

THE HISTORY OF PARKS:
WITH AN EMPHASIS ON THE LA CROSSE PARK SYSTEM

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American urban landscape began to take the shape of the modern metropolis shortly after the Civil War. Urban population was growing at an unprecedented rate, with a massive influx of immigrants coming to the United States. Towns grew into cities and cities grew into metropolises. Cities industrialized, with a large metropolitan work force. Cities came to be characterized as overcrowded, dirty, and crime ridden. American city planners thought escapes from the city, within the city, were essential in providing a means for recreation, good health, and a means to reduce crime.

Influential men such as Frederick Law Olmstead and Daniel Burnham instilled an American parks movement that transformed the urban landscape to as we know it today. Olmstead, co-developer of New York's Central Park, believed in keeping a close relationship to nature. He also believed open spaces relieved urban anxiety and strengthened a sense of community, for this was a place that all social classes could be represented. Daniel Burnham, founder of The City Beautiful Movement in the late 1800's, created inner city public spaces along with European Beaux Arts style architecture. Burnham's vision of civic centers, parks, boulevards, and new transportation systems were meant to make cities more attractive, but financial problems kept many of his plans from ever materializing.

Most American cities have a common spatial sequence, or processional quality to them. This interior organization is shaped by the variety of open spaces within the city. Parks are formed, not at random, but at areas which signal a change in scale or function of a given area. For example, an open space or park would be constructed between a commercial and a residential district, to separate them. Parks would be formed to mark the end of one area in the city, while also marking the beginning of a new one. In La Crosse, for example, traces of this processional quality exists when one looks at the downtown area. Riverside Park

seperates the Mississippi river from the downtown business district. The downtown district is seperated from the residential districts by Cameron Park, Burns Park, the W.W.T.C campus, and the marsh, almost encircling the downtown area. While an interior organization in reality could be very hard to find. Many times cities may have plans for a park but are ditched because of the business interests of the city for example, or maybe the proposed land is used to build low income housing instead. The remarkable thing about parks are not so much that they are created in the first place, but the fact that they continue to exist.

Another important purpose of parks are to preserve the natural resources distinct to that specific area or city. For example, the park in Pittsburgh where the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers meet, or the Great Falls of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in Louisville Kentucky. In La Crosse, Grandad Bluff Park or Pettibone among others are also obvious areas where parks were created to preserve the natural terrain.

The Frederick Law Olmstead of La Crosse, was John Nolen, a landscape architect from Massachusetts who also designed the park system for Madison. Nolen saw the unique topography of La Crosse and took advantage of it. His goals were to "reflect and preserve the characteristic and topographical features of La Crosse, to constitute a whole, each part having relation to every other part, together forming a comprehensive, well-distributed system in which the needs of each section were adequately and fairly provided for." Nolen envisioned a plan in which all his parks were to be connected by parkways or boulevards and all leading to Levee Park (now Riverside Park). On May 15 1908 the Common Council of La Crosse established a Board of Park Commissioners,

and in 1911, the La Crosse Park system employed paid park supervisors to generate and organize games for the children over summer vacation and the Christmas holiday.

The rest of this report will get into more detail about specific parks in La Crosse. Darrin will write a brief history on 15 randomly chosen parks, and Larry will go into more detail of five more notable parks in La Crosse: Grandad Pettibone, Myrick, Copland, and Riverside.

Summary and Conclusion

The Progressive Era, at this time, is happening on a national and local level. The Progressive Era was one where there was a general movement to create a better society. Largely middle class Americans set the stage for many legislative actions which set into law environmentally beneficial acts. President Roosevelt had a reputation as a conservationist, adding around 150 million acres to our national forests, and in 1908, called the governors of the states as well as 500 natural resource experts to "[conceive a plan for resource management, ordered for growth rather than mere preservation of nature as it was.]"³

Parks in a city can be said to be a social and economic indicator of the city itself. Generally, if cities are doing well economically, and are progressive in their social works, they generally also have a very good parks system. Parks were designed for public use, to escape the city, relieve urban anxiety, and strengthen the sense of community within the community.

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THE HISTORY OF THE LA CROSSE PARK SYSTEM

A park is an area of land or water set aside for recreation, education, or for the preservation and enjoyment of natural beauty or a historical or scientifically important site. Public parks are created and administered by city, county, state, provincial, or national governments. They range in size from tiny vest-pocket parks within city blocks to huge national parks covering thousands of acres. Private parks are frequently theme or amusement parks, presenting exhibitions or entertainment centered on a particular theme for which an admission fee is charged.

