In response, groups began organizing to clean their cities to prevent disease and provide healthy environments. The actions of this group came both from progressive professional experts and from volunteer civic organizations, in which many women led the way with their efforts often described as “municipal housekeeping.” Efforts included street cleaning, waste management, sewage systems, and water purification systems. In the early portion of this period, movement leaders focused on visible dirt and grime to combat the causes of disease. With the advent of germ theory and the knowledge that many diseases spread through bacteria, “new public health” advocates in the early-twentieth century focused less on visible environmental conditions and more upon personal hygiene and unseen biological

factors. However, the earlier sanitary proponents were so effective that the public continued to expect visible cleanliness in their cities as well.²⁷

The idea of being clean carried with it an ethnic and racial undertone. As reformers attempted to teach the populace more hygienic practices for both self and home, they further stereotyped immigrants and people of color as physically and morally unclean as well as ignorant of how to lead a clean lifestyle. Cleanliness took on a value associated with whiteness and American citizenship. Whites identified racially “inbetween groups” such as Italians, Mexicans, and Jews as being inherently dirtier or greasier. Many of these immigrant groups considered not completely white at the beginning of the century did take on the hygienic values of middle class and elite white society and gained acceptance into the larger fold of white Americans.²⁸ African Americans also tried this route, with Booker T. Washington famously preaching the “Gospel of the Toothbrush,” which emphasized clean living as a means of advancing in society. Unfortunately, the Black population’s faith in this strategy was misplaced because as historian Suellen Hoy eloquently stated, “once they removed their dirt, whites found it nearly impossible to forgive them of their color.”²⁹

The ideas of the sanitation movement and Social Darwinism fostered the association of African Americans with dirt, uncleanness, and impurity. Popular perceptions of dirt from advertisements for cleaning products often used hyperbole and

²⁷ Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000): 106-107, 110-112.

²⁸ Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 87; Carl Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2015): 85-86.

²⁹ Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 119-120.

claimed the ability to wash away pigment and make the user white, implying dark skin meant dirty skin. Furthermore, segregation was a part of the overall regime of sanitation with whites believing that Black people “somehow polluted white neighborhoods, poisoning the community and devaluing the property.” With the notion of African Americans as pollutants, many scientists also believed that some immigrant groups and Black people were biologically predisposed to perform dirtier work. Therefore, whites disdained these groups for their dirtiness and at the same time valued their prowess to endure filthy conditions. “Dirty work” in many occupations fell to immigrants and African-Americans and was justified by the belief that they were naturally predisposed to handle it. Of course, these jobs only reinforced the stigma of being unclean. In addition, having these positions often meant living in close proximity to the job sites, not only affecting the dirt the worker brought home but the dirt and waste that surrounded their dwelling as well. If the worker did not live close to their dirty work site, white city officials in the U.S. often placed waste or industrial sites in their neighborhoods, making the dirt and grime inescapable.³⁰

The particular impetus to create a filtration facility in Washington, D.C. grew out of official and citizen desire to purify the District’s water to combat cases of Typhoid. By the late nineteenth century, medical experts identified the link that water supplies exposed to sewage played in the spreading of this and other diseases. D.C. suffered one of the highest incident rates of Typhoid fever in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century and its leaders sought to implement systems to clean the public’s water to remedy the situation. Beyond simply desiring water that was safe to drink, many

³⁰ Zimring, *Clean and White*, 92-96, 145, 87, 112, 138.

residents desired palatable and clear, cosmetically pleasing water. This was a holdover from the earlier emphasis on clean looking and tasting water, which had shifted to a focus on “pure” water or safe for human consumption.³¹ The filtration plant fulfilled both of these purposes. As Eleanor Pries demonstrated in her master’s thesis, the residents of Washington desired physically clean as well as pure water much like the rest of the nation.³² Therefore, from the outset, many residents associated the grounds that would eventually become known as McMillan Park with hygiene, aesthetics, and cleanliness. These three factors were interrelated in the ideal conception of a beautiful and efficient city of the City Beautiful movement. To movement advocates, living in this atmosphere produced not only a healthier life but also moral citizens in the process.

Yet, as mentioned, whites established the Black population as the inverse to cleanliness and hygiene. While the water issue and Typhoid were a problem for the entire population, some believed its higher incidence and mortality rate among the Black population was a result of the hygienic stereotypes outlined above. Allen Hazen and E.D. Hardy, the engineers responsible for designing and supervising the creation of the filtration plant, wrote an article in 1906 outlining this process and some of the technical procedures for its operation. Francis F. Longley, who was “Resident Engineer on the Washington, D.C. water purification works,” commented on the article in an effort to clarify some of the sources of water contamination in the District and the other causes of Typhoid that he felt the authors left out. In one section, he emphasized that Typhoid fever spread through contact and not just contaminated water, particularly in the Black

³¹ Melosi, *Sanitary City*, 137-138.

³² Eleanor Pries, “Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth, Recovering McMillan Park.” (Master’s Thesis, University of Virginia, 2005): 16-21.

community. His statements show a belief that all Black people did not know or care about hygiene, or that they were loath to do anything about it. To him, “the colored people as a class are more ignorant of the principles of hygiene than are the whites. Their circumstances and environment are less favorable to health. They are more careless in their personal habits.” In actuality, while many did live in poor conditions, often for reasons beyond their control, the D.C. Black community was diverse socio-economically, with many middle to upper-class African Americans following the hygienic principles espoused by whites and living in decent housing.³³

In addition to environment and knowledge, he thought African Americans as a race were inherently more susceptible to disease, substantiating his claim “by the fact that the health reports of the District of Columbia show greater death rates among the colored population in twenty-six out of thirty-one causes of death cited.” Finally, he claimed that the Black community is “more gregarious than the white population,” facilitating the spread of disease locally. In other words, African Americans socialized more (i.e. did not work) and that they all lived in close proximity together (using the biological connotation of gregarious: meaning they lived in packs, essentially comparing them to animals).³⁴ Longley’s biased opinions closely mirror national stereotypes of African Americans, both about cleanliness and in general, and confirm that at least some in the Corps of Engineers (and the District population in general) held the racial hygienic beliefs outlined above. To Longley and those who may have agreed with him, African Americans were creators of disease and one of the causes of an impure city. Therefore, following their line of

³³ Allen Hazen and E.D. Hardy. “Works for the Purification of the Water Supply of Washington, D.C.” *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers* 57 (1906): 369.

³⁴ Allen Hazen and E.D. Hardy. “Works for the Purification of the Water, 369.

thought, Washington could accomplish Typhoid control through the segregation of the Black population, in addition to filtration of its water supply.

Before the creation of the McMillan Filtration Plant, water in the District was not filtered by any means. The Washington Aqueduct system brought in water from the Potomac on the far western border of Washington and Maryland and into a depositing reservoir where the sediment was supposed to settle and then the residents would receive clear water. However, the consumption of water was too high to allow enough time for the sediment to settle and often was muddy. Some citizens used wells and springs instead, which provided clear but not necessarily clean water. With the population increase at the end of the nineteenth century, fewer residents had access to this alternative. Due to the ineffectiveness of current procedures and the threat of Typhoid mentioned above, the Senate began considering filtration in the early 1880s but the officer in charge of the Aqueduct, Colonel Elliot of the Army Corps of Engineers, felt the Potomac water was already pure and free of bacteria, even if it looked dirty. At the behest of Senator McMillan, the Senate again took up the issue of filtration in 1898 and passed an act to create a filtration facility.³⁵

Government officials and health professionals debated about the best type of filtration process to implement in turn of nineteenth-century Washington, much as they did in the rest of the nation. By this time, many U.S. citizens agreed that cities and towns should implement filtration; the only question was what kind? The debate over mechanical and slow filtration and using chemicals was common between 1890 and 1910 in many municipalities. Despite many cities constructing slow sand filtration plants in the

³⁵ Harry C. Ways, *The Washington Aqueduct, 1852-1992* (Washington, D.C. 1996): 89-91.

interim, mechanical filtration became the largely accepted standard by the end of these years. United States municipal officials also debated the merits of water treatment through chemicals which also gained greater acceptance from 1910 to 1930.³⁶ In the debate in Washington, Congressional studies and reports indicated that mechanical fast filter water filtration using chemical coagulants would be the most effective at combating bacteria and cost the least. However, there was a large contingent that feared the use of chemicals in the filtration process such as the D.C. Medical Society and the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army. To this group, the best option was slow sand filtration, which was less effective but did not require the use of chemicals. In the end, the two sides reached a deal, based on the recommendation by Senator McMillan, to implement the slow sand filtration process and to include coagulants only when necessary. In the end, this debate only delayed the use of chemicals and engineers began treating the water consistently by 1910.³⁷

Allen Hazen, a consulting engineer, designed the filtration area, adjacent to the already existing then called Washington City Reservoir, on the edge of Howard University. The filtration sections of the 92-acre site totaled approximately 29 acres of land with each filter bed comprising one acre of land. Each filter roof contained numerous manhole openings for access to the filter and sand below. Interspersed within the beds were service courts, allowing access through arched gateways with ramps leading beneath the surface. These courts also contained sand storage towers, sand washing machines, and regulator houses. 25 acres of this plant were on the eastern side

³⁶ Melosi, *Sanitary City*, 139-145.

³⁷ Ways, *The Washington Aqueduct*, 91-92, 98.

First Street. The Engineers regraded the land on this portion of the site to move it well above street level and allow room for the concrete vaulted cells of underground filters. The remaining filtration land on the western portion of the site was located directly next to the reservoir and contained a small pumping station, an office and laboratory building, and intake gatehouse. Hazen’s overall design was functional, but did include some flourishes on the gateways and elsewhere, showing the influence from the City Beautiful movement and the desire to match function and beauty.³⁸

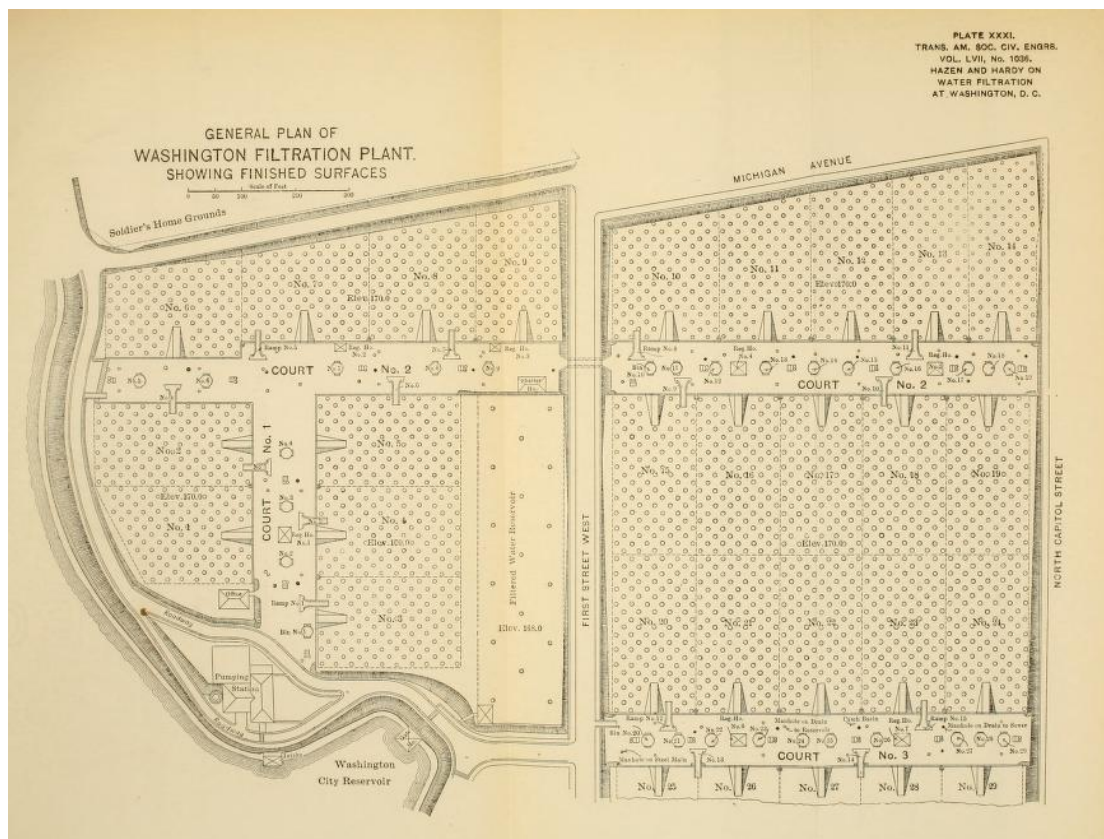


Figure 3: “General Plan of Washington Filtration Plant Showing Finished Surfaces” in Allen Hazen and E.D. Hardy. “Works for the Purification of the Water Supply of Washington, D.C.” *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers* 57 (1906): Plate XXXI.

³⁸ EHT Tracerics, Inc., “McMillan Sand Filtration Plant: Historic Preservation Report for the Proposed Redevelopment of the McMillan Slow Sand Filtration Plant, Final Report” (EHT Tracerics, Inc, September 15, 2014): 1-2. Pries, *Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth*, 28.

The filtration process began with the circulating conduit at the reservoir expelling water through pipes out to the top of the filtration cells. The gatehouses controlled the flow of water in these pipes into the cells below and deposited it across a bed of five-foot thick bed of clean sand. After entering the filtration cells, water slowly seeped its way through and left biological impurities clinging to the sand. Then the water left through drains in the floor and fed into distribution pipes, leaving just sand behind. These pipes led back to a filtered water reservoir, then was pumped to the Bryant Street Pumping Station, and from there to the rest of the city.³⁹

Some parts of the daily operation of the sand filtration site were more labor intensive. Using sand for filtration required its removal and cleaning after prolonged periods of filtration. In this process, workers shoveled two inches of dirty sand by hand to ejectors that hydraulically lifted the sand onto the surface and then workers moved it into washers which cleaned it through a reverse current of water. The clean sand then moved into large storage towers found on the surface of the site. Once the incremental removal of the sand in the filter reduced it down to 2 feet, workers used horse-led carts to move sand from the storage bins and deposit it through the manholes on the surface of the filter roofs, back into the beds below. The sand then sat for about ten days to develop the “schmutzdecke,” a biological layer that performed most of the filtration process.⁴⁰

By 1910, with planning to create a park on these grounds underway, engineers moved the sand cleaning process mostly underground. By gaining the ability to both pump the sand out for cleaning in the washers and the storage towers and back in again,

³⁹ Pries, *Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth*, 26-27.

