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REPORT

TO THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE UNITED STATES

ON

IMPROVEMENTS AND POLICY OF MAINTENANCE  
FOR THE EXECUTIVE MANSION GROUNDS

Olmsted Brothers - Landscape Architects  
Brookline, Massachusetts  
October 1935

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REPORT  
TO THE PRESIDENT  
ON THE WHITE HOUSE GROUNDS

by Olmsted Brothers

October 1935

PART I

The White House Grounds, in spite of certain defects such as are discussed in this report, are characterized by many long-established landscape qualities of great dignity and appropriateness. It is of the utmost importance to perpetuate these qualities; and, in so far as they are affected by changes which are necessary or desirable for other reasons, to strengthen and perfect them instead of obscuring or weakening them.

Some of these admirable qualities inherited from the past are very obvious; some have already been obscured by past deliberate or accidental alterations. In order to understand them clearly and provide a sound basis for continuity of purpose in management a thorough study of the landscape history of the grounds is necessary. Fortunately it has been possible to enlist the aid, in making such a study, of Mr. Morley Williams, who has done such admirable work on the history and on the restoration of the grounds of Mount Vernon. His findings are included as the

second part of this report.

This report is concerned primarily with matters of appearance, and especially with increasing the general amenity and the seclusion and privacy proper to the domestic portions of the grounds south of the building; but it is convenient first to discuss defects associated with certain utilitarian features.

#### I. DEFECTS IN CERTAIN UTILITARIAN FEATURES.

Changing conditions of use now demand, as they are bound to do from time to time, new or enlarged or altered provision for the performance of various practical functions. The following list, based on discussion with members of the White House staff, indicates their nature, though the list is miscellaneous and presumably incomplete.

(a) Limitation of office space. The confessedly "temporary" office quarters built in Theodore Roosevelt's administration have now been enlarged to meet urgent present needs. In the long run further increases in working space closely associated with the President's office may well become unavoidable. Substantial further increase of office space within the White House Grounds we believe to be incompatible with the proper performance of the social functions of the

White House as a Presidential residence and with the preservation of the essential landscape qualities historically and properly associated with the White House Grounds. Deliberate preparations should therefore be made in due course to insure the well-considered planning, in advance, of the next step in office expansion in case it shall prove to be required. The logical direction for that step is the bodily transfer of the Presidential offices to the State Department building, within which indefinite expansion is practicable and which can be made conveniently accessible from the White House under cover, with or without closing to the public or completely obliterating that part of West Executive Avenue which now separates the two buildings.

Even apart from these remoter possibilities, consideration must properly be given to the relation of East and West Executive Avenue to the general street traffic. (See Note 1.)

(b) Insufficiency of loading and unloading space for cars of visitors at the East Entrance. The insufficiency of permanently covered loading space at the east entrance has been met in part by the use on special occasions of a temporary sidewalk-awning extending along the curved approach road to the northeast. Further improvement in capacity and convenience

is apparently desirable here, though not extremely urgent. Possibilities and limitations are discussed in the accompanying Note 2. (See also plan No. 2 and plan No. 4).

(c) Insufficiency of service yard space.

The sunken service yard around the northwest corner of the main building is only about 27 feet wide, is very difficult for the manoeuvring of service trucks, and is reported to result in serious congestion at times. To enlarge this yard by encroachment on and curtailment of the surrounding landscape would be deplorable. Possibilities are discussed in Note 3, and one solution is shown on Plan 4.

(d) Wireless antenna. See Note 4.

(e) Defects of road system south of White House and conflict of functions. The present system of roads within the White House Grounds south of the building is the result of numerous past changes of a rather patchwork sort, adapting very different earlier plans to changing practices in use. (See Plan 1, present conditions, and Plan 2, proposed improvements, also historical report and plans).

The roads produce unpleasant landscape effects, they are not entirely convenient for the vehicular uses to which they are now put, and some at least of those uses appear to be illogical and in conflict with the

best performance of other functions proper to this part of the grounds.

Unpleasant landscape effects of the present road system are (1) the interruption of the axial lawn by a conspicuous band of transverse roadway cutting it in two in the middle as seen from the White House, (2) the duplication of the lateral roads on each side of the axis, and (3) certain details of crowning, guttering and surface material. Possibilities of improvement in regard to these matters are discussed in Note 5.

But consideration of functions raises a more radical question. The use of these roads as a parking-space for automobiles of visitors, in the midst of what is otherwise the most secluded and most nearly private part of the grounds, seems distinctly illogical and undesirable. The practice appears to be confined mainly or wholly to the cars of dinner-guests, and to be based on the desirability of using a separate entrance to keep their cars separate from those of the much larger numbers of other visitors who sometimes attend the White House at the same time and who use the east entrance. If the separate handling of two groups of visitors' cars can be managed in some other way so as to keep such automobile traffic entirely out of the entire area south of the building, that part of the grounds could be treated

without compromise for its primary and essential function as a really private pleasure ground for enjoyment by the President and his family and by guests invited for that purpose.

The means of circulation within it could be treated in effect as a system of garden paths appropriate to such use; although so arranged, of course, as to provide the President with a strictly private vehicular approach and exit connecting with the private south doors of the White House and of the Executive Office for use when desired, and to provide for the occasional circulation of maintenance and service vehicles.

This would be so desirable for the general amenity of the private pleasure-ground that very serious consideration should be given to the possibility of bringing it about, before entering upon any extensive changes in roads based upon continuing the present use of that area for the circulation and parking of the automobiles of guests, even though this use be confined to dinner-time and after, when it interferes least with the proper functions of the area. Some ideas bearing on the possibility of handling this traffic elsewhere than in the private grounds are touched on in Note 2.

## II. GENERAL LANDSCAPE DEFECTS

(a) Lack of privacy. The outstanding general defect in the landscape condition of the White House is the lack of adequate privacy in the area south of the building. Automobiles and pedestrians on the surrounding streets are conspicuously noticeable from many parts of the area and curious on-lookers in the streets can and do gather to peer at the doings of those within these portions of the grounds, which in the main ought rightly to be as secluded and domestic as the interior of the building.

From the buildings southward to the two gates the ridges adjoining East Executive Avenue and West Executive Avenue effectively screen the grounds from people at the street level. Even here the upper windows of the Treasury Building and of the State, War and Navy Building overlook these ridges, and are somewhat conspicuous, a condition which could in time be mitigated by additional planting and manipulation of foliage within the grounds.

South of these ridges there is no effective screen whatever between the street and the White House grounds. About a generation ago an attempt to meet this condition was made by planting a continuous privet hedge just inside the low fence; but the hedge has been

clipped just low enough to see over, and even if allowed to grow taller would in itself be comparatively ineffective. At best it is somewhat diaphanous, and in some places full of holes and very shabby because of overshadowing and root competition by neighboring trees. With the vitally important exception of the open view at the south end of the grounds, discussed in the following paragraph, all this boundary ought in our opinion to be so planted and so managed as to accomplish in a reasonable length of time the double purpose of presenting a dignified and beautiful aspect to the public outside and at the same time securing effective privacy and seclusion within. Methods for accomplishing this are discussed in Note 6. (See plan No. 2).

There is one portion of this boundary, and only one, where it is desirable, indeed of marked esthetic importance in the general plan of the National Capital, to maintain in perpetuity an unobstructed and satisfying view into the White House Grounds from the street. This is at the southern end of the grounds on the main axis, for a width of about 150 feet, commanding the very best views of the building over the long sweep of its axial lawn and between the fine flanking masses of tree foliage. This public "in-look" is at such a

distance from the building and can be so effectively screened from those parts of the ground where privacy is most desirable, that no reasonable objection can be raised to it, and from the standpoint of the general public the inward view through this gap is one of the distinctive and inspiring features of the National Capital.

Any hedge or other planting here ought always to be kept at the height and in the condition that will exhibit this view at its very best, which has by no means been the case during the last thirty years, as has been repeatedly pointed out by Mr. Olmsted to the maintenance officers during his years of service on the Fine Arts Commission, and the National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

(b) Tree Plantations. In general the distribution and the character and condition of the large trees, which with the building and the land-forms constitute the major elements of the landscape, are admirable.

There is need for planting a very few long-lived trees, carefully chosen as to species for each location, to replace in effect certain existing trees which are or soon will be too far gone to be worth retaining, especially the short-lived silver maples, many of which are steadily retrograding.

In general an increase in the present number of trees and in the density of their stand is distinctly not desirable. The main landscape effects are produced by finely developed trees which are, broadly speaking, in good condition, with every prospect of living for generations to come, and quite sufficiently close together. Indeed there are several smaller and in general partly suppressed trees which it would be better, from every standpoint, to remove because they merely seem to compete with and detract from the dignity of those that overshadow them.

Naturally, none of the large trees will live forever. In the course of a long time, measured in decades and centuries, they will all succumb; one by one, or occasionally as in great storms more than one at a time. And to maintain or restore the quality of the landscape to a satisfactory degree will require not mere saplings as their successors but trees at least fifty years of age.

But except when and where an individual old tree becomes clearly moribund no one can predict with reasonable confidence whether a serious gap in the ranks of the old trees will occur in any given locality within ten years or within fifty or not before a century or more to come.

The attempt to grow, underneath the canopy of the great old trees, young trees fit to succeed them is utterly futile in this kind of landscape; for long before such undergrowth trees could attain a respectable size they would have become distorted, by over-shading and competition, to a condition making them quite unfit to replace their spreading and full-foliaged predecessors.

Worthy successors of the dominant spreading trees which now give character to the landscape can be grown only under the open sky and with reasonable lateral space for unobstructed spread; and this can rightly be done on the White House Grounds only in so far as gaps (now existing or brought into existence by the removal of present trees) can be occupied by new trees without choking up and frittering away any of those open spaces which are as vital to the character of the landscape as are the foliage masses adjoining them.

Whenever potentially long-lived trees (of permanently desirable species and of various ages short of decrepitude) occupy all of the space which can be so occupied without serious impairment of the landscape through encroachment on the remaining open spaces, any further tree planting is really destructive, and should not be countenanced on any excuse.

In some parts of the grounds that limit has already been overpassed, and trees (mostly small) should be removed. In few places has it not been reached or closely approached.

If adherence to the above principles — avoidance of encroachment by trees on essential open spaces, and avoidance within tree masses of excessive crowding with its concomitant of spindling or otherwise ill-developed trees — results, as it is likely to do at irregular intervals, each of a good many years, in the occurrence of deplorable gaps due to the sudden loss of fine old trees where their absence seriously hurts the landscape, it is far better than to move in well developed trees of respectable size but good for a century or two of further vigorous life, than to rely upon insuring against such calamities by planting prospective successor trees in situ where they injure the landscape in their youth and are almost certain to become suppressed and worthless before they are needed.

There appears to be only one place where any considerable number of trees can wisely be planted as a permanent additional feature. This is on the flat plateau near the east boundary and southeast of the building; now in bare turf except for the fine oaks in its northern part and two silver

maples nearing the end of their normal life-span. This space is ineffective in the landscape and appears to have no useful practical function. It is the one place which seems adapted for introducing a sylvan feature suggested by the President, and rightly noted by him as both pleasing in itself, highly characteristic of the region surrounding Washington, and relatively durable. This is a dense pure stand of nearly even-aged tulip-poplars, with columnar aspiring trunks and high foliage canopy, which would completely fill this ineffective gap within the surrounding stand of more spreading and wide-spaced trees.

Certainly the major open spaces now wholly free from trees are none too large in scale and ought not to be encroached upon in the slightest degree. Indeed, as above stated, there have already been a few such encroachments by ill-advised tree planting, especially within the critically important open space of the central vista; and these ought to be corrected.

The most serious of these intrusions, now getting large enough to make obvious how badly it would hurt the vista if allowed to remain and grow to its full dimensions, is the Weeping Beech near the fountain basin. It is a good specimen of its freakish

kind and perhaps is worth moving to some other place on the grounds or elsewhere in the park system; but it would be far better to destroy it than to leave it very much longer where it is.

South of it some smaller-growing (and hence less fatally objectionable) flowering trees encroach undesirably upon the central open space. These should be destroyed, or be shifted further from the axis if found to be worth moving and embodied in rather dense flanking foliage masses which would screen from the central vista and from the outside public the tennis court (or the open greensward which would be more pleasant in its place) and the adjoining and opposite lateral area. These lateral areas have often been used for one or another form of exercise and recreation by Presidents and their families and friends, and certainly ought to be available for such use without subjecting them to constant scrutiny by the public outside the fence and without making the temporary or permanent equipment needed for such exercise and games conspicuous features in the central landscape unit.

(c) Minor vegetation outside the gardens. In general and notwithstanding some exceptions, the White

House Grounds outside of the definitely enclosed gardens next to the building are characterized by a very restrained use of shrubbery and minor vegetation; for the most part confined to a few rather large, massive and very dignified specimens, admirably in keeping with the large scale and simple dignity of the great trees and the lawn vista.

This characteristic of the general landscape ought to be carefully respected in any efforts to develop the boundary foliage screens so much needed for privacy or to increase the richness and interest of detail; and it ought to be perfected by the removal or alteration in character of a few sporadic instances of rather trivial and undignified minor plantings which seem to be the remains of occasional attempts in the past at decorative enrichment.

There should be a persistent and determined continuation of the successful efforts made in recent years to improve the quality of parts of the turf, which is the background or canvas of the whole picture and which, in the southerly part of the grounds, is still deplorably weedy and unkempt.

A few scattered shrubs and small trees that are weak and trivial in appearance (for example,

the six scrubby spruces and firs north of the building) should simply be eliminated. Several others, which are individually excellent in character but indiscriminately scattered in locations where they do not compose well with the major elements of the landscape, should be moved. This applies especially to the area added to the grounds in the eighteen-sixties, the original planting of which appears not to have been controlled by any well-considered conception of its general landscape effect and which has been modified from time to time in a very sporadic and planless way by the accidental death of some of the planting and by occasional additions and removals that appear to have been dictated by passing whims or by a vague feeling that the effect was not satisfactory and "something" ought to be done. (See historical report).

The functionally desirable bed of planting north of the north portico, and the floral and quasi-decorative planting between it and the Pennsylvania Avenue fence ought to be simplified into a more dignified and less restless and self-assertive appearance.

Another trivial feature is the dilapidated rusty iron fence, partly covered with rambler roses and clematis, along the approach road at the south front of the building. Apart from serving to support these plants this fence appears to have no function unless it be as a barrier when throngs of people are admitted to the southern part of the ground on such special and rare occasions as the egg-rolling days; a function which could far better be performed, if these occasions continue, by erecting a temporary barrier for each occasion. We were interested to learn that when it was proposed, a few years ago, to remove this shabby old fence the proposal was vetoed by the then lady of the White House because she was unwilling to dispense with the floral effect of the roses as such, especially in view of the very limited occurrence of flowers elsewhere on the grounds. This fence, however, would be inevitably removed if our suggestion on the revision of this area were carried out.

This points toward an important and very difficult question. There is no doubt that the White House Grounds as a whole are rather meagre in respect to floral effects even though some of the efforts to

meet this criticism have, as above indicated, introduced trivialities of floral decoration which really impair the general impressiveness of landscape qualities of major importance.

A greater richness and perfection of floral display than in the past would be entirely appropriate and desirable in the two formal gardens south of the east and west wings; both of which, while admirable in situation are now wholly unworthy in detail and upkeep for the positions they occupy. These formal garden areas, however, cannot be very greatly extended without doing violence to the historically long-established, and in its own way admirable and dignified informal landscape of a simple and large-scale character which is the dominant characteristic of the general design. (See page 20. Plan 4 shows what we believe to be their maximum extent.) With sufficiently careful regard to scale, and to the character and composition of foliage masses, a somewhat larger proportion than at present of the plants appropriate to the simple and large-scale type of landscape (mainly trees and massive shrubs) might be of flower-bearing kinds, especially in the vicinity of the building and the formal gardens; but to attempt any extensive

and general richness and intricacy of floral effects throughout the grounds would be definitely unwise, even if the increased cost of upkeep, and the probability of its not being appropriately maintained even so, were not a powerful argument against it.