Public parks are a development of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the first half of the 19th century, parks acquired by the public solely for public use appeared in some of the towns of England and continental Europe. Agitation for similar action in the United States by such men as Andrew Jackson Downing, Washington Irving, and William Cullen Bryan resulted in the establishment of Central Park in New York City in the 1850's. Central Park is considered the first large, predesigned landscape park established in America. Its designers, which included Fredrick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, set the pattern for park development that was followed for more than a century.

Such parks consisted of large areas of turf, trees, lakes, and streams, arranged to form a pleasing natural scene in contrast with the crowded conditions of the city. The beauty of nature provided a serene atmosphere conducive to quiet contemplation and relaxation. These parks were located in various parts of cities and were connected by a system of parkways and boulevards. Such parks became the ideal city park system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

At this time such midwestern cities as Chicago, Kansas City, and Minneapolis were building elaborate park systems. Also at this time other smaller cities began incorporating park systems, one of these cities was La Crosse.

On May 15, 1908 the common council of La Crosse created a Board of Park Commissioners to start finding land suitable for parks (Nolen, p.3). The park commission felt they should select property that was naturally fitted for park uses. This land was mainly found in areas near the bluffs and Mississippi River.

On November 18, 1908 the citizens of La Crosse resolved in a mass meeting in favor of the adoption and execution of a plan of park improvement that would beautify the city and minister to the comfort and pleasure of all the citizens (Nolen, p.4). They also resolved at this time to set up a special tax for the first time to be set apart from other tax money and spent by the park commission for park purposes. Up until this time only a small amount of money was appropriated each year for the care of parks. This care basically only consisted of cutting the grass and trimming the trees and the work was done under the supervision of the Board of Public Works.

Plans were laid out to make the park system comprehensive, including city squares, equipped and supervised playgrounds, small and large parks and scenic reservations all of which was to be connected together by parkways or boulevards. The park system was also not set up to just meet the demands of all the people in all parts of La Crosse at the time, but was set up to reasonably anticipate the needs of the future.

By 1912 there had already been eight areas set aside for parks. They were Pettibone, Myrick, Burns, Copeland, Powell, Riverside, Grandad Bluff, and Hixon Forest.

Now I will write about roughly fifteen parks that are a little less known to the average citizen. I will also tell when they were developed and who donated or purchased the land, along with there location and some points of interest about a few parks.

First of all there is Memorial Field, which was formerly named Fairground Football Field. This land was purchased by the city in 1885 and was originally intended to add onto Myrick Park. It was used by the La Crosse Interstate Fair for 66 years ending in 1957. The grandstand was erected in 1924 (La Crosse Park System, p.14).

The land known as Cameron Park, located at the southeast corner of 4th and King streets, was purchased by Peter Cameron in 1847. He deeded the land to his brother Daniel in 1850, but the deed was incorrectly registered as a "Public Square". So over the years both the city and Cameron laid claim to the land and several court battles followed. Cameron finally won in 1899 and in 1903 the land was named Cameron Park. A Ten Commandments plaque was placed in the park in 1964, but in 1985 great comntroversy over this plaque started and the city was sued to remove it (La Crosse Park System, p. 4).

Burns Park, located at the northeast corner of 7th and main, was developed in honor of Timothy Burns, one of La Crosse's first citizens and once Lieutenant Govenor who once owned the land. It officially became a park in 1908, but was a public square since 1852 (La Crosse Park System, p. 3).

Powell Park, formerly known as the West Avenue Playfield is located at the southwest corner of West Avenue and Jackson Street. It was originally made a year-round facility including game fields, a skating rink, and a small park-like area for the recreation of children's parents. It illustrated the park commissions interest in playgrounds for children. The land was purchased from Dr. George

and Dr. Will Powell in 1909, one year after the Board of Park Commissioners was created and was part of the plan to establish a comprehensive park system (La Crosse Park System, p. 23). They offered the park as a memorial to their brother Frank. At Powell Park there is a fountain that has a white beaver carved on the base. This is a memorial to Dr. Frank Powell who once healed a critically ill daughter of Sioux Indian Chief. The Indians then gave him the name of "White Beaver". He was also made chief medicine man of the Winnebago tribe in 1876.

Hixon Forest was purchased in 1912 for the city of La Crosse by a group of private citizens headed by Mrs. Frank Hixon who then donated much of the land and it was named after her. This is the largest land area under the park department control and is now maintained as a forest preserve and wild life sanctuary (Board of Park Commissioners p. 5).

