

Before Olmsted: Inspiration Behind the Louisville Parks System

Origin of Louisville's Olmsted Parks System

“Success has a thousand fathers, and failure is an orphan” goes a familiar saying. The overwhelming success of Louisville, Kentucky’s city park system has fostered many tales of how it began and who were the original civic boosters.

Long before Frederick Law Olmsted talked about developing a park system to a small gathering of local leaders at the Pendennis Club on May 20, 1891, a group of Louisvillians were meeting and strategizing on how to implement such a proposal.

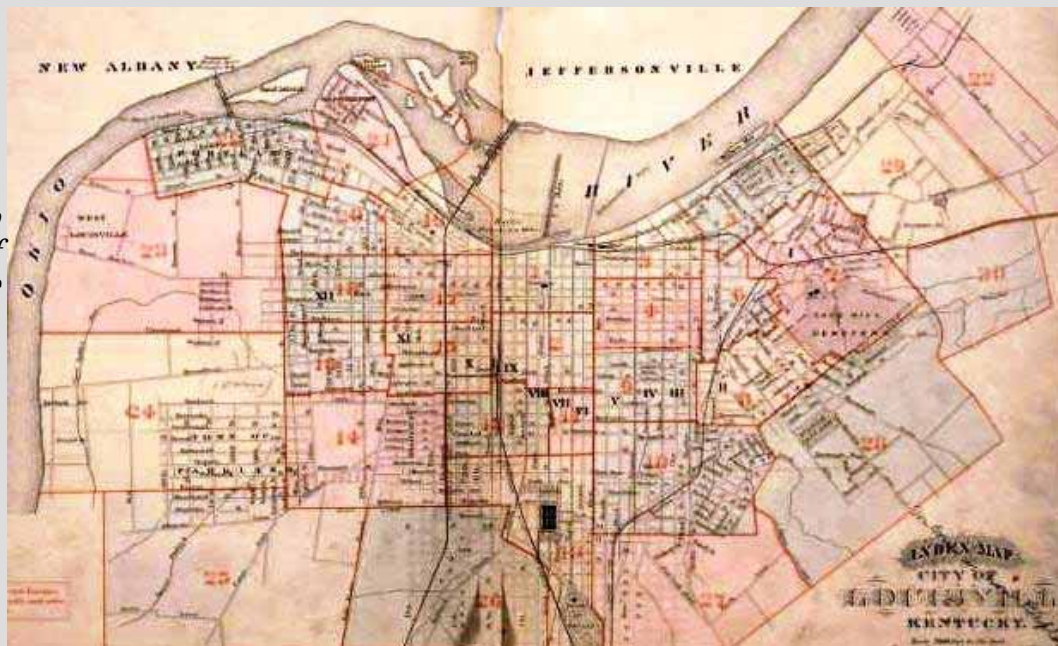
Provided below is the first official documentation of these individuals and their vision of how the parks would be built and benefit the city. It was published in the Courier-Journal on June 5, 1887.

The following is the full text and was transcribed by Steve Wiser.

The Louisville Courier-Journal, June 5th, 1887

The Salmagundi Club is society organization for mutual improvement. It holds fortnightly meetings throughout the year, at which questions in philosophy, science, art, history, biography, literature, political, and social economy, etc., are severally discussed. At one of its late meetings the subject of public parks for the city of Louisville was presented by Capt. Thomas Speed, and fully discussed. The question proved so interesting that a committee of which Maj. William J. Davie was made chairman, was appointed to collate the argument and present it with additional suggestions in the front of a report at a future meeting. The committee made a resume of the discussion as instructed, and appointed Col. Andrew Cowan to write out the report and Mr. Charles Hermany to prepare the maps illustrating the location of the several parks it was thought Louisville should have sooner or later. This report is now published as a matter of common interest, and is presented to consideration of the public rather as suggestions than conclusive. The committee entire consisted of Maj. Wm. J. Davie, John E. Green,

