

# The Landscape Architect's Guide to **WASHINGTON, D.C.**

## Constitution Gardens

### History

Located between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, this site was originally part of an area once known as the Potomac River Flats.

The Washington Canal Company began construction on the Constitution Gardens in 1810, and the site opened in 1815 at the east end of 17th Street, along what is now Constitution Avenue. Later in 1915, the 1832 Lockkeeper's House was moved from 17th Street to the west and slightly north.

In 1882, the Army Corps of Engineers prepared a reclamation plan for Potomac Flats areas that were subject to repeated flooding. After discussion about private or commercial development, the reclaimed land was established by act of Congress in 1897 as Potomac Park, which contained 621 acres of land and 118 acres of tidal reservoir.

Double rows of elms along Constitution Avenue were implemented as part of the McMillan Plan.

A 1930s/40s flood control levee, created to protect Washington, D.C. from river flooding, separates Constitution Gardens from the Lincoln Reflecting Pool.

From World War I (1918) until 1970, West Potomac Park was home to a series of temporary office structures used by the United States Navy and Munitions Department.

President Nixon directed demolition of the remaining "tempo" and the First Lady Pat Nixon suggested a park like Tivoli Gardens.

1976 — In a series of plans and designs, architecture firm Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM) and Modern landscape architect Dan Kiley completed Constitution Gardens as a picturesque restful park with a small lake, which would contrast with the "formalism of the Grand Axis." Meandering paths would traverse meadows shaded by tree canopy.

However, the original design was not achieved. There was hope that Constitution Gardens could become the home of the Smithsonian Institution Folklife Festival, but that did not come to pass. Subsequently, the festival's location on the Mall was defined in federal regulations. Construction budgets were reduced from \$14M to \$6.7M. The approved design for an "East End Pavilion" with food service was not completed; and planned model sail boating did not occur.

There were issues with the poor soils and subsoils of the area, building debris and the lake's water quality of raised concern as well. Hundreds of trees drowned as the result of soil conditions and wet weather. The site was one of the first to use sewage sludge, as extensive soil amendment was necessary.

In 1984, the Memorial to the 56 Signers of the Declaration of Independence was completed and placed on an island in Constitution Gardens Lake in 1984. It was designed by EDAW, now AECOM, with Joe Brown, FASLA, as the principal landscape architect. The low-key design featured a granite semi-circle with gold signatures of our founding father, organized by the original thirteen states.

In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was built at the west end of Constitution Gardens, and by 2004, when the World War II Memorial was completed, Constitution Gardens had a more commemorative context and was largely a quiet respite on the way between the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial.

A Constitution Gardens Cultural Landscape Report, prepared in 2008, detailed the site's history and described the period of significance as 1882 to 1993.

A 2011–12 national design competition was sponsored by the Trust for the National Mall to select a design team for the redesign of three sites: Constitution Gardens, the Sylvan Theater, and Union Square. The design team of Peter Walker and Partners and Roger Marvels Architects was selected for the Constitution Gardens site.