



Re-greening Embassy Row
restoremassave.org

Rock Creek Park
Attn: US Reservation 302 Landscape Rehabilitation Project
3545 Williamsburg Lane, NW
Washington, DC 20008

November 11, 2015

Re: Rehabilitation of Landscaping at U.S. Reservation 302

Restore Mass Ave is pleased to submit this Comment on the above proposal, as described on NPS web site. Our comments reference a few images and attachments that cannot be appended online. These will be submitted in print form along with this Comment and our book to the NPS Williamsburg Lane address.

The group is a 501 (c) (3) registered in the District of Columbia. It has worked since 2006 to restore the canopy of major trees and historic landscape that made the part of Massachusetts Avenue now known as Embassy Row a world attraction a century ago.

The original historic landscape which we are reviving dates from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, city leaders determined that Massachusetts Avenue, as L'Enfant's longest transverse avenue, would have double rows of majestic trees in formal lines enhanced by "park" in the 40' strips of city land on each side, for its full length across town.

Because it is the last intact piece of this landscape, the Embassy Row segment must be restored for the next century. So far RMA has arranged 330 additional trees, meant to grow big canopies that will revive the historic look. 1/ Two of the trees we arranged and care for are in city land around Reservation 302; this Comment proposes two more.

Our book, *A Grand Avenue Revival: Massachusetts Avenue Landscape History & Design Guide*, shows the elements of the original historic landscape. It quotes the City Beautiful vision for parks and small woods as "ponds" along the "rivers" of tree-lined streets. 2/

Given the importance of statues along Embassy Row, here we argue for statues and landscape to work together for public enjoyment. The ensemble is more important than any piece. Our theme is "many stakeholders, one landscape."

Definitions. We use “park,” not to mean garden beds, but as used historically in DC street design: shade trees above open ground. RMA stresses the city’s “parking” heritage in our materials and landscape work. 3/ In the original landscape of Mass Ave, the “parking” linked the formal grand avenue to the old forests of the Kalorama hill and Rock Creek valley. Also, the area at issue is the triangle bounded by Mass Ave, S Street and 24 Street, which includes a 12-foot bands of city land along the curb on 24 and S street sides per Baists Atlas and city records.

SUMMARY A Enhance the statue. B. Keep the Deodar cedar. C. Irish yews not needed. D. Two new shade trees on S and 24 Streets. E. Other present trees. F. Other improvements: light the statue. Conclusion.

A. Enhance the statue

Restore Mass Ave agrees that the statue of Robert Emmet is first-rate public art -- artistically, historically and symbolically. We support keeping this statue so long as the historic, park-like landscape is preserved as its setting.

1. To the merits NPS cites, Emmet’s importance and being near the Irish Embassy and Ambassador’s Residence, two other aspects are important.
First, it was unveiled in 1917 by President Woodrow Wilson. The President Woodrow Wilson House is half a block away, so visitors to the house can enlarge their experience of Wilson’s era by visiting the park. (But see F below.) Second, the figure conveys the man and message beautifully. Today, when artistic merit is increasingly rare among statues along our Grand Avenue, federal, city and community groups need fine examples of art and natural setting, to improve the quality of all.
2. The NPS presentation says the statue is “individually eligible to National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C.” We ask whether an individual piece of outdoor art can be extracted from its landscape for such status. RMA is establishing the Embassy Row part of Massachusetts Avenue as an historic early 20th century cultural landscape. The goal of “rehabilitation” in this case should be statue and park together.

B. Keep the Deodar cedar.

The core of the NPS plan is removal of the big Deodar cedar, to improve the statue’s visibility and because it is “potentially damaging” the statue. But this old and healthy tree “creates much of the context and character for the park,” in the words of one of many neighbors opposed to removal (#savedeodarcedardc). Some say they would rather have the statue go than lose this tree.

Restore Mass Ave strongly opposes taking the cedar down; removal is unnecessary. We support trimming the tree as needed to improve statue views, while keeping its wondrous character.

In fact the NPS proposes “removing the four lower limbs of the Deodar cedar this fall to improve light level and views into the park from Massachusetts Avenue and S Street NW.” Why not leave the tree alone thereafter?

On the sap-damage question, RMA asked some experts whether Deodar cedars drip sap, how such dripping can affect bronze statues, and what is done about this issue in other places where large old trees overhang sculptures. The responses are summarized in a brief RMA Note on Sap and Statue, which is in our print submission. It includes Bartlett Tree Service saying that Deodar cedars routinely don’t drip, but can drip after pruning. The firm’s practice is to bandage the wound for awhile to prevent sap from falling below.

C. Irish yews not needed.

NPS proposes a row of three Irish yews: two just west of the statue and a third where the majestic cedar is, after its stump is gone. The yews are formal garden plants; if kept to 10’ height and 3’ diameter as planned, they will form a dark wall, making the statue hard to see and photograph from the park entrance and bench. Finally three yews will block views of the statue from Mass Ave and S Street. The park should have open views at ground level to be an inviting, walkable public space.

