

Before Olmsted: Inspiration Behind Louisville's Park System

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Interpretation by Steve Wiser

(The following is an analysis by Steve Wiser of the parks proposal that appeared in the Courier-Journal on June 5, 1887. This is his own evaluation of how the Louisville parks system was initiated based on this article. Steve Wiser is a Louisville architect and historian.)

On June 5, 1887, a Courier-Journal newspaper commentary appeared that advocated creation of a parks system for Louisville. It set forth four principle goals for such a park system:

- Advance the city: civic leaders no longer wanted to be viewed as 'second rate'
- Amenity for residents: provide healthy, recreational 'pleasure grounds' for factory workers and their families
- Attract businesses and workers: additional population would translate not only into more commerce but provide new tax revenues as well
- Increase property values: higher residential costs will also provide more tax revenues

Two of the four goals sought more tax revenues which would help pay for construction of this large park initiative. What is now known as 'tax increment financing' (or, TIF), was the same economic strategy 120 years ago to build, and maintain, the parks.

Three large parks were proposed in the Courier-Journal article: East park that would be adjacent to the Ohio River near the Water Tower; West park that would be also adjacent to the Ohio River at the western terminus of Broadway; and, South park at the southern end of Fourth Street. East park would eventually shift to be near Cave Hill Cemetery.



Above: Original map that accompanied the June 5, 1887 Courier-Journal article that indicated 3 park locations: East, South, and West. This map was developed by Charles Hermany.

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The initial parks proponents were a who's who of Louisville business executives: William R. Belknap (*photo at right*), Henry Watterson, Andrew Cowan, Basil Duke, Charles Hermany, and Harry Weissinger, among many other notables. This synergy of civic leadership brought much needed momentum and clout to this city-altering endeavor.



Setting the stage for this expansive environmental project was the Southern Exposition, which ran from 1883 to 1887. This was a significant national event that featured the latest manufacturing innovations as well as art and cultural achievements. It also contained large exterior

grounds with horticultural and garden exhibits which influenced attitudes towards landscape design.

Another important component to the parks proposal was Mayor Charles Jacob. Jacob was independently wealthy. His father, John Jacob, was one of Louisville's first millionaires and owned an area known as Jacob's Woods to the south of Broadway, along Second Street. John Jacob and his business partner Thomas Prather were early Louisville entrepreneurs. Charles Jacob would serve a total of four terms as mayor, and this continuity provided experienced stewardship of this effort.



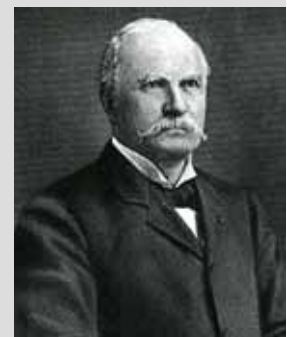
Above:
Mayor Charles Jacob

A final ingredient was Andrew Cowan, who served as ex-officio project manager of the park process. Cowan, who wrote the June 5th article, had the determination and political savvy to pull together all the different elements together. Without Cowan spearheading this initiative, it may not have happened.

Below:
Andrew Cowan

In summary, the parks plan succeeded due to:

- Civic leader buy-in
- Heightened civic pride resulting from the Southern Exposition



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- Continuity of an energetic, knowledgeable mayor
- Passionate advocate in Andrew Cowan

Were the goals set forth in the June 5th, 1887, commentary achieved?

The city did grow but did not attain the desired upper tier status. Louisville though has always ranked high in quality of life and was voted the No. 1 'best place to live' in 2008, which certainly the parks system is a key factor.

Factories boomed in the late 1800's and early 1900's. American Standard, Vogt Machine, Peaslee Gaulbert, Mengle Company, etc., all were prominent industries that employed thousands, and whose workers took advantage of the parks in their leisure time.



More businesses did move into the city. Most notably was Ford Motor Company which built its first factory at the western terminus of Eastern Parkway, and on the route to Iroquois Park. Ford's second factory was also located on a parkway, Southwestern, which was near Shawnee Park.

And, many distinctive homes were built adjacent to the parks. Cherokee in particular is ringed with elegant residences. Iroquois also has fine homes near it, like the Kenwood Hill area, and Shawnee has large houses along its perimeter. All of these well-built structures raised the property values – and taxes.



When Frederick Law Olmsted arrived in Louisville on May 20, 1891, the city was already primed to proceed with the parks system. Olmsted took this concept and made it world-class.



Left: Frederick Law Olmsted

Right: Old Pendennis Club location at 322 W. Walnut (now Muhammad Ali) where Olmsted spoke to a small gathering of civic leaders on May 20, 1891. A few days later, the city officially hired him to design the park's system.



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On June 5, 1887, the civic leadership of Louisville set in motion a grand plan that transformed the city in an unique, and remarkable manner. This vision, dedication, and implementation created the Olmsted Parks system, which has provided recreational and enjoyment for over a century.

To read the full June 5, 1887 Courier-Journal article, log onto www.WiserDesigns.com and click 'Before Olmsted'.

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Louisville is in the midst of a parks revitalization movement that is building upon the Olmsted vision of 110 years ago. Provided below are the significant initiatives within this new parks expansion effort:

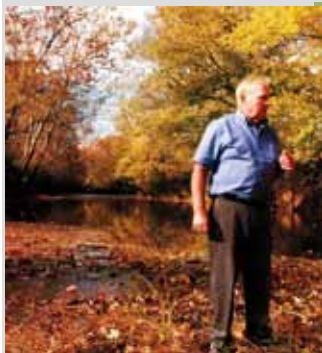


Waterfront Park, which began development in the early 1990's.

It is now the city's fourth major park, joining Cherokee, Shawnee, and Iroquois.



Metro Parks is undergoing a restoration and renovation process which is entitled the 'City of Parks' initiative.



21st Century Parks, under the civic stewardship of David Jones, Sr., will double the parks acreage within metro Louisville over the next 20 years.