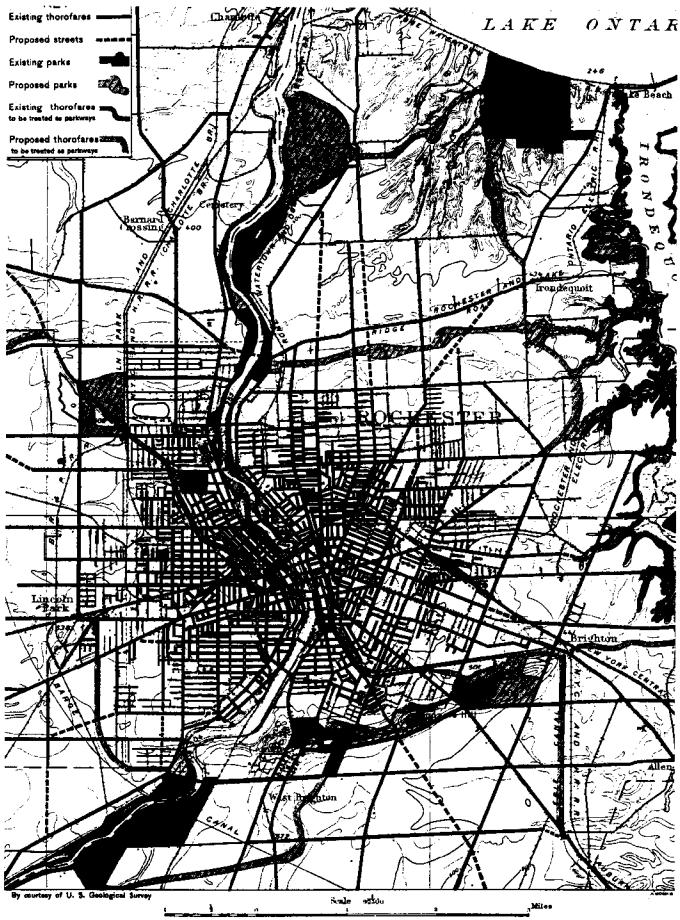
ROCHESTER HISTORY

Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck, *Editor*

Vol. L April, 1988 No. 2

The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted

by Marjorie Wickes and Tim O'Connell



Above: U.S. Geological Survey map of Rochester showing thorofares, parks and parkways. (City Department of Maps and Records).

Cover: Photograph of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. in about 1895 (From the Olmsted Office Portfolio).

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by the Rochester Public Library. Address correspondence to City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Ave., Rochester, NY 14604.

Subscriptions to the quarterly *Rochester History* are $6.00 per year by mail. $4.00 per year to people over 55 years of age and to non-profit institutions and libraries outside of Monroe County. $3.60 per year for orders of 50 or more copies.

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Lilacs in bloom attracted 80 to 100,000 visitors to Highland Park every year. This photograph taken a half a century ago conveys the natural beauty that was a part of Olmsted's design.

Introduction

This year marks the centennial anniversary of the Rochester Park System. Since the acceptance of the gift of the first twenty acres of land from George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry, parks within Monroe County have grown to more than 11 thousand acres. This centennial year is an appropriate occasion to reflect on Rochester's four major parks, Highland, Seneca and Maplewood, and Genesee Valley Parks.