D. Two new shade trees on S and 24 Streets

We propose RMA or the DDOT Urban Forestry Administration plant two new shade trees in the 12’ deep strips of city land on the neglected upper slopes of the triangle. The trees should be species tall enough to absorb significant rainwater, cool a hot traffic area, and visually connect the lower triangle area and Mass Ave with the old-growth forest hill of Kalorama.

On the NPS proposed planting plan, we added the approximate sites as Trees (a) and (b).^{4/}

The ground of the upper area offers good rooting space, so the trees could grow to mature size. They will be far enough from statue to not overhang and frame views of it from the park entrance and down Mass Ave. They will make the “park” of this section of Mass Ave continuous, leveraging prior investment by the city, embassies, and private parties.^{5/}

E. Other present trees

The plan does not propose any change to the eight other trees in **the area**. We strongly agree with NPS’ commitment to keep them. The two old cherry trees appear in the 1927 NPS photo of the site; they are of significant age and part of Washington’s arboreal legacy. We hope they live much longer.

As for the other six other trees within the triangle area, following the principle of “many stakeholders, one landscape,” RMA has and will work to assure growth of the

four city street trees on Mass, the cherry tree on 24 St (which we planted with Casey Trees in 2011) and the black gum tree on the point of Mass and S Street (planted with Casey Trees in 2008). (In our print submission, see RMA flyer on Emmet Park.) 6/

F. Other improvements: light the statue

The project proposal includes “Reinstalling landscape lighting around the Emmet statue, as funding becomes available.” We propose that money saved by NOT taking down the big cedar and grinding out its enormous stump be spent on lighting to the statue; it would make the park safer. The park HAD lights as the old box is by the bench. Restore Mass Ave supports this as a top priority in its own right. We have long urged that the statues along Embassy Row be lit.

Other landscape: adding laurels is not bad, except if they block pedestrian access to the statue, which is already difficult. Removing juniper and invasive ivy are fine.

Removing the trash can is a mistake. It was overflowing because of growing foot and bike traffic along Mass Ave (including tourists on BikeShare bikes). Without the can, litter is left on the ground of a place that should look inviting and cared-for. Consider putting back the can and emptying it more.

The public would linger at the statue area more with modern NPS educational signage highlighting Emmet’s historic importance and the link to President Wilson.

Conclusion

Our case - for keeping the majestic Deodar cedar, while creating more open views from Mass Ave and S Street, adding two new shade trees to the upper slope, and lighting the statue - rests on the NPS’s 1974 argument for Massachusetts Avenue as an Historic District for the National Register of Historic Places. The NPS’ nominating form of May 1974, which brought about the Secretary of Interior’s designation, argued that the original landscape was the Beaux Arts layout of the late 19th and early 20th century, based on myriad European and US precedents, and including the artful woodlands alongside. It said:

“The rhythm and proportions of this broad, tree-lined avenue dynamically interact with the scale and visual excitement of the architecture which abuts it...Rock Creek Park, whose presence is felt from Sheridan Circle to Observatory Circle, creates and appropriate aura of *rus in urbe* creating a street façade unique in the city and perhaps the nation.” 7/

Our suggestions for new NPS work at Reservation 302 aim to advance this shared goal.

Deborah Shapley, President
on behalf of
The Board of Directors

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Notes

1/ These are planted by the city, RMA, Casey Trees and private parties. Maintenance is equally important. The work has been recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the DC Historic Preservation Office, the State Department and many embassies.

2/ *A Grand Avenue Revival: Massachusetts Avenue Landscape History & Design Guide*, supported by National Trust for Historic Preservation, Sheridan Kalorama Historical Association and others, available free. Pdf is at <http://restoremassave.org/grand-avenue-revival-book/>.

For book's receipt of the 2015 Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation (Education) at DAR Constitution Hall see http://blog.restoremassave.org/2015_07_01_archive.html and <http://restoremassave.org/events-archive/>.

3/ For the "parking" or "public parking" see Grand Avenue Revival, pages 3-5. RMA "parking" graphic at <http://restoremassave.org/green-your-street/second-row-of-trees/>.

4/ The pdf showing our proposed two new tree locations, and the image from Baist's showing DC boundary lines in the triangle, are in the RMA print submission.

5/ Tree (a) could be a "Red Sunset" red maple to form a corridor with the three of this type we arranged across S Street; the Chad Embassy added one of these and care for them all. Tree (b) could be an American elm such as "Valley Forge" to connect with other elms: one we advised the Chad Embassy to plant at Mass and S Street and elsewhere along the Avenue by UFA and ourselves, Casey Trees and private parties.

6/ In addition, RMA assists the four street trees along the Mass Ave side of the triangle. RMA volunteers and paid service workers weed and mulch these, as we try to do for all the maturing and at-risk street trees along Mass Ave between Waterside Drive and Dupont Circle.

7/ Inventory Form, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1974. Access from <http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/natregisterresult.do?fullresult=true&recordid=0>. Context is in Grand Avenue Revival, page 18.

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