The only places in which this might conceivably be done without a radical and wholly unjustifiable change in major historic features of the landscape is in the lateral wooded areas separated from the central lawn by the "mounds". But apart from the purely esthetic danger of too great and sudden a contrast in treatment if these areas were to be made into something in the nature of sylvan "wild-gardens" (interesting and beautiful as these might be in themselves) there is a serious practical and functional objection to such intricacy and enrichment. These areas are the most available and satisfactory for use by considerable numbers of people on the occasion of garden-parties and kindred outdoor entertainments, for which purpose an essentially unobstructed sweep of turf among and under the trees is practically necessary. We think, therefore, that the treatment of these areas should not be radically altered. A possible floral enrich-

ment not out of keeping with their established general character and not unduly interfering with their uses would be the introduction, casually and irregularly in the turf and not in distinct beds, of considerable quantities of spring-bulb flowers of kinds appropriate to woodlands, confined to those portions least needed for circulation.

(d) The formal gardens. As above indicated, the two formal gardens adjoining the east and west wings, while admirable as to location and appropriate enough as to the general conception of their design, are not nearly good enough of their kind in detail. The conifers in the east garden, for example, are badly overgrown and out of scale, and there is a makeshift look about both gardens which is very disappointing. We take it that this condition is due in part to inadequacies in the original design of the gardens, in part to hasty and imperfect execution, in part to ill-advised alterations from time to time, and in part to very inadequate maintenance. Not only is the maintenance force left very uncertain as to the kind and quality of special maintenance which is desired for these gardens in competition with the simpler but very extensive routine maintenance of the rest of the grounds, but we are told that the total man-hours which the

limited maintenance force can devote in any given week to any and all of the seasonal gardening work is materially controlled and limited by various calls on their time for doing work of a non-gardening sort in connection with the building.

We show on plan No. 4, and in its more general relations on plan No. 2, what we believe to be essentially the right conception for the design of these gardens. No garden scheme will be finally satisfactory unless it be worked out as an integral part of the design of the whole area immediately to the south of the buildings, bearing in mind also the relations of this area to the axis and to the views of and from the buildings. The following important considerations must be taken into account:

1. The dominant axial view from the Executive Mansion to the south.

The foreground of this view should be simple so that the attention is directed into the distance and not toward the ground near the observer's feet. There should be therefore no flower beds in this central area. The approach road and the paths should be as close as possible to the place from which this great south view is to be most frequently enjoyed. We wish that it were possible to bring the road and

the path on the axis of the south view nearer to the Executive Mansion than we have done, but for reasons to be discussed later this appears to be impracticable.

2. The axial view of the Executive Mansion from the lawn to the south and from the street between the Executive Mansion grounds and the ellipse.

The southern facade of the Executive Mansion is a fine architectural design. The whole of the central mass unquestionably was rightly designed to be appreciated as one symmetrical composition. The total extent of the buildings from east to west, however, in its necessary relation to the planting and other development of the ground to the south cannot be seen in its entirety at one glance as a single picture. From any point more than two hundred feet or so to the south, the wings are cut off by the enframing foliage. It is therefore esthetically perfectly possible, as it is for other reasons desirable, to enclose the two gardens east and west with planting which from close at hand, and especially from the inside, would give proper seclusion and enframing to these gardens, but which from the more distant views and from the

outside will appear to be a reasonable element in the broad and simple composition in trees, turf, and shrubs of the whole grounds to the south.

It is evident that the present magnolias standing in a group in front of the southwest corner of the main building are a very unfortunate element in the general composition. They are not balanced by any corresponding mass on the other side of the axis, and to balance them in this way would be an unfortunate expedient because they already unhappily blind a portion of the main building which should be seen in its entirety in the main view, and to add a corresponding mass on the other side would double this serious esthetic disadvantage. In spite of the historic and sentimental reasons to the contrary, therefore, we propose a plan based on the assumption that at some time in the future these trees be either destroyed or moved to some other place, according to what they shall prove to be worth at that time.

3. The relation of the gardens to their architectural enframement.

A. Three main areas.

Obviously, the design of this area so close to the buildings must be in the best possible relation

to the architectural masses. In its main conception, we believe that this consideration dictates a composition in three parts.

I. A simple, quiet, open space on the axis, containing the approach to the building, both by pedestrians and by automobiles, and forming an unobtrusive foreground to the main view into the south.

II.& III. Two enclosed gardens at the east and at the west, embraced by the architectural masses, considerably segregated from the central open area, developed at a smaller and more intimate scale, and enriched in a restrained and simple way by flower beds and perhaps by other objects designed to be enjoyed at close range and in considerable seclusion.

B. The axis of the President's Office.

It is to be assumed — certainly it is greatly to be hoped — that the present buildings for executive offices to the west of the Executive Mansion are now at their ultimate extent and that if further office space be needed, it will be provided, presumably, in the State Department Building. The relations set up therefore by the present office building may well be considered as final in the design of the western garden,

and since the whole southern front of the building is symmetrical, there is every reason in the ultimate design to make the corresponding eastern garden approximately symmetrical with the western garden. Indeed, it is not impossible that a small extension to the south from the southern end of the east wing might be required for practical reasons and could then be constructed to balance the corresponding southeastern corner of the western wing.

The design of the President's Office in the western wing calls rather strongly for a minor view on the cross axis of this room, extending to the east parallel to the southern facade of the main building. This axial development plainly should be treated as a vista, either completely inside or completely outside of the west garden, and there is apparently every reason for carrying this design through to the east, treating the east garden in the same way, and terminating the vista, perhaps for the time being as we show it, with a minor feature at the southeastern corner of the east garden, but ultimately perhaps terminating it on an architectural feature at the end of the eastern wing, sufficiently balancing, as we have said, the President's Office in the western wing. At present, of course, since there is an open colonnade on the

eastern side of the western wing and no corresponding colonnade on the western side of the eastern wing, the east garden is longer than the west garden. We do not consider that this lack of symmetry is important, but if ultimately a colonnade were built on the eastern wing, the two gardens would then be symmetrical and the eastern path of the east garden would be treated practically in the same way as the western path of the west garden.

These considerations, we believe, call for a path very much as we have shown it on plan No. 4. We would willingly have this path somewhat closer to the buildings, but this would appear to be undesirable as a matter of design in relation to the present (and we believe now permanent) architectural masses.

C. Entrances to the gardens immediately east and immediately west of the main mass of the Executive Mansion.

The present architectural design produces two entrances to the buildings just east and just west of the main Executive Mansion. The westerly of these two entrances is at present very much used. The easterly entrance is used to some extent and could be used much more if the easterly garden were designed to be more attractive.

The above-named paths automatically produce three areas, which, as we have said, are desirable in any case as being the most effective treatment of the grounds close to the south facade of the building. We have considered a multitude of alternatives in the hope of bringing the southerly path which bounds these gardens (and thus the southerly side of the gardens and also the southerly side of the central open area) closer to the building, for reasons which we have already stated, but we have been unable to evolve any good scheme which will produce this effect, or which would hold the two gardens as we have shown them and recess the central area, and which would be in pleasant proportion in itself and in pleasant relation to the building.

Of course the whole of the three-fold design need not be carried out at once. There is no physical obstacle to carrying out the west garden immediately according to our plan. It is true, however, that if this were done the whole of this important area would have a most unfortunate one-sided and incomplete appearance until such time as the whole scheme were carried out. We believe, however, that this could be said of the partial carrying out of any other com-

prehensive and well-related scheme in this area.

It should be noted that our plans do not show the flower-bed details of these gardens. These should be carefully worked out, historically, horticulturally and esthetically, after the main scheme has been determined.

(e) Pool in the South Lawn

The present pool, as we have said, is rather unfortunate in its detail and none too efficient in its construction. Moreover, we believe that it is in the wrong place. It can be argued very strongly that any pool in this south lawn is an incongruous thing. If a naturalistic pool were attempted, as has been shown in some of the old drawings of the grounds, (see illustration No. 55) it would be absurd as a feature on the main axis, and unnecessary if not generally undesirable anywhere else. If a formal pool be considered, it must, of course, be on the axis and under the circumstances should probably be circular, as the present pool is. But even if it were well done of its kind one might still argue that the very clarity and definiteness of its outline would make it an incongruous object in the great view, since this view, although axial, is composed of ground forms and tree forms which in their minor details are and should

be irregular and to some extent natural. However, after much deliberation and consultation, we have come to the conclusion that a simple fountain on this axis is so desirable that the minor disadvantages which we have mentioned should be overlooked.

The present pool, however, does not produce by any means the whole effect desired. As we have said, it is not particularly good in itself. Moreover, it is so related to the ground that a person standing in the street and looking toward the Executive Mansion cannot see the surface of the pool, and further, it unnecessarily interrupts the large area of the lawn to the south of the cross road and it is very difficult to relate to the boundary planting. We have therefore shown it moved further to the south, and in this new position we have, we believe, related it fairly well to the open areas and to the enclosing masses of trees and shrubs.

In the foregoing report we have endeavored to consider primarily the larger aspects of the problem,

and not to overburden the statement with a multitude of details. Some small specific points we have included. Most of the more important specific discussions we have appended as notes. Many considerations of detail, however, which often have motived the exact form of our plans, we have not specifically mentioned.

If action is taken along the lines of our recommendations, careful study will still be necessary in order to avoid the danger of blurring or even nullifying the major effects. The construction plans and specifications should be "thought through" in every detail in their relations to the character of the whole scheme.

*Respectfully submitted*  
*Charles Brothman*

EXPLANATORY NOTES

To accompany report on White House Grounds, dated October 1935, by Olmsted Brothers.

1. General Street Traffic in relation to Executive Avenue.

Because of conditions in the business district north of Pennsylvania Avenue and east of the White House a large and growing amount of traffic is seeking and will continue to seek, and to need, by-pass routes south of the Treasury Building and the White House and north of Constitution Avenue. It is clearly desirable from the point of view of White House functions that a large volume of general traffic should not be permanently routed through either branch of Executive Avenue and especially not through the west branch.

But no satisfactory solution lies in merely discouraging and inconveniencing this routing, as by the somewhat dangerous gateposts at the north entrance to West Executive Avenue

and the unavoidable occasional closing of East Executive Avenue to the public during large receptions at the White House. There is need for adequate and convenient means of traffic-flow just south of the White House Grounds between the districts east of the Treasury and west of the State Department Building. This calls, in the first instance, for improving the awkward existing connection with Seventeenth Street and with New York Avenue west of Seventeenth Street; including perhaps curtailment of the grounds at the south end of the State Department Building or cutting off some of the projecting southwest corner of Seventeenth Street and New York Avenue, or both. Ultimately it may require also a fairly direct connection between the road at the south end of the White House Grounds and a widened E Street west of Seventeenth. The Park and Planning Commission has made some study of this traffic problem and should be asked to pursue the problem to a conclusion in consultation with the various agencies concerned in it.

2. East Entrance.

It has been stated by a member of the White House Staff that the narrowness of the east

carriage porch, which confines the movement of vehicles past the entrance to a single line, seriously limits the rate at which vehicles can be handled (even though the number of cars which can load passengers at a given time be increased by extending the length of awning-covered loading platform to the northeast of the building), by compelling all cars of any one "batch" to wait until all cars ahead of them in the loading line complete loading and move out. And it has been suggested that for this reason the carriage porch be made two cars wide, as by removing those columns which constrict the roadway through the porch to a single lane.

Apart from the bad architectural appearance which would result from the mere removal of these columns, or probably even from the complete redesign and reconstruction of the porch with a greater width, such a change does not appear to be desirable even purely as a matter of traffic control. Experience where large numbers of cars have to be loaded and unloaded rapidly, as at railroad stations and large country clubs, indicates that confining

the movement of cars past a loading platform to a single lane, in spite of the delays and irritation caused by making cars in the rear wait until the slowest-loading car ahead of them is out of the way, results in the highest average speed and efficiency by avoiding confusion. Where a single loading platform operated in this way can not provide sufficient capacity, the only practicable remedy is duplicate or multiple loading-platforms in parallel, each operated with a single lane of cars. The Washington Union Station is an example all at one level. If two levels can be used, the inconvenience is avoided of people on foot passing through one line of cars.

A widening of the porch merely to permit by-passing of standing cars can not be recommended; and the introduction of parallel loading platforms at the same level, requiring passengers to walk across automobile traffic at grade as at the Union Station, is probably, for guests in evening dress, more objectionable than limitation of the average rate of departure to the capacity of a single loading platform of the maximum practicable length.

If further experience shows the need of increased capacity for handling cars at the east entrance to be great enough to justify it, the problem might be solved by a much more radical change, which would provide two loading platforms separated in grade. (See plan No. 4.) By a moderate increase in the gradient, the curving approach road could be brought up very nearly to the floor-level of the east wing at the entrance doors of the latter, or even this road could, by cramping the rest of the scheme, be left as it now is, (as shown on plan No. 4) and a second curving approach road could be constructed within it and parallel to it in plan but nearly at the level of the street, so as to give access to a basement-level entrance, under cover of the upper road and connecting within the building by a short flight of stairs with the existing reception rooms and dressing rooms.

It is to be noted that such an arrangement would not only approximately double the aggregate capacity (in cars per minute) of loading or

unloading at the east entrance, but would also permit segregation of the cars of two different groups of guests without, as at present, intruding upon the President's private grounds south of the building for the circulation and parking of visitors' automobiles.

This idea seems to deserve at least more detailed exploration, testing the practicability, convenience, appearance, and cost of such a solution.

An alternative idea, also worth exploring for its advantages and drawbacks, is that of making the main north entrance of the White House, in addition to the east entrance, conveniently usable on occasion for considerable numbers of guests arriving or leaving at any one time. The practical abandonment of this main entrance for such use was due, of course, to the impossibility of providing adequate and convenient cloak rooms and dressing rooms on the main floor of the building and their consequent installation in the basement, and to the apparent impracticability of bringing the vehicles of visitors to a basement entrance on the north side.

In this connection it is interesting to note that several of the early architectural studies for the north side of the White House showed high flights of outside steps rising to the main floor level, with the ground north of the building nearly level with Pennsylvania Avenue and with an approach drive and forecourt nearly at the level of the basement floor. (See illustrations Nos. 26 and 33.) These designs would have made possible a covered, basement-level carriage-door underneath the monumental steps, as was done on the east front of the Capitol.

It is, of course, quite out of the question to consider reverting to this earlier type of design for the north front of the White House. The present general appearance of the north front of the building and its approaches is not only so familiar and so intertwined with historical associations as to have become in its main features sacred against radical change, but is far better in architectural character than these earlier studies.

It is not inconceivable, however, that without any noticeable changes in the architecture

or the landscape it could be made possible for guests arriving by car in the north portico to have the alternative of either going up the few steps which lead to the main entrance door or of going down minor, lateral steps directly connecting with the cloak rooms and dressing rooms in the basement. The advantages of having dinner guests and all distinguished visitors enter and leave by the main north portico of the building (whether on occasions permitting their direct entrance to the State Rooms of the main floor or on occasions when they need first to go to the basement cloak rooms) instead of approaching by the north portico on some occasions and by the garden door on others, are so considerable as to make it well worth while to explore carefully the practical and architectural possibilities of this idea also. We have not attempted, however, to illustrate this idea graphically in this report.

### 3. Service Yard.

Note: Some of these suggestions have been carried out since this part of our report was first written.

It would be a simple matter, and relatively inexpensive, to build a small extension of the service yard northward, underneath the pavement of the main

north approach to the building, sufficient to permit trucks to turn without serious difficulty by backing once in a "Y", one arm of which would be in the extension. This would require no columns, the wide opening in the present north wall of the service yard being spanned by a reconstruction of the existing parapet as a reenforced concrete girder, to support the south edge of the concrete deck forming the sidewalk over the extended service yard.