Rochester's Parks
The Olmsted Legacy

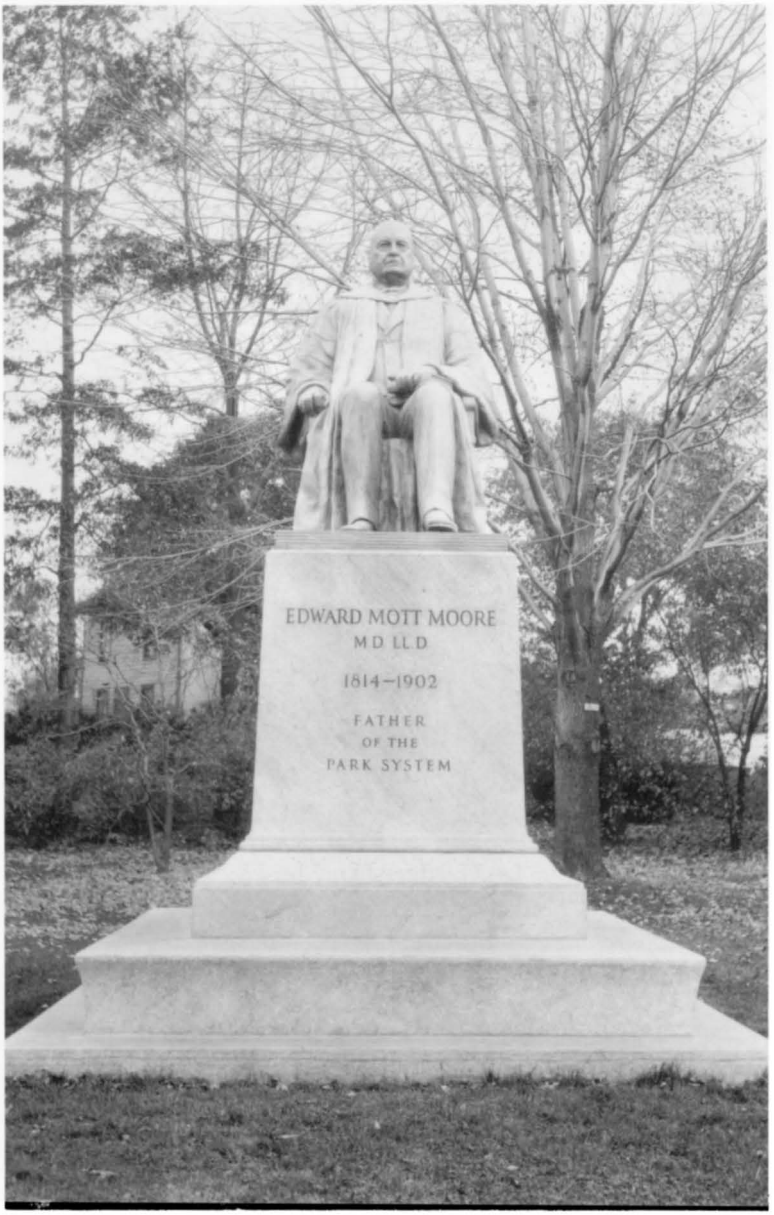
When the celebrated landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted addressed the Rochester Park Board soon after adoption of his son's plan for the city's major parks, he said, "some day persons will make it a point to stop off at Rochester to visit your parks." By 1910, the prophecy was fulfilled.

Plans for the three major parks: Highland, Genesee Valley and Seneca Parks (originally including Maplewood Park), were accepted by 1893; but ten years earlier, few could have predicted Olmsted's statement or even the existence of parks in Rochester. Land offered in 1883 by George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry was not at first accepted by the Common Council.

Before the parks were organized, many Rochesterians enjoyed walks and picnics at Mt. Hope Cemetery.[1] The landscape as well as the variety in topography was as attractive as a park. The Mt. Hope Nurseries owned by George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry provided a park-like atmosphere also. Their grounds around the nursery office and Patrick Barry's home were landscaped as a showcase for specimen stock. Citizens enjoyed these displays much as they would a park, but while the need for public parks was demonstrated, it was not politically recognized.

Two major concerns led to the lack of enthusiasm for parks. Taxes were high in the rapidly expanding city and a park system did not justify any further tax increases. Secondly, the proposed locations were too distant from concentrations of people. Although the economy was in slow transition from agricultural to light industrial, it was not apparent that the land would change on a large scale in future years. Thus, there was no haste to preserve land for public use. Planning for proper use of land, although long-recognized as important by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., did not receive adequate recognition from legislative and political bodies around the nation.

Dr. Edward Mott Moore, a Rochester physician, sought community support and through his efforts, the Common Council took steps to receive the gift of land from Ellwanger and Barry. On October 3, 1887, Common Council legally accepted the 19.63 acres located to the east of Mt. Hope Reservoir. The conditions of acceptance were restrictive. The deed required the employment of a landscape engineer to develop what became known as Highland



Edward Mott Moore, a city physician, was a strong advocate of the park system because it offered recreational space as well as fresh air. He encouraged Common Council to accept the first park lands as a gift from George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry and he served as the first Park Commissioner. His statue stands in Genesee Valley Park.

The Olmsted Firm designed squares as well as parks. The city squares throughout the city served as parks until the growing population required larger spaces and rapidly developing countryside hastened the need to preserve open spaces. Much of the park land purchased by the city, preserved the country atmosphere for future generations.

Park as an arboretum which served as a model for Genesee Valley, Seneca and Durand-Eastman Parks. The deed restrictions ensured that the excellence of Ellwanger and Barry's Nursery, would continue to be associated with them.

The Board of Park Commissioners was created on April 27, 1888. Common Council provided the Board with $300,000 to be used for land acquisition. Now, the Board was responsible, not only for the development of Highland Park as an arboretum, but for the acquisition of land for parks, boulevards and parkways. Initially, the Commissioners desired a parkway that would encircle the city, but they soon realized that proper selection of land was best served by professional advice.

The Board visited Buffalo to learn of its experience with Frederick Law Olmsted. Two major points were stressed: secure as much land as needed because land values escalate, and select a landscape architect to advise on site selection and needed acreage.