*Right.
1884 Map
of
Louisville*

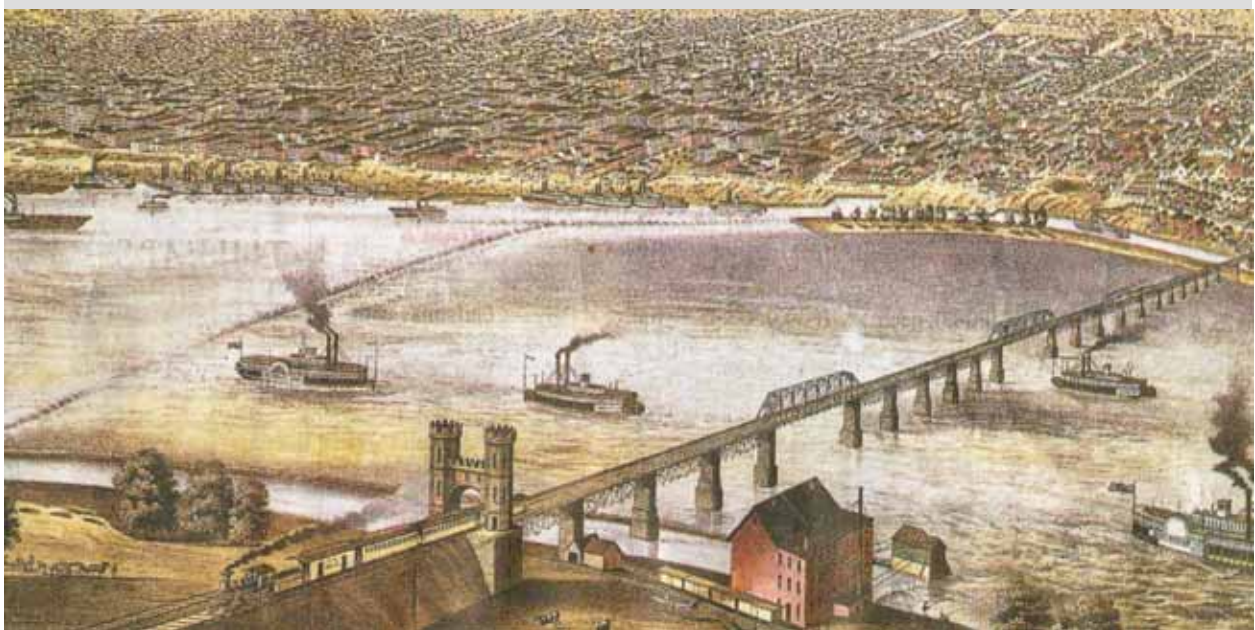


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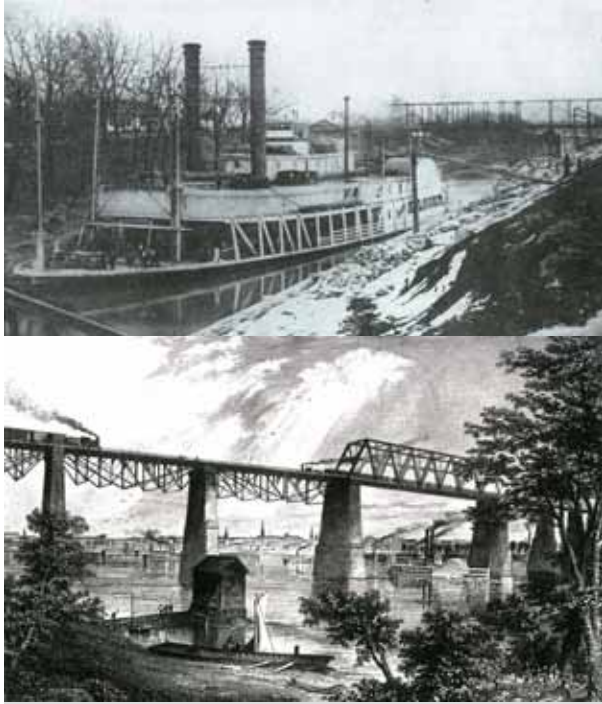
Andrew Cowan, S. E. Jones, Charles Hermany, J. H. Lindenberger, C. W. Kelly, A. R. Cooper, Basil W. Duke, Edgar Hounsfield, A. P. Humphrey, R. W. Knots, Thomas Speed, J. M. Wright, B. H. Young, William R. Belknap, John Mason Brown, Geo. M. Davis, Harry Weissinger, Rufus Saxton, and Henry Watterson.

