

History of Lake Harriet

Lake Harriet was named for Harriet Lovejoy, wife of Colonel Henry Leavenworth, who founded

Fort Snelling in 1819. It is a 343.75-acre lake and was at the center of park plans from the time the park board was created in 1883. Less than two months after Minneapolis voters approved the legislation that created the park board for the city, the board voted to acquire a strip of land 200-feet wide encircling Lake Harriet. The only park plans that were given a higher priority by the first park board were the acquisition of a park for each section of the city of Minneapolis: Farview Park in north Minneapolis, Logan Park in northeast, Loring Park in south Minneapolis, and Riverside Park along the Mississippi River downstream from St. Anthony Falls.

Preservation of the city's lake shores and river banks had been a primary motive of Chicago-based

landscape architect Horace Cleveland, who had campaigned for years for Minneapolis to establish parks. The desire to create a park around Lake Harriet was evident in the state legislature when it passed a bill in February 1883 to create the park board; the same day the legislature extended the boundaries of the city to include Lake Harriet. Surrounded by hills, the lake had much less swampy shore line than other bodies of water in the city.

In the first overall plan created for Minneapolis parks in June 1883, Horace Cleveland's "Suggestions

for a System of Parks and Parkways," commissioned by the park board, showed a parkway completely encircling Lake Harriet. On June 2, 1883, the day Cleveland submitted his plan to the park board, the board voted to acquire all the land around Lake Harriet. It would take a couple years, and a generous donation, however, before the lake became park property. When the appraisers appointed by the park board to determine the value of the land around the lake came back with a total of nearly \$300,000 the park board was disheartened.

In the 1884 annual report, park board president Charles Loring wrote, "the cost of the right of way

(around the lake) rendered it impractical for the Board to acquire it, and it was abandoned."

Near the end of 1884, however, three property owners around the lake – Henry Beard, James Merritt and Charles Reeve – came to Loring with an offer to donate most of the Lake Harriet shore to the park board. The park board accepted the offer, which left only about a quarter-mile of shore on the south side of the lake to acquire by condemnation.

But very little in the early days of the park board ended up being easy. In 1885 a court ruled that the land didn't belong to Beard and the others, that the rightful owner was William King. This was the same William King who had been instrumental in creating and passing the legislation that

had created the park board. Years earlier he had offered to sell part of his farm encompassing Lake Harriet to the city as a park – an offer that was declined. With the title to the land returned to King (Beard and the others were not implicated in the expropriation of the land from King), King confirmed the donation of the other men. By late 1885, the park board began construction of Lake Harriet Parkway, which was completed in 1886.

With the acquisition of Lake Harriet, the park board -- and Charles Loring in particular -- began a campaign to convert the other nearby lakes in southwest Minneapolis into parks and to extend park property down Minnehaha Creek from Lake Harriet to Minnehaha Falls. Lake Harriet proved to be the anchor for the growth of the Minneapolis parks system, and for the transformation of Minneapolis' identity into the City of Lakes. The acquisition of Lake Harriet largely by donation also established a precedent that was followed in the acquisition of Lake of the Isles, and much of Bde Maka Ska (formerly Lake Calhoun) and Minnehaha Creek.

Curiously, in 1888 the park board paid Beard about \$8,000 for some of his property. It is not clear if that payment was for the park land that became known as Beard Plaisance west of the lake, or for the land that became Linden Hills Parkway, all of which Beard had owned. Upon finally wrapping up the deal with Beard, the park board held title to all the land around the lake.

The registering of the deeds to all of the lake shore prompted Charles Loring to write in his diary on October 2, 1888, "I have spent much time during the past three years bringing about this result and today I feel fully repaid. I hope future generations will feel as happy over the possession of this park as I do today in feeling that I have been instrumental in getting it for them."

Lake Harriet became a popular boating and picnicking spot almost immediately, aided by the Minneapolis Street Railway Company. The company's track extended to Lake Harriet and to increase ridership the company built an entertainment pavilion in 1888 on private land adjacent to park property west of the lake where the company offered concerts. At that time the board leased a concession to rent boats on the lake, but in 1889 took over boat rentals itself.