But if, now that the addition to the Offices has been completed so as to relieve some elements of the recent congestion in the basement of the main building, analysis of the service requirements shows that there is need for more than merely a turning space for trucks, it would be better to excavate a much larger space under the sidewalk and road of the north approach and cover it with a concrete deck supported on as many columns as may be necessary, so as to provide not only for turning trucks but for parking several trucks at a time and for other storage.

The question has been raised whether and how it would be practicable to avoid routing the service yard truck-traffic as at present through

the main entrance gate on Pennsylvania Avenue and through the rather restricted forecourt of the Executive Offices. This could be done by lowering the profile of the service road, in the open, from the present gate of the service yard to a point near the forecourt of the offices, and from there carrying the service road under that forecourt (or its approach road) in a short cut-and-cover subway with a rather abrupt short rise to West Executive Avenue. (See plan No. 4.)

We believe that some such separation was considered by Mr. McKim at the time the offices were built, but was not thought worth undertaking.

Only those who have closely watched the actual results in operation of the present arrangement can judge whether such an improvement would now be worth its considerable money cost. Properly worked out in detail it would undoubtedly improve the appearance and the efficiency for its proper purpose of the forecourt of the Executive Offices.

#### 4. Wireless Antenna

The small steel masts and antenna installed in the summer of 1934 to provide wireless service to the Executive Offices are

not conspicuous from most points of view, but the southerly of the two masts is more conspicuous from the west road and its vicinity than it need have been, and a shift in location ought to be considered. The least conspicuous location on the grounds within the permissible distance from the offices would be to the west of the present location, with the southerly mast between the English elm at the top of the mound and the white poplar some 30 feet east of it, and with the northerly mast about in a line between the southerly mast and the large linden immediately south of the offices. This location might involve pruning off some small outlying branches on the east side of the horsechestnut which stands about 50 feet north of the English elm first mentioned, in order to give clearance for the antenna. This pruning would be entirely unobjectionable and the location suggested would certainly be more inconspicuous.

From a landscape standpoint it would be still better if the antenna could be stretched over one of the courts of the State Department

Building. We understand that at present the antenna is not used. Perhaps therefore it may be entirely removed.

5. Roads.

(a) Road across the south vista.

If the transverse road across the middle of the central lawn must be permanently maintained, it should be made invisible from the main floor of the White House. This can best be done by moderately depressing the level of the road and slightly raising the level of the lawn just to the north of it. (See plan No. 6 for section and plan No. 2 for grading.) The road could be concealed without lowering it by a greater raising of the lawn north of it, with or without the use of a "ha-ha" wall; but from many points of view this would in itself impair the continuity of the lawn to an unfortunate degree. To hide the road at its present elevation would require at least a two foot raising of the lawn north of the road, and to do this without a conspicuous and unpleasant break in the very suave and perfectly graded profile of the lawn would require regrading and re-establishing the lawn surface for a distance of at least 150 feet to the

north of the road and probably more, at a cost closely approaching that of lowering the road. Moreover, so considerable a raising of the lawn grade would appreciably reduce the pleasant concavity of the cross section between the wooded mounds, and whether the tradition attributing the design of this grading to President Jefferson is right or wrong the present effect is so good and has so long been established that it would seem unwise to alter it materially.

There would be no difficulty in taking care of the drainage of the road if depressed, as the existing drain is very deep where it passes under the road near the axis.

It is interesting to note that this transverse road is a comparatively recent reconstruction of an early road, or more probably path, which lay just within the wall which then marked the southern limits of the enclosed grounds of the White House and formed part of a self-contained circuit within the pleasure grounds, having no connection to the outside except where it joined a road running easterly and westerly

near the south porch of the White House.

(See illustration No. 48.) When the grounds were extended to their present limits this old line was simply left, cutting across the middle of the lengthened lawn. This is only one of the evidences of failure at that time to deal intelligently with the problem of unifying the landscape of the new and the old portions.

It would be far better from a landscape standpoint if this vestigial reminder of the old and too-restricted boundaries of the White House Grounds could now be eliminated entirely, as it could be if the circulation and parking of automobiles of guests in this part of the grounds could be done away with. We have drawn plan No. 4, however, in the belief that for the present this road can not be removed.

(b) Inner lateral roads.

The present duplication of the lateral roads is not only a blemish in the landscape, through excessive and conspicuous interruption of the lawn and plantations by pavement; but it also interferes physically with the satisfactory

use of the grounds for garden parties and kindred social and domestic functions at the very places which are otherwise best adapted to such uses. Moreover, the road arrangement is inconvenient and confusing for traffic, and the extra road space appears to serve no practical purpose except the parking of automobiles of guests on certain special occasions. It would be a decided improvement to eliminate the inner pair of lateral roads and to connect the outer roads with the transverse road by a "Y" so as to lead in both directions. By moving one or two specimen shrubs and a horsechestnut tree this can be done on very good lines with no loss and much gain to the landscape. We show this change on plan No. 2.

The easterly "Y" could be built without moving the horsechestnut, but only on a rather awkward and ugly line involving a sharper turn into the transverse road at a rather dangerous point.

(c) Desirable minor changes in road alignment.

It is desirable, in connection with

improvements in the planting near the southeast and southwest gates intended to secure greater privacy within the grounds, to reduce the width of the roads and improve the alignment of their edges for a short distance inside the gates.

It will be desirable in any case to improve the alignment of the east road at the now rather abrupt and ungraceful bend just south of the East Formal Garden whenever the old silver maple around which it bends is removed and replaced by a more permanent tree a little further west.

In connection with the redesign and improvement of the West Formal Garden and the final adjustment of adjacent grading and planting to the enlarged Offices, it will almost certainly be desirable in any case to make minor changes in the alignment and grades of the road running along the south side of the White House.

Both of the above difficulties, however, would be entirely overcome if a consistent revision of the whole area immediately south of the Executive Mansion were made as shown on plan No. 4.

(d) Details of the roads.

There are some details of the existing roads which are open to criticism, although they are very minor blemishes in the landscape as a whole and improvement of them is much less important (in relation to the cost of making such improvement) than most of the other items discussed in this report. But if new pieces of road are to be constructed as outlined in this report it will be necessary to decide how far these defects of detail are to be corrected in the new road construction and whether to plan for correcting them, in whole or in part, now or later, on the remaining portions of the old roads.

These roads have in most places an excessive "crown" inherited from by-gone conditions when the road material was soft and quick surface drainage was important. So great a crown is not only unpleasant in appearance, making the road a much more conspicuous interruption of the general surface, but also uncomfortable in use except for a car in the very middle of the road. With modern methods of road construction a heavy crown is useless

and wholly undesirable.

The roads are in general bordered by conspicuous brick gutters, again an inheritance from by-gone conditions, undesirable in appearance and wholly unnecessary with modern methods of construction.

The surfacing of the roads is of blue-gray crushed stone screenings spread thinly over the top of a bituminous macadam and kept (so far as our observation goes) in unusually good-looking condition for that type of road by persistent maintenance; which maintenance must be rendered more difficult and costly by the excessive crowning. The color and texture of this road surfacing are undoubtedly pleasanter to the eye, in such a situation as this, than those of a brownish-black bituminous road which is not persistently kept covered with such a camouflage of loose material in imitation of an old-fashioned water-bound road of crushed rock or gravel. As compared with an equally well maintained surfacing of well-selected natural gravel of the warm tones characteristic of Potomac gravels it is, in our opinion, less

harmonious with the surrounding greens of vegetation and generally less pleasing to the eye.

To maintain a good-looking gravel surfacing over a bituminous base, without having the bitumen show through in streaks and patches, is fully as laborious as to do the same with crushed-stone screenings as at present; and especially where new supplies of gravel for road-surface maintenance would be ordered at relatively long intervals and in relatively small quantities, it is much more difficult in the case of gravel than in the case of crushed-rock screenings to adhere to that close standardization as to the color and as to gradation of sizes of the surfacing material which is necessary for good results. It is chiefly due to the ease of obtaining a fairly well standardized product in crushed stone screenings, as compared with gravel, that the former has been used so much on roads and paths where the "hard" appearance of a more or less frankly exposed bituminous binder or of an ordinary cement concrete surface is unacceptable.

No way has been discovered of avoiding the considerable difficulty and expense of maintaining under automobile traffic a surface of "natural colored" aggregates free from visible bituminous binder, even on roads of such light traffic as these, while all attempt to do so has been wholly abandoned on roads of heavy traffic.

It is therefore necessary to choose between some such alternatives as these:-

(1) To adhere in the new work to the present type of road construction, with a thin layer of loose crushed-rock screenings over bituminous macadam, but avoiding the excessive crown and the unnecessary brick gutters; and, sooner or later, altering the remaining roads to conform to this standard by doing away with their excessive crown and the undesirable brick gutters.

(2) To surface the bituminous macadam of the pieces of road with a warm-colored local gravel (defined by very carefully prepared standardized specifications) instead of with gray crushed-rock screenings; and at the same time reshape and re-surface all the remaining old roads in a similar manner, so as to avoid the very disagreeable patchy effect which would result from two very

contrasting materials.

Both these alternatives look toward continuing the somewhat troublesome and laborious maintenance of a thin superficial layer of loose aggregate over the bituminous binder; but either, of course, might degenerate under insufficient maintenance into a third alternative of showing the bituminous binder on the surface, either occasionally and in streaks and patches or frankly and uniformly as on ordinary bituminous highways. Alternative (2), if sufficiently well-maintained, would undoubtedly give the best looking results and would harmonize best with any minor garden paths of water-bound local gravel.

6. Border Planting.

A taller and much denser and better hedge than the existing privet hedge is desirable as the back-bone of an improved foliage screen for the southeast and southwest parts of the boundary. The best procedure appears to be: (1) to let the existing hedge grow somewhat taller (except in the view-opening about 150 feet wide on the axis of the White House) while keeping it trimmed on the

sides to its present width (or a little less by trimming on the inner side); (2) to plant a new hedge of yew (*Taxus cuspidata*) inside the present hedge on a line about 6 feet from the fence curbing; (3) to keep the privet root-pruned on the inside by trenching occasionally to minimize root-competition with the yew; (4) to keep the yew hedge trimmed to about 4 feet wide, and keep a space at least 2 feet wide between it and the privet, until the yew has reached a height of about 6 feet (again excepting at the axial view-opening on the south where it should be kept down just below the top of the fence); (5) then remove the privet and allow the yew hedge to spread to a greater width and grow to 7 or 8 feet tall (except at the southern view-opening).

A few inferior trees on or very close to the proposed line of the yew hedge should be removed; but at certain other points close to the line of the hedge there are important trees which ought not to be sacrificed to the perfection of the hedge and these will inevitably cause small gaps or weak spots in it. At these places supplementary informal plantings inside the trees must be relied upon to make the enclosure

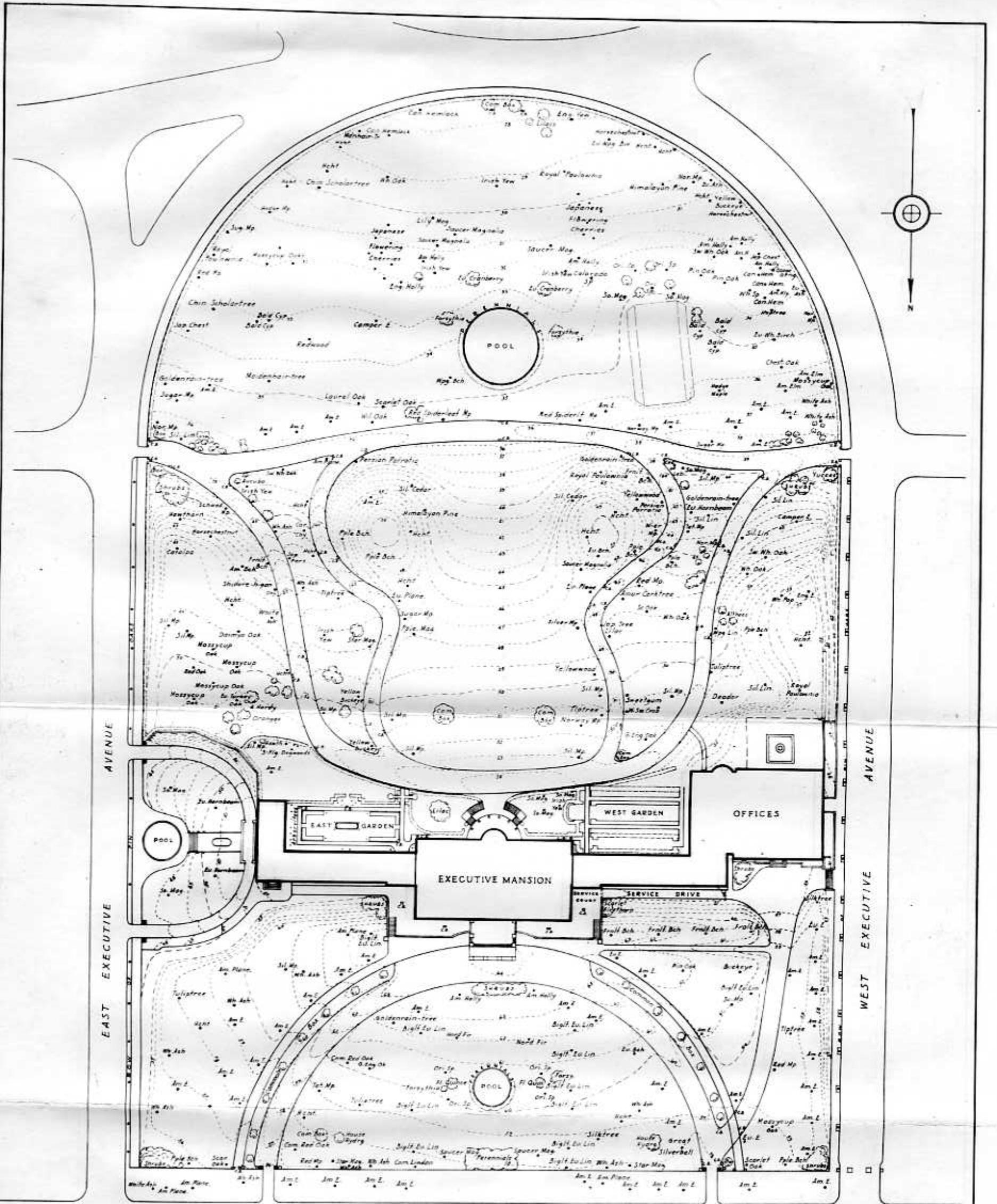
effectively continuous. Some additional informal plantings inside the hedge, largely of evergreen material, and including both yews and hemlocks, are desirable for their landscape effect from within as well as for reenforcement of the screening effect of the hedge.

The formal yew hedge would end at the north with larger yews on each side of the southeast and southwest gates where the border ridges begin to rise above the street level and would be continued by an informal planting, again largely evergreen, extending up the crest of the ridges along the top of the slope next the street, with lower planting such as *Jasminum nudiflorum* and ivy covering the slope where it is difficult to maintain turf in good condition.

There is a problem of policing which can not be ignored in connection with any attempt to increase the privacy of the White House Grounds south of the building. The fence is one that can easily be climbed, and not infre-

quently unauthorized intruders are found and ejected by the police. Even a much more formidable fence would not, unwatched, prevent the entry of a determined person, even if the change to such a fence were not open to many objections. It is undoubtedly true that the problem of policing the grounds against unauthorized intruders (including the always possible homicidal crank with designs on the President's life) would be increased by any screening plantations even though designed, as they should be, to facilitate thorough and rapid inspection of the grounds to the utmost degree consistent with performance of their primary purpose; and would, by the same token, be decreased if all vegetation were eliminated so that every foot of the ground could be seen at a glance. The practical impossibility of completely uninterrupted and perfect visual observation as a means of preventing an occasional unauthorized individual from slipping into the private grounds over the enclosing fence, especially at night, suggests that it might be well to investigate the possibility of installing around this

part of the grounds, probably just inside or just outside of the suggested permanent hedge, an alarm system using photo-electric cells and an invisible cordon or fence of infra-red or ultra-violet rays such as have recently been developed for burglar alarms.