⁴⁰ Ways, *The Washington Aqueduct*, 95, 97.

they freed the surface of continual destruction and waste from horses and moving sand for deposit over to the manholes. Filtration site laborers now removed the manholes mainly to provide better ventilation while they worked underground. In line with Hazen's and other engineers' hope to improve the aesthetics of the site, this change in technology and labor methods below ground made the creation of a permanent green space possible above ground.⁴¹

As mentioned above, Senator James McMillan was an advocate for a water filtration system for the District and in addition was a proponent of the City Beautiful movement. Thus, his background and values played a role in the naming of the park as well. When Senator James McMillan died in 1902, the District government looked to rename a park after him to honor his involvement in the McMillan Plan, the plan to improve the green and city spaces in the capital, inspired by the City Beautiful movement. Senator McMillan headed the commission to create the designs of this plan along with various other leaders of the landscape architecture community, including Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr, who would later design McMillan Park, more details will be given on his life and design in Chapter 2. The 1896 World's Columbian Exposition and Daniel Burnham's model of Chicago that imagined what an efficient and clean city could look like through design, sanitation, and nature, inspired them to construct their own vision of the "White City." Putting these ideas on paper, the commission returned to the original L'Enfant plans and enhanced them to create a comprehensive model of the national capital. They focused on establishing a monumental core centered and

⁴¹ EHT Traceries, Inc., "McMillan Sand Filtration Plant," 122; Betty Bird, "Preliminary Research - McMillan Reservoir" (June 18, 1991): 8, 6. Accessed December 19, 2015, <http://envisionmcmillan.com/wp-content/uploads/McMillan-Preliminary-Research-June-18-1991.pdf>

established on the uninterrupted green space of the national mall connected by a ring of parks. While McMillan did not live to see most of these plans put into action, his impact on the built environment was huge.⁴²

In 1906, the Civic Center, a citizen group addressing social conditions of the city, sent a request to the D.C. Commissioners to name half of the filtration site after James McMillan to commemorate these accomplishments and half for Senator J. H. Gallinger who also advocated for improvements of the District. This area was not part of the McMillan Plan but planners mentioned it as a possible park-like area that could connect the Soldier's Home grounds to the north with the core of the city. The Army Corps of Engineers, which had jurisdiction over the facility, responded after being forwarded the request by the Commissioners that they favored naming the site solely for Senator McMillan. The final report cited Captain Crosby, the Army Engineer in charge of the site, saying that,

it is rather doubtful whether the filtration plant and surrounding grounds can properly be called a park. Should, however, such a designation be deemed suitable, it is believed that a single name should be applied to the plant as a whole and the adjacent grounds surrounding the Washington City Reservoir. The name of Senator McMillan, who took a deep interest in the purification of the Washington water supply and was largely instrumental in the establishment of the present filtration plant, seems most appropriate for the purpose.⁴³

In agreement with Captain Crosby and the Chief Engineer, then Secretary of War Taft dedicated the area to McMillan in 1906. By justifying this decision with the open association of the site with McMillan solely and the connection with water purification instead of the Senator's other accomplishments, officials continued the site's symbolic association with hygiene, despite its new labeling as a park. As the Captain stated, the

⁴² Margaret E. Farrar, *Building the Body Politic: Power and Urban Space in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.): 45-46.

⁴³ "Tribute to McMillan: Late Senator's Name Given to Filtration Plant," *Washington Evening Star*, April 9, 1906.

area could barely be called a park upon its naming because of its general lack of green space and horses destroying grass and creating mud as they walked across the top of the filtration beds. Through the dislike of technology's destruction of aesthetic symbols of nature such as green grass on the filter beds, Crosby demonstrated a belief in the ruinous effect of technology on the natural landscape. Nature and parks needed to appear clean and this space would need to move its technological functions and have a professional add the green elements in which culturally defined parks at this time. Therefore, multiple city residents established a connotation of the space with its other technical elements from the start.

Once the Corps of Engineers developed the park, the McMillan Memorial Fountain, created as a centerpiece for this space, also embodied hygienic symbolism. While most statues honoring an individual would depict that person, this memorial was a conceptual symbol. Designers Herbert Adams and Charles Platt created a memorial that not only evoked the neo-Classical design aesthetics of the City Beautiful movement but also its civic-minded goals. The centrality of water to the design further reflected McMillan's role in obtaining abundant and clean water for the United States' capital.⁴⁴ In original intent, name, features, and local white community commitment, the space known as McMillan Park reflected its sanitary nature.

⁴⁴ Ernest Peixotto, "The Sculpture of Herbert Adams," *American Magazine of Art* 12:5 (May 1921): 151; Thomas P. Somma, "The McMillan Memorial Fountain: A Short History of a Lost Monument." 14: 2 (Fall/Winter, 2002/2003): 99-100.



Figure 4: McMillan Memorial Fountain, November 1916. Terrence Vincent Powderly Photographic Prints Collection. Catholic University Archives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2041/61140>

At the same time as the genesis of the park, the planning to build stables for the horses used in the daily processes of city engineers generated a minor controversy. The Water Department (under the District Engineering Department) desired a stable to make their work easier rather than having to retrieve horses from across town. The local community did not like the idea of horses coming into close proximity of their homes and protested the proposed location. The dispute over the location of these equine enclosures, which lasted only two months, demonstrates that the public not only ascribed to the ideas of beauty and cleanliness associated with the function and naming of the space but they felt it necessary to protect these notions.

While the use of horses was in decline by 1907 in the United States, in some areas they still performed duties in many city functions such as transportation on small streets,

operation of some machinery in industrial labor, deliveries, crowd control, and leisure. Horses were a major producer of the filth and waste in cities at the time and inhabitants disliked stables in particular for their presence in their neighborhoods. Residents detested these facilities because of their smell, noise, and considered them a general nuisance. The smell from piles of their manure, often rarely emptied or cleaned, was at one time considered the cause of disease in the Miasmatic theory but later was equally disliked because it attracted flies and vermin, the real producers of the disease acknowledged under Germ theory. Horses also died in the street or in stable fires, decayed, and further contributed to both the smell and attracting vermin in the surrounding area. When the District Engineer proposed to build a stable in 1907 to support the functions of the filtration site, residents in the area had these conceptions in mind while imagining how this new addition to their built environment would alter the neighborhood.⁴⁵

It is difficult to determine exactly how many horses Washington contained during this period or whether stables were a common nuisance to the city's residential neighborhoods. Looking at the annual reports from the District of Columbia Commissioners covering the years from 1906 to 1908 gives a general understanding of equine presence. Despite the Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police mentioning in the section on traffic of the general change over to electric vehicles for transportation, many of the different municipal departments mention the use of horses in their work during this period. In 1908, the District's veterinarian, C. B. Robinson, wrote the number of horses had reached a new high. He reported that when appointed twenty years' prior, the District owned 65 horses. At the time he filed his report for 1908 fiscal year, the number on hand

⁴⁵ Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007): 165-167, 120-123.

had risen to over 600. While generally horses were in decline, the use by the District departments were largely within the types of use mentioned above that remained persistent well into the early-twentieth century. Nor were these animals concentrated all in one central location, they were scattered over a wide area “from Blue Plains to Tenallytown one way and from the Potomac to Langdon the other.” At the same time, the Street Cleaning Department reported collecting 614 dead horses for the fiscal year. Hence, unless the District’s entire stock of horses died that year, one must assume that there was a large contingent of these animals used by others in the city as well and that their corpses often littered the streets. Furthermore, the Engineering Department listed collecting fees for 5,950 horses under the heading “unmetered business premises.” It is unclear whether this category meant individual horses, horse fountains, or business stables, but it is clear there remained a sizable quantity of these beasts.⁴⁶

Also under the “business premises” heading, the District Engineering Department listed 111 residential stables in Washington in their annual report. Therefore, in addition to a decent size population of horses in the District, many of them did live in residential areas. A year prior, the report of the Health Officer, William C. Woodward, mentioned in the Commissioners Report the enforcement of a new regulation for the “better keeping of stables and the disposal of manure.” He raised the point that for many residents, the removal of their stable waste was untenable. With the expansion of the city and with farms moving further out, farmers would only come to haul the city resident’s manure away for exorbitant fees. In response, the Officer recommended that the District create a

⁴⁶ District of Columbia. Board of Commissioners. *Annual Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia*, (1908) Vol. 1: 352, 238, 68.; D.C. Board of Commissioners, *Annual Report*, (1908) Vol. 2: 70.

service to pick up the waste from these local stables.⁴⁷ Mimicking the situation on the national level, these examples demonstrate that horse waste was a problem in D.C. that residents had to deal with on a daily basis both on a large and small scale. Thus, a stable moving into a neighborhood where one previously did not exist would not have made those residents happy.

It is then of little surprise that when quietly announcing plans to build a stable between Bryant, Adams, Second, and Third Streets, NW for horses used in the operation of the Water Department in early June of 1907, the District Commissioners immediately received vociferous protests from the residents of Bloomingdale. Despite the proposed location being about a block away from McMillan Park itself, residents were no less incensed about the possible effects it could have on the park or the filtration site. A newspaper article describing the initial citizen response directly connected Senator McMillan to the issue, saying that he would have wanted the filtration plant to be a place of beauty and many had bought homes in the area based on this policy of beautification.⁴⁸ To these citizens, the proposed construction was a broken promise and against the intentions of the man whose name was on the area these stables would support. As seen here, the earliest desire to live in the area and prevent these odious facilities from entering the neighborhood centered on the space's association with beauty and cleanliness, an idea that protestors increasingly relied on as the controversy unfolded.

Less than a week after the article mentioned above, the Commissioners held a hearing to receive public comment on the proposed stable plan. At least 200 citizens

⁴⁷ D.C. Board of Commissioners, *Annual Report*, (1908) Vol. 2: 70; D.C. Board of Commissioners, *Annual Report*, (1907) Vol. 3: 31.

⁴⁸ "The Public Stable Site," *Washington Evening Star*, June 6, 1907.

showed up to voice their dissatisfaction with the possible location to store horses. Attendees raised a number of issues explaining their stance and particularly focused on hygiene. They brought in common ideas of stables at the time, both about their neighborhood and the water supply. Resident J. C. Sheeby's complaints reflected Germ theory and the fear of an increase of vermin that were associated with stables, claiming that "rats, germ-breeding flies and mosquitoes" would inevitably come in the direction of the houses. A doctor from the area expressed trepidation that dust kicked up by the horses would make its way into the reservoir. The neighborhood's most famous resident, Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, came to the hearing and said that he knew "little of bugs or bugology" but he disapproved of the plans as well and thought that the rest of Washington would too if consulted.⁴⁹ The article mentioned no justification for why he felt this way.

Other arguments reiterated that these plans did not follow Senator McMillan's original vision for the area and that property values would fall because of the unsightly nature of the stable building. The only woman to address the commission, Mrs. W. J. Thurber, took a moralistic approach to these notions and demonstrated that to Bloomingdale citizens, hygiene also meant morally clean individuals. Her comments and some other elements of Sheeby's testimony elucidate that there were class (and in implication, ethnic and race) elements to these complaints as well. In addition to Sheeby's concern over pests, he stated, "not long after the stable materialized the neighborhood would be built up with cheap unattractive houses." While not explicit, his intention was clear that the stables would bring with them the type of people that would

⁴⁹ "Combine in Protest: Residents of Bloomingdale Discuss Projected District Stable," *Washington Evening Star*, June 12, 1907.

perform manual or dirty work, poor immigrants and people of color, who could not afford houses on par those currently in-residence. Mrs. Thurber was more open in her objections, stating that the handlers of horses “whether they are white or coloured the language they use is not fit for receptive ears of childhood.” She went on further to say that these men would make the women fear to go outside at risk of an insult and their daughters would be the target of coarse jokes.⁵⁰ Thurber’s fears, like Sheeby’s, centered on hygiene but exposed the white resident’s concern that these unclean processes and structures would bring “unclean” people with them. These comments expose the neighborhood’s congruence with the overall hygienic stereotypes mentioned above. Yet, with African American laborers already working at the filtration plant (more on this in the next section), what made these workers different? The filtration plant worker’s presence may have been more acceptable because the filtration works were further away from their homes and often out of site. In contrast, the proposed stables meant the new laborers worked directly adjacent to white homes and were visible daily in their care and moving of horses.

With the complaints tallied, the Commissioners were initially dismissive claiming that the stables would not affect the hygiene of the water because it still went through filtration after leaving the reservoir. Commissioner Morrow said that the stables would actually have been an aesthetic improvement to the block as it was one of the more squalid ones in the District. Strengthening his opinion, he said it would “probably be much better in appearance than any residence that is ever likely to be constructed on the south side of Bryant street west of this point, or on the north side of W street.” Morrow’s

⁵⁰ “Combine in Protest: Residents of Bloomingdale Discuss Projected District Stable,” *Washington Evening Star*, June 12, 1907.

claim that beyond the stable construction, “steps are being taken to eliminate as rapidly as legally done... many squalid shacks within stone’s throw of the proposed site” raises questions about the racial make-up of the neighborhood. Were African Americans or poor whites already living there in similar shacks and alley communities that were prevalent in the city center? Why such fear from neighborhood residents of future squalor if these conditions and residents were already present? Unfortunately, current research is too sparse and it is outside the scope of this study to do a detailed examination to know for certain. Perhaps while also protecting their newly forming elite white community, residents were also actively displacing a historically forgotten and poor one.⁵¹

Regardless, two of the three commissioners demurred and voted against the proposed site. As one proposal for the site died, the Commissioners looked for and found a new site a month later. This new location was even closer to the reservoir but further from the homes. Situated directly behind the Bryant Street pumping station, it was at the bottom of a steep embankment with the reservoir at a higher elevation above, alleviating some fear of contamination. Forcing the site here also decreased its size and the Commissioners agreed to plant trees all around it to hide it from view. Despite some remaining complaints, the Commissioners accepted the new location, believing that they addressed the citizens’ concerns the best they could.⁵²

Nevertheless, the incident demonstrated that the local white citizenry could influence governmental decisions based on class, ethnicity, health, safety, and declining

⁵¹ “Stable Site Hanging Fire,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 1907; “Morrow Wants Site,” *Washington Herald*, June 20, 1907.

⁵² “Stable Project Fails,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 1907; “Water Stables Will Be Built at Bryant, St.,” *Washington Times*, July 19, 1907.

property values. This approach mirrors the emerging tactics also used in support of racially biased zoning and racial covenant cases both in Washington and throughout the nation. It further shows how whites had the ability to come together as a neighborhood to protest through normal systems of government and assert their privilege to act within the legal notions of both public and private space. The local white's notions of cleanliness, the ability to assert power over their built environment, and the industrial functions of the filtration facility all are crucial to understanding the racial contours created with the use of the park. First, in order to understand the use of McMillan Park, one must understand the context of its creation.

Chapter 2: The Creation of a Memorial Park

Starting in 1907, the Army Corps of Engineers hired Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to design a park out of the already existing 92-acre filtration site, reservoir area, and adjacent grounds. Olmsted, Jr. (1870-1957), a nationally renowned landscape architect, played an influential role in the design of Rock Creek Park, the National Zoological Park, and many other spaces in D.C. and the entire United States. He also played a large role in the creation of the landscape architecture and city planning professions. Through a design of McMillan Park which demarcated areas to serve certain functions, he left a lasting impact on this built environment for years to come. This parking project was both born out of the complex history of park design and ideas of the effects of parks, leaving a legacy on how its users perceived and interacted with the area. Any action against his clear original intentions for the space was an act of resistance from the start.

Parks became center points in cities in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. As cities industrialized, open outdoor space came at a premium. For around the next fifty years, parks designers conceived of parks in terms of “pleasure grounds,” stemming from the desire to bring in a piece of the country in order to improve the city and an escape from its evils. They served as “breathing spaces” to bring relief from the congestion and pollution of the industrial environment. Thus, they also were involved in the overall establishment of sanitation and the prejudice it produced. Beyond this, elites sought parks to boost the United States’ cultural prestige in comparison with Europe.⁵³

⁵³ Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982): 3-5.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and his design partner, Calvert Vaux, dominated the notions of park design and function during this period. Olmsted, Sr., in particular, designed and conceptualized parks as a place of recreation where the populace could take in a pastoral and picturesque landscape. To them and other park planners, “passive recreation” was the ideal activity in these spaces or activities such as promenading, horseback riding, or ice-skating. During most of this period, Olmsted conceived of parks as a crux of social control. Much like his ideas about recreation, Olmsted’s ideal use of the park itself for control was also passive. He believed in the power of nature as an antidote to the forces of demoralization in the city, thus by creating a park, ideally walled by trees with a wide-open green expanse, residents would experience this cure to urban ills. While the role of the elite was active to fund, design, and create the park, the experience inside would naturally produce the desired results. Olmsted believed that the park atmosphere created a “harmonizing and refining influence” that would bring about a greater feeling of community and happiness and therefore lessen class tension.⁵⁴ Despite his goals, these interactions were often hostile and designers and elites implemented rules, surveillance, and policing to ensure the users (particularly the workings class) acted in the acceptable manner. By the end of the century, working-class users’ frequent transgression of these rules swayed Olmsted and others to accommodate and create areas for active recreation within parks.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978): 236-237; Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600-1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 266.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *The Environment and the People*, 287-294. 304.