Following is the report:

Chambers Encyclopedia for 1808 mentions Louisville as a city of Kentucky, on the falls of the Ohio, 130 miles below Cincinnati. Until a date quite recent, it has been a common opinion abroad that Louisville was a second rate town on the Ohio River below Cincinnati and of little importance any way. The Louisvillian however was proud of his city: boasted of its geographical advantages as the gateway to the South, of its whiskey and tobacco, as the best in the world; its beautiful women, elegant homes, and lovely cemetery, to which the visitor was usually driven as part of the regular entertainment for strangers. The quiet easy-going business ways of Louisville merchants were understood by the managers of freight pools, passenger combination and railway lines in general who usually fixed such rates and percentages for Louisville as they saw proper, knowing that the business men of the Falls city, unlike their active and aggressive competitors of Chicago or Cincinnati, would take what was given them and make no fuss over it. But, within in a few years the lines of trade have been and the margin of profit has been growing so small that a change has been coming over the spirit of things here. Old houses, one after another, have passed away while a younger vigorous pushing element is taking control of the commercial and manufacturing enterprises of the city, which stands, apparently, at the beginning of a new epoch in her history. The Board of Trade after a long and persistent struggle forced the Trunk-line Managers to make freight rates from the East to Louisville on the basis of her distance from the seaboard by the shortest route, hereby effecting the saving of an immense sum annually to the business of the city, and demonstrating the value of organization and effort. But cheap tickets, excursion rates, solid trains, fast time, su-



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perb railway coaches, and many other advantages uncommon or unknown to Louisville are every day occurrences within Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Cincinnati, and places of lesser note. Across the Potomac or the Ohio, with few exceptions, such with superior accommodations, fast trains and reasonable fares are yet novel. The South has been the dumping-ground for second-hand Pullman cars and much of the second-hand material of Northern railways, which Louisville as a Southern city has to take her share of.

On spite however of indifference and easy going business ways, in spite of ourselves, in fact, Louisville has gone forward, her business has grown, her manufacturers have increased, her population has doubled. To her natural advantage more than to enterprise and effort the most of such growth and prosperity is to be credited.

It is time though for a general waking up and a most encouraging feature in the situation of today is the enterprising character of our young men and their growing interests in practical questions affecting the prosperity and growth of the city. Encourage them with generous appreciation of whatever they may undertake for the public good and their own advancement. Nothing stimulates the energy of youth more than just praise. We have had an era of depreciation and doubting; now let us try encouragement and have faith. We have been greatly prone to think that other places were better than our own town, other manufacturers better than similar goods made here, shops elsewhere superior to our shops; lands and houses in our city investments to be shunned; houses in Chicago, lands in Texas, cattle on the plains, mines or railroads, everything, and anything almost away from Louisville commands money while enterprises of more than equal promise at home remain dwarfed for lack of capital and encouragement.

If Louisville is indeed entering upon an era of great prosperity, we must learn to pull together and help each other more than has been our habit in the past. We will have to put Louisville abreast of her sister cities in respect to energetic action and vigorous self assertion. We must have not only employment for all who will make their houses among us, and furnish educational advantages of the best character, by maintaining the public schools, but we must also provide for the recreational and health of the people.

Public parks for the recreation, health, and benefit of the public and free to all forever are recognized as imperative necessities wherever large bodies of people have come together for permanent residence. It has been the com-



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mon assertion heretofore when this question has been discussed here that we do not need parks because our streets are so broad and the grounds surrounding our handsome residences are so ample and beautiful. But nothing can be more misleading than assertions of this kind. It is true that the streets of Louisville are generally broad but are they more so that those cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, Toledo, Chicago, and many others, where public parks have been established? It is true that we can point to many private residences possibly a larger proportion than can be found in any other large city whose grounds are ample and beautiful.



But, the largest part of our population have no such advantages and live from year to year in small dwellings or rooms oppressed throughout the long summer months by excessive heat, from which they cannot escape.

From the wide streets powdered limestone is blown in clouds through every window or door that may be open to admit the breeze. The hot pavements and unwholesome gutters are the children's playgrounds, while hundreds perish every year for lack of pure air and wholesome recreation. When the hot days of June and the oppressive nights of July and August produce the usual exodus of the wealthy, and those who can afford to travel to the lakes or the mountains, there yet remain one hundred and fifty thousand men, women, and children who toil on and suffer under conditions from which there is no respite. For the working people and for all the people who must reside within the confines of the city from year to year, because they cannot afford to go away, public parks are imperatively needed and must be provided.