The Executive Committee was impressed by Olmsted's work in Buffalo. The views of five landscape architects were solicited and evaluated. Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, a former partner of Olmsted's, were among those evaluated. Nonetheless, the firm, Frederick Law Olmsted and Son, was selected on October 8, 1888, for the sum of $5,000 for three years of service from the date of the first visit.

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (1822-1903) and his partner, Calvert Vaux, legitimized the field of landscape architecture with their successful plan (1858) for Central Park known as "Greensward". It was the first urban public park in America specifically designed for that purpose. The success of the park led to a national movement to create similar parks. Many people are unaware that Olmsted-designed parks were the result of deliberate planning and construction because they appear to be natural. His plans not only provided practical solutions to such problems as traffic control, water control, proper placement of plant material and buildings to create beauty —for the landscape was a work of art.

Olmsted designed parks to accommodate a heterogeneous society. The "art" and the design of all of Olmsted's parks had one purpose: to create a country atmosphere for all people.

The principles of his designs according to Dr. Charles Beveridge, an historian and Olmsted scholar, are —A liberal use of plantings, the creation of natural scenery and topography, provision of adequate drainage, subordination of all individual designs to the overall design, the separation of styles and uses that may conflict, the creation of plantings with indefinite boundaries that give an illusion of greater size, designing for effect: the soothing pastoral design with scattered trees and water and the picturesque design with heavy plantings of shrubs on rugged landscape.

Olmsted's reputation extended beyond the creation of urban parks to the establishment of national and state parks. He wanted to preserve the splendor, grandeur and mystery of nature as public lands. His survey work and plans for Yosemite National Park were instrumental in starting a national park movement.

The talents of Olmsted, Ellwanger and Barry produced national fame for the new Rochester park that came to be known as Highland Park in 1890.

The Mt. Hope Reservoir was already built at Highland Park when Olmsted designed it. Though he preferred to design water to appear natural, the reservoir continues to attract visitors to admire its aerating fountain.

Highland Park

Olmsted's design constraints at Highland Park were that sizable acreage was not immediately available, the topography did not provide areas to be used as meadows, some horticultural material was already in place, additions had to be compatible with an arboretum and the large Mt. Hope reservoir, already on the site, had to be accommodated in the planning.

Highland Park is a part of the Pinnacle Range, a moraine that resulted from glacial deposits of sand and gravel. To preserve these features, one of Olmsted's first steps was the preparation of a topographical map. Calvin C. Laney, a civil engineer, was appointed Superintendent of the Parks in April of 1889 and he surveyed the park.

Olmsted designed an entry at South Avenue on the ridge of the moraine. The appearance was formal with evenly spaced trees lining either side of the street, somewhat reminiscent of a French *allée*. Where the present gatehouse for the reservoir is located, the road divided into curves to provide more divergent access within the park. A curved road also provided an entry from South Goodman

Street. A circle at the apex of the hill afforded panoramic views as far as Lake Ontario to the north and the Bristol Hills to the south.

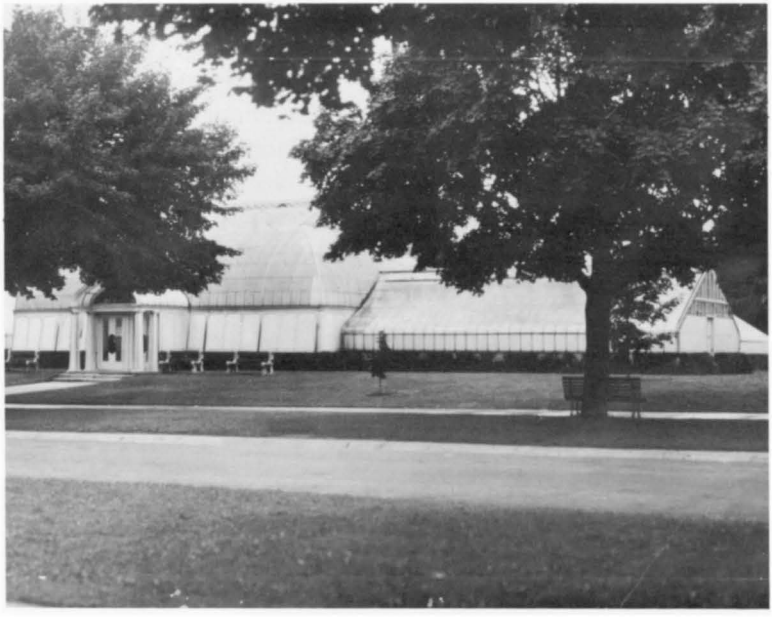
The opportunity for enjoying the scenic vistas was enhanced by a pavilion dedicated in the First Park Ceremony in 1890 to the children of Rochester by Ellwanger and Barry. It was designed by the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan and Cooledge under the supervision of Frederick Law Olmsted. The building, a large, tiered, circular, wooden structure, created controversy when George W. Elliott, a member of the Parks Commission, privately submitted to Olmsted his own design based on the Greek cross. Elliott wanted to provide healthful conditions and an attractive atmosphere for women and children. Exposure to fresh air were particularly desirable, because he had lost two children to cholera. This left Olmsted with an awkward dilemma, and he, of course, had to let Dr. Moore, the Parks Commissioner, resolve the situation. Dr. Moore was able to implement the Olmsted design. Lack of maintenance weakened the pavilion and it was destroyed in the 1960s.