In the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, parks transitioned to areas of more strenuous activity as well as to a more active administration of this green space. Still retaining Olmsted's ideas of the environment and control, park administrators began to actively stimulate the park goers' interaction with nature, foster their cultural improvement, and create spaces for community events, instead of merely policing actions that were undesirable. Thus, while realizing the unavoidableness of active recreation, the park leaders took it upon themselves to direct and influence this activity in order to control and produce a certain type of citizenry.⁵⁶ The playground movement embraced this plan with its elite leaders advocating for play areas and demanding their further inclusion in urban green spaces. I will go into detail below on how this movement influenced McMillan Park. At this point, it suffices to say that planners increasingly took into account the desire for playgrounds from the movement and the working class and began including these elements in the designs of parks.⁵⁷

In 1901, around the same time as these debates over recreation, the McMillan Plan sought to elevate the nation's capital to the level of prestige of other nations through the creation of parks, monuments, and public buildings. The center piece of the plan was the redevelopment of the National Mall and its monumental core. Many objected to altering the land by putting buildings there and or redesigning it to move away from its state as a romantic pleasure ground with trees and curving paths. In the end, the plan developed the mall as a 300-foot-wide and 2 ½ mile "green carpet" to emphasize the vista between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. In addition to this area, the plan

⁵⁶ Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 240.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *The Environment and the People*, 314-315.

focused on public buildings and the development of a system of parks, playgrounds, and parkways throughout the District. The planners intended the parks and recreation areas to be created along the Potomac and turn the abandoned Civil War forts on the edges of the city into a ring of green space that would beautify the landscape and would provide health benefits through reclamation of polluted and unsightly lands.⁵⁸

Both influenced by the park ideas of his father and the new ideas of progressive park and playground movements, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. undertook the design of McMillan Park in 1907. The neoclassical orderly and efficient design focus of the City Beautiful movement also influenced Olmsted, Jr. The McMillan Plan, the comprehensive park plan and public space design plan mentioned above and in Chapter 1, grew out of this movement. McMillan, the namesake of the plan, and Olmsted, Jr. were key members on the commission that created the McMillan Plan. Ultimately, Olmsted wanted to keep McMillan Park in line with the overall ideas of this vision, both with the original intention to use the space as a link in the green spaces in the city and as a larger testament to efficiency and the monumentality of Washington.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Timothy Davis, "Inventing Nature in Washington, D.C." in *Inventing for the Environment*, Arthur Molella and Joyce Bedi, editors (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press in association with the Lemelson Center, Smithsonian Institution, 2003): 56-59.

⁵⁹ Pries, "Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth," 45-46.

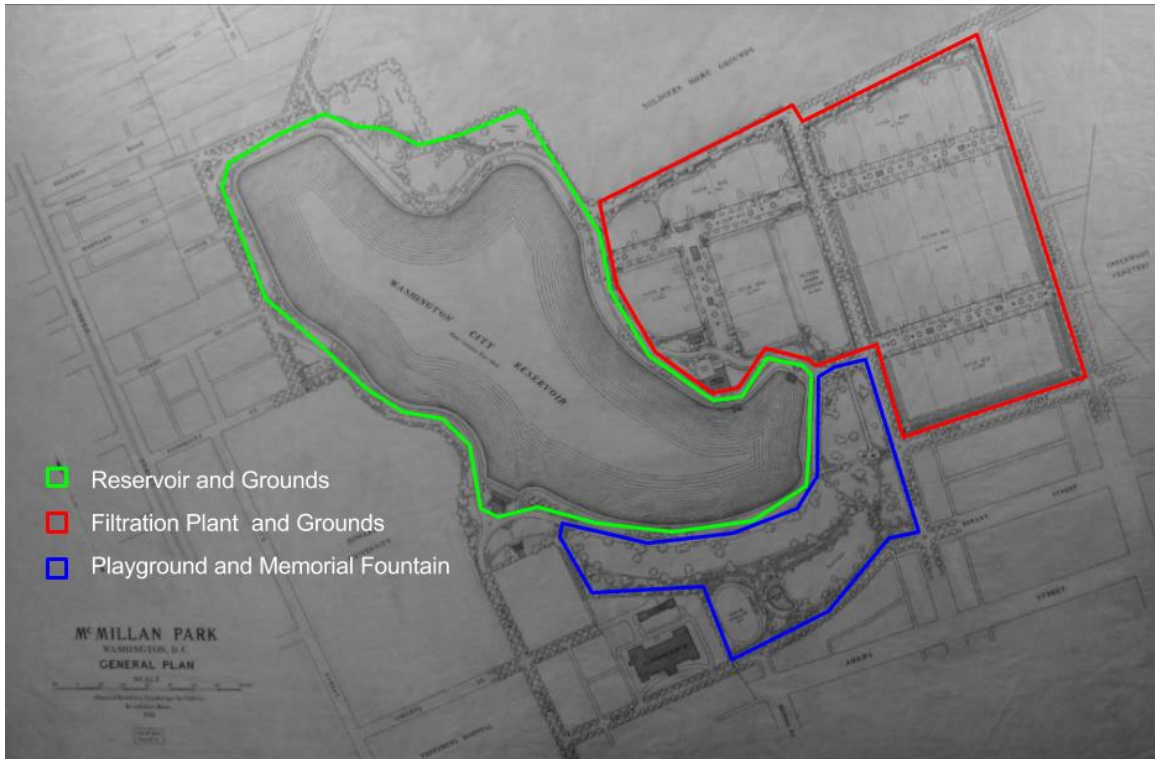


Figure 5: Original McMillan Park Plan with added markings to show boundaries of three different conceptual areas. Olmsted Archives. Plan #71: General Plan for McMillan Park (1911), F.L. Olmsted, Jr. Olmsted Job No. 2840, McMillan Park. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. Brookline, MA.

With these notions in mind, Olmsted had to design this park around the many already existing industrial elements, such as sand storage towers and filtration beds covered with manholes. As mentioned in Chapter 1, by the time of his design, technology developed to shift the filtration process beneath the surface, allowing for a more park like area by the filters than originally expected. In all, Olmsted designed three distinct areas: the northern sections surrounding the reservoir and filtration plant and the smaller southern portion, containing a memorial fountain to Senator James McMillan and a playground area. The northern areas melded with the main ideas of his father and the City Beautiful movement. Olmsted intended for its use as passive recreation, with walkways and plantings to compliment the views of the towers, reservoir, and landmarks of the city,

in all producing the tranquil effect of nature and monumentality but keeping users on the outskirts through strategic plantings.

In the northeast portion, Olmsted focused on emphasizing the “formal plain” created by the industrial and architectural elements. He intended to emphasize these landscape features through a perimeter path and multiple layers of perimeter plantings. The first layer would be a low three-foot hedge to maintain visibility of the site and maintain the proportionality with the raised banks concealing the filter beds. Olmsted knew that this would not be enough to deter park users from walking out across the beds and that it did not provide a “strong enough emphasis of the border” so he insisted on a double row of trees inside of the hedge. Olmsted assumed that the user could still take in the plain through the vistas in between these plantings. In addition to these smaller trees, some larger trees framed the entrance to the service courts allowing easy access to the site’s staff. Furthermore, the plan called for trees interspersed the courts but kept them minimal as to not detract from the tall and visually-striking sand towers to be covered with ivy. Trees were also limited on the plain because of the damage the roots could do to the concrete below. A final row of trees bordered the sidewalk below, creating a mimicking effect. While most of the boundaries were very straight and of a more European Classical style, the northern most path was curvilinear and demonstrated more of the picturesque style. The site’s rigidity is out of the norm for a picturesque landscape but was a necessary method of control to prevent and deter users from accessing the more industrial portions of the site.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ EHT Traceries, Inc., “McMillan Sand Filtration Plant: Historic Preservation Report for the Proposed Redevelopment of the McMillan Slow Sand Filtration Plant, Final Report.” (EHT Traceries, September 15, 2014): 3-4; Pries, “Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth,” 40, 44-46.

Olmsted wondered whether the Corps of Engineers should allow entry to the eastern portion of the filtration area at all due to safety issues. In response, he suggested thorny species like Japanese Barberry for the hedges and Cockspur Thorns for the trees. He also recommended thornier plants to flank the stairs to the path. The historic landscape report for this area cites Olmsted's concern over safety as the main reason for his planting decisions. I agree that the hesitations by Olmsted did play a role in his designing physical barriers but safety was not his only goal. His design and intentions clearly reveal a desire to create a space for passive recreation, one where the user strolled around the outskirts and took in a picturesque view, harkening to the style of his father. Additionally, views could be outward facing, featuring vistas of the Capitol and the Washington Monument. Whether the design intention was for safety or passive recreation, Olmsted's plan is a prime example of the designer's power to leverage environmental elements in an attempt to control the user in public space.⁶¹

The northwestern portion of the design also focused on picturesque and passive recreation while emphasizing the informal and irregular curves of the reservoir banks. Particularly, Olmsted wanted to highlight the reservoir as a water feature with "agreeable backgrounds of foliage as seen from the roads and paths frequented by the public." Here it is certain that Olmsted expected heavy use of the site in contrast to the eastern counterpart. At the same time, this heavy use would still be passive by focusing on taking in the scenery and staying to the edges of the landscape and water. Additionally, with the

⁶¹ EHT Tracerries, Inc., "McMillan Sand Filtration Plant," 3-4.

mention of the road, it is possible that Olmsted anticipated its use as a parkway as automobiles gained in popularity.⁶²

The design of the southern area was a concession to the playground movement and largely intended for active recreation but was still in keeping with the goals of the McMillan plan. As mentioned above, the McMillan Memorial Fountain occupied this space on elevated ground and was emblematic of the City Beautiful movement. In addition, its height connected its vistas with the monumental core of the mall and an overall coherence with the McMillan Plan. The design for the lower southwestern area focused on the playground. Olmsted's design contained a playfield, wading pool, and track area. Connecting this with the fountain area was a meandering narrow path with sporadic trees, preventing a direct view between the two spaces. In this way, Olmsted combined both the passive recreational style with the more active one below.⁶³ The playfield itself had shrubs and plantings that made it look more like a "sculpted clearing rather than a defined expanse." The wading pool and then track (or gymnasium) showed a progressive movement from passive to the most active recreation. Olmsted's delineations of zones of park use would influence how residents would conceptualize and utilize this area for years to come.⁶⁴

Due to consistently low funding levels for the parking of the grounds, the Army Corps of Engineers' implementation of these plans took place over a number of years.⁶⁵

⁶² EHT Tracerics, Inc., "McMillan Sand Filtration Plant," 4.

⁶³ EHT Tracerics, Inc., "McMillan Sand Filtration Plant," 2-4; Pries, "Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth," 45-48.

⁶⁴ Pries, "Prospect Over a Seeping Plinth," 47-48.

⁶⁵ Bird, "Preliminary Research - McMillan Reservoir," 3.

For the most part, these efforts created an area that eventually mimicked Olmsted, Jr.'s vision. Trees lined the walkways around the filtration area, ivy grew on the sand towers, benches dotted the borders of the reservoir, and a memorial fountain adorned the elevated area above the playground. The Playground department never constructed a wading pool in the playground area, even though they requested funding for it, and it is uncertain whether they created a track.⁶⁶ Regardless of the few differences, the Department of Playgrounds opened Bloomingdale playground in this space in 1913 and lobbied for improvements throughout the site's life as a public area. The specifics of this section and the District of Columbia Playground Department will be examined further in Chapter 3.

The city's slow implementation of the park development was not unique to McMillan Park. By 1924, the District had only obtained six of the 53 tracts of land the McMillan Commission recommended for park land in 1901. Of 18 major cities at the time, Washington was last in park property value at \$5 million as compared to Chicago at \$60 million and New York at \$287 million. In addition, most of the parks in Washington remained on the periphery other than the National Mall and the adjacent Potomac parks. Also seen in the next chapter on playgrounds, Congress remained reluctant to spend on capital improvement but finally approved the National Capital Park Commission in 1924, renamed the National Capital Park Planning Commission in 1926, to coordinate the creation of park land and public buildings. Despite the creation of the new agency, park acquisition continued to lag until at least the end of the decade. The agency removed the

⁶⁶ "Alive to City's Needs: D.C. Board Gets Requests From Civic Associations," *Washington Post*, September 14, 1914.

park portion of its name by 1950, reflecting the waning concern of developing parks a part of an urban society.⁶⁷

By bringing most aspects of Olmsted's vision to fruition, the Army Corps of Engineers developed a park in an area where there were few others nearby. In addition, by following the original design for the most part, the Corps of Engineers created discrete sections of the park that would influence both its physical and its conceptual boundaries. The trees dissuading entry into the filter beds and the confining of playground equipment and fields to the southern section were physical indicators giving residents a clear idea of what sort of activities were meant for each of these spaces. In addition to natural elements and physical apparatus, the activity in these sections was beholden to cultural expectations, of which elites continually attempted to define and control. In keeping with this trend, whites in the neighborhood continued to use the space to perpetuate their cultural hegemony through the definition of recreation, environment, and citizenry.

Any recreation performed outside of the normative cultural and physical definitions of park and playground would therefore have been transgressive and an act of defiance against the attempts of societal control by elite whites. Through disobedience to the defined roles of these areas, much like the working-class people in the rest of the country, African American actions in McMillan Park challenged the notion that any space could be confined to active or passive recreation. African Americans demonstrated their agency simply by entering these spaces, their presence alone altering the park from a place of control to a place of defiance, from public space to communal space. These

⁶⁷ Howard Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 125, 127-128; Davis, "Inventing Nature", 60.

actions fall in line with McQuirter's notions that African Americans were active in claiming areas of the city as their own and that they continually contested the racial and spatial boundaries in D.C.⁶⁸ Looking at segregation and specific park use by African Americans in the section below, I will put these claims into greater context and relate them back to the functional water filtration aspects of the area.

Segregation and Park Use

McMillan Park was a part of the larger segregationist project of Washington, D.C. and the rest of the country (whether de jure or de facto). During Reconstruction and until the beginning of the twentieth century, Washington, D.C. did give many African Americans opportunities to work in the federal government and attain some measure of prosperity. However, overtime Republicans' commitment to ensuring African-American equality waned and protection of the rights of Black residents in the District eroded, as in much of the rest of the United States. D.C. never had any official Jim Crow laws during this period but it was unofficial policy and done widely in practice. The Wilson Administration would increase the speed of this degradation, segregating federal government facilities under the guise of efficiency, massively cutting the majority of African American jobs, and curtailing advancement in the national government in order to maintain white supremacy. Whites also attempted to segregate leisure space as well, with Black people kept from many of the city's theaters, restaurants, amusement parks, and many other public spaces.⁶⁹ As discussed in the introduction, McQuirter showed that

⁶⁸ McQuirter, "Claiming the City, 3-4, 8-11.

⁶⁹ Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City*, 119. 213-214, 262.

African Americans were mobile and created or claimed many of these areas for their own use, despite official policy.

Parks and recreation areas were not absent from racial division. Playgrounds, which I will discuss in detail in the next section, were also segregated, probably more so than parks. As in other aspects of D.C. life, elite and fair-skinned Black residents leveraged their status and skin tone to access white areas and to create their own areas of recreation. Poorer Blacks did not have the privilege and had to make do with what was around where they lived.⁷⁰ Black residents could also enter some white spaces at certain times or days when whites would refrain from visiting these areas. One of these times was the day after Easter, when many African Americans went to enjoy Rock Creek Park unperturbed.⁷¹ Recreation spaces, and in particular, swimming places, were contested areas, as in much of the country. These contests rarely changed official procedure but show African Americans continually pressing for access before the later Civil Rights movement.⁷²

To understand the racial contours and actions of defiance in McMillan Park, one must first establish that African American use actually existed. Authors describing McMillan Park as the first de facto integrated park in Washington, D.C. or as a predominately-Black space primarily cite one line within *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban*

⁷⁰ Martha H. Verbrugge, "Exercising Civil Rights, 106-107.