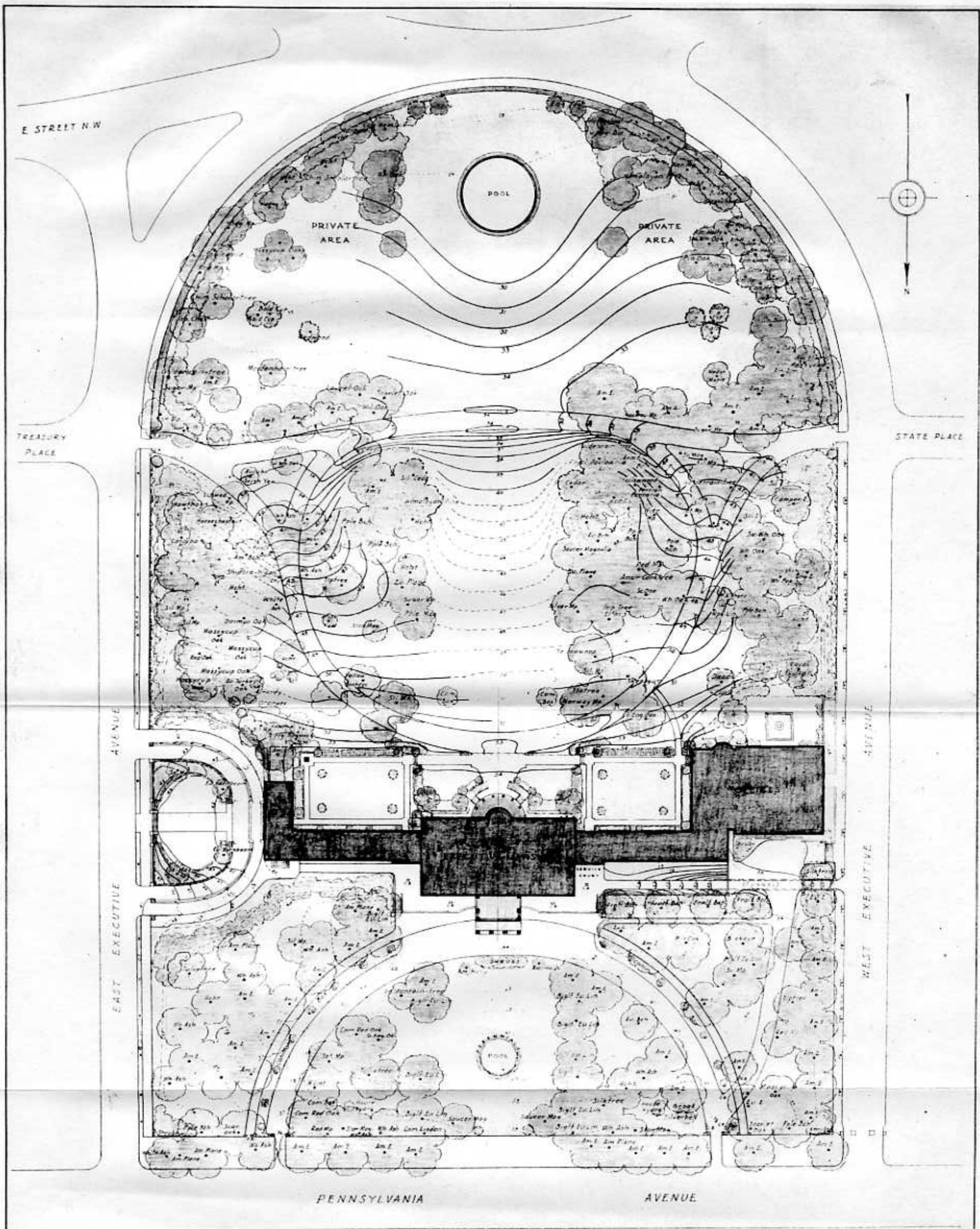


**NOTE**  
 ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS TO EXECUTIVE OFFICES TAKEN FROM BLUE PRINT OF A PLAN DATED JULY 18, 1934. PREPARED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE OF THE DEPT. OF THE INTERIOR

**EXECUTIVE MANSION GROUNDS  
 WASHINGTON D.C.  
 GENERAL SURVEY**  
 SHOWING EXISTING CONDITIONS AS OF JANUARY 1, 1935.

**NOTE**  
 TOPOGRAPHY FROM PHOTOSTAT OF GENERAL SURVEY BY THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND PUBLIC PARKS 1925, WITH CORRECTIONS BY OLMSTED BROTHERS 1935 ESPECIALLY AS TO NAMES OF TREES.

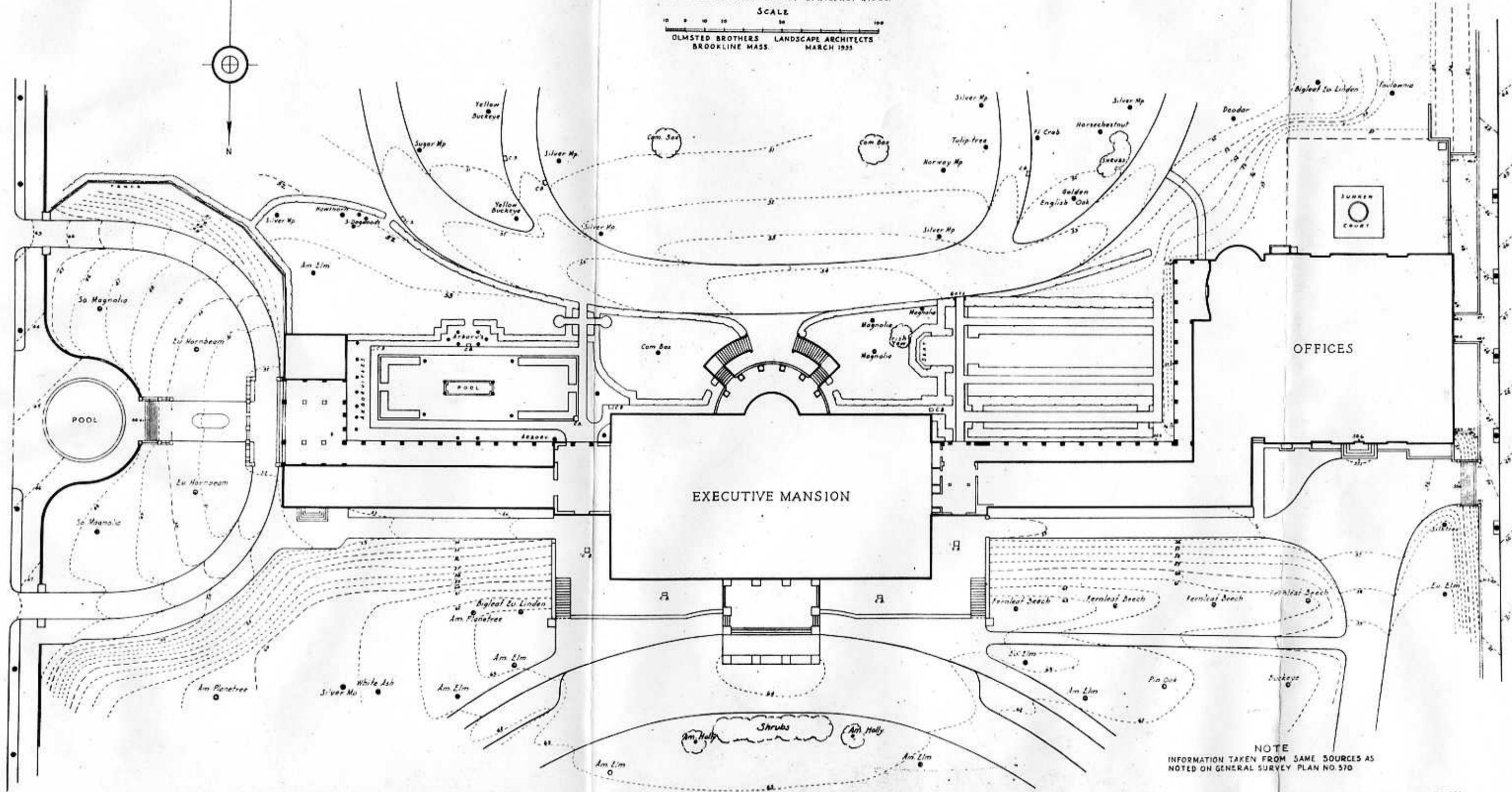
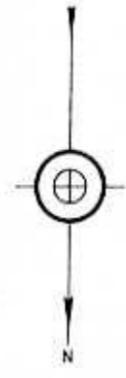
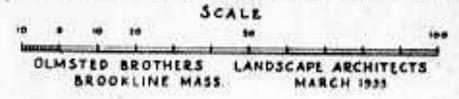




EXECUTIVE MANSION GROUNDS  
 WASHINGTON D.C.  
 GENERAL PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENTS

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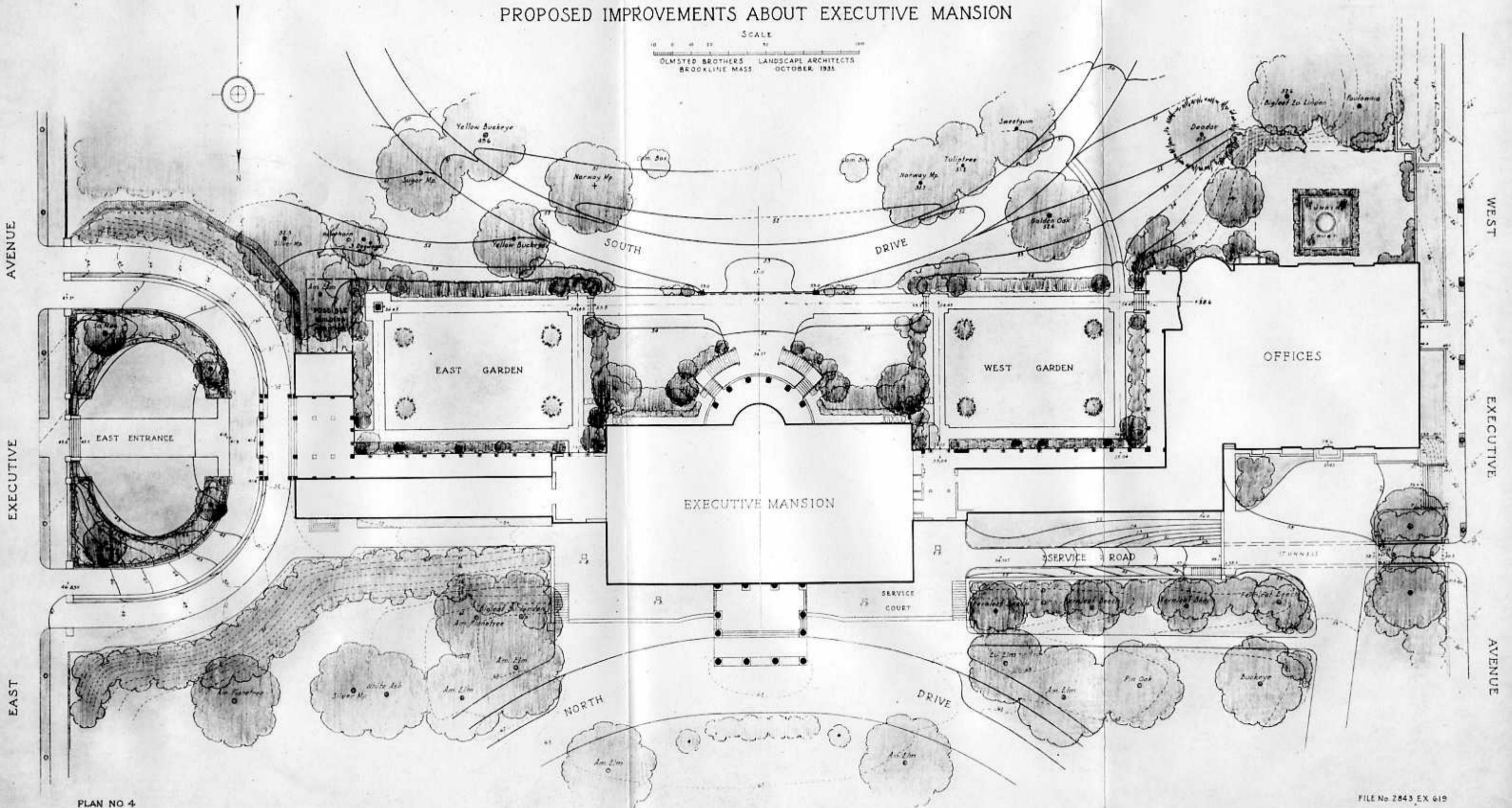
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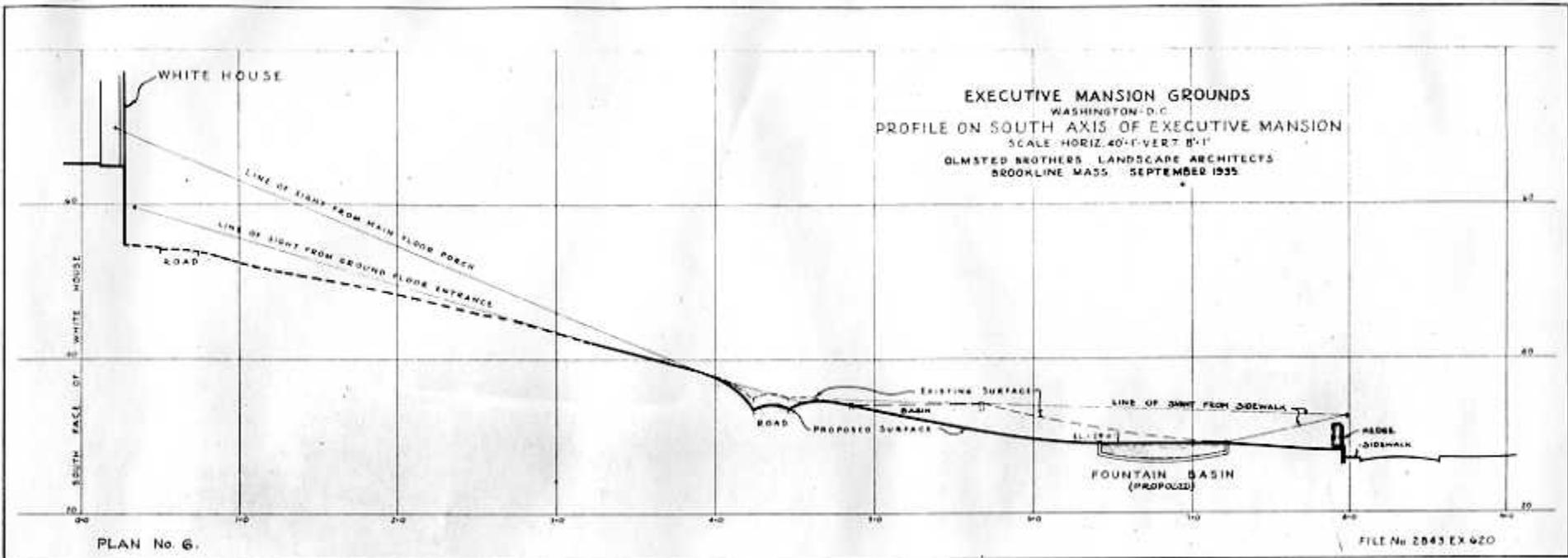
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WASHINGTON D.C.  
PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS ABOUT EXECUTIVE MANSION