In 1894, a two-story building west of the pavilion was built which combined two separate functions. Placed below the hill from the pavilion, the second story was a refectory, or cafeteria, and the first floor provided office space and maintenance equipment. The upper story has been removed, but the first story can be seen today.

John Dunbar, a horticulturist, was appointed foreman of Highland Park in 1891, and in January, 1895, he became Assistant Superintendent. Flowering and fruiting shrubs hardy enough to survive winters in Monroe County, were planted on the south slope in 1892. By 1896, an extensive collection of conifers was planted on the north slope. Ellwanger and Barry gave a specimen of every kind of plant in their nursery, and purchases by Dunbar included plant material from Germany, England, and France.

Dr. C. S. Sargent, director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, visited Rochester in 1902 and offered seedlings of trees and shrubs collected by E. H. Wilson on a visit to China. Dunbar selected 368 species of these trees and shrubs. The Arnold Arboretum provided Rochester with plant material that allowed near-duplication of itself. Although Olmsted recommended selected plants in his original plans, the plantings in Highland Park far exceeded the number and variety of the modest recommendations he made.

The H. G. Warner estate, located to the west of South Avenue and adjacent to Highland Park, was acquired in 1907. Many years before, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. noted that this land would



The Lamberton Conservatory was built in 1911 in Highland Park through a bequest by Mary Starbuck as a memorial to her brother-in-law, Alexander B. Lamberton, a former Park Commissioner.

make a fine park. Still, Highland Park, to him, was not a "proper" park because it lacked water that appeared to spring from natural sources.

In 1910, Mary A. Starbuck willed $20,000 to construct a greenhouse at Highland Park in memory of her brother, Alexander B. Lamberton, president of the Board of Park Commissioners from 1902 to 1918. The recently expanded and remodeled greenhouse is one of the few remaining structures from the Olmsted era.

In 1902, Olmsted's son, John, visited the new Highland Park gatehouse at the reservoir. He objected to the protrusion of the building that blocked the sidewalk, but he was unable to change the plan as work had progressed too far. He also objected to the pale yellow brick because it was out of harmony with the park scenery, but he did approve of the stone terrace for the north front. This building exists today without major changes.

Painters often captured the pastoral beauty of Genesee Valley Park as shown in this early post card.