⁷¹ William H. Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927): 100.

⁷² Martha H. Verbrugge, "Exercising Civil Rights, 113-115; Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 199.

Environment by William Jones as their main source of evidence.⁷³ The line reads, “McMillan Park, located east of Howard University and surrounding the New Reservoir, has now been taken over almost exclusively by Negroes.” Jones, a Howard University professor, conducted the study for this work over a twenty-six-month period in the mid-1920s before publishing in 1927. It is likely that Jones knew much about the park himself as well, being a professor at a university adjacent to the park. Despite its brevity, the sentence is still a useful source.⁷⁴

Not only describing extensive park use by African Americans, by employing the word “taken,” Jones implies that first, this area was not meant for them to begin with and second, it was a proactive decision on their part to occupy it and demonstrates their agency to claim this space. While unclear whether Jones was talking about the whole space or just the reservoir and filtration area, he later briefly mentions Bloomingdale Playground as a distinct area (the all-white area which will be discussed in detail below), implying he understood the differing divisions within the park.⁷⁵ Despite being only a brief sentence, it is very much a key piece of evidence in understanding African American use of the area. Yet this sentence and study remains in a historical vacuum by only describing a very limited period with no comparison across time. Is there more information before and after this time that can provide more context?

The surviving records of African American use of McMillan Park are extremely limited, a possible reason why other authors have relied so heavily on the Jones study.

⁷³ Vining, “McMillan Park – Washington’s First Racially Integrated Park”; Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation’s Capital 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999): 53.

⁷⁴ Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*, 100.

⁷⁵ Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*, 41.

The few remaining fragments of information on this subject can be pieced together to reveal more of the uses Black people had for this space and demonstrate the continuity of their use both before and after the study mentioned above. The earliest reports of African Americans in this green area involve violence. In 1907, a Black man beat a plain-clothed police officer who tried to break up a game of craps in the park before another officer showed up. In another article from 1915, the newspaper describes an African American man as hitting a woman (race unknown) in the head with a brick.⁷⁶ It is possible that the white press was playing up the violent incidents because Black people were involved but they were not the only crimes reported during this period. Other crimes did not mention race, such as a stabbing, harassment of a “spooning” couple, and the robbery of playground supplies, indicating the park area was somewhat of a tumultuous place in its early days.⁷⁷ Whether or not there was a racial undertone, these reports demonstrate the contested nature of the space and the working out of the lines of permissibility when the area was still new. What these reports leave out is any mention of concern that African Americans were in these areas in the first place.

⁷⁶ “Handle Violent Men: Officers of the Law Have Tussles with Prisoners,” *Washington Evening Star*, October 14, 1907; “Thrown Brick Injures Woman,” *Washington Evening Star*, July 13, 1915.

⁷⁷ “Stabbed As He Sits in Park,” *Washington Post*, May 7, 1915; “Says Couples Have Right to Spoon in Parks,” *Washington Evening Star*, May 15, 1915; “Playgrounds Robbed of Tennis Sets,” *Washington Evening Star*, September 16, 1914.



Figure 6: Black children on roller skates next to McMillan Park Memorial Fountain, November 1916. Terrence Vincent Powderly Photographic Prints Collection. Catholic University Archives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2041/61142>

Other, less public, documentary sources show African American use in this early period in a tamer manner. One photograph from 1915 with a focus on the McMillan Memorial Fountain contains a group of African American children in the corner putting roller skates on.⁷⁸ More extensive than evidence of Black children playing in the park is the place the reservoir area had in the life of Howard University students. In particular, the reservoir was a popular destination for dates to stroll around. By 1934, students described the “Reservoir Park” as one of the three main areas to take dates, if not the main area because “it can’t hold everybody,” along with the library and the Student Council Office. This example, one of the longer mentions of all the yearbooks, said “the

⁷⁸ “McMillan Park,” Terrence Vincent Powderly Photographic Prints, Catholic University Archives. Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.handle.net/1961/2041-61142>

Reservoir Park is too chilly for your year round use but a few hardy couples venture out—particularly the engaged ones. The benches are not upholstered but there are nice lawns. Admission, a hearty constitution.” This and other brief mentions of strolling around this area in yearbooks from 1918 through the 1940s demonstrate the consistent African American presence for the majority of the use period of the park, at least near the reservoir.⁷⁹

Besides university students, in one incident, an African American woman learning to drive, lost control and hit three African American boys playing on the north side of the park (luckily only minor bruises ensued). Again, newspapers reported the boys’ presence in a matter of fact way implying that it was nothing out of the ordinary.⁸⁰ Similarly, another account of a Black man falling asleep in the park and having his shoes stolen by another Black man seems like something printed to reinforce the racist stereotype of African Americans as lazy buffoons, but the man’s presence sleeping there is unquestioned by the reporter.⁸¹ These reports and the Howard student accounts are in line with Olmsted’s intended vision of these sections as spaces of passive recreation or merely occurring on the edges of the park. Nevertheless, did African Americans ever claim this space for their own active recreation?

⁷⁹ Howard University, “The Bison: 1934” (1934): 103, http://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/113; Howard University, “Howard Academy Year Book: 1918” (1918): 31, http://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/99; Howard University, “The Bison: 1927” (1927): 56, http://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/107; Howard University, “The Bison: 1929” (1929): 60, http://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/109; Howard University, “The Bison: 1943” (1943): 27, http://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/115; Howard University, “The Bison: 1946” (1946): 30, 35, http://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/116.

⁸⁰ “Seven are Hurt in Auto Mishaps,” *Washington Evening Star*, May 4, 1937.

⁸¹ “Sound Sleeper Robbed,” *Washington Evening Star*, August 2, 1933.

A few interviews of long-time residents recorded in the early 1990s and in 2013 describe many of the activities in the park not documented in traditional records. The interviewees' testimony mainly covers their childhood experiences in the 1930s but does establish how important to the community this area became. They describe picnics, riding bikes, watching fireworks, performing military drills, and playing football. A life-long resident of the area, Ella Walker, said, "nobody bothered you" in the reservoir area, even when staying there overnight due to the excessive heat during the summer.⁸² At times, it seems that African Americans did turn this space into an area of active recreation but more often than not, they confined themselves to the passive recreation that the designer intended. In part, this was due to the obstructions of trees, fences, or open manholes, making active recreation physically difficult. Additionally, Black acquiescence to recreational intentions may have related to the limitations African Americans placed upon themselves as they had elsewhere in the area to prevent falling into the stereotypical roles whites assigned to them of idleness and unruliness in recreational spaces.⁸³ Despite fewer recreational transgressions, Black citizen presence in the space was an act of transgression of itself and was a moment where they could assert their power to define their own spatial and racial reality.

⁸² Interview with Thomas Hage quoted in Anne Sellin. "McMillan Park Reservoir, DC Historic Preservation Review Board, Application for Historic Landmark," (1990): 28; Ella Walker, Ben Franklin, and Frank Braxton, interviewed by John Salatti, Jen Quintana, and Rosina Teri Memolo, digital recording, *Portrait City DC*, November 2013, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://www.portraitcitydc.com/mcmillan-park>; Sleeping in parks was not unusual in this time period with high temperatures in Washington during the summer. City residents would often drive to Rock Creek Park and sleep in their vehicles to escape the oppressive humidity, for more see: Davis, "Inventing Nature", 58.

⁸³ Andrew W. Kahr, "'The Slightest Semblance of Unruliness': Steamboat Excursions, Pleasure Resorts, and the Emergence of Segregation Culture on the Potomac River," *The Journal of American History* 94: 4 (2008): 1130-1132.

The park's status steadily increased over time due to the opportunities it provided for recreation and the increasing sense of belonging African Americans felt after claiming their spot within its "cultural public." The area became so enshrined in the African American community culture that in 1930, the Bloomingdale Civic Association (at this time a Black citizens group) protested the plan to build an automobile repair garage for the District Highways Department on McMillan Park, for fear it would interfere with the beauty of "the residential section [of the neighborhood]." ⁸⁴ These remarks are reminiscent of the dispute white residents had over the proposal to create a stable near the site more than twenty years earlier. However, examining this case demonstrates the environmental racism whites were willing to expose African Americans to and the numerous differences in where their agency to control their public space lay.

The Bureau of Efficiency, which was an independent agency in the federal government, undertook a study to understand the needs of the Highway Department for auto repair shops in the fall of 1928. This Bureau's general duty was to centralize and apply of the ideas of scientific management to the federal government in the areas of personnel management and rating, cost saving, and information gathering. With the District of Columbia under the rule of Congress, this agency also served local Washington departments, with a focus on these groups becoming a large amount of its work from 1927-1933. The Bureau's site selections often mired them in debates with local residents and departments, making the protest from the Bloomingdale residents nothing out of the ordinary. The Bureau recommended moving the location of the

⁸⁴ "Citizens Will Meet: Bloomingdale Association to Hold Session Tonight," *Washington Evening Star*, May 13, 1930; "Bloomingdale Group Desires New D.C. Heads," *Washington Evening Star*, January 15, 1930.

Highway Department shops in order to consolidate them all in one place and due the need for more room for the “Botanic Garden” near the Mall. They decided the best location for this new building would be to the east of and adjacent to the Bryant Street Pumping Station, on land used as part of the Playground on McMillan Park. In deciding on this parcel, the Bureau cited its low cost (the United States government already owned it), the ability for it to be powered by the pumping station, and its proximity to additional automobile shops further west across the street. Efficiency, however, often overlooked the effect on everyday people’s lives and, as mentioned, could be utilized to discriminate against African Americans.⁸⁵



Figure 7: Map showing location and size of auto garage proposed in 1929. Map background imagery from Google Maps, 2016.

The Corps of Engineers and District Commissioners accepted this location and a proposed plan to build a repair shop with a frontage of 225 feet. In 1929, the District appropriation bill for 1930 made its way before the Senate and House Committees on

⁸⁵ Mordecai Lee, *Institutionalizing Congress and the Presidency: The U.S. Bureau of Efficiency, 1916-1933* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006): 90, 121-124; *Supplemental Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, HR 10813, D.C. Appropriation Bill for 1931. District Automobile Repair Shop, 71st Cong., 2d sess., May 7, 1930, 6-8*, accessed February 15, 2016, ProQuest Congressional.

Appropriation with an estimate from the Budget Bureau of \$205,000 for the purpose of building the new Highway Department garage.⁸⁶ In the hearings for the 1930 bill, representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers never mentioned that the site was a park. Their main emphasis of their testimony was that it was “on land owned by the United States adjacent to the Bryant Street Pumping Station.” Other than these brief mentions, the legislators and testifiers demonstrated little concern about the garage’s location and thus the funding to remove this part of McMillan Park passed into law.⁸⁷

Again, in 1930, the D.C. appropriation bill for 1931 contained a line item to increase the funding for building the shops, this time for \$150,000. As in the previous year, the Senate committee hearing brought little comment on this item of the bill.⁸⁸ However, in the House of Representatives hearing, committee members asked the officials present about the site’s location and current use. In reply, Major Atkins of the Army Corps of Engineers said that “Bryant Street is just south of McMillan Park” and “this is on the southern boundary of that McMillan Park reservation.” In reply to the question of the function of the proposed site, the Major said he did “not know that they are using the filter beds out there now.” Captain Oram, also of the Army Corps of Engineers, chimed in saying that it was in use for filtration, but evaded saying that this

⁸⁶ HR 10813, Supplemental Hearing, 7.

⁸⁷ *Hearings before the Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations*, HR 16422, District of Columbia Appropriation Bill for 1930, 70th Cong., 2d sess., January 3, 1929, 17-18, accessed February 15, 2016, ProQuest Congressional; *Hearings before the Subcommittee of Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate*, HR 16422, District of Columbia Appropriation Bill for 1930, 70th Cong., 2d sess., January 28, 1929, 3-4, accessed February 15, 2016, ProQuest Congressional.

⁸⁸ *Hearings before the Subcommittee of Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate*, HR 10813, District of Columbia Appropriation Bill for 1930, 70th Cong., 2d sess., March 31, 1930, 292, accessed February 15, 2016, ProQuest Congressional.

area was a playground and not the filtration portion of the site.⁸⁹ It is a reasonable expectation that these officials, if testifying on this project, would know residents used the site and the District ran it as a playground. Their statements seem to be an intentional withholding of the exact function of the site. It also demonstrates a commitment to building the repair shop in this location, more so than tacit acceptance because the Bureau of Efficiency selected it, an excuse that officials would later cite in their explanation at the special hearing requested by the African American neighborhood residents.

In this case, the African-American community only found out about the building plan after the 1930 appropriation bill had passed and the President signed it into law in 1929. Once hearing rumor about plans to build on the park site, local Black citizens submitted a petition to the Secretary of War who informed them about the plans and the appropriation for the building of the garage. They then went to the District Commissioners who told them to take up the issue with Congress. The Bloomingdale Civic Association attempted to get an audience before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations during the hearing for the District of Columbia Appropriation Bill for 1931 (which contained additional funding for the building of the garage) but Senator Arthur Capper missed or ignored their letters of request. Finally getting in touch with him in person, the subcommittee agreed to hold a supplemental hearing upon realizing the issue, but it was after they sent the bill to the Senate floor.

⁸⁹ *Hearings before the Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations*, HR 10813, District of Columbia Appropriation Bill for 1931, 70th Cong., 2d sess., January 27, 1930, 169-170, accessed February 15, 2016, ProQuest Congressional.

Capper was not chair of the subcommittee but apparently was in charge of scheduling the meetings.⁹⁰

Why did Black residents protest but not the white residents? Why would the white residents be willing to give up this portion of the park, especially with the automobile shop reducing the area segregated as a playground for their exclusive use? The answer is also to be found within the subcommittee hearing; officials explain that they would simply shift park activities eastward where they still felt there was plenty of room. To those using the park, little would change, as this area already abutted the pumping station, which had its own shops. Therefore, moving the park over did not fundamentally alter the area itself or the nature of what bounded it. The fundamental change was to the environment of the African Americans, who by this time were moving into the neighborhoods nearby in greater numbers despite the best efforts of local whites to bar them as mentioned in the introduction.⁹¹

According to their own testimony, the Senate committee found out the site was a park the previous February, but agreed that if officials could shift over playground activities, it was fine if the Highway shops occupied this land. Additionally, the Senators and the Army Corps of Engineers representatives emphasized that the government originally purchased the area for use as a pumping plant and meant only for temporary use as a playground. While, true on its face, this argument entirely discounts the role of Olmsted, Jr. and the Corps of Engineers decision to transform the grounds into a park. It seems disingenuous to say that after creating the memorial grounds that the area was only

⁹⁰ HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 4-5.

⁹¹ HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 9.

meant for temporary use. Ultimately, their original decision considered the white users of the space, but not the African Americans living across the street.⁹²

Edward F. Harris, Corresponding Secretary of the Bloomingdale Civic Association (BCA), laid out the case of the Black neighborhood residents before the subcommittee on why they disliked the proposed location of the automobile shop. He attempted to convince the group of white Senators with arguments that they would be sympathetic to: law and property rights. Harris and the association claimed that placement of this garage violated zoning restrictions designating the surrounding neighborhood as a residential area, which would require the owners within a 200-foot radius to consent to the building's construction.⁹³ This was not unusual as officials erratically enforced zoning ordinances that would disbar the building of industrial sites in residential neighborhoods, especially in minority communities, during this period in the United States. The construction of waste and industrial facilities in African American communities was a commonplace example of this environmental racism and a reification of ideas of African Americans and uncleanness.⁹⁴

Harris demonstrated that this type of policy was present in D.C., saying that, “we are handicapped. Wherever we go and seek a home, we wake up the next morning and find a gasoline station or something put up there to mar our comfort and depreciate the value of our property. What can we do?” It is clear from his words that the community was frustrated with their attempts to improve their standards of living and being setback

⁹² HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 8.

⁹³ HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 3.