Houska Park was created to give the south end of the city a park much like Pettibone Park. In 1909 the entire tract of land known as Isle La Plume was given to the city by the John Paul Lumber Company and the C.L. Colman Lumber Company and was made into a park in 1937. In 1947 the name changed from La Plume Island to Houska Park. It was formerly the site of one of the major saw mills in La Crosse (La Crosse Park System, p. 9).

Also several beaches are under control of the Park Commission, one of these is the Black River Beach. In 1946 the Council Committee approved the dredging of this beach and in 1947 it was opened to the public (Board of Park Commissioners, p. 9).

Red Cloud Park, located at 520 Powell Street was formerly called Indian Hill Park and was the site of the last indian village

in this area. In 1953 development of this park as a picnic area began. In 1957 it was renamed Red Cloud Park, dedicated after Corporal Red Cloud of the United States Army. During the Korean war he alone held off the enemy during an attack with a machine gun until death, saving the life of his entire company. Between 1887-1890 "Buffalo Bill" Cody owned part of this park area (La Crosse Park System, p. 25).

The Trane Park, located at the northeast corner of South 15th street and South Avenue, was developed in 1954 with \$35,000 being donated by the Trane Company in honor of Reuben Trane and his family (La Crosse Park System, p. 30).

The land of Bluff View Park, located at 28th and Jackson, was acquired by the city in 1957 for the school board. Planned use for for this land was for a future elementary school but it ended^{up} being a park and the school was built elsewhere (La Crosse Park System, p.2).

The land now known as Weigent Park, located between 15th and 16th streets is the site of the old Central High School. It was vacated in 1967 and in 1975 the city of La Crosse approved its development into a park (La Crosse Park System, p. 32).

The Civic Center Park was developed in 1980 as part of the Harborview Project (La Crosse Park System, p. 6).

Wittenberg Park, located at 2900 George Street, is the most recent park developed in La Crosse that I could find. It was developed in 1982 and named after Henry Wittenberg, a 30 year board member (La Crosse Park System, p.33).

Goosetown Park, otherwise known as Forest Avenue Park, is located at 19th and La Crosse street. It is known as far back as 1880 as lover's lane. In 1985 it was designated a historical site (La Crosse Park System, p. 8).

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A HISTORY OF LA CROSSE'S MOST POPULAR PARKS

La Crosse has a rich historical heritage. Adding to that heritage is the La Crosse Park System. Now that you have had a brief history on parks in general and how parks were started in La Crosse, I am going to write about La Crosse's five most popular and prominent parks. They are; Pettibone Park, Copeland Park, Grandad Bluff, Myrick Park and Riverside Park. Hopefully when you are finished reading this, the La Crosse Park System will be more enjoyable for you to visit.

At Pettibone Park in 1841 La Crosse came into being. Nathan Myrick came up the mighty Mississippi River that year and docked here. Pettibone Park can be found by crossing the Cass Street bridge and turning right on Plaza Drive.

Pettibone Park, La Crosse's largest park, is really 1/2 of a 350 acre island, called Barron's Island. In the late 1800's ownership of the land switched hands many times, with Buffalo Bill Cody owning the land for a short time. (Peterson, P.5). Finally in 1901 Albert Pettibone, a lumber baron, donated the land to the city. In addition he added a \$50,000 endowment for the Parks' upkeep. (Fry, P.7)

Pettibone Park has been kept, as much as possible, in a natural state. It is here that you may drive leisurely under arching trees, alongside the Mississippi on one side and a Y-shaped lagoon on the other. It is here that you can get an

excellent view of the place where three rivers, the La Crosse, Black, and Mississippi, meet. (Peterson, P.7). From Pettibone Park, one will find fishermen casting along the shores of the Mississippi or still-fishing in the Lagoon. Here at Pettibone Park you will find a heron or a white egret standing quietly in the water, while ducks swim in the more secluded areas. (Fry, P.2).

The park also has a band stand, picnic tables and fireplaces. A natural spring supplies running water to sunbathers at Pettibone beach found at the south-east end of the park. One final thing to look for at Pettibone Park is the 21 ton rock, located near the pavilion. The tablet on the rock recognizes the gift of the park from A.W. Pettibone.