The next year, 1890, parkland in the Lake Harriet area expanded significantly with the donation by the Lakewood Cemetery Association and William King of Lyndale Park and the purchase of Interlachen (William Berry) Park between Bde Maka Ska (formerly Lake Calhoun) and Lake Harriet.

When the street railway's private pavilion burned down in 1891, the park board and the company agreed to build a new pavilion on the shore of the lake on park property. The railway company would pay for the pavilion, and provide entertainment, in exchange for a portion of the park board's boat rental income. Both sides benefitted from the arrangement: the park board provided entertainment on one of its premier properties and earned more in boat rentals if people came to the lake for concerts; the railway company increased its ridership by offering concerts. (The park board had more than 170 rowboats and three sailboats in its rental fleet at Lake Harriet in 1892. In 1894 the park board issued its first permits -- for \$2.00 a year -- for people to keep their own boats at the lake, a practice that continues today.

The new pagoda-style pavilion, designed by Minneapolis architect and park commissioner

Harry Jones, opened in 1892. The park board had a ten-year agreement with the street railway company to provide concerts at the pavilion and that contract was extended for five years in 1901. Unfortunately, in 1903, the pavilion burned down. By this time, with more residential development near the lake, the street railway company didn't need the inducement of concerts to get people to ride the streetcars and the company contributed the \$15,000 it received in an insurance settlement on the old pavilion to the park board to build its own pavilion. With another \$15,000 loaned to the park board by an association of Minneapolis retailers, the park board built a new pavilion, also designed by Harry Jones, in 1904. The new pavilion extended out over the water and provided an open-air concert venue.

During the bicycle craze of the 1890s, the park board built a bicycle path around the lake. The configuration of the paths around the lake in 1896 was almost identical to today: a walking path nearest the shore, then a bicycle path and finally the parkway, which of course at that time was built only for horses and carriages.

Bicycles were so popular that when the park board built an enclosure for people to check their bikes at the lake while they boated, or attended concerts, the facility was built to hold 800 bicycles.

When Theodore Wirth was hired to be the new park superintendent in 1906, replacing William Berry, who had held the job for 20 years, one of his first major proposals was to redesign the lake. The shorelines of Lake Harriet, he wrote in the 1906 annual report, were "regular and monotonous." To make the lake more interesting, he proposed building a peninsula into the lake near Beard Plaisance on the west shore and filling in the lake in front of the pavilion to put it on dry land and reduce maintenance costs. (The water into which the pavilion projected had to be kept free of ice in winter to prevent the ice from crushing the pilings on which it was built.) Shortly after the publication of his plan, however, Wirth told the board in January 1907 that reshaping the Lake Harriet shore would be difficult. More difficult, he said, than the dredging he had proposed at Lake of the Isles to fill in the wetlands on the west side of that lake. Part of the plan for Lake of the Isles was also to open a channel to Bde Maka Ska, which had been desired for many years. Wirth later also presented plans for a possible channel from Lake Calhoun to Lake Harriet, but those plans were never pursued, in part because the surface of Lake Harriet was seven feet lower in elevation than Bde Maka Ska and a channel would have required locks to make it navigable.

Thus the park board shifted its focus from Lake Harriet to Lake of the Isles and then Bde Maka Ska.

Wirth never was satisfied with the pavilion at Lake Harriet, however. He proposed replacing the pavilion many times over the next two decades, even after the pavilion's pilings in the lake were replaced in 1912 and the pavilion was renovated and rearranged by Harry Jones in 1913. In 1912 the park board also built a station at the platform for the street railway at 42 Street. The station was designed by Harry Jones to resemble a Swiss chalet.

Finally in 1923, the park board approved building a new pavilion at Lake Harriet, but with many other projects then in progress, construction of the new pavilion was delayed. A

severe storm in 1925 forced the park board's hand. What some called a tornado leveled the old pavilion and two people died in the wreckage that summer. The next year a temporary bandstand was built to the east of the old pavilion, at a cost of \$4,000, so the park board could continue to provide concerts at the lake.