⁹⁴ Zimring, *Clean and White*, 157-159.

at every turn. How could Black people overcome stereotypes if systemic racism kept them from gaining a better means of living? If the Senators would not listen to arguments of written law, then the group would appeal to the more abstract notion of property rights.⁹⁵

Arguing for property rights was a method seen in the earlier protests by white residents over the placement of stables. This was also the argument used as justification for zoning, racial covenants, and keeping African American residents out of both Bloomingdale and neighborhoods across the country. Thus, Black residents would have experienced firsthand its effective mobilization to sway legal or governmental favor. Beyond simply not wanting their property value to decrease, the past effectiveness of this strategy is likely why the Bloomingdale Citizens Association utilized property value as one of their main defensive points. A secondary argument, made by resident Guy Tinner, cited the danger from the increase of traffic, on a street which was a main thoroughfare in the area that local children walked on to get to their school. The protection of children and safety from the dangers of the street was also an effective tactic that whites often used to sway governmental opinion for discrimination and which these African Americans hoped to mobilize to their advantage.⁹⁶ In particular, Harris framed these arguments against the new auto shop as not only affecting their property value and children due to the type of activities it brought but that it specifically devalued their homes by removing a portion of McMillan Park.

⁹⁵ HR 10813, Supplemental Hearing, 12.

⁹⁶ HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 4, 14-15.

Beyond the group's additional demands that the Senate impede building on the land and disbursing the money for it, the BCA mandated that the Senate designate the area for exclusive use as a public park. Moreover, they acknowledged the segregation of the space for white playground recreation and that they would not be able to use it. Regardless, Harris specified that "the residents there desire that place remain as a park, just as it is now—whether it is a playground for white, or a playground for colored, or whatever it may be—but let it remain as a park."⁹⁷ From his testimony and this statement, it is clear that Harris and some African American residents willingly complied with the segregation of the playground portion of McMillan Park. Even though race demarcated access into the site, these lines show a clear commitment to keeping the area as a green public space for its larger effect on the neighborhood and a sense of it as part of their neighborhood. Yet, there remains in the dialogue the hint of the aspirational idea that perhaps it would open for use to African Americans one day.

In fact, Harris claimed later that the reason the Bureau of Efficiency selected the site for construction was that the colored children had no reason to use McMillan Park, having access to a small playground near Howard University, and believing that the African American community would have nothing to say about it. You can sense the anger of in Harris's words: "They just wanted to put the thing up there, the way we look at it, as a mushroom, overnight, irrespective of how we would feel about it, and irrespective of how it would depreciate the value of these people's property there." These lines demonstrate that this group felt unrepresented and betrayed by those in power in a

⁹⁷ HR 10813, Supplemental Hearing, 12.

situation that happened all too often in their community.⁹⁸ Judging from both the official's avoidance of revealing the site was a playground in the other hearings and only caring that construction did not curtail the white children's activity, the Black residents had a right to feel disregarded.

Even when the subcommittee's Senators proposed alterations like reducing the frontage of the building, Harris would not give ground stating, "we are so unalterably opposed to taking any part of McMillan Park, which we cherish as valuable to the neighborhood." McMillan Park meant so much to their living environment that they could not be moved on the issue. In the end, the Senators could do little about the original disbursement because the appropriation bill had already passed and gone into law. Additionally, the subcommittee already reported the 1931 appropriation bill to the Senate floor and any further action on their part would have gone against legislative procedure. Even with the unchangeable factors, the Senators blamed the African American residents for "sleeping on their rights" by not reading about these plans in the newspaper and acting sooner.⁹⁹ Despite the Senators' claims, I could not find any earlier evidence of the proposals in the newspapers I examined. While the Senators had sympathy for Harris and his neighborhood's plight, they did not even consider them in their original decision and made it clear that they believed it was the residents' own fault rather than a racially biased program of the government.

This protest demonstrates a vision of public space as something local residents should control based on their own conceptions of beauty and wellbeing. African

⁹⁸ HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 15-16.

⁹⁹ HR 10813, *Supplemental Hearing*, 17-18.

Americans saw the park as something to be protected and emblematic of their neighborhood much like local whites. Yet, unlike their white neighbors, African Americans residents did not succeed in influencing or even altering the location of the new garage. From this example, it is clear that African Americans could rarely exercise their agency through the same normative governmental system as whites, even when using the same arguments whites often used to discriminate against them. More often than not, this system served to oppress rather than help Black people in Washington and in the rest of the nation. Therefore, to control their environment, they had to operate with direct action outside of the established forms of power.

While holding the playground portion and the park in general as a valuable part of their neighborhood, it is clear from the few remaining records that African-American use mainly centered on the reservoir and filtration area. Much of this use was passive recreation as Olmsted intended but there was also some active recreation never intended by its designer. One wonders, why would local white residents be content with African Americans utilizing any portion of the site? Returning to the functional and symbolic aspects of the park mentioned above provides some conjectural answers.

As the white public enmeshed the idea of the park as a place of cleanliness in their minds and strove to protect this new vision, it is odd that they would have accepted Black people's presence in this area. Residents were often successful in flexing their muscle to keep African Americans out of the neighborhoods and were willing to use community protest to protect the park, as seen above in the debate over the stables. Additionally, at the time of this controversy, racist whites stereotyped African Americans as being dirty and unclean. Whites used this reasoning to exclude Blacks from many public and private

recreational facilities both in Washington and in the rest of the United States.¹⁰⁰ Finally, for most of this period of study, the Army Corps of Engineers controlled the public grounds and parks in the District and had them under a system of segregation. Yet, evidence is lacking of this type of white reaction to the Black presence around the reservoir and filtration area.¹⁰¹ With a scarcity of extant records on the subject, I can only speculate on the reasons residents and government officials may have accepted this contradiction.

Despite the filtration site's clear overall association with hygiene by the populace and with it having pleasant exterior aesthetic features, citizens most likely never fully dissociated the section's connection with its industrial plant element. Daily functions of the plant such as the movement and care of horses, eventually replaced by bulldozer-like machines, and a predominant smoke stack that was adjacent to the reservoir would have been visible to those in the community. These aspects served as reminders to residents that the area was not solely a park and remained a site of labor in the background and beneath the surface. The space also served as a fire station and center for emergency services, further detracting from its park feel. If one reframes the image of the filtration and reservoir sections as an industrial public works plant with park elements, rather than mainly park land, these areas resemble other areas African Americans claimed as makeshift recreational facilities. As Verbrugge asserts about recreation in D.C., "discrimination forced many blacks to swim in polluted rivers and streams, play in dangerous streets and alleys, and make do with dilapidated baseball fields and tennis

¹⁰⁰ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 196-199.

courts.”¹⁰² While the production of this plant may have been pure and clean water, the physical processes to reach this goal still carried the stigma of industrialism, a type of space that middle- to upper-class whites would not fight African Americans over and might even say they belonged. Additionally, a number of automobile accidents occurred in these sections of the site, making them seem not even that much safer than the street for children to play.¹⁰³



Figure 8: Filtration facilities, McMillan Reservoir, and smokestack, November 1916. Terrence Vincent Powderly Photographic Prints Collection. Catholic University Archives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2041/61145>

In addition to whites associating this area with industrial functions of the site, some African Americans worked at the filtration plant itself, taking on the hard labor tasks in the procedural filtration activities mentioned above. Images demonstrate Black laborers shoeing horses and cleaning and hauling sand in 1906 and once again 1938. In

¹⁰² Martha H. Verbrugge, “Exercising Civil Rights, 107.

¹⁰³ “Man Unhurt as Car Plunges Over Bank,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 1928; “McMillan Park Drive a Menace to Traffic-Should be Widened and Made Straight,” *Washington Post*, November 24, 1930; “Driver Leaps Safely in Truck Accident,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 1927.

1934, John W. Chase, an African American man who worked there for 15 years drowned in the filtration system. The article reporting his death described no evidence of foul play but Chase had been “despondent over a recent injury.” The short report is not very empathetic and focuses on the quick work done to remove the body before the water was contaminated.¹⁰⁴ Despite any obvious grief by the press and his tragic end, Chase’s work history at the site demonstrates a near continuous presence of African American labor for the time the plant was active. To whites, the Black laborers removing sand containing filtered bacteria below ground would have only strengthened the connection as an unclean area and that those who worked there were also unhygienic.

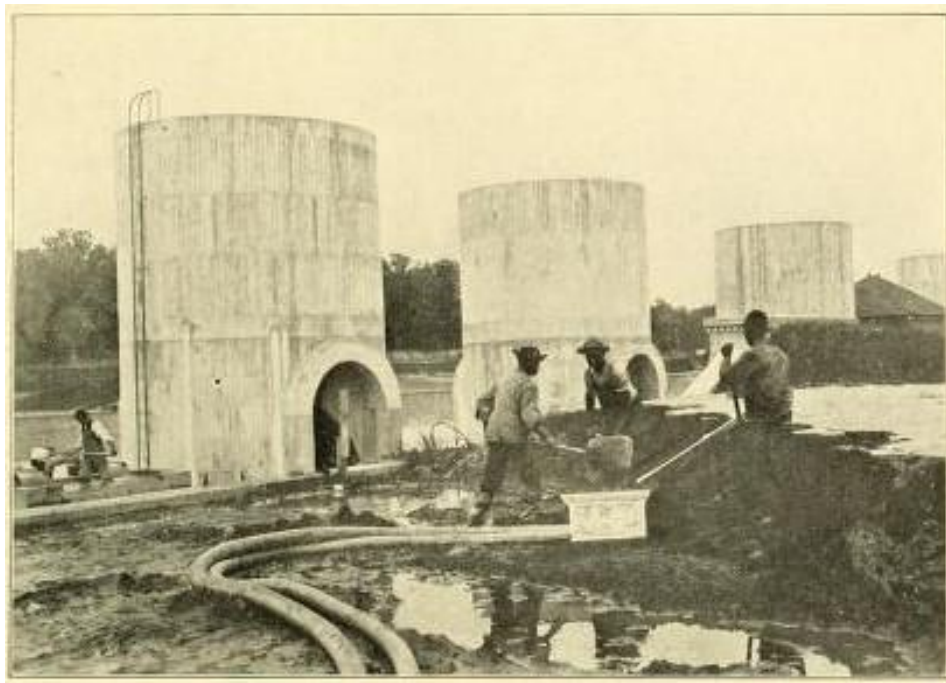


Figure 9: “Movable Ejector at Work Moving Sand Temporarily Stored on top of a Filter”, in Hazen, Allen and E.D. Hardy. “Works for the Purification of the Water Supply of Washington, D.C.” *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers* 57 (1906): Plate XXXV.

¹⁰⁴ “Horseshoeing of horses in the D.C. Water Department grounds, at the McMillan Reservoir,” Thompson Lantern Slide Collection, TH78, Historical Society of Washington, D.C.; EHT Tracerics, Inc., “McMillan Sand Filtration Plant,” 174, 186; “Reservoir is Drained After Man Drowns,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 26, 1934.



Figure 10: Workers removing sand for cleaning in filtration beds, 1938. *Washington Evening Star*, from June 12, 1938 article. Washington Historical Image Collection. Washingtoniana Division. Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Library.

Beyond whites associating the area with its productive aspects in some ways, African Americans in the plant labor force could have made them unsure if the Black user of the park was there for work or pleasure. Conversely, the Black worker presence on the grounds could have encouraged other Black people to utilize the facilities, feeling more comfortable and free from reprisal. Furthermore, the workers could have taken pride in the area they helped maintain and invite their friends and family to enjoy the more pleasant areas of the site. In short, the ability for Black citizens to claim the area may have stemmed from both white unease with knowing who should and should not be there while at the same time African American users' comfortability in this space stemming from a workforce that looked how they did.

Although, the Black population of Washington and the rest of the United States was not monolithic. For instance, many elite African Americans did not associate with their lower-class counterparts for at least the early part of the twentieth century, despite whites typically identifying them as one unit. Furthermore, wealth, status, and differing degrees of skin tone allowed access to different parts of society as noted above with D.C. recreation and leisure spaces in general. Were whites silent on African American presence in this section of McMillan's green space because it was upper class or lighter skinned Black people using the park? It seems that Lillian Evanti, Opera singer and D.C. native, had no issue getting her photo taken next to the McMillan Memorial Fountain sometime around 1930. A successful and lighter skinned Black woman, Evanti rose to prominence as the first Black woman to sing opera in an organized company in Europe. Her celebrity and Washington roots are reason enough for her admittance into the park regardless of race, but her personal attributes do demonstrate the way some African Americans could gain access to these spaces.¹⁰⁵ Whether or not whites would weigh these variables in every decision of who to exclude, it is worth remembering that African Americans were and are not one single block, but occupy multiple and interacting identities.

¹⁰⁵ Moore, *Leading the Race*, 190-191; White House Historical Association, "Lillian Evanti: The First African American Woman to Perform with a Major European Opera Company." Accessed February 23, 2016. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/lillian-evanti>; [Lillian Evanti in park #96: cellulose acetate photonegative.], Black-and-white negatives series 4 [photonegatives], 1904-1994, Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History: Archives Center, Washington, DC. Accessed February 23, 2016. <http://sirismm.si.edu/archivcenter/scurlock/618ns0227092-01pw.jpg>



Figure 11: Lillian Evanti by the McMillan Memorial Fountain, ca. 1930-1940. Black-and-white negatives series 4 [photonegatives], 1904-1994, Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History: Archives Center, Washington, DC, <http://siris-archives.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?&profile=all&source=~!siarchives&uri=full=3100001~!227092~!0#focus>

Even if local white segregationists could determine who were permissible in this space, the overlapping jurisdictions preventing a comprehensive racial policy in the recreation system of Washington, as Verbrugge suggests, similarly would have befuddled efforts to control this area. With the reservoir and filtration area under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers, local residents would have had to rely on the Army Corps of Engineers' staff to police this section of the space rather than the Department of Playgrounds. Additionally, with the park police in charge of public parks controlled by

the National Park Service, there was no dedicated police force. The Corps of Engineers would call in the municipal police if there were any sort of trouble.¹⁰⁶

In the end, the Corps of Engineers had to hire their own guards to be a part of the staff of the Washington Aqueduct system and patrol multiple sites across the district. The Engineers gave the mandate to their guards to “prevent minor misdemeanors and eject all persons not conducting themselves in the proper manner; to prevent destruction of government property, and to enforce traffic regulations on the Conduit Road outside the District of Columbia.” McMillan Reservoir and Filtration Site had its own dedicated guard and therefore did have a way of removing whom they considered to be not conducting themselves properly. It is unclear, however, whether they used this force to patrol racial boundaries. Additionally, it is uncertain how effective the policing would be due to the limited number of guards and what the Corps of Engineers believed to be jurisdictional restrictions on their guards’ actions.¹⁰⁷

The issue, according to the District Engineer, was that these guards did not have any power other than to throw people out or call the municipal police to make an arrest. Even then, once brought to trial, the courts often discharged the accused because the judge believed that the police lacked authority in this area. By December 1932, the issue was such a problem that the Army Corps of Engineers wrote and considered proposing a bill in Congress to give their watchmen authority to make arrests and the District courts to have jurisdiction in the subsequent trials. Specifically, they cited “residents of the city,

¹⁰⁶ J. D. Arthur, “Proposed Legislation – Washington Aqueduct Reservation,” 1, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 6453, Record Group 77: Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Civil Works, 1923-1942, Rivers and Harbors Files, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter Office of the Chief Engineer Records).

