

Heritage Documentation Programs Record Baltimore's Mount Vernon Place

by *Martin Perschler*

Baltimore's Mount Vernon Place is the result of nearly 200 years of effort by the citizens of Baltimore to create an appropriate setting for the city's Washington Monument, the first major public monument erected in the United States to honor the nation's first president. (Figure 1) The only known urban landscape to enjoy an architectural pedigree that includes Robert Mills (the nation's first native-born and trained architect), the Olmsteds, and the New York architectural firm of Carrere & Hastings (designers of the New York Public Library), Mount Vernon Place also plays an important commemorative role as a war memorial and an enduring symbol of Franco-American cooperation. In recognition of Mount Vernon's unique status in the cultural history of Baltimore and the United States, the National Park Service launched a multi-phase effort in 2003 to shed new light on this National Historic Landmark's storied past.

The combined Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) recording project began in January 2003 with a round of photo documentation of the four squares collectively known as Mount Vernon Place, as well as historical research on a number of neigh-

FIGURE 1
This 2003 bird's-eye view of Mount Vernon Place shows the Washington Monument with the west square in the foreground. (Photograph by Walter Smalling, Jr., courtesy of the National Park Service)



boring historic buildings. The buildings include the Peabody Institute and Conservatory (begun 1858), established by the 19th-century philanthropist George Peabody; the Walters Art Gallery (1905-1907), a museum building by the firm of Delano & Aldrich modeled after an Italian Baroque palace; the Mount Vernon Place Methodist Church (Dixon & Carson, 1873), a massive Gothic revival church of green serpentine stone; and several private townhouses dating from the mid to late 19th century. In the summer of 2003, a US/ICOMOS intern from Poland produced detailed existing conditions drawings and planting inventories of the four squares. A grant from the Maryland Historical Trust in 2004 helped offset the costs of a new round of photo documentation and a second summer project to create an interpretive drawing showing the evolution of Mount Vernon Place from 1812 to the present. The grant also helped cover the costs of a comprehensive site history of the four squares.

The site history project highlights significant periods in the evolution of Mount Vernon Place. The Mills period begins with the decision in 1814 to erect a monument to George Washington on land north of Baltimore donated by John Eager Howard.² The Olmsted period extends from the work of Frederick Law, Sr., in the mid 1870s to that of his son, Frederick Law, Jr. The Carrere & Hastings period runs from 1917—the year the city of Baltimore hired the firm to redesign the four squares—to the present day. All three phases are extremely well documented in correspondence, historic photographs, maps, site plans, and other materials preserved in local libraries and archives and at the National Park Service's Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation in Brookline, Massachusetts. Whereas the surviving drawings and photos illustrate the various changes in grade, paving, plantings, and configurations of the squares over time, the correspondence, including that of Baltimore Mayor James H. Preston from 1911 to 1919 regarding the current design, offers insight into the myriad aesthetic, political, and financial considerations that shaped the design process.

After Howard's death in 1827, his heirs worked with architect Mills to build an attractive residential quarter on land the elder Howard had owned adjacent to the monument. The focal point of the new quarter—a cruciform arrangement of squares extending outward from the colossal triumphal column—served as the catalyst for the rapid development of the area into Baltimore's most fashionable residential district. The engagement of Olmsted, Sr., to improve the four squares signaled the beginning of an important intermediate period in the evolution of the site. Until the 1870s, iron fences and gates—in place by 1839—had restricted use and enjoyment of the Mount Vernon Place squares to neighboring residents. The removal of the fences, as well as the addition of gaslights, curved walks, and other embellishments resulted in a landscape more in keeping with the evolving democratic ideals of the 19th century.

FIGURE 2

This 2005 view of the west square from atop the base of the Washington Monument shows how the architect Thomas Hastings used balustrades, stairs, and changes in grade to set the four squares apart from the central plaza. (Photograph by James W. Rosenthal, courtesy of the National Park Service)



By 1917, however, architectural tastes and attitudes towards the symbolic role of the Washington Monument in civic life had changed. An advocate of Beaux-Arts architecture and City Beautiful planning principles, Preston found a kindred spirit in Thomas Hastings of the Carrere & Hastings firm, whom he hired to redesign the squares in a style more appropriate to their function as pendants to the monument.

Hastings's design for the squares called for simple lines, forms, and architectural elements in keeping with the monument's classical grandeur. In each square, he lowered the grade and introduced staircases, retaining walls, and balustrades made of the same white marble as the monument so as to re-establish a sense of hierarchy between the squares and the monument's central plaza—a plaza he likened to Paris's Place de la Concorde.³(Figure 2) He also straightened paths, rearranged the bronze sculptures, and introduced elegant stairways and water basins evocative of those he might have studied or seen while a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, France's premier school of architecture and the standard bearer of classical architectural design and city planning principles since the 17th century.