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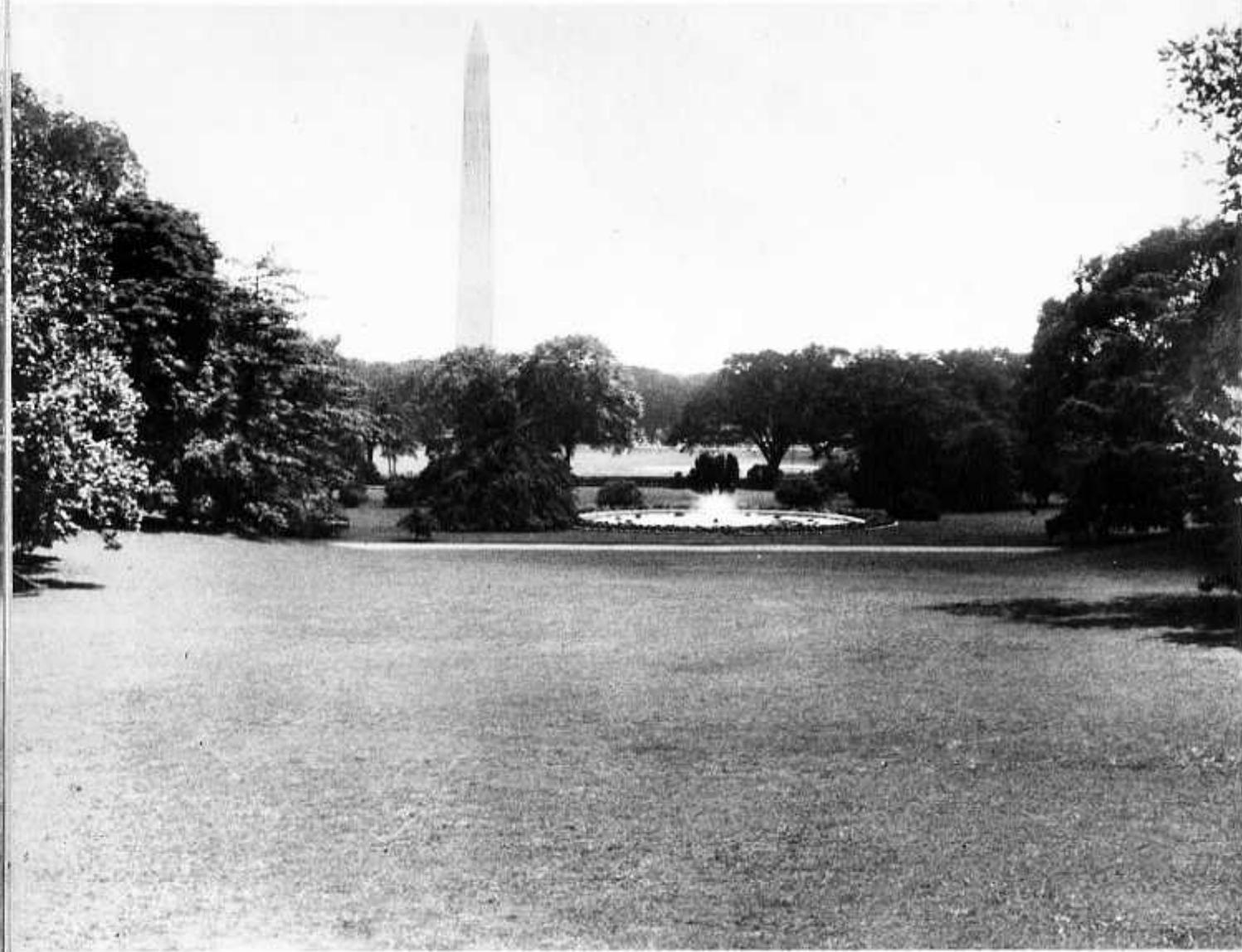


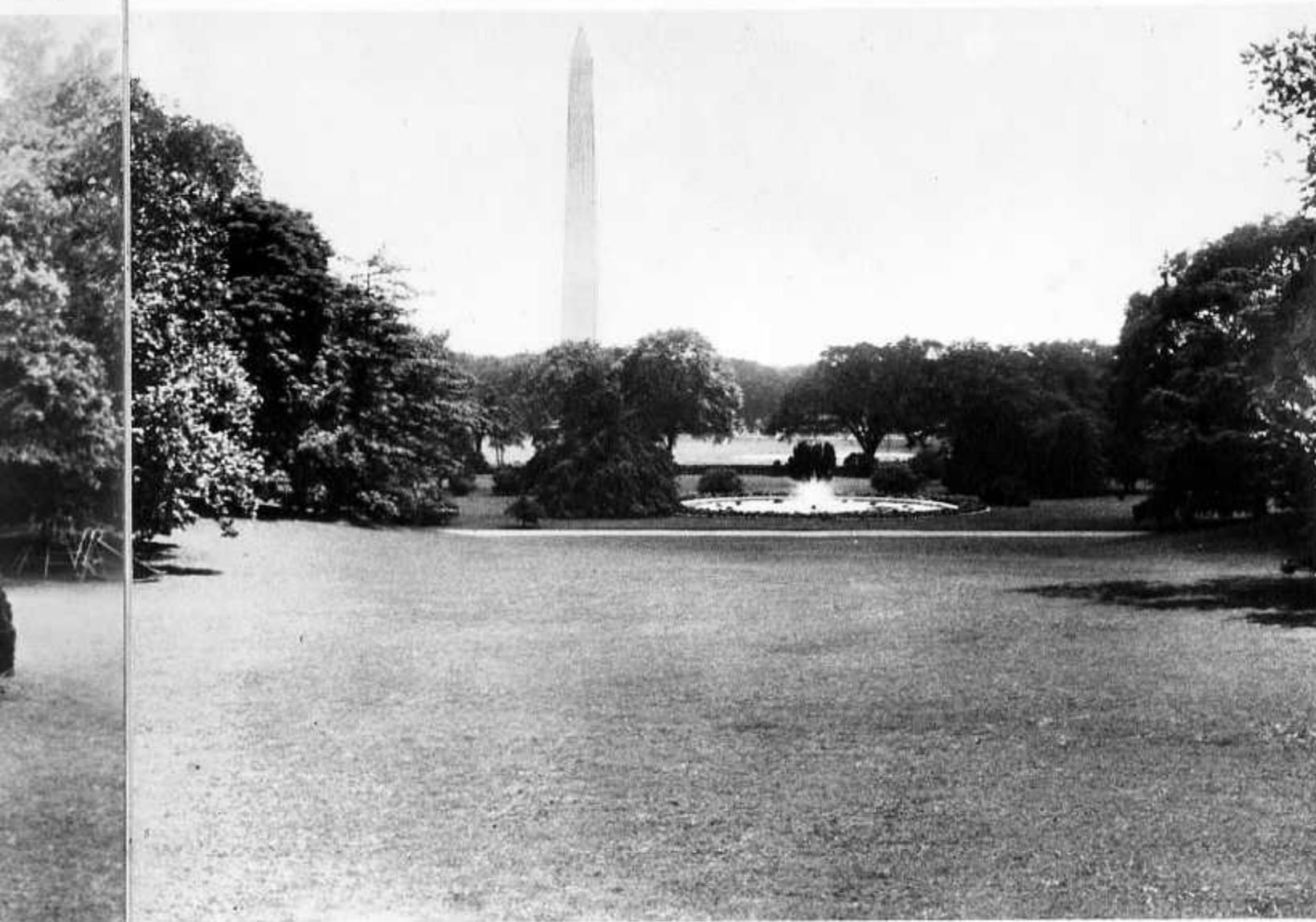
EXECUTIVE MANSION GROUNDS  
 WASHINGTON D.C.  
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 OLMSTED BROTHERS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS  
 BROOKLINE MASS. SEPTEMBER 1935



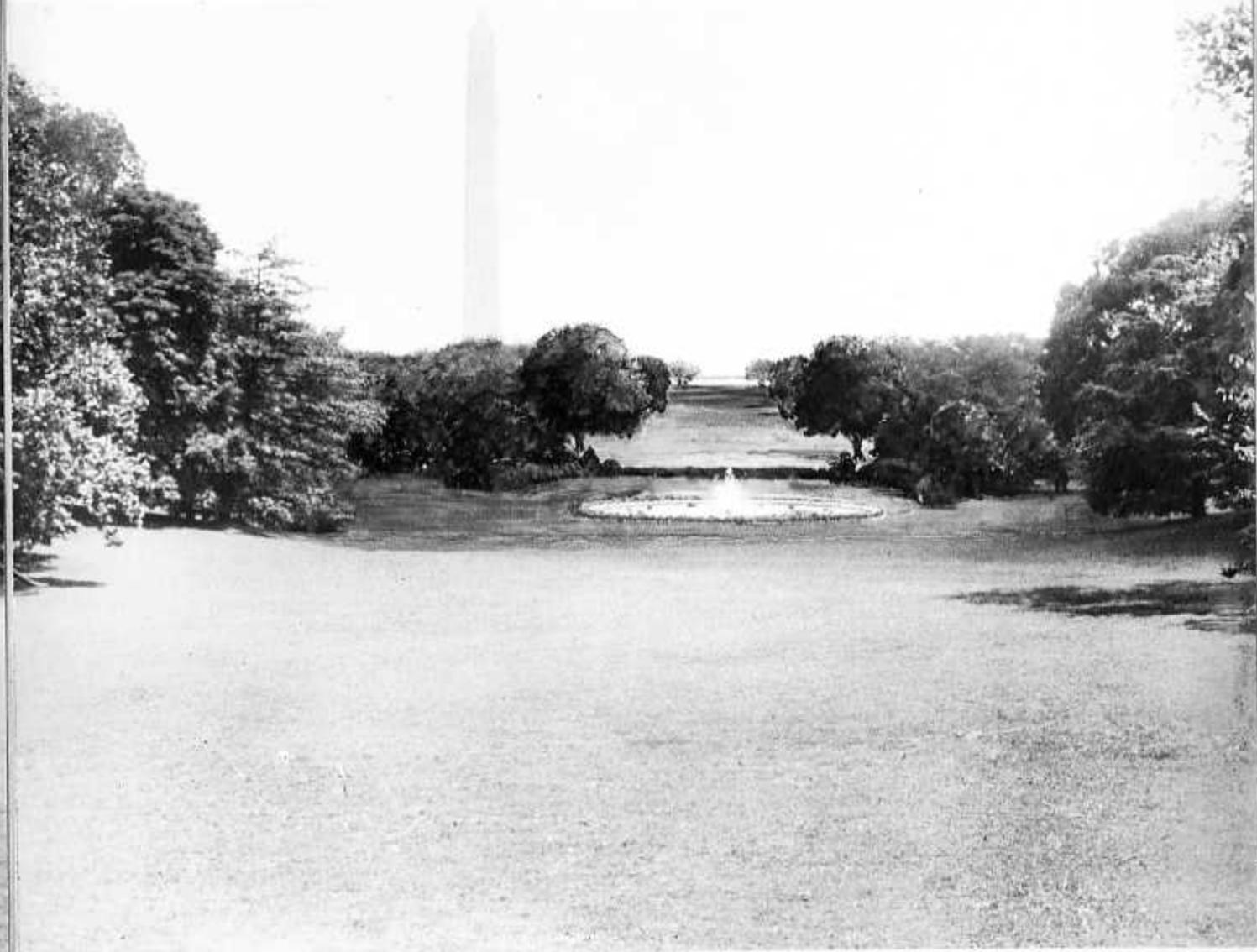
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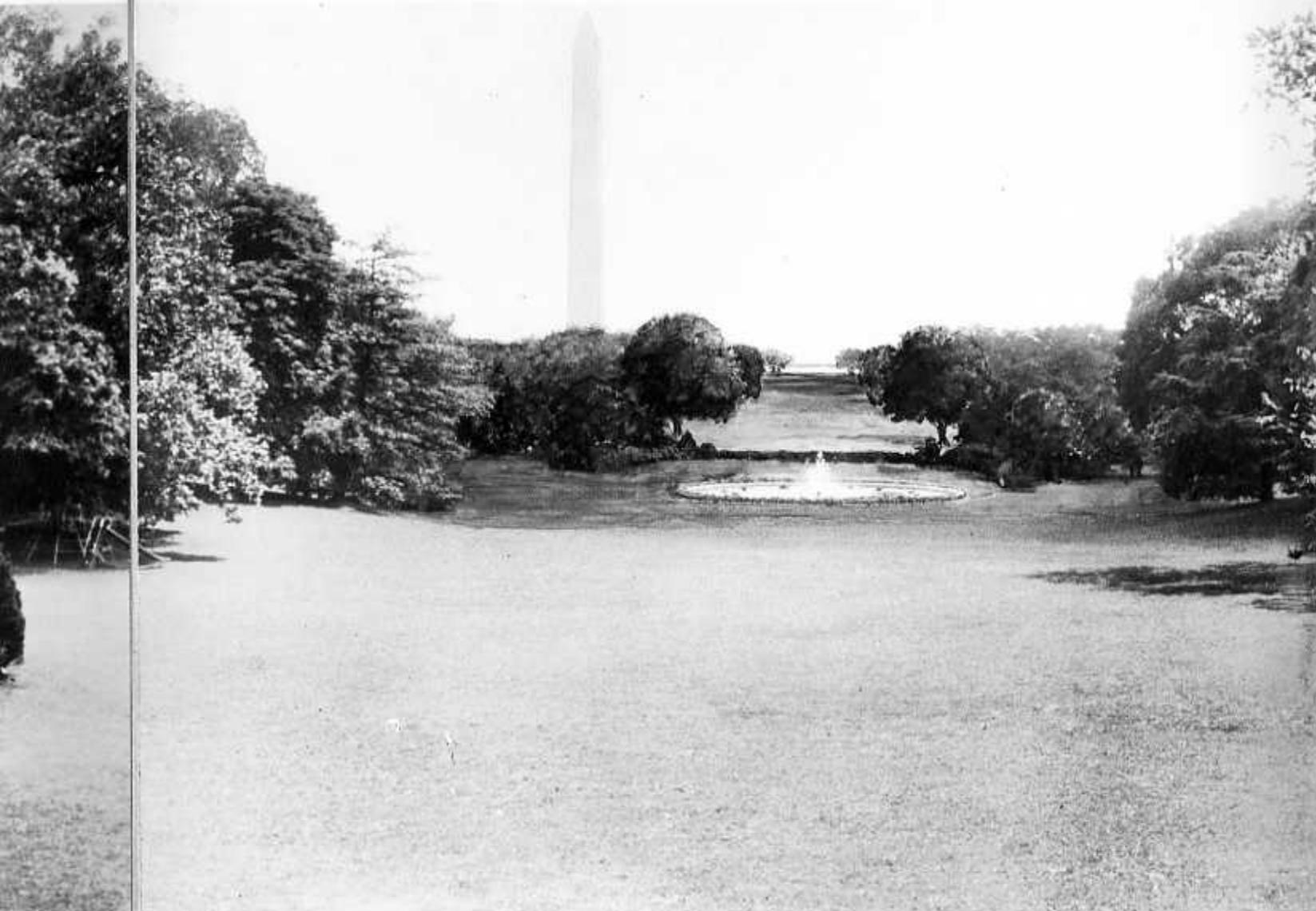
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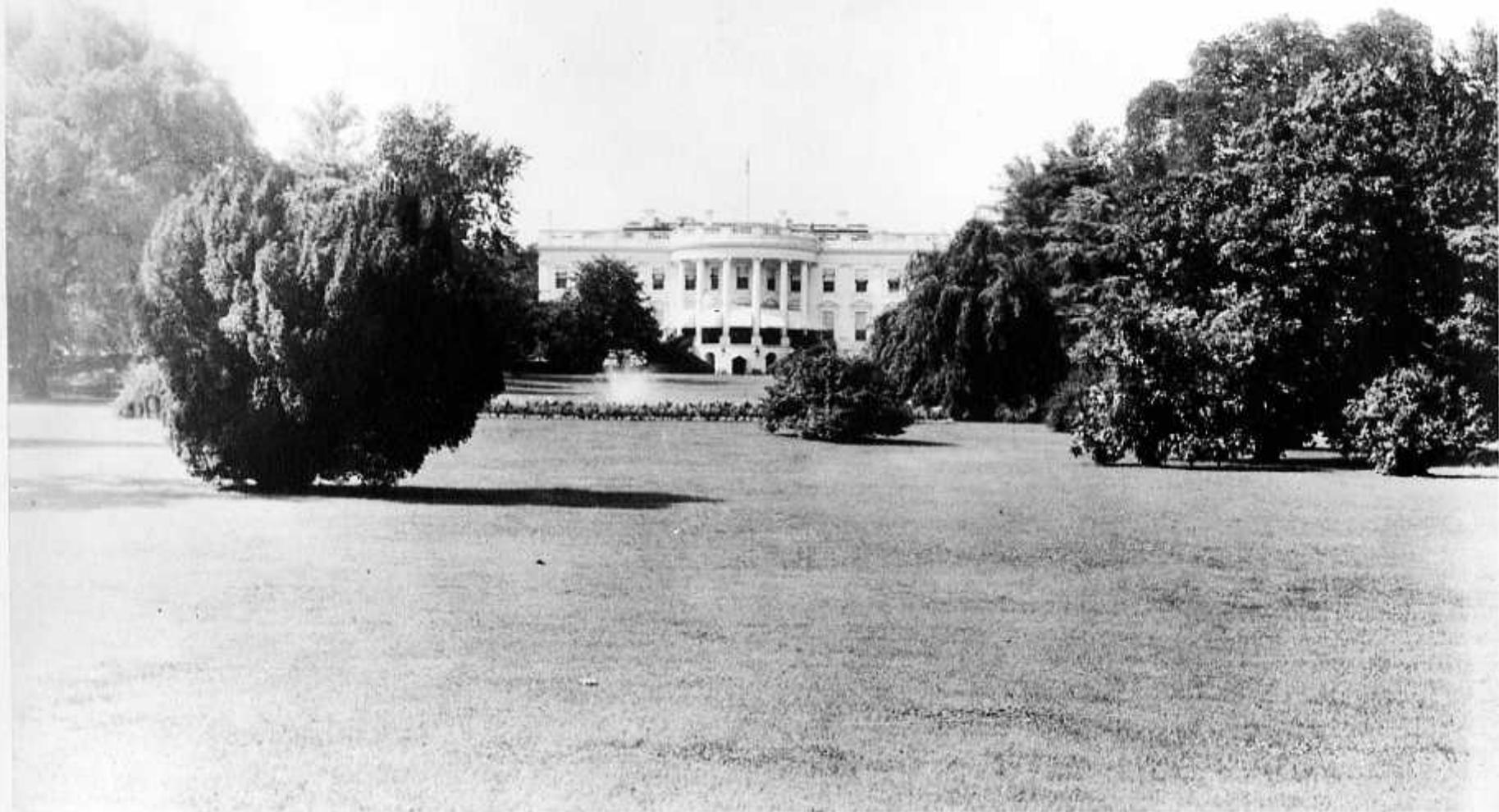