¹⁰⁷ J. D. Arthur, “Proposed Legislation,” 1, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 6453, Office of the Chief Engineer Records.

particularly in the vicinity of McMillan Park, have frequently complained over the failure of the District Engineer to take proper steps to punish offending persons committing minor offenses in this park.” Some other offenses the Corps of Engineers raised in later complaints are outlined below but here only mention these from the residents in this vague manner. Yet, the complaints demonstrate very plainly that residents disliked the activity taking within the grounds.¹⁰⁸

Yet, it is not certain if white or Black residents made these complaints, as each group prized the area by this time, as shown in the cases above, and whether their complaints had a racial bent. Could these be the complaints from white residents of Black children using the playground that Jones mentioned in his study and is covered in Chapter 3? Alternatively, was this about the reservoir and filtration area, a space that African-Americans frequented? The information is too vague to tell, but these documents indicate that the Corps of Engineers were ineffective from the site’s opening until 1932 in controlling activities taking place on these grounds and that some residents did not like what was taking place there. Once again, an overlapping and confusing jurisdiction gave the Black residents greater ability to make the space their own. In response to the unruly nature of the park, the Army Corps mobilized to take control.

The proposal for greater policing power circulated for two years before the Corps abandoned it when finding out that the guards had the power to make arrests the whole time! In statutes discovered regarding the District of Columbia passed in the late nineteenth century, the Engineers realized that their assumptions and experiences with the guards were incorrect. First, “watchmen provided by the United States Government for

¹⁰⁸ J. D. Arthur, “Proposed Legislation,” 1-2, 7-8, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 6453, Office of the Chief Engineer Records.

public squares and reservations in the District” had the same powers and duties as the Metropolitan Police. In addition, laws and regulations of D.C. barred disorderly conduct or the damaging of public buildings and grounds and could result in a fine of \$50. Additionally, the District courts had jurisdiction over the offenses outlined in the statute. With these newly discovered powers, the District Engineers ended their legislative pursuits.¹⁰⁹

Having a solidified claim to police jurisdiction, one would expect that the Army Corps of Engineers tightened control of their Washington Aqueduct properties. Yet, at the end of the 1930s, they asked for additional funding to protect and secure their facilities, both through fencing and an increased guard force to patrol them. Much of this desire stemmed from the unstable political environment and fear of sabotage by America’s enemies on the eve of World War II. However, in proving this need, the Corps of Engineers also cited their continuing inability to control the activities on their property, saying that these lands were used as a public park for the past 40 years and that it “was physically impractical to keep the public out.” Aligning with the original fear of Olmsted, Jr. and despite his attempts to keep people out of the filtration areas with designed landscape, users still got in.¹¹⁰

The Army Corps of Engineers believed that completely closing these areas with fencing and increasing the number of guards was the only option to maintain the safety

¹⁰⁹ J. D. Arthur, “Proposed Legislation,” 5-6, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 6453. Office of the Chief Engineer Records.

¹¹⁰ Office of the Chief Engineer, “Justification of Deficiency Estimate, Fiscal Year 1941,” 1, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 7245, Office of the Chief Engineer Records.

and sanitary conditions in the reservoirs and on the slow sand filter roofs.¹¹¹ Previous issues with the District’s reservoirs included having to hire a special contingent of guards in the summer to keep people from swimming in them and keeping residents from ice-skating in the winter. On the filter roofs, the Corps of Engineers gave example problems of a child falling through a manhole on the filter beds and one man removing a manhole cover and committing suicide. Additionally, the Engineers complained, “on numerous occasions, the manhole covers of the McMillan filters have been removed during the night.” With only one guard assigned to McMillan Park, it is understandable why many people could get away with many actions in this area. It is also further evidence that African Americans had the ability to claim this area, even if whites did not want them there.¹¹²

The lack of control over their properties and public safety risks made a convincing argument and the federal government closed off McMillan Park to the public in 1941. Additionally, other cities in the United States also took these measures to protect their water facilities, most of which already had less public access.¹¹³ While brief general examinations of McMillan Park’s history have focused on the role the fear of sabotage played in its closing, none examined the arguments leveraged to support that claim and what it meant the park was like in years prior. What the evidence demonstrates is the

¹¹¹ By referring to the “slow sand filter roofs,” one can assume they were referring to the McMillan Filtration Site because it was the only *slow* sand filtration site in the city.

¹¹² Office of the Chief Engineer, “Justification of Deficiency Estimate,” 2, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 7245, Office of the Chief Engineer Records; Office of the Chief Engineer, Untitled Report to the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia circa 1939, 1-2, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 7245, Office of the Chief Engineer Records; Office of the Chief Engineer Records; Office of the Chief Engineer, Untitled Report to the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia circa 1941, 1-2, Box No. 1717, Folder No. 7245, Office of the Chief Engineer Records.

¹¹³ Melosi, *Sanitary City*, 221.

continuing ineffectiveness of the guards since the bill proposal in 1932, revealing that for the entire history of the site, there was never comprehensive control of the activities taking place. Additionally, it further demonstrates the inability to patrol racial boundaries, even if wanted, in the reservoir and filtration areas.

Beyond the hired guards, it seems unlikely that African American staff would vigilantly keep other African Americans off the property unless those in charge made it a strict requirement for keeping their job. In fact, one can imagine that unless white workers had strong feelings on race, they most likely would be concerned about doing their job in the function of the plant, rather than keeping kids off the grass. The Engineers' complaints and calls for increased help demonstrate that general work staff were too busy to undertake these tasks. Ultimately, the inability to monitor and discipline socially acceptable persons and actions in the space is just as strong of a reason for why African Americans could use this area as local whites not caring because it was a space of dirt and labor. Overall, this example demonstrates the racial and social contestation of and through green public space and its eventual elimination entirely as a result.

Chapter 3: Playground Morals: Whites Only

From what evidence remains, white community attitude toward the African-American presence in the filtration and reservoir area seems at best ambivalent. Contrarily, in the region south of these sections, containing Bloomingdale playground and the memorial fountain, District officials clearly assigned the space for white use only. This area was leased to the Department of Playgrounds by the Army Corps of Engineers and thus under local jurisdiction. The early twentieth century playground movement influenced this department, a connection that is essential to understanding the role of this public green space in the neighborhood and why whites strove to protect it. Through a detailed examination of playground distribution and activities across D.C., it becomes evident how open space and play functioned in the lives of city residents. Looking at Bloomingdale (or McMillan) playground demonstrates the gendered play environment, the changing delineation of what it meant to be white, the process of nationalistic acculturation, and the continuing ability for African Americans to disrupt the isolation in which whites hoped these things would occur.

The playground movement, or a diverse group of reformers focusing on play and playgrounds as the loci of social betterment, grew in prominence in the early twentieth century progressive era. Their general ideas for their actions centered on a few central theories. One of these core elements was the idea of play in relation to recapitulation theory. The main idea of the aforementioned theory was that children were similar to savages and that childhood was one of the stages of human evolution. Play had survived as a useful tool for human development. Playground leaders, to attract these beasts from the wild urban jungle of the street, made playgrounds mirror nature and contain activities

that satiated primal urges such as climbing and swinging. Eventually, they became a space for all ages and community recreation but primarily were areas for children.

Administrators and professionals served to meld these young people from uncontrolled animals into ideal citizens, content to live and work in an urban environment.¹¹⁴

Beyond simply part of an evolutionary process, leaders of this movement also saw an educational and controlling value to play. Playground leaders wanted to keep children from being idle when not at school or in the home. Supervision was required for producing the right kind of play--healthy constructive play that instilled moral values--rather than the street play, described as wild, uncontrolled, and subjected children to the vice of the city, leaving them unrefined and morally corrupt overall. Supervised team games promoted cooperation and leadership essential to balancing the aggressive individualism considered part of masculine nature. Additionally, these games and other activities in recreational areas served as a way of teaching proper patriotism, civic values, and “whiteness” to new immigrant communities. Movement leaders considered teams a traditional cultural element of the Anglo-Saxon “race” and “the competent and respected team player was one who saw himself as a mere cell in ‘the race brain.’”¹¹⁵ Additionally, playground leaders thought that influencing children early would inculcate these values for the rest of their life before they became a part of the anonymous mass of adulthood. In turn, these advocates believed that the children would spread what they learned to their

¹¹⁴ Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 245-246.

¹¹⁵ Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 244, 248; Cavallo, Dominick. *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981): 74, 92.

families. To the movement leaders, control through early childhood play was the first step of greater society's acceptance of social control in all other aspects of life.¹¹⁶

While playground leaders in Washington accepted many of ideas of the larger movement, compared to most U.S. urban environments of the time, playgrounds perennially received low funding in the District of Columbia due to the unique jurisdictions of governance over the city. The District commissioners wholly supported playgrounds but with the national government in control of many aspects of city life, residents were at the behest of representatives from other states and their biases formed in their home region. Despite most of the members of Congress seeking to turn Washington, D.C. into a model city, each senator or representative had a different vision of what that meant. Congressional representatives from the larger urban centers, places that considered play and funding for these areas important, would support new playground funding. In contrast, legislators from rural areas were skeptical about the value of such spaces. To them, guided recreation removed the ability for boys to assert their individuality and the self-reliance of American citizenship. Some did not like play at all, considered it a waste of time, and thought that children should spend their time on means that are more constructive. Congress did pass statutes making it illegal for children to play in the streets in the 1890s but the impasse between the two factions kept spending on playgrounds low. The Department of Playgrounds made do with what money the

¹¹⁶ Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 250

government allocated, which increased with the influx of public works spending in the 1930s.¹¹⁷

Playgrounds in D.C. started first through the efforts of individual philanthropists at the end of nineteenth century and eventually gained traction as a function of government. Serving as the first playground supervisor of Washington, D.C. starting in 1905, Henry S. Curtis, an early leader of the national playground movement, established the main tenets of what would become the Department of Playgrounds for years to come. The movement in the District mirrored the ideas on the national scale, and decried the idleness of children or those who were playing undesirable games in the streets and numerous alleys. District playground leaders, like those in the rest of the country, saw the street, in particular, as an avenue to vice and extremely dangerous with the advent of the automobile.¹¹⁸

Leaders wanted to provide children with a place to go after school where they could perform constructive tasks. They focused on team games and supervision to produce good morals in the children. However, Curtis clashed with others in Washington who disagreed with him about keeping girls and older children on separate playgrounds. Leaving in 1909, he was eventually replaced by Susie Root Rhodes in 1916, marking a return to professional leadership after a number of years without someone experienced with playgrounds in the position. It also marked a milestone, for although women were very involved with playgrounds, few occupied top leadership positions such as Rhodes at

¹¹⁷ Robert Harrison, “‘The Ideal of a Model City’: Federal Social Policy for the District of Columbia, 1905-1909,” *Journal of Urban History*, 15: 4 (August 1989): 442, 444-445; Mergen, “Children’s Playgrounds,” 396, 387.

¹¹⁸ Bernard Mergen, “Children’s Playgrounds in the District of Columbia, 1902-1942,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 50 (January 1, 1980): 391-392, 394-395.

this time. Reflecting on this in her 1919 Annual Report, she associated her role in the department with mothering qualities and that in general said that as women gained new powers they should be used to benefit and take a mother-like role with others.¹¹⁹

Although games became more competitive around World War I, the ideas supporting the playground activities remained consistent throughout the period that McMillan Park was open to the public. There would always be play on the streets and unsupervised play despite the best efforts of D.C. playground officials. This does not mean that they did not affect the ones who did receive supervised play. Along with some avoiding department lead activities, it was also difficult to put these ideas into action due to the government stalemate on funding levels.¹²⁰

A low amount of funds did not stop attempts to increase land for play and recreation activities from occurring within Bloomingdale Playground and other play centers throughout the city. There were three types of playgrounds under the Department of Playgrounds control: those that belonged to the District of Columbia, those that were owned by the federal government, and those owned by private parties and loaned to the department for playground purposes. In 1915, there were 15 playgrounds, each with a playground director to supervise activities and a watchman to serve as “a special policeman.” It is uncertain how active these watchmen were and how well they enforced the rules of segregation, but with this employee, whites did have a mechanism to enforce this control. At different parts of the year (mainly the summer months), playgrounds gained assistants to help at the larger playgrounds. By 1931, at the end of the tenure of

¹¹⁹ Mergen, “Children’s Playgrounds”, 392-395; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report of the Department of Playgrounds of the District of Columbia* (1919): 3.

¹²⁰ Mergen, “Children’s Playgrounds”, 395-396.

long running head of the department, Susie Root Rhodes, there were 30 municipal playgrounds open for year round service, doubling the number from 16 years prior. Furthermore, in the interim years, those in the department worked with the District education department to open 49 school playgrounds after the school day and during vacation, some only during the summer, making the total of all playgrounds throughout the year ranging from 42 to 79. Reports by newspapers in the 1920s and a survey in 1934 found that the recreation facilities of Washington to be woefully inadequate for the population but within a few years there was rapid growth with the city reaching 118 recreation centers of all types by 1939. Grounds were scattered throughout the city, but due to the difficulty of obtaining land in the city center, most of the play areas were further out, other than around the National Mall.¹²¹

¹²¹ District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1915): 3-4, 6-7; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1931): 1; Mergen, "Children's Playgrounds", 395-396.

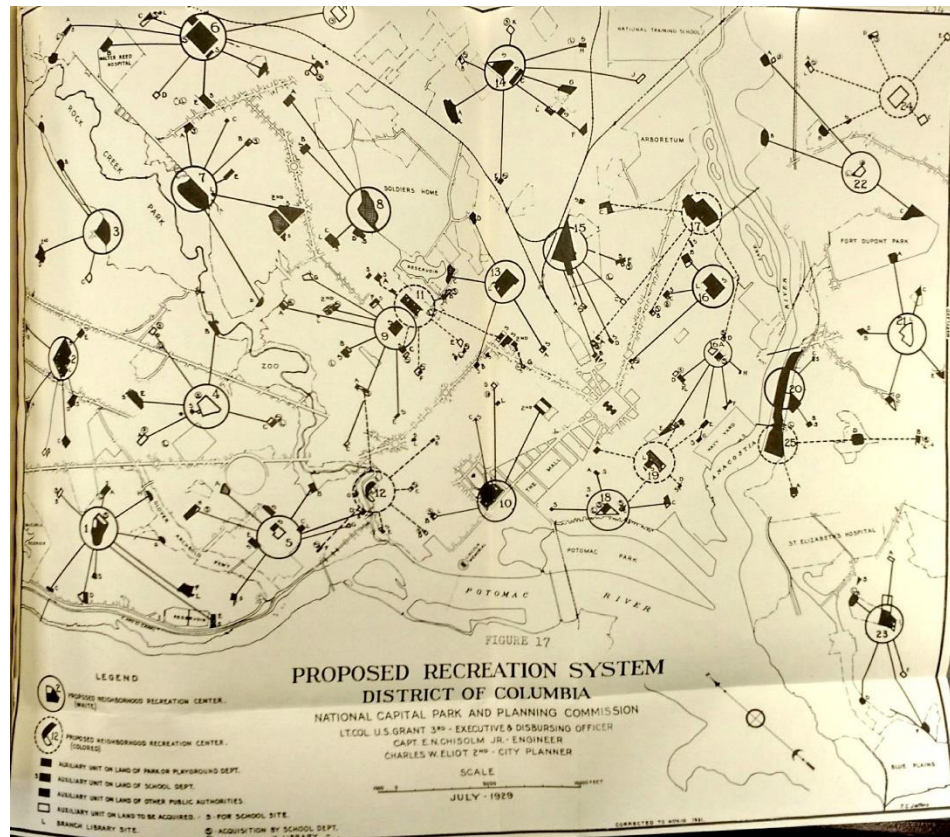


Figure 12: D.C. Proposed Recreation System map, July 1929 by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Copy from Bernard Semple Fortner, "A History of the Municipal Recreation Department of the District of Columbia (1790-1954)." (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1956): figure 17.