Mount Vernon Place's French connection extends well beyond the classical principles behind Hastings's design. Initiated in response to the United States' entry into World War I, the redesign of the four squares took place during a period of close diplomatic relations between the United States and France. Within two months of the U.S. declaration of war against Germany, French dignitaries, including the vice premier and the Marquis de Chambrun, a great grandson of the Marquis de Lafayette, took time off from their diplomatic mission in Washington to participate in a groundbreaking ceremony for a stat-



FIGURE 3
 This 2005 view of the statue of the Marquis de Lafayette in the south square of Mount Vernon Place shows the pedestal bearing inscriptions written by President Woodrow Wilson and French President Raymond Poincaré. (Photograph by James W. Rosenthal, courtesy of the National Park Service)

ue of Lafayette in the shadow of Baltimore's Washington Monument.⁴ The statue was eventually placed on a pedestal designed by Hastings bearing two inscriptions—one written by President Woodrow Wilson and the other by French President Raymond Poincaré—commemorating the enduring spirit of Franco-American cooperation over the centuries. (Figure 3) Translated, Poincaré's inscription reads—

In 1777 Lafayette, crossing the seas with French volunteers, came to bring brotherly help to the American people who were fighting for their national liberty. In 1917 France was fighting, in her turn, to defend her life and the liberty of the world. America, who had never forgotten Lafayette, crossed the seas to help France, and the world was saved.

French officials returned to Baltimore in 1924 to dedicate the completed statue and redesigned squares in the company of President Calvin Coolidge, who was given the seat of honor for the occasion—a Baltimore painted chair used by Lafayette in the city a century earlier during his farewell tour.

Largely unaltered since 1924, Mount Vernon Place survives as one of a handful of public squares in the United States where the architecture of the site continues to express the lofty ideals and cultural sentiments behind its creation as forcefully as when first conceived. Plans are underway to publish a book on Mount Vernon Place once the historical research and photo documentation are complete.

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Notes

1. Planning for Baltimore's Washington Monument began as early as December 1809 with a citizens' petition. Designed by the architect Robert Mills between 1813 and 1815, the monument was considered complete with the placement, in 1829, of the final block of sculptor Enrico Causici's statue of Washington. Plans for the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, which was also designed by Robert Mills, were just beginning to take shape in 1829. See, for instance, Pamela Scott, "Robert Mills and American Monuments," in *Robert Mills, Architect*, ed. John M. Bryan (Washington, DC: American Institute of Architects Press, 1989), 143-177.
2. Soldier and Maryland statesman John Eager Howard (1752-1827) played an important role in the Revolutionary War as an officer in the Continental Army. His leadership at the battle of Cowpens, South Carolina, earned him a Congressional silver medal. Over the course of his distinguished career, Howard served as Maryland governor, state senator, and United States senator. He also commanded the defense of Baltimore during the War of 1812. In 1824, he hosted the Marquis de Lafayette at his home, Belvidere, north of Baltimore.
3. Hastings described his design philosophy vis-à-vis the Mount Vernon Place squares in a letter to Baltimore architect Josias Pennington. See Thomas Hastings to Josias Pennington (December 23, 1918), Baltimore City Archives.
4. Having learned that the French war commissioners were going to be in Washington, DC, in May to ask the United States for military assistance in the war against Germany, Preston invited them up to Baltimore to break ground in Mount Vernon Place for a statue of the Marquis de Lafayette that had yet to be designed. Mount Vernon Place resident and former U.S. ambassador to Belgium, Theodore Marburg, reminded Preston a couple days later that the "fact that these gentlemen did break ground for the monument places an obligation upon our city and State" to follow through on its commitment to erect a statue. Meanwhile, Preston had established contact with Thomas Hastings regarding a City Beautiful plan for the city. The groundbreaking—and the pressure to make good on the commitment—acted as a catalyst for the comprehensive redesign of Mount Vernon Place. See Theodore Marburg to Mayor Preston (May 19, 1917), Baltimore City Archives; also "French Commission Will Ask For Army," and "The Visitors from France," *Washington Post* (April 25 and 26, 1917).

The French soldier and statesman Marie Jean Paul Joseph Roche Yves Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, served as an aide to George Washington during the Revolutionary War and played a critical leadership role in several battles against the British, most notably at Yorktown. His service in the cause of American independence led to a life-long friendship with Washington and celebrity status in the fledgling United States.

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