AXIAL SOUTHERLY VIEW FROM SOUTH PORCH  
PRESENT CONDITION





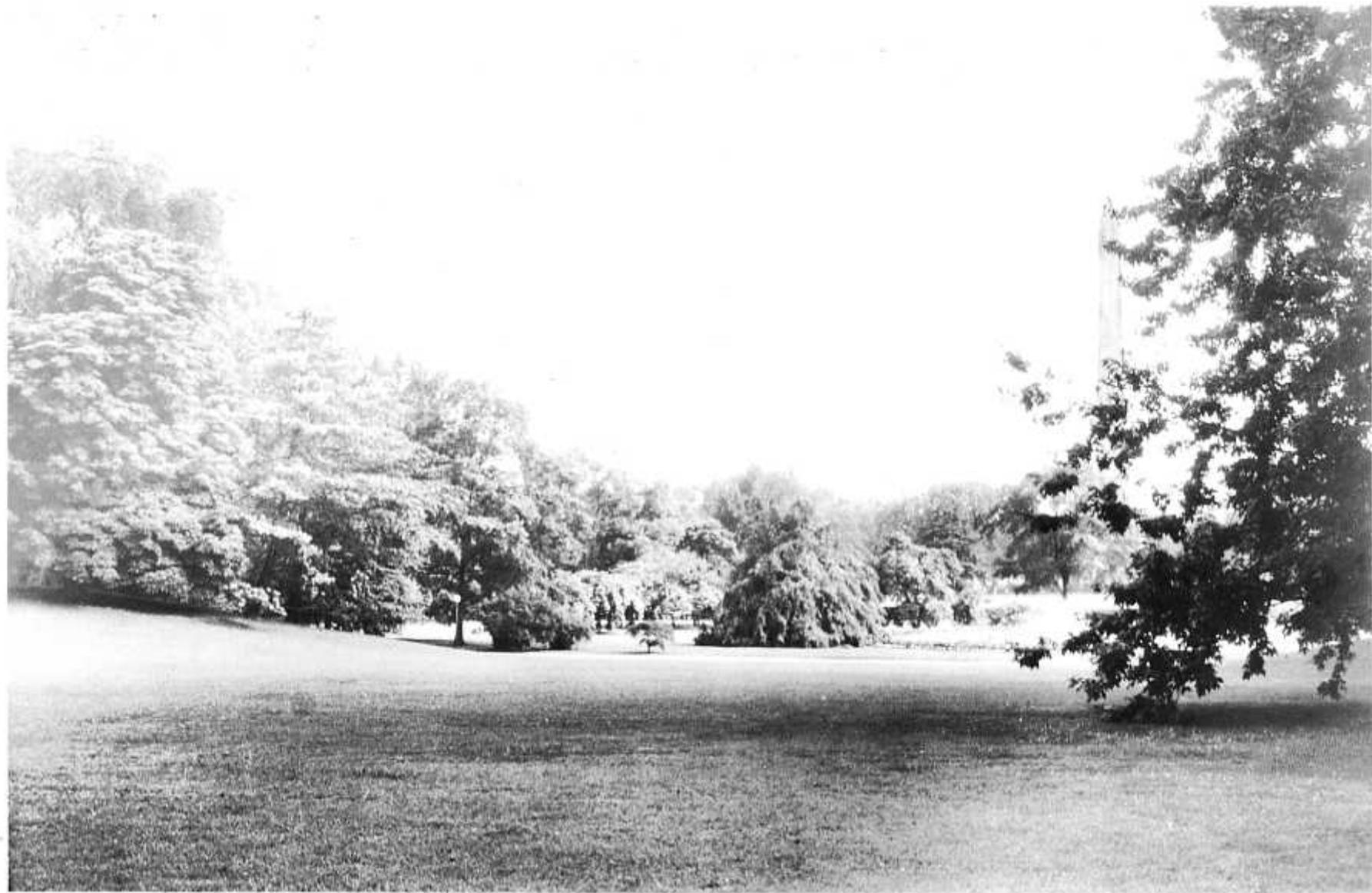
AXIAL SOUTHERLY VIEW FROM SOUTH PORCH  
PROPOSED CONDITION



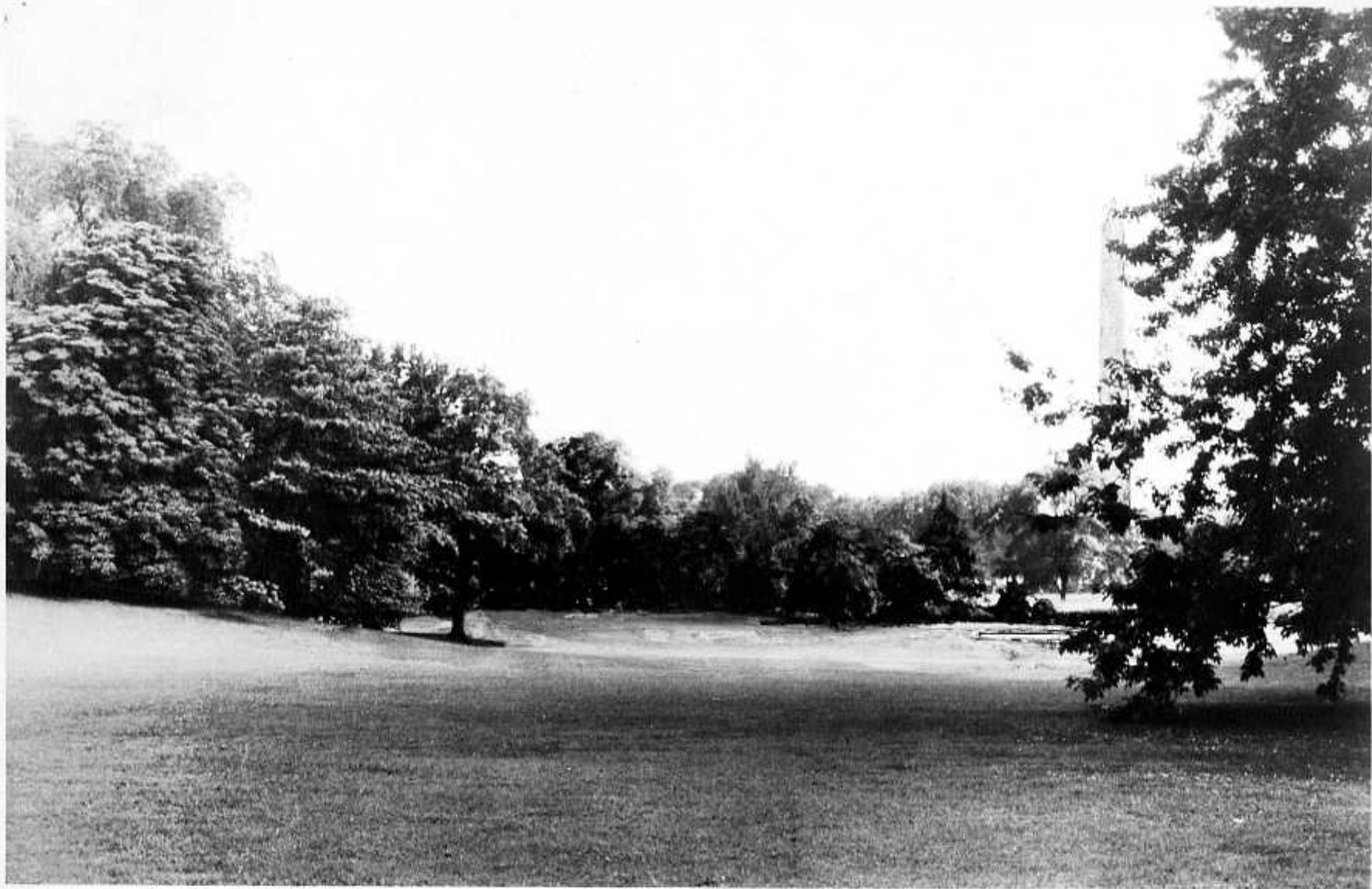
AXIAL VIEW OF WHITE HOUSE FROM STREET, LOOKING NORTH.  
PRESENT CONDITION.



AXIAL VIEW OF WHITE HOUSE FROM STREET, LOOKING NORTH.  
PROPOSED CONDITION.



SOUTHEAST VIEW, DIAGONALLY ACROSS LAWN  
PRESENT CONDITION



SOUTHEAST VIEW, DIAGONALLY ACROSS SOUTH LAWN.  
PROPOSED CONDITION



SOUTHWEST VIEW, DIAGONALLY ACROSS SOUTH LAWN  
PROPOSED CONDITION



EASTERLY VIEW FROM THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE  
PRESENT CONDITION

# WHITE HOUSE REPORT

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PART II

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE  
DESIGN OF THE WHITE HOUSE GROUNDS

- - - -

Washington chose the site of the city. L'Enfant drew the plan. On it he indicated the proposed streets, public reservations and sites of important buildings. As his studies progressed, L'Enfant seems to have kept in close touch with President Washington and to have sent him at least one of them, with a letter of explanation.

On the twenty-second of June, 1791, L'Enfant wrote with regard to the proposed site of the President's House, that it was "situated on that ridge which attracted your attention at the first inspection of the ground on the west side of the Tiber entrance." Possibly this "first inspection" was that referred to in the "Times and Patowmack Packet" for the twentieth of October, 1790. It tells us that "President

George Washington viewed the country adjacent to the Patowmack in order to fix upon a proper situation for the Grand Columbian Federal City."

In giving reasons for locating the President's House as he did, L'Enfant says "10 or 12 miles down the Patowmack front it will see the town and harbor of Alexandria" and again that it would "stand to the view of the whole city."

This calls attention to the fact that much of the land on which it was proposed to locate the city was low and flat. Along the north of this low ground ran the high land, to be known later as the F Street ridge. It was on a prominent portion of this ridge that the house site was indicated. On rounding the bend in the river opposite Mount Vernon, the early navigator saw the residence of the executive as the focal point of that great river vista and seemingly at the very heart of the Federal city. Later the significance of this organization was overlooked and the view interrupted by planting intended for local beautification.

The Capitol was placed on a prominent knoll known as "Jenkins' hill" to the east of the low ground, a long distance from the Executive Mansion. In justifying this distance, L'Enfant calls attention to the feeling that the decorous conduct of official business required that committees or messengers moving between the two should do so by carriage and not on foot. Of the executive departments, he felt differently, so "to mak however the distance less to other officers I placed the three grand Departments of State contiguous to the principle Palace." Thus we have the closely knit executive group far removed from the legislative center.

The cornerstone of the President's house was laid by Washington on October thirteenth, 1792. In November, eight years later, the first occupant, President Adams, moved into the still unfinished building. The launching of the Federal city had severely burdened the finance<sup>s</sup> of the young country, and consequently construction was slow.

During all these years the grounds surrounding the house seem to have been in the

chaotic state to be expected around any building under construction, but in addition the situation was aggravated by the fact that brick was being made from clay excavated on the property. The Commissioners of the District had asked L'Enfant on September 21, 1791, to have clay taken from the foundation of the Capitol and the President's house sufficient for 3,000,000 bricks, but the excavations do not seem to have been confined to the foundations. As late as November 19, 1805, Thomas Monroe writes the following illuminating bit to President Thomas Jefferson. "T. Monroe presents his respects and begs leave to ask whether the President has any objection to the removal of the stile, at the west side of the fence, from its present position to one a little to the south, so as to avoid the danger of falling into the holes which the brick-makers left before it was cleared by T. M."

In addition to throwing light on the condition of the ground, this abstract suggests a definite enclosure, of which Mrs. Thornton tells us more in her diary. On March twentieth, 1800, nearly five years earlier, her entry reads, -

"After breakfast we walked with Dr. T. to the ground behind the President's house, which he is going to have enclosed & laid out for a garden. It is at present in great confusion, having on it old brick kilns, pits to contain water used by the brick makers, rubbish, etc. The Commissioners have agreed to have a few hands employed on this, & Dr. T. is going to direct it for he says, if he does not undertake it it will not be done at all. Which I would let it be."

The kind of garden is not made clear. It may have been for pleasure, or simply a kitchen garden of the sort then considered an essential part of any well managed establishment.

As to the shape of the enclosure, there is a similar uncertainty. An early undated sketch plan (No. 25) has indicated on it a rectangular outline with circular corners which may have been the shape of the first enclosure. The plan on which this is found is a sketchy affair of the sort a surveyor might use when engaged in

laying out work on the ground. The information given on this plan is chiefly with regard to the streets and blocks surrounding the President's Square, and of these the widths and lengths are shown quite fully. The enclosure of the grounds is not dimensioned, but as indicated is approximately the same in width, from east to west, as at present, but the southerly line is much farther north than at present.

Whether this shape was adopted or not is uncertain, but we do know that an area was enclosed, for the records of the Commissioners show that in December 1801 a certain Peter Lenox was asked to view the fence around the President's house and to report the number of panels and if completed in a workmanlike manner.

No dependable plan has been found which shows the layout of the grounds between 1800 and 1808, at which time certain changes seem to have been made.