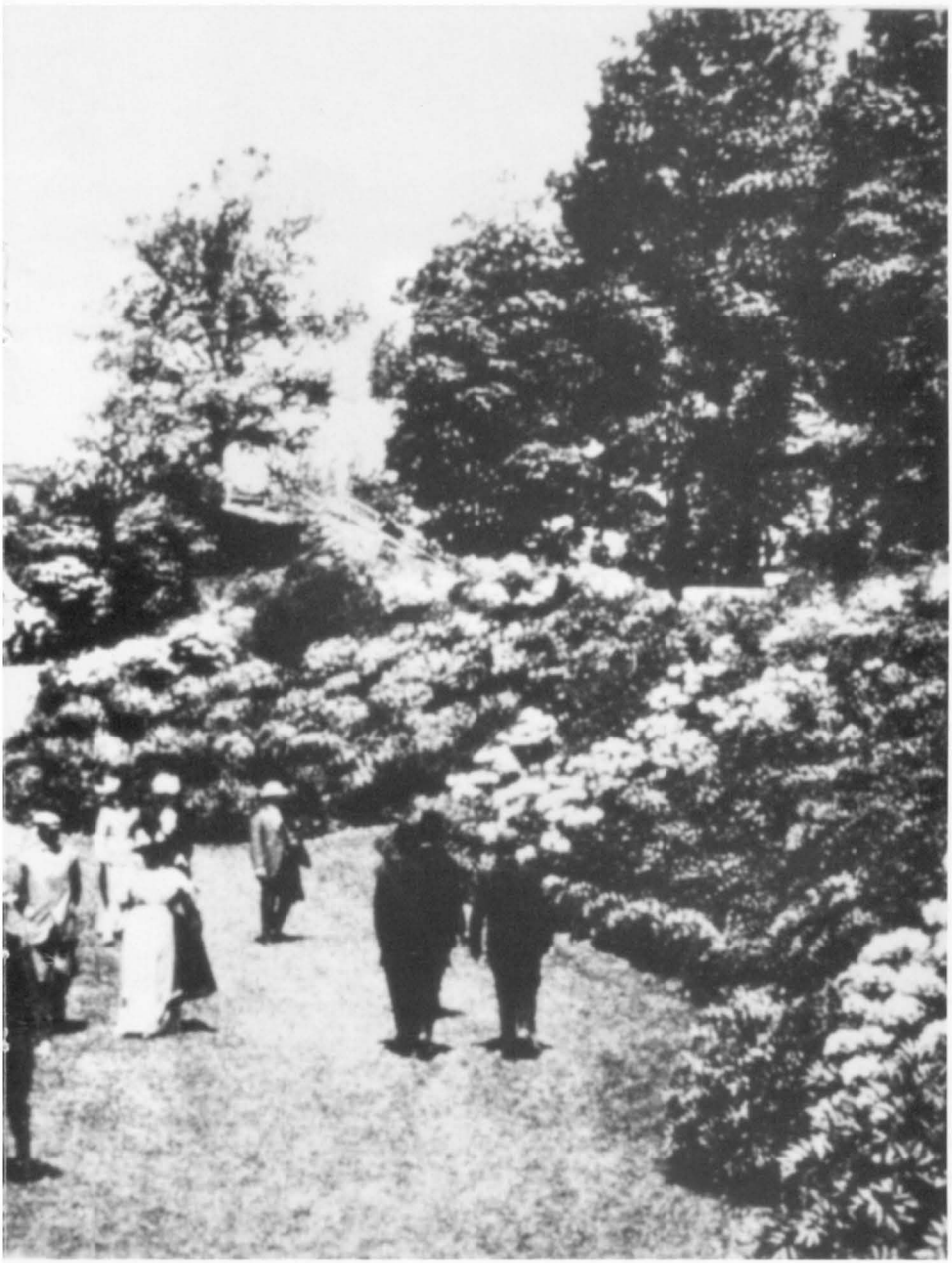
Genesee Valley Park

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. recommended that the land along the river be purchased for the park. Unlike Highland Park, this was a site that could include the three basic elements he felt were necessary for any large park: wood (trees and shrubs), turf and water, either natural or artificial with an appearance of naturalness. The site was largely farm land that contained vast meadows. Until the park was officially designated as South Park, Olmsted's plans identified it as Meadow Park.

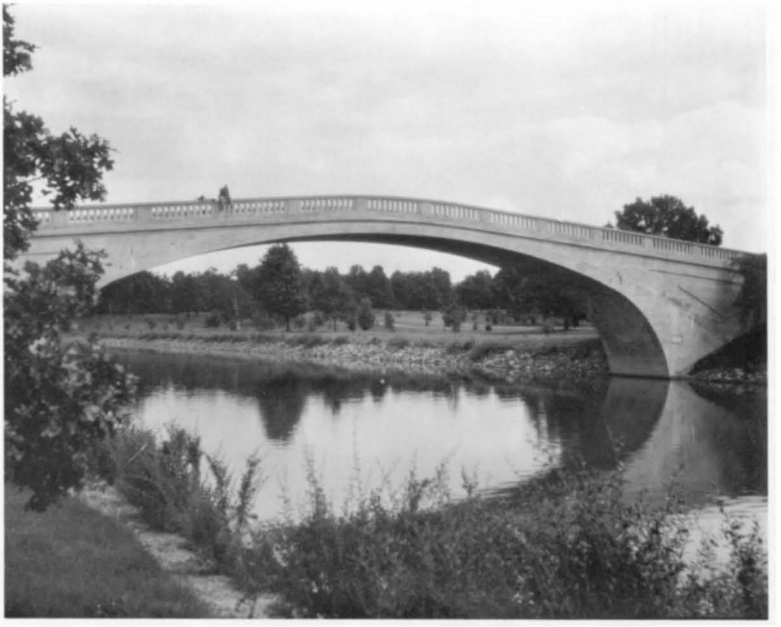
Despite five years of public opposition to parks, the Board of Park Commissioners exerted considerable pressure on Olmsted to make recommendations for acquisitions at Genesee Valley Park. Olmsted wrote that the advice regarding purchase of land was tentative and depended on the topography and that he works from the larger to the smaller. He could not make decisions in an instant. He deliberated over designs and preferred to study topography and other aspects of the land before making a final decision. His plans included land bordering both sides of the Genesee River.

Much to the dismay of John C. Olmsted,[2] the rerouting of the Erie Canal to become a part of the Barge Canal, bisected the park.

The Children's Pavilion at the top
dedicated in 1889 to the children
park ceremony. Rhodedendron Va
the pavilion. (From an early post



of the hill at Highland Park was of Rochester in the first official lley provided a beautiful walk to card).



