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Lafayette Square—Washington's Masonic Statuary Garden?

Most Washingtonians know Lafayette Square as the public park across the street from the White House. But among the profane, few suspect it as the perpetual home for statues of five Freemasons, erected in recognition of their faithful and loyal service to the Nation in its formative years.

Originally part of the White House grounds under L'Enfant's city plan and known as the "President's Park," Lafayette Square was severed from the grounds in 1804 when President Jefferson opened Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the presidential mansion. In 1824, the square was officially named in honor of General Lafayette of France.

[Look for the forthcoming biography of Brother Marquis de Lafayette from Sir Knight Chris Ruli, Eminent Commander of Potomac Commandery No. 3, arriving later this summer.]

According to a National Park Service history, Lafayette Square has been utilized over the years as a construction depot for the White House, racetrack for horses, a graveyard, a zoo, a slave market, and as an encampment for soldiers during the War of 1812. Throughout the history of the Republic, the square has been the site of numerous political demonstrations and inaugural celebrations.

The landscape plan of the park has been largely unchanged since the 1930s. Erected in 1853, an equestrian statute of General Andrew Jackson, hero of the Battle of New Orleans and seventh President of the United States, stands in the center of the square.

At the four corners of the square are statues of Revolutionary War heroes from foreign lands—General Marquis Gilbert de Lafayette of France in the southeast (dedicated 1891); Major General Comte Jean de Rochambeau in the southwest (dedicated 1902); Major General Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben of Prussia in the northwest (dedicated in 1910); and General Thaddeus Kosciuszko of Poland in the northeast (also 1910).

All five men are known to have been Freemasons. A summary of what is known about their Masonic pedigrees follows—

Jackson—Debate exists as where and when he received his degrees; member of Harmony Lodge No. 1 in Nashville as early as 1800; Grand Master of Masons of Tennessee from 1822 to 1824; elected an honorary member of Federal Lodge No. 1 of Washington, DC in 1830; and a Royal Arch Mason, including service as Deputy Grand High Priest at the institution of Grand Chapter of Tennessee in 1826.

Lafayette—While on his famous 1824-1825 American tour, Lafayette attended a banquet held by the Grand Lodge of Tennessee and stated that he joined Freemasonry before he arrived in America to fight in the Revolutionary War. Therefore, he most likely joined the fraternity sometime between 1771 and 1775, possibly in a military lodge while stationed in Metz, France.

Rochambeau—Details of Masonic membership not known but was listed with Lafayette as a visiting brother—"Les Chers Freres Visiteurs"—at the consecration of the Lodge of St. John de Candeur in Paris in December 1775.

Von Steuben—Received his Masonic degrees in Europe in an unknown lodge, but brought with him to America, Masonic affiliation credentials with the rank Past Master, first to Holland Lodge No. 8 and later joined Trinity Lodge No. 10 [now No. 12], both in New York City.

Kosciuszko—Acknowledged as a Mason, but no proof of membership has been found for this Polish patriot and hero of the American Revolution; original member of the Society of the Cincinnati, composed of General Washington's office corps, many of whom were Freemasons; namesake of Kosciuszko Lodge No. 1085 in New York City.

One other Masonic legacy of the square—a 1926 history of the park by Gist Blair reports that Lafayette Square was "used on September 18, 1793, as the meeting ground for Masonic Lodges, just before the cornerstone of the Capitol was laid. President Washington with his suite met Lodge No. 15 of the city [now Federal Lodge No. 1] before the ceremony."

Lafayette Square—while not a Masonic Park—is occupied by the statues of outstanding examples of Masonry and universal brotherhood who helped to forge a new nation inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment. Authored by REPGC Craig Lasher