This view of the question may be thought wholly sentimental or philanthropic, but it is neither when considered as we are accustomed to in America to think of the people, or to estimate, for instance, any taxation for public education. The free-school system, save in rare localities, is no longer criticized. As being founded on sentiment or maintained from motives or philanthropy alone. So, also, where public parks are long established, as in New York, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, or cities already referred to, it is the all but unanimous opinion that they are necessary for the comfort, happiness, and health of the people, regardless of class or worldly circumstances, and should not be dispensed with. As conservators of good morals, as well as good physical conditions, nothing excels the innocent sports and amusements which such public pleasure grounds stimulate and make popular with the masses. But, if we consider the question in a financial way, apart from humanitarian considerations, it will commend itself as a safe and wise investment.

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The parks and boulevards of Chicago which that city begun to acquire in 1869 have cost, inclusive of all improvements to the present year, almost \$10,000,000 – less than a half million of that sum remains unpaid, so that city is now the owner of a system of public parks and boulevards of magnificent extent. Who can estimate the advantages of such pleasure grounds; they have added thousands to the population, millions to the taxable wealth of the city, and must continue to confer such benefits in ever increasing ratio.

No one questions the safety and wisdom of that investment, since the lands and improvements are worth far more today than they cost. A member of one of the largest manufacturing and commercial houses in Chicago, himself without any official connection with the parks, or holding any political office, writes:

‘Since my residence in Chicago, now about seventeen years, I have never heard a complaint from any person about the amount of park taxes or the disbursement of the money, and I doubt if you could find one businessman in fifty who can tell how much he paid for park tax. The one thing in Chicago that seems to give satisfaction to its people is the parks, in their size, management and expense; they have good reason to be proud of them. Recently the lots in Hyde Park have been improved with such a fine class of residences that it has become part of the most desirable property to be had for that purpose.’

The Chicago parks have been a profitable investment for the city, the State, and the people.

Central Park, New York, famous the world round, was secured at great expense and has been improved by lavish expenditures of money, yet that beautiful pleasure ground, free to all the people irrespective of condition or place, has been more than paid for by the heavy revenue derived from adjacent property which has become immensely valuable through the benefits conferred by the park. Prospect Park, one of the most lovely pleasure grounds in the country, represents the best investment made by the city of Brooklyn. Cincinnati, with its narrow streets, and shut in by the hills, overcame her natural disadvantage by providing several parks

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for her people, becoming more attractive to a manufacturing population than is Louisville, without a single free pleasure ground worthy of the name. Buffalo, NY, has about 500 acres of public parks and boulevards, which had cost up till January 1886 \$1,240,000, the city continuing to appropriate from sixty thousand to one hundred thousand dollars yearly for their improvement and extension. There is no difference of opinion there as to the safety and wisdom of the investment. The following contract from the last report of the Buffalo Commissioners will illustrate this:

'In looking back over the period since the establishment of the park scheme, the retrospect can not fail to be exceedingly gratifying to all who are interested in the welfare of our city. The development of the park system has simply kept pace with the advance of our city in every element of prosperity. In 1870, the assessed valuation of real and personal property in the city was \$37,642,132; in 1880, the valuation was \$104,801,190, an increase of 300 per cent. The cost of the parks has been in a large measure compensated by taxes receivable from the increased valuation of the adjacent property, to say nothing of the health giving recreation and pleasure parks afford to the thousands who visit them during the summer months.'



It matters not where the investigation of the park question is carried, at home or abroad, the verdict in its favor is universal. Whether we consider the question in a purely financial way or in the light of sentiment and philanthropy, it appears eminently safe, wise, and important to provide free pleasure grounds of the people. They increase in an important sense the attractions of a city as a desirable place of residence.