The pedestrian bridge over the New York State Barge Canal at Genesee Valley Park created an unintrusive crossing through the middle of the park as it reflected in the water.

On May 10, 1918, the waters of the Barge Canal and the Genesee River merged within the park. The Olmsted firm designed a bridge for the canal in 1912. A dam was built at Court Street to provide a higher water level as a widewater for barges.

To a large extent, Olmsted treated the east and west sides of the park according to function. In general, the east side provided an atmosphere of pastoral tranquillity. A long, gently curved carriage drive, which circled around the entry, continued to an oval turnaround at the southern tip of the park. A pedestrian path was built along the river, and other paths led to the meadow and the deer park.

In 1893, the pastoral nature of the park was emphasized by the introduction of sheep. Olmsted recommended hiring a shepherd before purchasing an initial flock of 80 sheep. They also served the useful function of keeping the grass short. During the summer, 62,500 trees were planted in a forest plantation along the Erie Railroad and Westfall Road. These trees, planted by the railroad, hid the tracks from view within the park. Ten thousand, five hundred shrubs and 10,000 willows were planted in groves and along

In 1893 Olmsted suggested that a flock of sheep tended by a shepherd would emphasize the pastoral beauty of the Genesee Valley Park. (Courtesy of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House).

the river bank. In April of 1890, 493 deciduous trees and 1,280 evergreen trees were planted, and in the fall, 152 deciduous trees and many shrubs were planted.

A playground and tennis court were built. By 1899, the meadow became a golf course, one of the first public golf courses in the country. **The deer park became a polo grounds.** When Olmsted designed public parks, he faced a constant battle to provide facilities available to all people, not just the privileged.

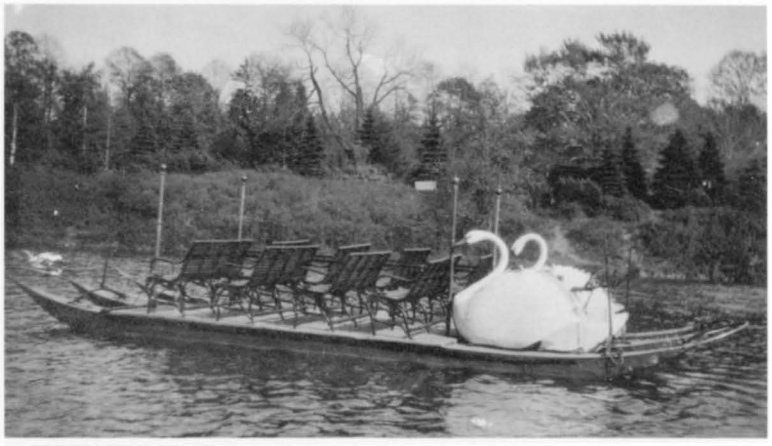
The west side of the park provided opportunities for active recreation. North of the Elmwood Avenue bridge were several boathouses as well as ball and gymnastic grounds. South of the bridge was a large ball ground that served as a skating rink in the winter. In 1908, Francis Baker gave more than 120 acres to expand Genesee Valley Park.

The original atmosphere of Genesee Valley Park has been strained by the Genesee Expressway which diminished the pastoral atmosphere.

Olmsted's designs blended new plantings with graceful mature trees like this magnificent elm. The enormity of the tree is evident by comparison to this park visitor in this turn of the century post card.

Ice skating at Genesee Valley Park near the University of Rochester has been popular for decades. This photograph was taken in the 1940s.

When the Genesee country was first settled, Indian paths like this one preserved along the river at Maplewood Park were the only routes through the wilderness.



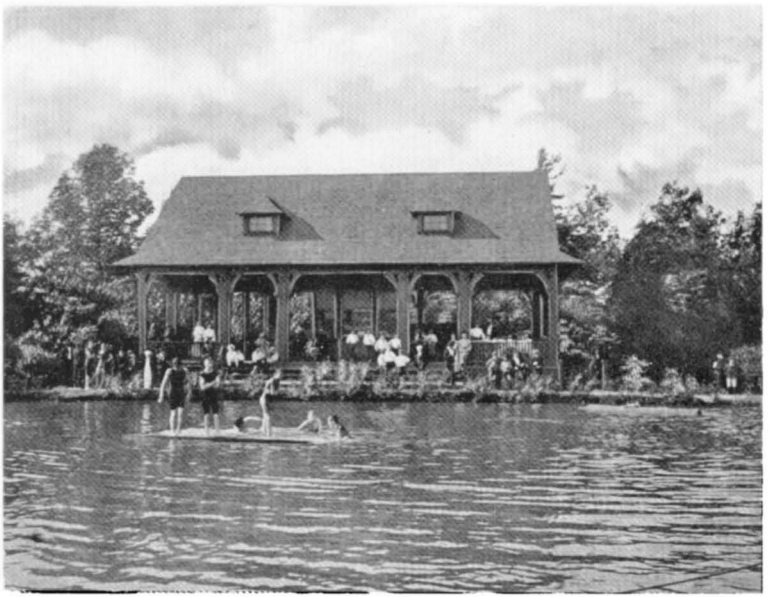
Swan boats carried visitors around Trout Lake at Seneca Park until 1922. Drivers sat on a cast iron seat and peddled the boat like a bicycle.