This was of particular concern to the playground department, which wanted to have a playground within walking distance of every child. While the playground department encouraged and did use the streetcar system in Washington, they thought that the children would not have the money to travel far distances. In the case of McMillan Playground, it often served as a place for children with no other playground areas nearby. In particular, the region south of Bloomingdale and above New York Avenue, as seen above in the 1929 "Proposed Recreation System, District of Columbia" map, was a dense stretch of housing with little green space. To answer this need, the department proposed turning a small triangle of land into a green space bounded by Second Street, T Street,

and Rhode Island Avenue. In response, the Senate rebuked them saying that it was unnecessary since residents of this area could just use McMillan Park to the north. Despite this setback, residents still felt this was a need in 1940 when they proposed a park in this area again. In the time between, without having a park or playground close by, these residents would have been forced to use McMillan Park if they wanted to use a playground area or be forced to play in the street.¹²²

A typical playground in Washington, D.C. looked like and had much of the same equipment in the first half of the twentieth century as what is associated with a stereotypical playground today. They had slides, swings, sandboxes, and equipment to climb on. However, playgrounds then not only featured jungle gym play areas but often had playfields and sporting grounds. Thus the idea of a playground in concept was much more general during this period. The activities on these grounds were in line with the larger playground movement's recommendations for team games with children playing baseball, basketball, softball, soccer, football, tennis and various other team sports. Additionally, the department also focused on industrial leisure such as sewing, crafting, and basket making that kept the children occupied and that also created a product.¹²³

The playground on the southern portion of McMillan Park, first opened as Bloomingdale Playground in 1913, and renamed McMillan Playground in 1934, matched how many other D.C. playgrounds looked and operated. From its opening it was heavily used by residents, with the newspapers reporting that in its first three weeks, 300 to 700

¹²² District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1931): 16; "Park Project Opposed," *Washington Post*, June 1, 1908; "Playground In Midcity Area Is Considered," *Washington Evening Star*, June 22, 1939.

¹²³ District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1915): 4-5, 9; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1925): 2-3; Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1931): 18.

people used the grounds each day. The department equipped the grounds with many of the typical playground items: slides, swings, vertical bars, ladders, sand boxes, and merry-go-round. Furthermore, there were many areas for larger games, having six tennis courts, basketball courts, a pavilion, and a general playfield. In Bloomingdale, team games, such as popular sports like soccer, football, baseball, track, and tennis took up the vast amount of the activities occurring in the space. Additionally, there were many other activities like marble games, doll contests, picnics, and pet parades. It is through these activities that McMillan Park became more of a citywide resource than just a local neighborhood area. School and playground officials created “Bloomingdale division” comprised of multiple schools in that area of the city competing against one another on Bloomingdale Playground. The winner of this division would represent it in the city-wide championship. These games were a subset of other city leagues (and in some instances, multi-state leagues), bringing in citizens from throughout the urban area.¹²⁴ With each game played in Bloomingdale, participants from outside the neighborhood were reifying the space’s recreational functions and racial divisions.

Without sufficient documentary sources, it is difficult to tell the effect these games had on the children precisely. Newspaper articles discuss little from the child’s perspective in the accounts of activities. One good example of how the children conceptualized the site is from a few newspaper columns where area children wrote in every week. In ones that mentioned accounts of McMillan Park, the children consistently described that they liked that the amenities for team play and one mentioned having a

¹²⁴ EHT Tracerics, Inc., “McMillan Sand Filtration Plant,” 4; “New Playground has Capacity Strained,” July 24, 1913; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1915): 12-13; “School Soccer Teams Prime for Finals,” *Washington Post*, November 25, 1934; “Ringer Tossers Go Into Action,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 1937.

place to go when school was out. Another article, written by eight-year-old Joseph T. De Bettencourt, described his enjoyment of the playground stemming from the safety from lack of cars and room to play games “with good teachers to help.” From these accounts, it is obvious that children enjoyed their time on the playground and started to pick up some of the ideas about safety and team play of those in charge, enough so that the users won the American Automobile Safety Award for 1936.¹²⁵ However, these few accounts demonstrate little about the instillation of white, American, or gender values.

In this all-white zone and in the rest of the city playgrounds, boys and girls occupied the same space but most of the guided activities were segregated by gender. Both groups enjoyed tennis, basketball, and track and many other activities had versions for each gender. One event playground officials specifically tailored to girls was the doll contest. In a detailed description of one in Bloomingdale from 1922, a newspaper article entitled “The Interests of Girls,” described the girls participating as mothers of their dolls and that one treated her doll with “motherly tenderness.” The only boy to enter the contest was Leonard Lobred, who was very young, and exhibited “a grotesque clown doll” because his other doll was too dirty to bring. While not participating, other boys did often jump in to provide commentary or “brutally frank criticism” of the dolls. One boy was described as speaking in a “scornful, matter-of-fact voice,” saying his sister should not want her doll to be real because they already have a troublesome baby sibling at home. Another, who had just finished playing baseball, “spit on his hands” before commenting that he predicted which doll would win. Thus, not only did the newspaper

¹²⁵ “Cousins’ Club, 1st in the Hearts of the Children,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 1920; Joseph T. De Bettencourt, “Bloomingdale for Safety First – What Bloomingdale Playground Means to Me,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 1921; “Playgrounds Safety Drive Will Be Opened on April 1,” *Washington Post*, March 14, 1937.

show the girls assuming a motherly role by taking care of their dolls, it also demonstrated the boys taking on more masculine and abrasive roles, lacking parental instincts both in demeanor or practice.¹²⁶

Similarly, the Playground Department administered athletic tests that measured physical aptitude which increased in difficulty from bronze, silver, and gold levels. Although each had different standards for girls and boys, most of the requirements were for physical tasks based on sheer athletic ability rather than any trait assigned to a gender. In fact, Susie Root Rhodes described the benefits of team play for girls as improving thinking power, poise, loyalty, and fair play. Games and tests focused on physical standards and some empowering aspects for women and yet some of the goals for girls often implied a graceful nature to their actions. One example where this desire was prevalent was with folk dancing. Playground officials never marked it as an activity exclusively for girls but it was not included in the boys' athletic test. Rhodes said girls derived "grace and a sense of rhythm" from learning and mastering the dances and therefore were pushed to learn traits assigned their gender, rather than a neutral athletic standard. While young women participated in the physicality of playground games and activities, the department wanted these tasks to help girls educationally, physically, and socially. This combination of ideals made seemingly gender neutral activities carry messages of proscribed gender roles.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1931): 9-13; "The Interests of Girls," *Washington Evening Star*, August 10, 1922.

¹²⁷ District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1924): 10; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1918): 16.

Folk dances also offer a window into the nationalist and racial ideas of the District of Columbia playground movement. Other than in the athletic tests and the reality of girls being more likely participate, playground leaders believed both boys and girls could partake in folk dances. Users of Bloomingdale Playground performed folk dances on its grounds or represented the area in other festivals across the city. Most of the early accounts of dances involving playground users in Bloomingdale and in Washington in general focused on Western European cultural dances. As time went on, those organizing the program started including more cultural groups, such as Irish, Italian, and Mexican, which many believed to be less white or even black in the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century.¹²⁸

Rhodes consistently described in her annual reports that folk dancing made ethnic groups feel welcome within the play spaces. To her, parents watched their children and were reminded of the stories and customs of the “old country.” Especially during World War I, Rhodes reported that children were interested in the dances of the neutral allies, such as Italy, Russia, and Sweden. She further stated in 1918 and repeated the same lines in 1919 that,

the playground is appreciated to a greater extent when it uses in its every-day play the familiar and loved customs brought in by our people from the mother country. The struggling between capital and labor, with its sharpening class distinctions, we may best fortify against through the intermingling of the youth of the country, so building up a splendid Americanism.

Rhodes demonstrates that folk dances were one way to draw in immigrant groups who may have been new to the neighborhood and leery of entering the space and leaving their children under the care of playground staff. Her words also reveal the goal of these

¹²⁸ “Playlet Presentation Pleases Proud Parents,” *Washington Evening Star*, July 3, 1913; “Playground Girls Stage Irish Jig,” *Washington Times*, March 18, 1821; “Children in Folk Dances,” *Washington Post*, July 28, 1922.; “Rehearse for Al Fresco Dance,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1939; “Girls of the Playground Department Present Folk Festival,” *Washington Post*, June 11, 1938.

dances as both entertainment for the immigrant parents and an attempt to ease class and ethnic tension. This second desire drew on fears of class struggle and the specter of communism, which would have weighed heavily on Rhodes's mind due to the recent Russian revolutions in 1917. Her words mirror her feelings on the democratic nature of playgrounds in general, which could serve as a "mixing-bowl" where everyone had the same rights, "social positions melt away," and children only know the "law of association, without regard to creed or nationality."¹²⁹

Rhodes's ideas of an intermingling of youth of many nationalities harken to a civic or "new" nationalism that focused on shared American values regardless of national origins, prominent in the late nineteenth century through World War I. In practice, this ideology was racially biased and mainly embraced European groups, yet the inclusion of Eastern and Southern Europeans was progressive for this time period. Despite ethnic-based discrimination and restriction of these groups in part stemming from fears of socialism in the United States at large during the 1920's, civic nationalism remained an undercurrent and gained strength again in the 1930's. The Playground Department's continued commitment to folk dances and the greater inclusivity of European immigrant groups demonstrates these trends. While the department promoted some alternative cultural celebrations, on a larger scale it hoped to Americanize these groups. The folk dances thus became nostalgic memories of their old life, not a continuation of how they would live in America. Folk dances held on these playgrounds also demonstrate, in part, the process of assuming "whiteness" and the eventual acceptance of other ethnicities outside of Western Europe into this category by the mid-twentieth century. The

¹²⁹ District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1919): 25; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1918): 21, 30.

coalescence of a greater white racial identity served to undercut the class and worker solidarity that could bridge racial lines. The assumption of whiteness also meant the acceptance of white racial attitudes of the United States during this period and allowed ethnic groups to use these privileges to get ahead.¹³⁰

At the same time that the Playground Department and those in charge of parks celebrated ethnic pluralism they also attempted to Americanize park and playground users through patriotic pageants and concerts. Pageants served as additional ways to teach children civic values and to influence the parents that came to watch. In these events, participants would personify a patriotic virtue and put on a play demonstrating “American values.” Other efforts to instill national identity were through concerts, in Bloomingdale they occurred in the fountain area. The U.S. Marine Corps Band naturally played during these performances and in parks around the city, focusing on patriotic numbers or Western European music, and always ended with “The Star Spangled Banner.” They often attracted a large number of people, for instance, newspapers reported that citizen attendance to one of these concerts at McMillan Park to benefit the American Red Cross during World War I was over 2,000 people! Along with various other events, the pageants and concerts taught both young people and the growing immigrant population what it meant to be white. These concerts were events of decorum that demonstrated the correct way to act in a white racialized space, with police often

¹³⁰ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 50-53, 67-68, 122, 126-127; David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005): 111, 143, 62-63; The Washington Playground Department's maintenance of ethnic folk dancing while displays of culture were suppressed in the general United States during the 1920s could have been due to the small immigrant population in the District mentioned in the introduction. In contrast, Chicago's parks and playground leaders, with a much larger immigrant population, tried to suppress these folk activities and focused more on Americanization during this time, see Fisher, *Urban Green*, 68-70.

attending for the “protection of auditors against unnecessary disturbance.” Gaining admittance into these events in segregated areas meant those in control accepted the attendee’s whiteness and those attending accepted the racialized spatial divisions and proper cultural rules.¹³¹

It is hard to determine how many immigrants actually took part in these programs or if users assumed racial attitudes due to the program content in the park and play areas. However, descriptions of Elizabeth Mahon, the director of Bloomingdale Playground from starting around 1918 and until 1939, can give some possible answers on the racial atmosphere and further demonstrates Bloomingdale playground’s alignment with playground principles of the day. Mahon’s moral ideas about play activities, and the activities mentioned above, serve as a lens for the overall themes and leadership in the space for almost the entire time it was open to the public. Her continued presence in the park allowed her to mold the minds of multiple generations of children of neighborhood families. At one point, she organized the folk dances for the entire city.¹³² One article from 1934, describing her supervision style on the playground one day, said she walked “from one end of the lot to the other, cautioning against infraction of game rules, directing, applauding. Elizabeth Mahon is a stickler for rules.” The director’s supervisory style, as seen here, closely mirrors the tactics and goals of the playground movement in general, with team games and sticking to the rules. The article continued to mention that she focused on two main rules in practice “good manners and good environment” and

¹³¹ “In July 5 Playground Liberty Pageant,” *Washington Times*, July 8, 1915; “Concert Today by Engineer Band, at McMillan Park, 7:30 p. m.,” *Washington Times*, September 17, 1915; “Raise \$35,000,000 to Aid Red Cross,” *Washington Times*, June 20, 1917; “Park Concerts,” *Washington Evening Star*, May 14, 1914.

¹³² “Playgrounds Teaching Children Folk Dances,” *Washington Times*, July 28, 1922.

concerning the second aspect she was quoted saying, “if you put children in ashes and dirt, they grow up that way.” Therefore, in addition to the form and manner of recreation the children partook, the atmosphere in which it took place was extremely important to Mahon. Here, she reflects attitudes on cleanliness mentioned above where dirt was a negative attribute associated with poverty and ethnic and racial minorities.¹³³

When Elizabeth Mahon retired from the Playground Department, the North Capitol Citizens Association, of which she was a member for a number of years, honored her service to Bloomingdale Playground. This acknowledgement, from the same association that mobilized the white populace in the area and led the legal battle for restrictive covenants in Bloomingdale, also brings up questions regarding Mahon’s racial views. I can only raise more questions without Mahon’s personal accounts on this matter to add to the conversation. However, her membership in this citizens group, longtime employment with the segregationist Department of Playgrounds, advocacy for group play (thought a part of the melding of the Anglo-Saxon race), and deep concern about the play environment for the children, establishes a context plausible where Mahon could have had racist attitudes toward African Americans and could have passed these values onto those under her care.¹³⁴ This is simply a theory, the racial ideas of the playground movement in the United States is a topic too understudied to draw any parallels from other regions.

Whether or not the playground leaders like Mahon inculcated racist ideas to children, it was clear that they felt Black people and whites should be kept separate in

¹³³ “Miss Mahon Has Taught Charges at Playground for 17 years.” October 1, 1934.