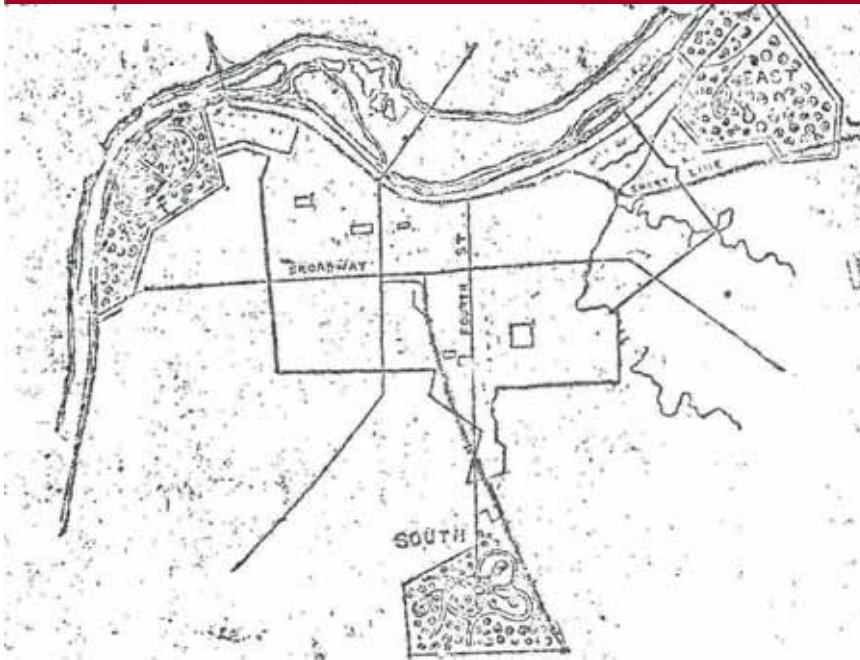
When we make such provisions for the pleasure and health of the people the best class of mechanics will more readily be induced to settle here and will remain when they come. Employers of highly skilled labor know how difficult it has always been to keep the best class of skilled workmen permanently. They find here no recreation for themselves while their wives and children finding small relief from the discomfort and monotony of their pent-up cottages grow discontented and move elsewhere.



Public parks certainly confer benefits equal to all that they cost, and such pleasure grounds for the people of Louisville should be provided without delay. The men or party who will advocate and establish a system of parks commensurate with the future growth of the city, improved sufficiently to meet the present necessities will deserve and win the gratitude of its people.

Surrounding the city on three sides are picturesque grounds, admirably suited for parks and capable of

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Left:
This map accompanied this article on June 5, 1887, and was developed by Charles Hermany (Below)



The three major parks were named East, West, and South. The Eastern park location would change, but the other parks were built in these general locations.

improvement, to satisfy present needs without a large expenditure of money. At no future time in the history of Louisville is it probable that this property may be obtained at such a favorable price as at present. It is likely that the lands requisite and most suitable for the principal parks can be bought at an average price not exceeding \$300 an acre and it is certain that within ten years the increased value of the property adjacent will have exceeded their entire cost. On the east there is the present water works ground, comprising about two hundred and fifty acres in three tracts partially improved and extending from the river to the Shelbyville turnpike, which with the addition of about six hundred acres, will make a magnificent park. On both sides of the water works property the land is beautifully situated and adorned with groves of the forest trees. Beginning at the new reservoir grounds and widening to the east, and also to the west side, until the river is reached, affording a waterfront of suitable width, there is presented a varied landscape of hill, vale, and bottom land of surpassing beauty. The park could be easily reached by several lines of street cars by Story Avenue, Reservoir Avenue, the Brownsboro and River Road and the Shelbyville Pike, also by the narrow-gauge railroad running along the base of its bluffs, by the short-line Railroad to its western front, and from the city wharf by boats, landing the passengers at the park dock.

A grand avenue to the park can be run by way of the East Broadway and the 'Daisy' Road through Forest Hill, a handsome tract of land belonging to the city, thence by a bridge across the workhouse road, and the creek, to a beautiful plateau stretching straight across Shelbyville Road. By reserving a strip on both sides of this avenue of suitable width to accommodate summer villas, the entire cost of the avenue might be returned within a few years.