Seneca Park

Recognizing the Indian heritage as well as the geologic development of the deeply cut stone in the river gorge, North Park was renamed Seneca, meaning "stone". Frederick Law Olmsted designed this three mile park on the east side of the Genesee River as well as the Maplewood Park that stretched for a mile and a half on the west side. Olmsted felt the river was the city's greatest natural asset and its beauty should be preserved.

In 1893, two years after the Park Commission authorized Olmsted's plans, work was begun on carriage drives and walkways. The Seneca Park bridge opened in 1890 connecting Maplewood and Seneca Parks. Pedestrian walkways and carriage drives parallelled the river on both sides and circled the artificially built Trout Lake created in Seneca Park by damming a natural spring. Swan boats floated on the lake until 1922. Scenic look-outs were placed at intervals on both sides of the river. Olmsted advised that future landscaping should consider that:

> *Where woods are cut through or the edges cut away exposing tall unfurnished trunks, plantings should be made to connect foliage with the ground.*
>
> *Where trees or shrubs are much drawn up by crowding they should be gradually thinned and replaced by new plants .*



Many people can remember the hot summer days spent at the swimming pool and pavilion at Seneca Park as shown in this early post card.

> *In planting, all appearances of gardening should be avoided, excepting such cultivation as is necessary to establish plants.*
>
> *Plants indigenous to the park and vicinity should predominate in the planting, and should be planted into conditions similar to those in which they are growing wild.*
>
> *Garden forms and exotic plants should as a rule not be used in any part of the park with the exception of the following kinds which are either natives of other parts of the country, similar to natives in character or especially adapted to certain conditions.*[3]

A refectory once stood near the railroad tracks at the northern end of the upper plateau. It provided a view of the lake. The encircling paths, trees and shrubs near Trout Lake have also disappeared.

A great variety of oak and hickory trees were planted, singly as well as in groves.

The band stand near the rose garden at Maplewood Park was the site of hundreds of musical performances every summer.

Maplewood Park

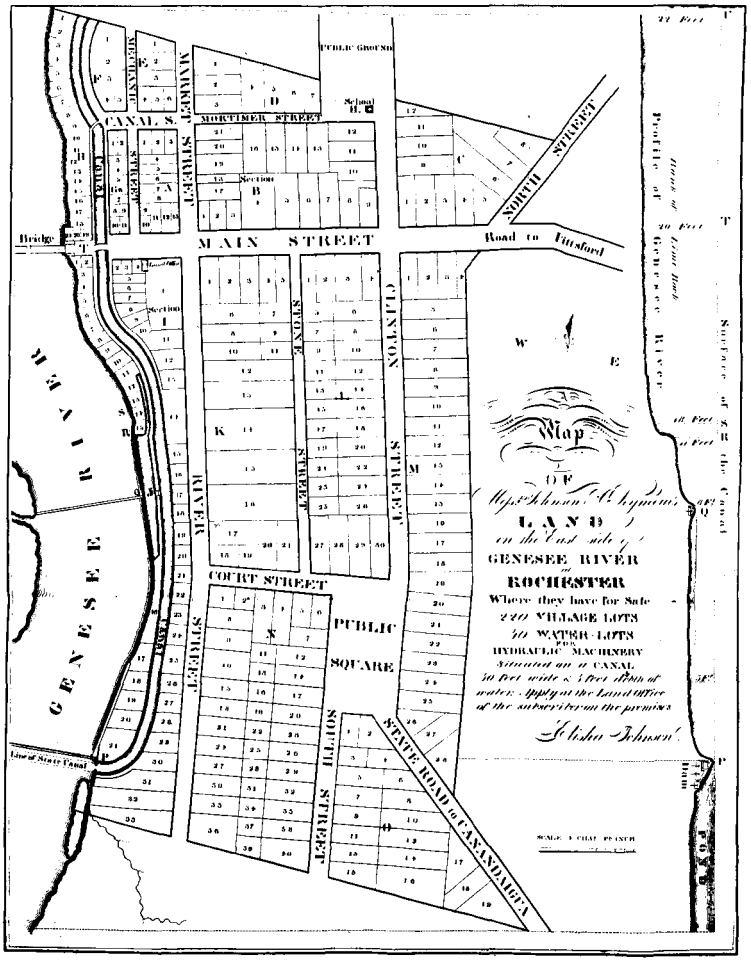
One can still sense the grandeur of the drive along the edge of the river at Maplewood Park. The trolley carried families to its terminus where they picnicked at Maple Grove on Lake Avenue. A band stand, shelter and golf course attracted crowds to performances and outdoor activities. Until it burned down in 1894, the Glen House, just below the Maple Grove, attracted diners and dancers who arrived by boat, descended stairs or rode an elevator from the park above.