Copeland Park is a twenty acre park located on Copeland Avenue in the North-Side of La Crosse. Picnic areas, playground equipment, tennis courts, a wading pool, and a ball park provide diversified recreational facilities for every member of the family. (Fry, P.10)

This land originally owned by F.A. Copeland was donated to the city in 1921. Sawmills were located at the present site of the park with the large Davidson Boat Building industry flourishing alongside of the sawmills. The hill overlooking Rose Street was hand built for a slope to launch river boats. At the North end of the Park stands a steam locomotive to remind us of the extensive railroad history of North-La Crosse. (White, P.2). This Burlington Steam locomotive and

Milwaukee Road Caboose were placed in the park in 1963. (Park System P.9)

Grandad Bluff is a 150 acre wildlife sanctuary found at the top of Bliss Road, 1,172 feet above sea level. In 1912 the city using private donations of \$17,000 bought the land from Mrs. Frank Hixon, (Nolen, P.12), and since that time visitors from every state and from foreign countries have been meeting on Grandad Bluff. The lookout, 650 feet above the city, provides a view of La Crosse plus 40 miles of the Mississippi River and Minnesota bluffs. On a clear day one can see three states--Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. (Fry P.4).

This Mississippi limestone bluff offers a native scenery distinct from anything else in the United States--a grandeur equalled only by the ancient castled bluffs of the Rhine River. (Park System P.11).

The height of Grandad Bluff enables La Crosse to present unique displays. Each Christmas the Y.M.C.A. Father's Club erects a 21-foot lighted Christmas tree constructed of steel pipe, to be seen from the city. A midnight fireworks display, arranged by the La Crosse Skyrockers Assoc., has become an annual event every New Year's Eve.

As stated earlier, Grandad Bluff has been designated as a wildlife sanctuary. Many kinds of birds and animals inhabit the area. Even an occasional deer may investigate the Park. (Fry P.5). Grandad Bluff is also a great picnic area, and includes picnic tables and a shelter house, fireplaces with

firewood, and running water.

Myrick Park, named after La Crosse's first settler--Nathan Myrick, was bought by the city for \$1,160 in 1873 (Nolen, P.20), and can be found on La Crosse Street between Losey Blvd. and West Ave.

Myrick Park is a 20 acre picnic area and zoo. Conveniences include fireplaces, tables, a concession stand and comfort station, a wading pool, a bandshell, two shelter houses and playgrounds. (White P.1). For a group picnic or for just a small family outing, Myrick Park is the place to go. The zoo, which includes monkey island, a bear cage, and a petting area, is a real child pleaser.

Two Indian burial mounds of the Turtle Clan dating back to the Pre-Indian period can be found in the North-East corner of the Park. In 1883 the curator of Peabody Museum of Archeology of Harvard, visited these mounds. In the center of the turtle, he discovered remains of a human skeleton. The curator said, "I believe this is the first record of the find of human bones in effigy mounds." (White P.1 and Fry P.6)

The early history of La Crosse is written into Riverside Park, which is located on the riverfront at the end of State Street. When the first white man, Nathan Myrick, came to La Crosse, an Indian tribe was camped alongside the present Riverside area. Nathan Myrick, a fur trader, settled on Pettibone Island. The following winter he crossed the Mississippi with a team of horses and a sleigh to establish a

trading post near the Indian village. (White P.2). A stroll around the 13 acre park reminds one of the past history of La Crosse. First note the Anderson Memorial bandstand. In 1930 this structure was built and maintained from a donation dedicated to Mr. Anderson, a La Crosse mayor who conceived the idea of the La Crosse Park System. (Fry P.6)

The children enjoy climbing on the Spanish War Cannon; but the inscriptions on the cannon tell a complete story of the rise and fall of the Spanish Empire. The cannon cast in Spain, was used to guard the entrance to Manila Harbor a century later. Since the Spanish-American War, the cannon has remained a Riverside Park showpiece. (White P.2).

Also, in Riverside Park, a statue of Hiawatha, the largest Indian statue in the Mid-West, towers 31 feet high and is dressed in authentic Indian garb. The sign alongside mentions Decoran, a famous Indian Chief, whose tribe fought historic battles in this area. Anthony Zimmerhake and his sons carved this 15 ton statue from a cement block. (Fry P.6).

The La Crosse Queen, a paddle wheel boat, docked at the north end of the park, gives daily boat rides throughout the summer. This paddle boat reminds people of the romantic excursion boats of the past which periodically stopped at La Crosse. (White P.2).

Finally the flower displays and rose beds add an attractive display to the park, masses of tulips bloom in the Springtime. The feature of the flower display is a round,

formalized bed in a "Star" design. This bed has honored the
Sold Star Mothers of La Crosse for the past several years. (Fry
P. 7).

These five major parks of La Crosse combine to total
only 432 acres of land but this small sum of land brings
immeasurable joy to the citizens of La Crosse. Hopefully
with this report we have proven the need of parks and why they
are so important to any community.

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