During these eight years a great deal of work of various sorts was going on within the grounds as well as within the house. Land drains were

installed, a main sewer built, walks laid, trees planted, a stable built, and a great deal of earth was moved in dressing the ground. An English visitor, writing in 1807, says of the President's house,- "The ground around it, instead of being laid out in a suitable style [is in a condition] so that, in a dark night instead of finding your way to the house, you may, perchance, fall into a pit, or stumble over a heap of rubbish. The fence around the house is of the meanest sort; a common post and rail enclosure. This parsimony destroys every sentiment of pleasure that arises in the mind, in viewing the residence of the president of a nation, and is a disgrace to the country."

The incongruity of this condition seems to have been felt at home as well. On March 17, 1807, Latrobe, surveyor of buildings, wrote a letter to President Jefferson, accompanied by a plan, which unfortunately has not been found. He wrote in part: "I herewith submit to your consideration a project for laying out the grounds around the President's house. The present enclosure together with the buildings already erected and those pro-

jected are also laid down in their proper situations so as to give you at one view all the merits of the plan. By the arrangement the public are put to no inconvenience of communication between the parts of the city on each side of the President's house, under which they do not now labor, excepting one: namely those who receive warrants from the Navy, War, and Secretary of State Offices, payable at the Treasury, must make a longer circuit than at present. Otherwise the communication between Pennsylvania Avenue on the East and New York Avenue on the West will be made more direct than hereto before, and the distance between the East and West streets which are more to the North, remain as at present."

The next paragraph of his proposal is important in that it indicates the point of view with regard to the great square south of the White House grounds. It continues:

"My idea is to carry the road below the hill under a wall about 8 ft. high opposite to the center of the President's house. At this point I should propose, at a future date to [go] through

an arch, or arches, in order to provide a private communication between the pleasure ground at the president's house and the park which reaches to the river and which will probably be also planted, and perhaps be open to the public."

On April 29th, 1807, Latrobe again wrote to Jefferson as work progressed and in this case we have the sketch which accompanied the letter. (See Illustration No. 31)

He said: "At the President's house I have laid out the road on the principle of the plan exhibited to you. A small alteration of the outline of the enclosure to the south was necessarily made, which renders the whole ground infinitely more handsome, and accomodates the public with easier access from Pennsylvania Avenue to New York Avenue.

"In the plan submitted to and approved by you a semi-circle was struck to the south from the center of the bow of the house. This semicircle carried the enclosure too far to the South. Mr. King

[Surveyor who laid out the city streets] will lay before you the new plan which differs from the other in being of oblong figure instead of a semicircle, thus (sketch)." (See Illustration No. 31.)

"By this alteration many very important objects are gained.

1. The Pennsylvania and New York avenues are [faced] by the wall opposite them at right angles.
2. A direct access is obtained from The New York to The Pennsylvania and on the shortest line.
3. The wall is straight from point to point, and thus all circular work is avoided.
4. The Nature of the ground is consulted so far as to obtain the best level for the road with the least removal of earth.
5. The road runs in such a manner that the President's house is not overlooked from below and is covered by rising knolls as the road rises."

From this last it would appear that at that time at least, privacy for the President and his family was considered essential.

The letter continues with remarks concerning arrangements and materials for the immediate building of the south half of the wall and then the following:

"The next step was to get down to the foot of the wall on the south side by cutting out the road to its proper width, leaving the internal dressing of the grounds until last. The building of the wall rendered it necessary to go to the permanent depth of the road, otherwise I should have contented myself with laying it down on its right place, removing only so much earth as would have made the declivities convenient to the carriages. But this could not be done, and I contracted with Wheeler and Stame to level the ground from the great Walnut S. E. of the President's house to the War Office the width of the road footpath and wall."

Of the north side of the grounds

Latrobe has this to say: "The next consideration was to execute your directions as to the north side of the President's house and to level the ground regularly and gradually from the level of the stone steps (which nearly agrees with the sills of the office) sloping in every direction toward the enclosure. The earth which was to effect this necessarily was to be moved from the site of the office between the President's house and the War office and accordingly we have set a gang under Mr. Bereto on the work."

The office mentioned is probably the first of the White House office buildings and approximately on the site of the present structure.

There is no available plan known to have been made in 1807 which shows the shape of the ground. The nature of the proposal for the south half can be gathered from the sketch which accompanied the above letter. For the shape of the north half of the enclosure we take the evidence of two manuscript sheets of survey data, one of

which is dated the second of June, 1898.  
(See Illustration No. 30.) These have been photostatted together for ease of comparison. On the undated sheet is shown what seems to be a layout sketch for a "Wall N. West of President's House". The east end of the wall so indicated would have been at the side of a gate directly in front of the north door of the house. Though the successive stretches of wall are each straight, the general effect is of a quarter of an ellipse. Each angle is given a letter and these letters correspond with those shown in the cut and fill notes on the accompanying dated sheet which is headed "Graduation of Wall N. W. of President's House".

The shape of the enclosure, as can be gathered from the above data, was roughly elliptical. It is possible that the exact outline is shown on another sheet, undated and presumably considerably later, on which are also shown the internal layout of the area and studies for proposed changes. This plan will be referred to later.

It is obvious that there were some modifications in the boundary outlines, both of the south half as proposed on the Latrobe sketch, and of the north, as indicated on the survey sketch.

Going to the appropriations for this period we find that on April 25th, 1808, there was set aside \$14,000.00, "For completing the wall of the President's Square, planting the ground so as to close this part of the expenditure, building a solid flight of steps to the principal door, and minor expenses."

Jefferson advised Latrobe of this appropriation in a letter of the same date and in outlining the work to be done wrote as follows:

"President's house, let the other half of the wall be immediately begun to be raised one foot higher than what is already done, 1. that which is already done be raised one foot higher. 2. The capping to be put on as far as it is already prepared, no Gate or Lodge to be attempted

till we see the state of our funds at the finishing of the wall so far. When this is done so far let us begin the stone steps, and when they are finished and money enough put by for the planting of the grounds we will consider how best to employ what may remain of capping and Gates. So that the order of this work is to be: 1. The wall completed and raised. 2. The steps. 3. Planting. 4. Calling-gates, and porter's lodges, doing one thing at a time, finishing settling and paying off one article before starting an other."

That Jefferson took great personal interest may be deduced from the above letter and there is of course ample additional evidence of his detailed attention to the design and arrangement of the house, the colonnades, the new office and the grounds. It is significant of his interest that this note to Latrobe was written on the day that the appropriation was passed. Its opening sentence is, "I had a note last night of the

appropriations of the Bill for public buildings, they are as follows."

On May 23rd, 1808, Latrobe wrote to "The President of the U. S." saying "I have made all the drawings necessary for the North Steps of the house. The scheme of a quadrant I have necessarily abandoned." The "quadrant" design was shown on Latrobe's drawing "Plan of the principal Story, as proposed to be altered", dated 1807. (See Illustration No. 27.) A small sketch of the new proposal accompanied the letter and the general appearance of the finished steps can be gathered from views of 1811 and later.

The boundary wall is also mentioned in this letter. Latrobe says, "The whole wall, including 27 feet across the wing equal to the width of the Treasury fireproof 346l' 4 in. long. Half of this may be said to be finished except the coping and the raising one foot." There follows

an estimate of \$11,582.90 for completing the other half, and then a sentence giving definite evidence of the height of the wall. "The raising of the walls on the North side, which when coped and the path laid at its proper level will be 6 ft. 6 in. high ....." The building of a wall to this height insured the complete privacy of the grounds.

Now to return to the undated manuscript plan already mentioned. It shows the then existing layout of paths, drives and planting in dotted or in faintly ruled lines. Strong solid lines show what appear to be studies for proposed changes made desirable by the removal of a stable which stood about two hundred feet east of the main part of the house.

The existing conditions are quite fully shown for the north portion of the grounds. The central gate, single entrance drive and court, may be seen on several of the early views. The center-lines of the radial streets north of the White House have their origins at the center of the north door and it was undoubtedly L'Enfant's intention to have

the building serve as the terminus of the street vistas. The planting indicates that for a time at least this was the case.

On the south side of the house we find a central grass panel extending the width of the house and south almost to the boundary wall, at which point it terraces down rather abruptly. In the narrow strips which bound each side of the central panel, the words "Border of flowers" can be read in faint writing on the original.

East of the center is a roughly lyre-shaped pattern which has one end at the east wing of the house and the other near the south wall. It is more than probable that this was repeated symmetrically on the west half. Patterns reminiscent of this shape are to be seen on city maps as late as 1851.

The outline of the north half had however been changed in 1818.

When the enclosing wall was built in 1808 the grounds within were in anything but a finished condition, and it is probable that the pattern shown on the undated plan was not immediately realized. Views of 1811 and 1814 show the entrance drive of the period from 1808 to 1818.

In 1818 the north half of the grounds seems to have undergone a change. The curving boundary wall was removed and in its place a stone and iron fence was erected along the present north line. The corners were made square in the line of the then east-and-west limits of the boundary, consequently we find the enclosed area considerably increased. At this time the single north entrance gate and drive were abandoned and in their place were substituted a semi-circular drive and two gates. Between the gates the fence was set back a short distance from the street line. There is unfortunately no available plan of the grounds showing the layout immediately after this change took place but an idea of the resulting appearance can be gained from one of the views of 1830. This view, though rather

quaint in drawing, we believe to be substantially correct.

Turning to other sources of information, we find that on April 20th, 1818, an appropriation of \$3,518 was made "For a wall north of the President's house, with gates and iron railing the width of the house." Again on the third of March in the following year \$5,344 was appropriated "For finishing the gates, the iron railing, and the enclosure north of the President's house." At the same time \$8,137 was set aside "For enlarging the offices west of the President's house", presumably the White House office building.

In 1814 the President's house was burned and James Hoban, the original designer, was put in charge of the repair work on the house and apparently also in charge of the changes north of the house. His report of February 16th, 1818, contains this information. "Following items of the wall and iron railing north of the President's house.

1. 1,500 feet taking down wall and fitting coping at \$1.00 per foot = \$1500.00

2. 1,500 feet of iron railing at \$6.00  
per foot = 9000.00
3. 3000 holes, cutting and leading at  
23 cents each = \$690.00
4. 2 piers and 2 iron gates \$810.00"

On the twenty-second of November 1818, Hoban again reports "A temporary fence has been put to enclose the area to the north of the President's house. A pedestal wall of granite stone has been built to receive the coping. The piers for gates, of cut stone, and the coping, are preparing. The gates, braces, and lamp-brackets, of wrought iron, and the upright bars of cast-iron, are in a state of preparation."

In the following year or on May 3rd, 1819, an appropriation of \$5,344.00 was made "For finishing the gates, the iron railing and the enclosure north of the president's house." This work completed the scheme of development and the general design of the grounds remained unchanged for thirty years.

In 1848 an appropriation of \$6,000.00 was made "For grading, draining, planting, and inclosing with wooden fence the grounds south of the President's

house and extending to the canal." This marks the beginning of another period of activity. In 1850 another appropriation "For continuing the improvement of the grounds south of the Presidents house, and, as incidentally necessary thereto, .... etc." amounting to \$10,000.00. Again in 1850, for sewers and further improving of the grounds, \$15,000.00. By 1858 another \$30,000.00 had been appropriated for similar work and by that time seeding, planting and walk and road building seem to have been completed.

In 1851 A. J. Downing had come into prominence through his work in laying out estates along the Hudson River. He was appointed to superintend improvements to the public grounds of Washington and in this connection his letter of acceptance is interesting. He wrote from Newburgh on the Hudson, March 31, 1851.

"Dear Sir- I have the pleasure of acknowledging the receipt of your favor of the 27th of March, informing me of the adoption of my plan for improving the public grounds and also my appointment by the President to superintend its execution.

I beg you to express my thanks to the President for the honor of the appointment which I

accept. I will report myself at Washington as early as possible -- probably by the middle of next week; and am Dear Sir

With respect

Yours sincerely

A. J. Downing.

To the Commissioner of Public Buildings,  
Washington."

On the side of this letter President Fillmore made the following endorsement "Ans. Referred back to Com. of P.B. to write Mr. Downing saying his compensation will be at the rate of \$1500 per annum for the time engaged. M. F. April 3."

The original Downing plan for the White House grounds and the great square to the south is so badly faded that it can be read only with great difficulty. On the photostat copy presented herewith (Illustration No. 53.) the definite portions of the outlines have been reinforced with ink to make them more readable, but this was not done where any uncertainty existed.

A great circle is shown for the first time in the President's Square and a similar circle is first indicated on a city map published in 1851. This circle is considerably larger than the present "ellipse". An examination of Downing's plan shows that he intended to close the south side of the circle with planting, thus interrupting, for the first time of which we have record, the great river view.

Within the grounds of the "President's house" there were apparently few changes suggested. On the north the tree planting was to be organized by arranging the trees in rows. The portion of the plan for the south is so faint as to be almost unreadable. There are indicated however two clumps of trees in the position of the present mounds and openings in the tree planting which correspond approximately to the drive pattern north of the present cross road. The angular outline of the south boundary was to be changed to a more graceful reverse curve. There is some uncertainty as to the fidelity with which this plan was carried out in detail. By 1857 we find that the city maps agree in showing a quite different scheme for the President's

Square, though the design has a similar informal feeling. It is probable that Downing modified his plan after study on the ground and that the map of 1857 represents the condition up to 1869.

In this year (1869) on May 3rd, an appropriation of \$27,000.00 was made "For completing the iron fencing of the President's grounds on the south and along the avenues now being opened between Fifteenth and Seventeenth streets, including gates." In 1870 and 1871 further appropriations of \$10,000.00 and \$45,500.00 were made "For construction of circular fence around and through the President's grounds to Seventeenth street, including foundation walls, curbing, flagging, and iron fencing."

This brings the outline of the grounds of the President's house to the shape which is found at present. For the layout of the grounds within the enclosure the city maps during the next few years show a great variety of patterns. It is probable that the design was the subject of considerable discussion and that different map-makers showed different proposed alternatives. Since 1871 the changes which have occurred within the grounds have been relatively minor, and it has not seemed to us

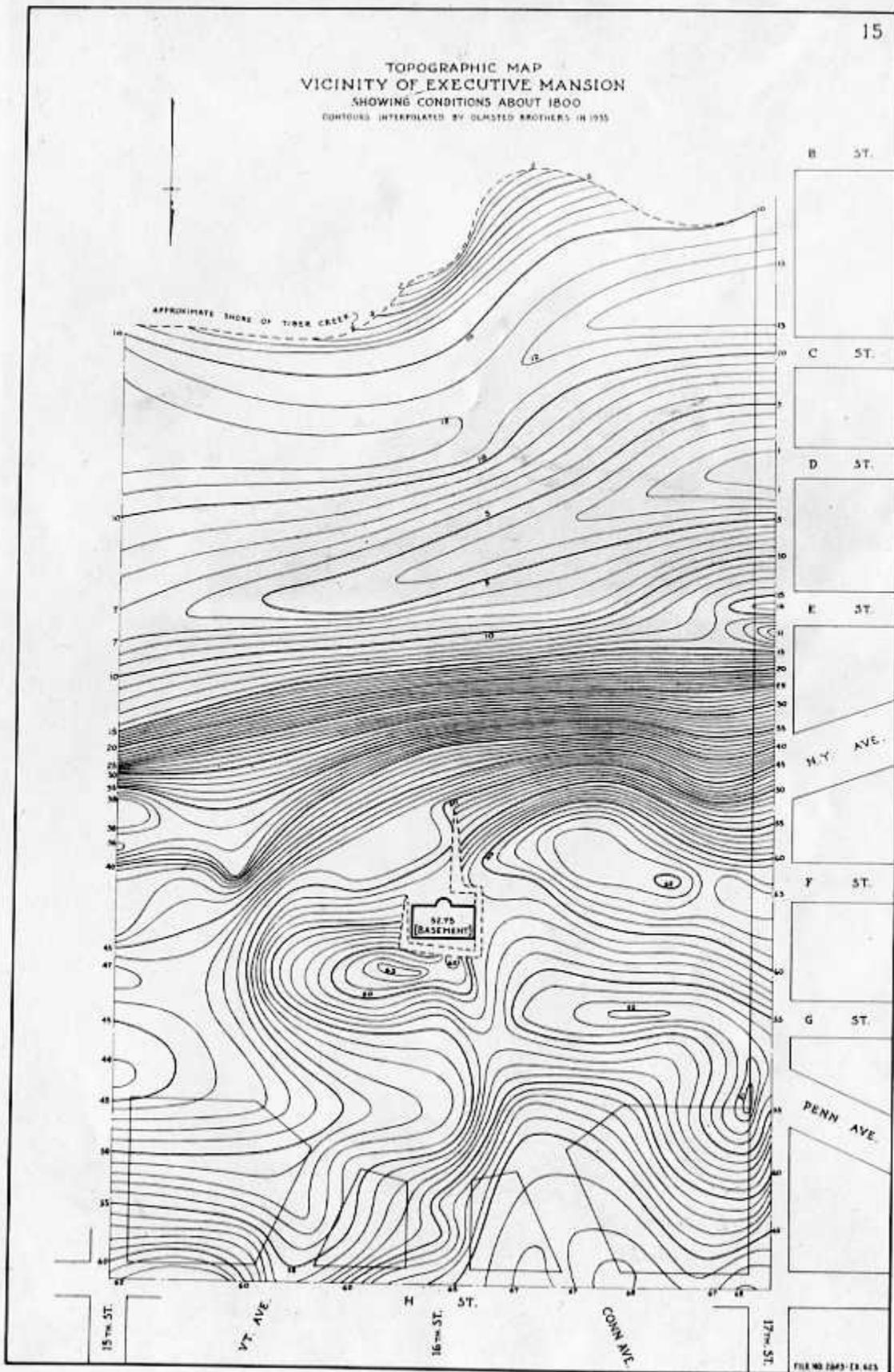
a proper expenditure of money for the purposes of this report to trace them to their respective sources, even if this might prove to be entirely possible. We considered it our task rather to discover those ideas, whether or not still embodied in the present layout, which should be in the mind of the present and the future designer in endeavoring to determine and maintain a scheme which should meet the changing necessities while maintaining the character fixed by the greater accomplishments of the past.