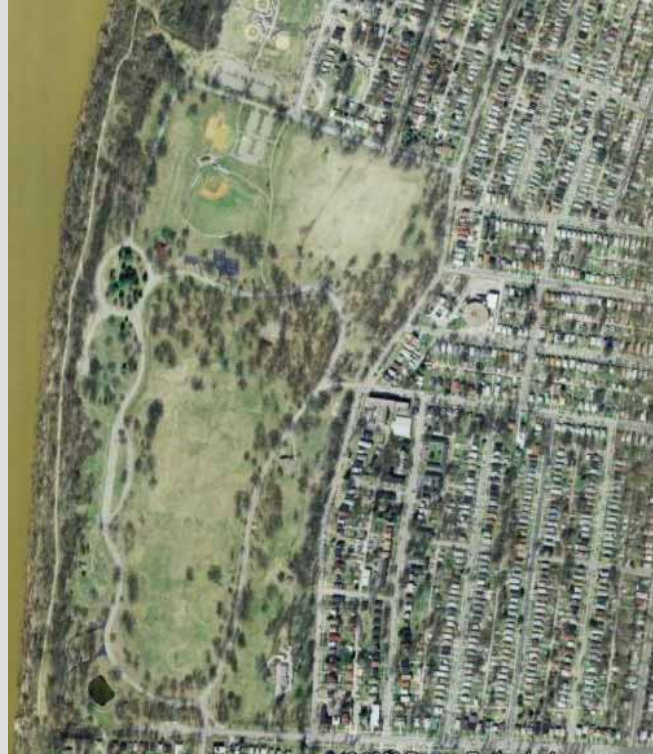


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The finest class of private residences would certainly follow the direction of this grand entrance to the east Park, so that in a short time the grounds beyond East Broadway running back from the Bardstown Road will be covered with handsome dwellings and added to the city.

On the west side of the city we have equally desirable park lands. An extension of Bank Street leads to the river below Portland. The bluffs are quite steep and beyond the river the purple Indiana hills make a picturesque background to the scenery. Beginning here a park semi-circular in form can be laid out with a depth of from one to four blocks, the convex side following the bend of the river and the other side toward the city extending as far south as Broadway. A more beautiful park than this can hardly be desired. Many groves of fine trees are dispersed over its surface, the soil generally is rich and the entire property is capable of suitable improvements at the smallest outlay. This park would be accessible from Bank, Main, Market, Jefferson, and Chestnut Streets and Broadway. Its location would greatly enhance the value of property, stimulate building and similar enterprises among the property owners and largely increase the taxable value of the West End so that within a few years the return to the city would fully cover the cost of maintaining the park.



South of the city on the line of Third Avenue extended certain lands, as is well known, are being kept in park-like condition by the private owners. The privilege of driving into and through these grounds is purchased by many well-to-do people, but they are in no sense free to the public. A park should be located in the vicinity, beginning at the high ground beyond the race track and extending from opposite Brook Street on the east to Sixth on the west, with such depth as the conformation of the ground renders most desirable. When this is done private residences will continue to be built out Third and Fourth Avenue, as well as on First, Second, Fifth, and Sixth Streets, until soon all suitable ground north of the House of Refuge will be improved and built upon, and, indeed, the line of residences may continue out to the gates of the park.

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Above: the old Pendennis Club, at 322 Walnut (now Muhammad Ali) which was formerly the W. R. Belknap residence. On May 20, 1891, Frederick Law Olmsted addressed a small gathering of civic leaders about establishing a parks system in Louisville.

Three parks on the scale and situated as described will afford a means of recreation and health which a great population such as this city should number within fifty years, must have and which is demanded by every consideration which effects the well-being of the people today.

The parks will enhance the attractions of Louisville immensely, will influence thousands to make their homes here who would otherwise pass us by, will add to the wealth and stimulate the business of the city, and will surely repay their entire cost in many ways within the lifetime of thousands who witness the day of their beginning. Within the city limits there is now a small public park known as Baxter Square, situated at Jefferson and Eleventh Streets. It is interesting to witness the crowds who frequent this little park on hot evenings and enjoy the opportunity for breathing an atmosphere purer and less oppressive than that afforded by their small rooms at home.

We ought to provide such breathing places in other parts of the city before it is too late to secure them at very reasonable cost. In the vicinity of Twenty-Fourth and Main Streets, adjoining what is known as National Park, an admirable location for another small park is obtainable. The ground, which is advertised for sale, has a width of almost two hundred feet on Main Street running back some four hundred and fifty feet to Rowan, and is thickly covered with magnificent forest trees. It would require but a suitable fence and a small outlay for walks and seats, to render it available and of great benefit to the working people who are thickly settled in that neighborhood, and of permanent advantage to property in that part of the city. Woodland Garden, at Market and Johnson Streets, is another desirable location for a public square; fine trees shade the grounds which extends through to Main Street, and the cost of all necessary improvements



need be small. In this neighborhood and within easy walking distance of the garden, a large and worthy part of our population reside, by whom such a pleasure ground would be greatly enjoyed and appreciated. A number of public-spirited citizens might unite to purchase both these squares and present them to the city for free use of the people, or at least hold them until the city has authority to acquire them for that purpose. The site of the



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old Short-line depot may be procurable at a reasonable price from its present owners, and by laying out walks, making lawns and flower beds, building a fountain, and providing other convenience that require but a short time to create. It could be made a most attractive place within a year, while in the course of time trees could grow to supply the desirable feature of shade during the day.