¹³⁴ “Citizens Honor Miss Mahon, Retired Playground Director,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 1939.; “McMillan Playground Director Retires,” *Washington Evening Star*, March 1, 1939.

practice. As stated previously, officials segregated playgrounds in Washington by race. The Department of Playgrounds took a separate but equal approach to providing recreation to both white and Black citizens. Similar to other aspects of society in the United States during the Jim Crow era, separate was inherently unequal. While all of the activities and games that took place in white playgrounds also took place on African American playgrounds in the District, there is little evidence on how well equipped one community was in comparison to the other. One metric that is certain is that facilities in D.C. for whites outnumbered facilities for African Americans. Of the 15 municipal playgrounds mentioned above in 1915, officials designated three for use by Black children: Cardoza, Howard, and Willow Tree Park. By 1931, there were 30 municipal playgrounds, eight of which served the Black population. In these years, African Americans made up one fourth to one third of the population but just barely reached a proportional share of the playground space. Of these, only Howard had a swimming pool which served the entire Black population of Washington for most of this entire period. While whites only had two playgrounds with swimming pools (Georgetown and Rosedale), they also had access to the bathing beach on the Potomac basin until 1925 and also two swimming pools there until 1936.¹³⁵ The water areas in particular became points of contention as Black people petitioned the government for access eventually gaining another pool in 1928 and a third in 1934. Official control only loosened over recreational spaces with the appointment of Harold Ickes to the Department of the Interior in 1934 and opening of national park facilities to more African Americans. District playgrounds

¹³⁵ District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1915): 6-7; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1931): 1, 17; Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, "Were people ever allowed to swim in the Tidal Basin or Reflecting Pool?", *Histories of the National Mall*, Accessed March 24, 2016. <http://mallhistory.org/explorations/show/swimming>

remained segregated by policy until 1954, after increasing challenges in the early part of the decade by local Blacks and officials alike.¹³⁶

Often without a large amount of playground space, play occurred in the streets, vacant lots, and alley communities that many African Americans occupied, much to the chagrin of the Playground Department. Without other options and without supervision, Black and white children would often play together. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the department saw the street and play in it as a safety and moral liability to children. City officials particularly targeted alley communities for demolishing and saw these areas as general centers of crime, disease, and immorality. The government replaced some of these areas with parks or playgrounds. George M. Roberts (the head of the Playground Department prior to Rhodes) demonstrated his alignment with these desires when describing the new Willow Tree Park Playground as “formerly known as Willow Tree Alley, where tumbledown shacks housed many dirty children and their idle, shiftless parents, has been transformed into a beautiful interior playground for colored people.” The language describing this space at Four-and-a-half B street, SW is not unusual for someone in charge a segregationist municipal department. Yet, it further aligns him and the department with the ideas of environmental racism that associated African Americans with dirt. Roberts goes on to explain that the parents need sanitary education and that the playground fills this need and is a place where if the children “wash their hands they can make beautiful things.” It is clear that Roberts saw the playground as part of sanitary racial uplift, yet cleanliness only bought African Americans access to “beautiful things” in separate facilities, never being clean enough to play with white children. This is very

¹³⁶ Wiltse, “Contested Waters”, 144-145; Martha H. Verbrugge, “Exercising Civil Rights, 111-112, 116.

much in contrast to the opportunities that poor and immigrant families had to raise their class and racial status through playground activity.¹³⁷

Despite inequalities prior to integration, some Black residents took it upon themselves to improve their playgrounds if the government could or would not. For instance, in the 1934 survey describing recreation areas inadequate mentioned above, the only one found up to a good standard was Lincoln playground in Southeast D.C. where Black residents paid for and built their own playground house and improved the grounds. Despite any facility inequalities, the play content of Black playgrounds was very similar to that of white playgrounds. African Americans played tennis, baseball, track, and baseball in particular was very popular. Black playground users also had their own festivals and events. In one instance, Rhodes described that Howard Playground held a spring festival involving a pageant, marching, and folk dance. How did this folk dancing compare to the version on white grounds? She did not describe the activity with any national origin attached, only saying that “several hundred children gave an interesting demonstration of rhythmic and esthetic and folk dancing.” While there is mention that a subset of 64 of the children danced the May pole, she does not go into detail about the rest of the them. The lack of description could imply that Rhodes did not know how to classify the type of dancing. Thus, at the same time they accepted European cultural customs like dancing around the may pole, African Americans could also have been celebrating their heritage through early African-American, African, or Caribbean dances unfamiliar to the playground director and using dance for their own identity formation. This would not have been unprecedented as African Americans did celebrate this folk

¹³⁷ Tom P. Barrett, *Segregation in Washington: A Report of the National Committee on Segregation in Nation's Capital* (1948): 38; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1915): 14.

culture through celebrations and pageants in parks at this time in Chicago. Regardless of whether this was the case, playgrounds were places that Black residents of D.C. took pride, enjoyed, and celebrated with each other.¹³⁸

In addition to festivals and dancing, the Black population also had their own city leagues and tournaments, although developing later than those on white grounds. The department claimed this was the result of the distance between the playgrounds and the desire of African Americans to compete on their own grounds. Whether or not African Americans wanted to compete only on their home playground, the scattered nature of African American play areas would have made travel cumbersome to children. This is particularly seen in the “Proposed Recreation System” map above.

This map was created as part of plan to establish recreational centers, where children and adults from surrounding playgrounds, parks, and schools could congregate in one central recreation area. The recreation centers are circled, a solid circle denotes a white recreation center and a dotted circle denotes an African American recreation center, and lines branching out showing the neighborhood recreational areas the center would serve as a central point. These are proposed plans and may have grounds that did not or never existed but it gives a general picture of recreation areas at the time. More so than its intended purpose, the map clearly shows that there were not many recreation areas that African Americans could use south of McMillan Park and north of the Mall. Overall, Black playgrounds were spread out and would require crossing a large part of the city to reach another. Distance, at least for children, often would have been a factor in which

¹³⁸ Mergen, “Children’s Playgrounds”, 396; District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1919): 27; Fisher, *Urban Green*, 109-112.

playground they attempted to utilize but overall, leagues formed and continued through the period.¹³⁹

In LeDroit Park, African Americans heavily used Howard Playground located only about a block away from McMillan Park. Not only attracting users from the neighborhoods around Howard, this park was immensely popular with African Americans in the city because it was one of the few Black playgrounds in the area and because it had a pool. This high amount of use and crowding could have pushed users over to McMillan Park. With relatively little travel, African Americans could still enjoy at least a nice stroll in a nature-like area and the cool breezes coming off the reservoir or on the higher elevated points of the filter bed. These qualities would have made it a nice alternative to beat the heat. However, as mentioned above, this use would have been in the non-playground areas with the Playground Department demarcating Bloomingdale Playground from its outset in 1913 as exclusively for whites.

With this labeling, it seems that whites were more concerned with policing this play area than the grounds of the reservoir and the filtration site. Much like the restrictive covenant cases, citizens themselves took the lead in protesting the presence of African Americans on the grounds. Whites exhibited this trait from the first year the playground opened in 1913. When the Playground Department initiated the building of a play space in McMillan Park, members of the community circulated a petition against the location of the site and brought it before the North Washington Citizens' Association (an earlier white citizen's group) for their help in furthering the cause. It was here where "further

¹³⁹ District of Columbia. Department of Playgrounds. *Annual Report* (1925): 9; Bernard Semple Fortner, *A History of the Municipal Recreation Department of the District of Columbia (1790-1954)* (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1956): 119.

investigation developed that there was no real opposition to the establishment of a *white* playground there” [emphasis mine] and from there after the residents supported its location.¹⁴⁰ While not stated outright, the focus on the acceptance of a white playground implies this misunderstanding centered on thinking that the department was creating a Black playground. In this example of confusion, it becomes clear that whites were willing to mobilize to keep this area for their exclusive use and as a racial enclave for their children.

As seen above, there are a few surviving examples of African Americans using this section of the site especially as neighborhood demographics changed. However, as the petition indicates, whites were more willing and capable of policing trespass on the playground with it squarely under the jurisdiction of the Department of Playgrounds and with each playground having its own watchman. Although it was easier for whites to assert their power, little record of their attempts to do so exist today. In the articles mentioning police activity above, it is uncertain exactly where on the site these illicit activities took place. The Jones study cited earlier mentions one of the few but telling examples of white contestation and demonstrates neighborhood citizens leading the way once again in preventing African American use of this area. In an earlier section on playgrounds, Jones describes the issue of multiple white communities in Washington complaining to the Playground Department of trespass on traditionally white playgrounds by African Americans, either from neighboring communities or in those which had shifted to majority Black neighborhoods.¹⁴¹ These complaints reveal that at least ten

¹⁴⁰ “Bloomingdale Seeks Children’s Playground,” *Washington Evening Star*, October 7, 1913.

¹⁴¹ Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*, 41.

years after the original petition to keep a Black playground from the neighborhood, whether successfully or not, white residents continued their attempts to police these grounds and keep it a place of patriotic pride and racial homogeneity.

These citizens' actions are more in character with the rest of the city's attempts to police segregated playgrounds and with their other efforts to ensure segregated housing rather than the ambivalence shown to the filtration and reservoir areas. The emphasis on the playground area as a safe space for children and others to be molded into proper citizens and as an oasis from the ills of the city seem antithetical to their acceptance of an African American presence in this space, beyond simply their belief in the segregation of the races. Of course, as mentioned above, there were some African Americans challenging the racial and spatial boundaries of the *entire* site, even while some were content to remain in the other, less contested, sections of it.¹⁴² Therefore, white attempts to control this area and the disruptive environmental element of African Americans entering this space reinforces the transgressive quality of African American actions and further demonstrates their power to utilize green public spaces to subvert the geographic hegemony of whites on a whole.

¹⁴² Testimony of Ronald Brown, quoted in Anne Sellin, "McMillan Park Reservoir" (1990): 28.

Conclusion

In function, use, and form, McMillan Park, in its entire constituent parts, embodies how urban citizens utilized green public space in the twentieth century to both build and defy cultural structures. Whites attempted to subject and control Black people in Washington, D.C. through segregation and environmental design, thus limiting the space they could occupy and enjoy. In practice, Blacks had the ability to contest their geographic manipulation by claiming sections of the city as their own, often in direct contradiction to segregationist policies. By simply entering areas whites barred them from, Black citizens changed these areas from symbols of control to symbols of disobedience and protest. Green public space, such as McMillan Park, served as a vehicle for these various forms of contestation.

In this park, African Americans defied the original delineations of Olmsted, Jr.'s site plans and sometimes practiced active instead of passive recreation. At times, they broke past the planted physical boundaries to claim and utilize the more industrial sections of the site. This industrial association and environmental racism may have been the reason why African Americans went uncontested in this area, as they were claiming an area somewhat similar to the dangerous and dirty areas they frequented throughout the city in areas like alleyways and polluted water. Ultimately the park is not a true industrial site due to the minimal amount of pollution it produced. However, the less nature-like elements of the site broke the illusion of a natural escape from city life and prevented it from being "properly called a park" at the beginning. Even with the adding of green elements, this connection was most likely never lost, and provided cause for at least tacit acceptance of Black people in the area. Additionally, this viewpoint refocuses attention

on the overlooked African American manual labor that maintained this site and the cultural and racial conception of cleanliness that played a role in defining it. The greater willingness of Black citizens to accept this space as a park demonstrates that the definition of a park can be shaped by race, culture, and class and adds another historical conceptualization of these green spaces during the early twentieth century. Additionally, this research also adds to the debate over passive and active recreation, showing that more than just white immigrants and the elites, African Americans took sides in this debate, both internally and within in the larger population.

The jurisdictional overlap between multiple governmental bodies could also have resulted in the gap in control Black people needed to assert their presence in this space. With the legal aspects used to control public property often in disarray, African Americans took advantage and claimed areas for their own use, sometimes even venturing into the white playground area. Nevertheless, Black residents could not alter the physical structure of the site itself without access to the professional knowledge, power structures, and technical processes controlled by whites.

Whites were still effective in their control of spatial boundaries and cultural norms despite Black agency to challenge them. In particular, they created a racial enclave in the playground where children received protection from the physical and moral dangers of the street and gained the moral values needed to be virtuous citizens. The activity in this area also mirrored the playground movement of the day in its attempts at Americanization and eventual acceptance of immigrant culture within the widening racial notion of “whiteness.” Furthermore, by mobilizing their strength as neighborhood blocks or multiple neighborhoods, whites could assert themselves to both the local and national

government, have their voices heard through supposedly neutral ideals of health, safety, and property values, all the while discriminating against minority groups. The filtration plant stable controversy and restrictive covenant cases demonstrate this idea. Sitting atop the racial hierarchy, white citizens in Washington could still control their own political destiny despite lacking real political representation under the rule of Congress and the Commissioners and despite protest from other racial groups.

However, African Americans did not have the same access to these power structures, as seen when they tried and failed to prevent the District Engineering Department from building an auto garage in McMillan Park. Their attempt to use zoning regulation, property values, and ideas of public safety, as whites had done regarding horse stables, failed to change the government's decision. Despite only being able to access part of it, Black residents adopted the park as an unofficial part of their neighborhood and property but did not have the same official claim in protecting an area designated for whites only. Thus, their contestation in regards to claiming public space remained outside of normative legal methods that white people often could mobilize to discriminate against them. Through the direct action of taking areas for their own, African Americans leveraged the notion of common rather than public property. Both racial groups saw green space as important to their community, used this site in similar ways, but gained access by their own means.

This study articulates what happens when the legal and structural elements of public property become difficult to enforce and cultural and spatial attributes play a stronger role in defining the relative degrees of public space. Moreover, it demonstrates that on the surface southern African Americans may have seemed content to advocate for

their own separate spaces rather than integrated spaces before World War II in areas like pools or other parks, in practice they often actively sought access into white spaces in small moments of contestation that affected few other than their individual experience. Yet, these small actions often built up and could transform an area, such as the creation of a cultural public in McMillan Park that included African Americans. The examples add to the idea of the “long Civil Rights movement” not confined to the protests of the 1950s and 1960s and show a continuity of local political action from the post-Emancipation era. In the end, African Americans demonstrated their agency to affect change in their lives without the same political sway they had in the era of strong Republican patronage of the late nineteenth century or without any real voice in the traditional government. Regardless of this ability, the system of non-representative governance, both municipal and federal, more often oppressed the Black residents of D.C. and kept these gains from being permanent.

Beyond this one issue, the study of McMillan Park is part of the history of changing racial borders and neighborhood population of Washington. It demonstrates how residents developed a sense of ownership over the public property near their homes and attempted to safeguard it as part of their property value, much like those who used restrictive covenants during the same period. Through this viewpoint, this study completes the picture of control of space in the Bloomingdale and LeDroit Park neighborhoods by showing the public property half that has been lacking in the many studies over the private property housing struggles.

Ultimately, due to the limited nature of all research projects, some avenues of research had to be left out. There are other areas that remain fruitful for future research

projects and furthering the themes discovered in this piece. One direction that is intriguing is looking further into the culture of Black playgrounds. The possibility of African Americans performing their own folk dances in these spaces poses the question of how prevalent was this? What were other ways Black people formed identities in these spaces? A detailed study of how African Americans formed their identities in these areas could add to *Urban Green* and help to understand more than just elite white's relationship with nature and recreation. Another area of study could be of the recreation movement in general. What were its racial viewpoints beyond segregation and across regions? What of gender? Little has been studied other than the psychological and social control aspect to this movement. How did these ideas change over time? Finally, more oral histories, if possible, of former McMillan Park users could build upon many of the conclusions and questions raised in this study and fill the gaps in documentation of this area.

To return to the original inquiry, was McMillan Park the first de facto racially integrated park in Washington, D.C.? As mentioned in the introduction, I cannot answer the question with a simple yes or no. If defining McMillan Park as an entire area comprised of the playground, reservoir, and filtration site, then it was not. Whites defined and created the playground for themselves from its inception and thus from an entire site standpoint it was internally segregated. Black disobedience of these lines does not mean integration but merely contestation. Integration implies acceptance, at least tacitly. If analyzing through section specific access, then apparent white acquiescence to Black presence does imply some form of integration on its face in the northern section. One wonders, how much actual integration took place in the areas that white people did not force African Americans out? How often did whites use the site once many African

Americans started using it? I found no reports that white people and Black people engaged in recreation together here and therefore it is likely that whites and blacks self-segregated within the same space. Overall, the question of integration is a distraction from the power demonstrated by African Americans to challenge geographic and racial norms through recreation in green spaces.

The debate over neighborhoods and public spaces still rages in Washington in 2016. African Americans became a majority in the city by the 1960s and for many years after but demographics are changing again. A new wealthy (often white) populace has been displacing long time African American groups today through the overall gentrification of the neighborhoods in this study. At the same time, a portion of McMillan Park is undergoing planning to become an accessible open space again but as a mixed-use site of both public and private property, further blurring lines of public spaces that were not entirely clear at the beginning of the previous century. As mentioned in the introduction, neighborhood members, the government, and developers are struggling to come to a consensus of how and to what extent the land should be used, whether for business, housing, park land, or community buildings. Some community members have even trespassed on the still closed off land to protest the proposed site plans.¹⁴³ Each side has leveraged the history and memory of the site in order to claim the right course of action. In the end, I hope this study can serve not only as a contribution to the history of public space, segregation, and Washington history, but guide these interested parties to

¹⁴³ Green, *Secret City*, 200; Kate Rabinowitz, “DC Gentrification by the Numbers”, *DataLensDC*, September 15, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.dataensdc.com/gentrification-by-numbers.html>; Rachel Kurzius, “Photos: Organizers Throw Secret Party Underneath McMillan Park To Protest Development”, *DCist*, January 11, 2016, accessed March 25, 2016, http://dcist.com/2016/01/photos_a_secret_party_underneath_mc.php.

better understand what parks and playgrounds meant in historical context, how their definitions changed, who used them, and how they were contested.

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