The appended plans and views are numerous, and it is laborious to follow their sequence and to attempt to solve their historical puzzles in detail. We have therefore shown first six small diagrammatic plans (Illustrations Nos. 16 and 17), on all of which appears in light lines the present layout, but on each of which is shown, in black, the arrangement of buildings and grounds existing at the date represented by the plan. These should give in brief the seven stages of development into which the history of the White House grounds may be divided from the beginning to the present day.

No. 15

Topographic map of vicinity of Executive Mansion, as it was about 1800. Contours interpolated from grades taken from manuscript map of R. King, surveyor. This map is one of several sheets, apparently plotted by King in connection with the first laying out of the city.

TOPOGRAPHIC MAP  
VICINITY OF EXECUTIVE MANSION  
SHOWING CONDITIONS ABOUT 1800  
CONTOURS INTERPOLATED BY OLMASTED BROTHERS IN 1955



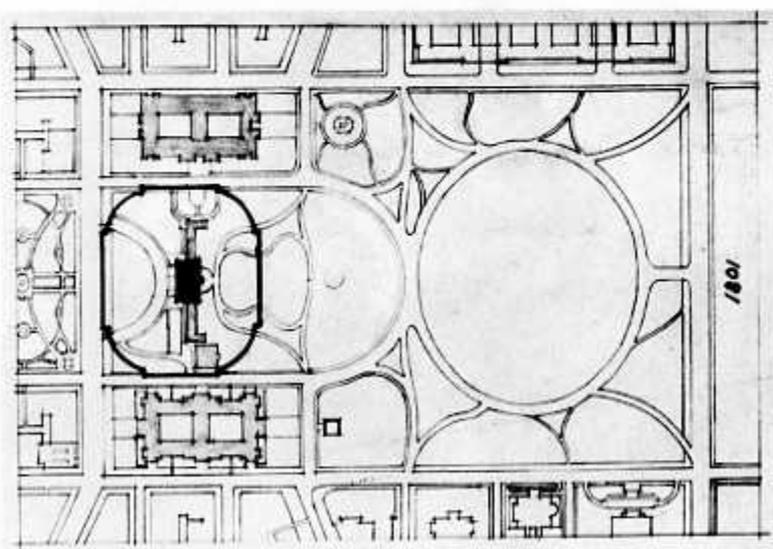
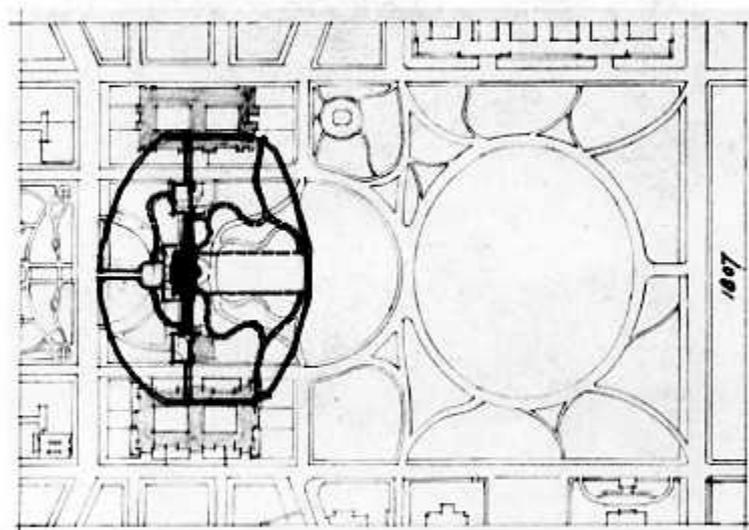
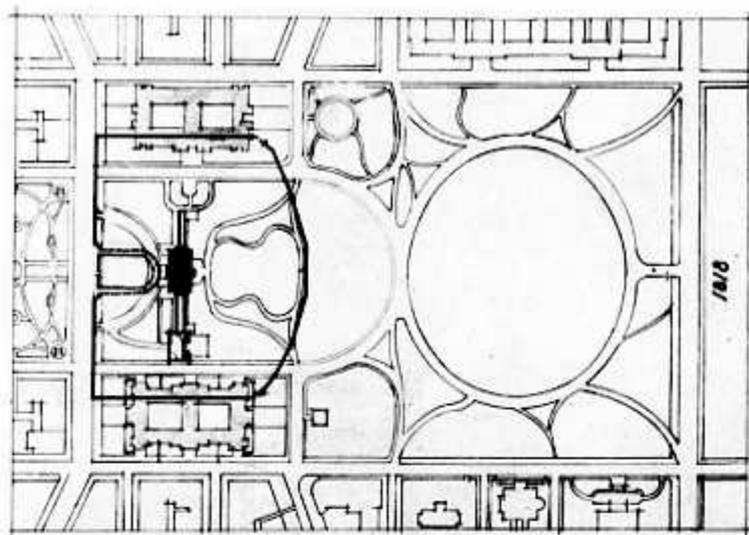
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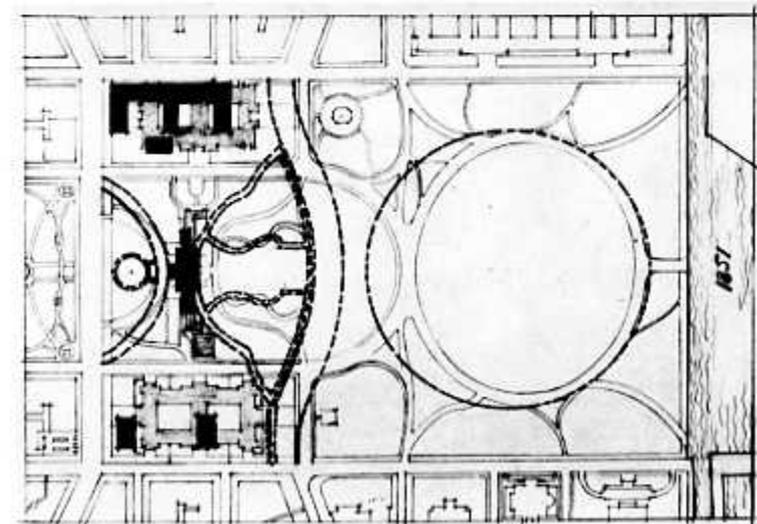
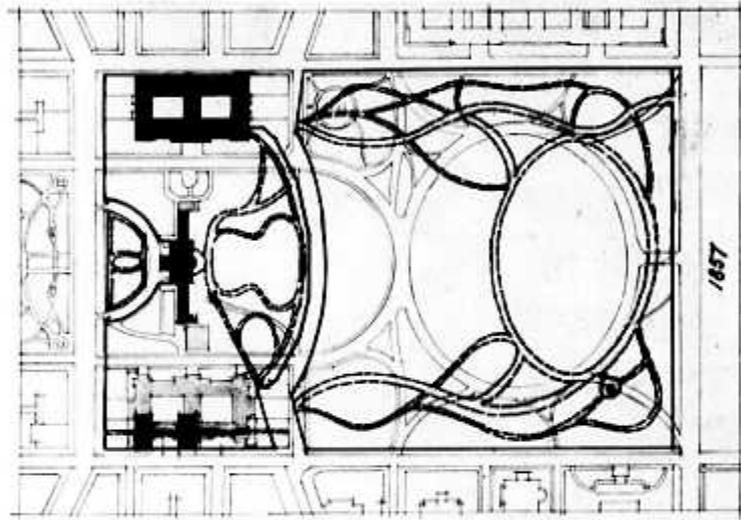
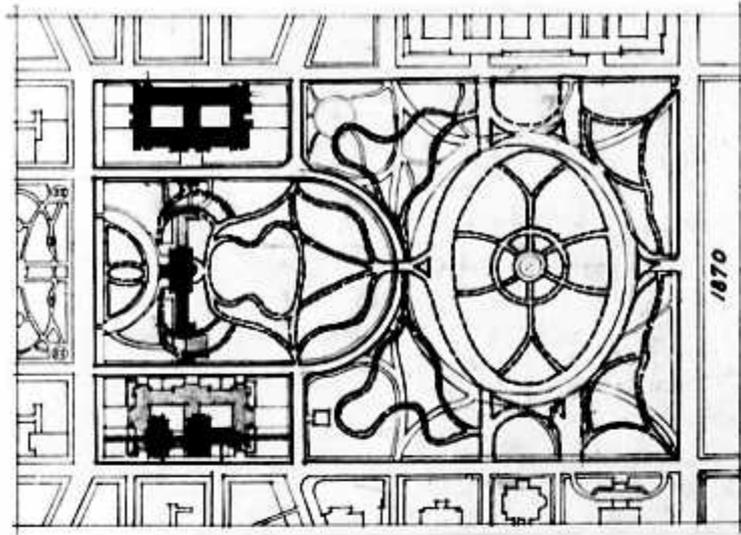
**No. 16 and No. 17**

**Six Plates**

Six sketch plans showing the seven main stages in the development of the grounds of the President's house. In each case the seventh, or present, layout is shown in faint line. Imposed on this are shown in heavy line the main features of the schemes developed at each of the dates indicated.

The background outline of existing conditions is from a map of the Public Buildings Commission, The Mall and Vicinity, Washington, Revision as of January 1931.





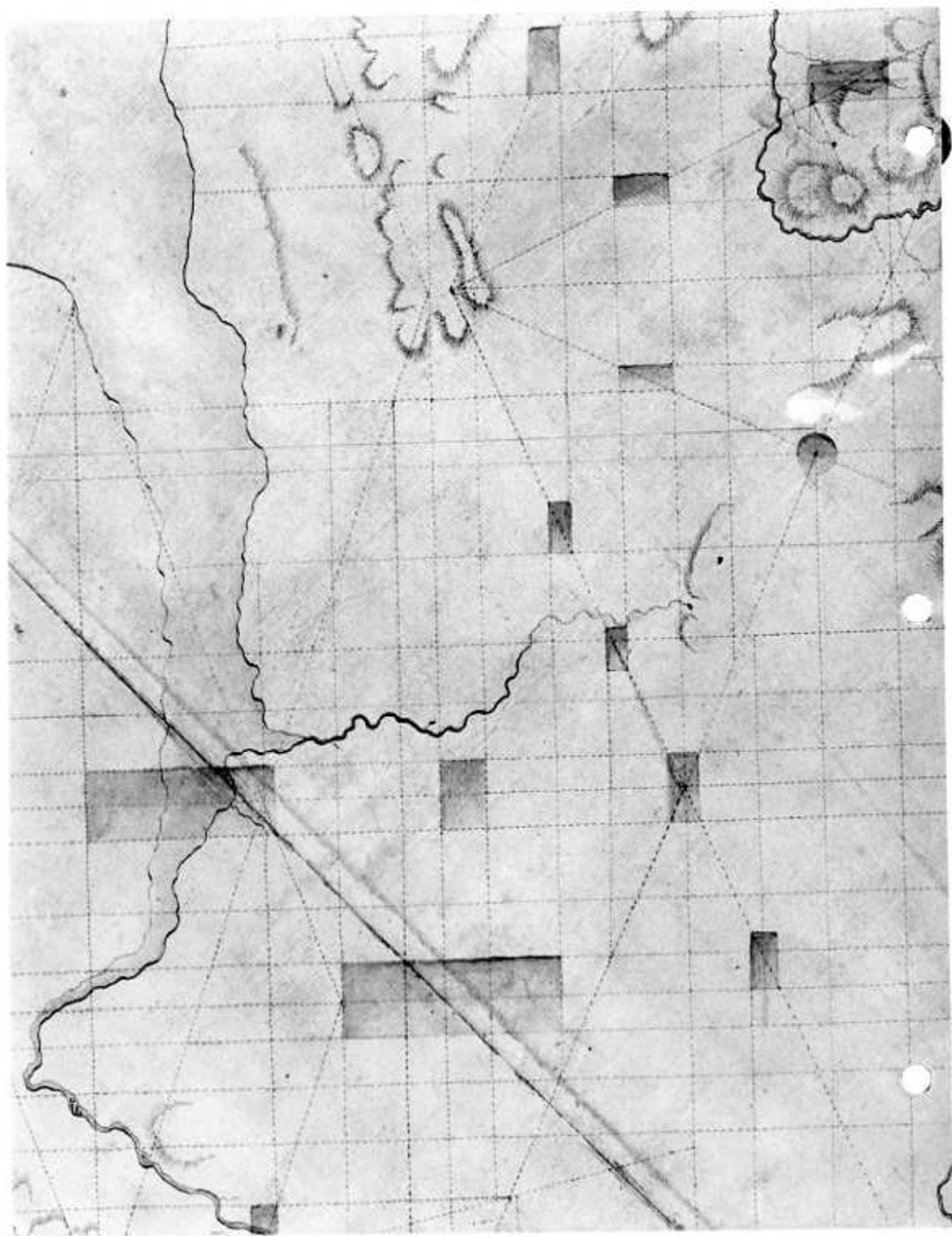
No. 18

1791

A manuscript study by L'Enfant which seems to have been sent to George Washington for approval or discussion.

On it we find at right center an indication of the ridge mentioned in L'Enfant's letter to Washington, June 22, 1791, as a desirable place for the location of the President's house. The dotted lines obviously indicate the center lines of proposed streets. The toned areas represent public reservations.

This plan remained among Washington's papers for a great many years, and was mistaken for a map of Washington's property. It was eventually found among the papers of the Toner Collection and bore in pencil the title "Mount Vernon Estate" and on the streams had been written in the names "Dogue Run" and "Little Hunting Creek".



No. 19

A portion of a Coast and Geodetic sheet of the Potomac River. It is reproduced in order to illustrate the point made by L'Enfant when writing to George Washington with regard to his proposed location of the site of the Executive Mansion, that here, "it will see ten or twelve miles down the Potomack front the town and harbor of Alexandria ...."