A fifth square of the same character should be made somewhere in the vicinity of Preston and Kentucky Streets, convenient to the neighborhood where the two large woolen mills are located. Suitable grounds can readily be had there at moderate prices. The city should also purchase what is known as Floral Park on Sixth Street or the Central Park on Fourth Avenue, and preserve it for the free use of the people. Another square might be set apart beyond Broadway and between Fourteenth and Eighteenth Streets, a section of the city that is rapidly filling up. The western cemetery in its present neglected condition is a disgrace. The streets all about it are building up very fast and steps should be taken to have the bodies removed to some more appropriate ground, well beyond the limits. The city could afford to purchase, adorn, and preserve a more desirable field for the purpose, in exchange for the present grounds, which then can be dedicated to the free use of the living and be maintained in a creditable manner as a public park, as has been done in the case of Baxter Square, so recently a burial ground. With such a system of public parks and squares, suitably improved and maintained there will be no city in the West more attractive than Louisville as a place of residence, an advantage which alone is capable of conferring benefits sufficient to make the burden laid upon tax-payers so light that as has been the case in Chicago, it may not be felt. There ought to be no more hesitation nor delay in going forward with the work here. Some of our lawyers are able, and would be willing to frame the necessary ordinance to be submitted to the next Legislature. Some of our prominent merchants and tax-payers will doubtless heartily support the movement.

Below: Cherokee Park and Cave Hill Cemetery; 1913



All our working people, the great army who spend their whole lives in the city, those who are never able to seek recreation at distant pleasure resorts because duty or necessary compels unceasing attention to daily labor, will unite in demanding that such provision for their comfort and happiness be no longer denied, and when such an ordinance shall be submitted to the people at the polls, it will certainly adopted by an overwhelming majority. In framing such an ordinance that utmost care must be exercised to insure honest and able administration of the act. The



Above: Shelby Park

Below: Iroquois Park



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office of Park Commissioner should not be honorary, without compensation, save perhaps in the case of the President of the Board, who might require to give his entire time to the work. The best and ablest men of the city might aspire to fill the office of Commissioner and may cheerfully make personal sacrifice to further a work of such public importance. No question of party politics should enter into the appointment of these commissioners. Their sole object and purpose will be to promote the pleasure, happiness, and health of the people by providing adequate means for recreation. Then in the esteem and gratitude of those whom they serve, they will find their reward.

The above transcription of the June 5, 1887 Courier-Journal is by Steve Wiser. Mr. Wiser is a local architect and historian, and has written several books on local history and architecture. He can be contacted at WiserAIA@Hotmail.com or via his website at www.WiserDesigns.com

Below are photos of the key civic leaders who helped champion creation of the Louisville Parks system:



Thomas Speed: Member of Salmagundi Club and who initially proposed creation of the parks in a paper to this organization. Speed was a cousin to the famous 'Farmington Speeds'. He was a clerk with the U. S. Court system in Louisville and was also a founding member of the Filson Historical Society.



Andrew Cowan was a passionate advocate for the parks and without his leadership they may not have been built. He owned Cowan & Company which was a leather goods merchant (belts, saddles, etc.). Cowan built a house adjacent to Cherokee Park. He also was a Salmagundi club member.



Gen. John B. Castleman was an accomplished equestrian rider and owned property between Barrett and Baxter Avenues. He allowed some of this property to become part of Eastern Parkway, where the parkway widens between these two streets. Castleman was also elected as one of the first Parks Commissioners.



Besides Cowan and Castleman, the other first Park Commissioners were: **Ernst Christian Bohn** (photo at left); **John Finzer**; **Gottlieb Layer**; and **Thomas Sherley**. Finzer died before he could take office and was replaced by **Rueben T. Durrett**.



Mayor Charles Jacob was elected to four terms as mayor. During his last term, he championed the parks development and using his own funds, purchased 'Burnt Knob' in southern Jefferson County, which at the time was outside the city limits. This property would become Iroquois Park. Jacob's father was John Jacob who was one of Louisville's first major business leaders.

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**1913 Map of Louisville
with the Parks in
existence.**

**The parks were named for
the native Americans who
lived in this region.**