Conclusion

Like a necklace of emeralds, a parkway was designed in 1891 to encircle the city and connect the parks. The only section of this original design ever completed was Seneca Parkway. One hundred years after the acceptance of the first gift of land from Ellwanger and Barry, Rochester's parks reflect the pride of its people in the "Flower City."

Footnotes for "The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted"

1. *Mt. Hope Cemetery, built in 1838, is an example of one of the first publicly owned cemeteries. It was developed according to a total plan. This approach to planning is a forerunner of the technique employed by Olmsted in planning urban parks.*
2. *J. C. Olmsted, letter to C. C. Laney in the possession of the Library of Congress.*
3. *M. M. Graff, Central Park, Prospect Park, a New Perspective.*



Brighton March 30th 1818.

Dear Sir,

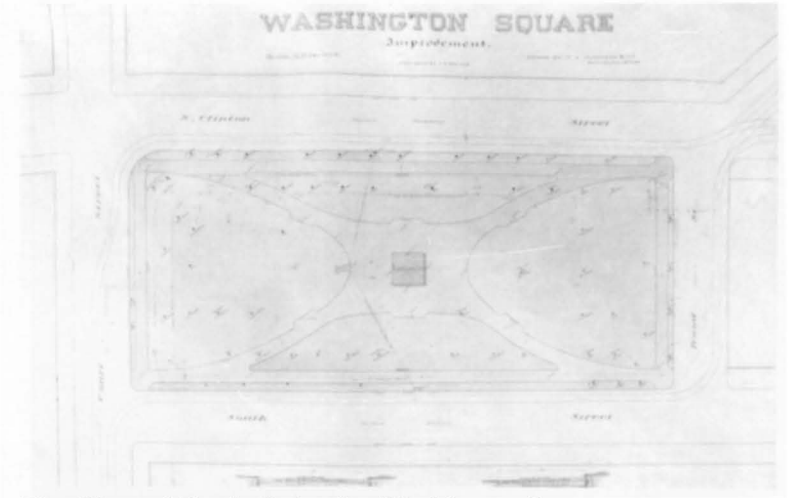
Your favour has just come to hand & have complied with your request. I should be happy in attending to any of your commands.

I am respectfully Dear Sir yours

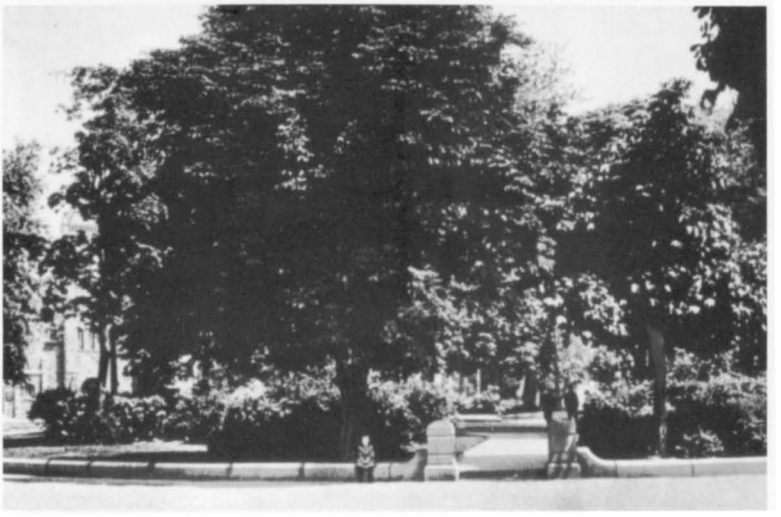
Elisha Johnson

Nelson Esquire

Washington Square is noted in this map as the public square set aside by east side developer Elisha Johnson for a court house that never was built. Washington Square was the site of many rallies and speeches and is today a favorite park for people working downtown.



The Olmsted Firm's design for Washington Square.



Plymouth Park, designed by the Olmsted Firm, is enjoyed as a neighborhood park. The needs of the public soon outgrew the small parks.

Back cover: Frederick Law Olmsted stands among the natural plantings that made his landscape designs famous.

Marjorie Wickes is a Frederick Law Olmsted scholar and is an advisor to the Monroe County Parks Commission. Tim O'Connell works in the city's Department of Maps and Records.