This temporary facility lasted 60 years, until it was replaced with the current bandstand and stage in 1986. Designed by Milo Thompson, the 1986 bandstand was the first oriented to provide the audience views of the lake. Costs had risen dramatically in the intervening years. The price tag for the new bandstand, a vast improvement over the one that had lasted so long, was \$5.5 million.

During the Great Depression and World War II few improvements were made to the park at Lake

Harriet. The only work done was by federal work relief crews, most notably the construction of a
shorewall on the northwest shore of the lake in 1939.

Street cars, such an important part of the lake's history as a park, were reintroduced to the Lake Harriet landscape when, in 1969, the park board approved a request by the Minnesota Transportation Museum to restore the rails and street car service at Lake Harriet. The street cars still operate from the site of the old street car station near the bandstand through William Berry Park.

Lake Harriet Parkway was given a permanent pavement, for the first time, in 1977. In 1914, the park board questioned whether it was wise to continue to operate the toboggan slide it had built in 1912 from the west bank of the lake at Queen Avenue out onto the lake. Despite precautions, Wirth wrote, several injuries had been incurred at the slide resulting in lawsuits. Also in 1914 the park board replaced the bicycle path around the lake with a bridle path. Several park commissioners were avid horsemen and the popularity of bicycling had declined dramatically.

For a few years in the early 1960s the park board's ice speed skating track, which had been operated for decades at Powderhorn Lake, was moved to Lake Harriet. In 1963 the United States Olympic speed skating trials were held at Lake Harriet, and local skaters Tom Gray and Marie Lawler were selected for the Olympic team. A few years later the track was moved to Lake Nokomis.

Beard's Plaisance

The park was named "The Beard Plaisance" for Henry Beard, one of three men who offered in

1884 to donate their land on the shores of Lake Harriet for a park. The park board also acquired the land for Linden Hills Boulevard from Beard. The picnic area was named in 1893 to honor Beard. "Plaisance" is a French term meaning "pleasure ground."

The park board first approved improvements to the "Beard land" in 1889. The first picnic shelter at

Beard Plaisance was built in 1904 and a stone walk was constructed along Upton Avenue west of the

park. In 1912 Wirth recommended a plan to rebuild and rearrange the eight-year-old picnic shelter. In the meantime, a tennis court was apparently built at Beard Plaisance. In 1916, the board ordered the construction of two new courts to complement the one already there. As with most tennis courts built at the time they were probably built without backstops and nets. In 1922 the park board responded favorably to a request by the Robert Fulton Community Club to provide a supervised playground for small children in the park. The only recorded improvement to the park over the next few decades was the renovation of the shelter in the late 1930s by federal work relief crews.

Several improvements were made to the park in the 1970s. In 1974 new playground equipment for little children was installed and in 1979 the tennis courts were renovated and a parking lot was added next to the courts. At the same time the picnic shelter was re-roofed.

Lyndale Park

The name of the park was taken from William King's farm, Lyndale Farm, which once surrounded Lake Harriet. King donated much of the land for the 61-acre Lyndale Park, as well as most of the land around Lake Harriet, to the park board. King named his farm after his father, Lyndon King, a preacher from upstate New York, where William King was raised. The name of the park was stipulated when the land was donated.

William King and his wife, Caroline, donated considerable land for parks in Minneapolis. They donated the shores of Lake Harriet, Lyndale Park and King's Highway. (The park board also eventually purchased the site of King's farmhouse and barns, which became Lyndale Farmstead Park.) King was a powerful and eloquent proponent of creating parks in the city before the park board was created and he served as a park commissioner on the first park board in 1883. He was a driving force behind the legislation that created the park board.

Long before the park board was established, King worked to create parks in the city, including as founder and editor of one of Minneapolis's first newspapers. King was one of the principal founders of Lakewood Cemetery near his farm. Prior to the creation of the park board, he proposed to sell 250 acres of his 1,400-acre farm to the city as a park for \$50,000. The land he offered would have surrounded Lake Harriet. The offer was reportedly met with derision by some, who told King to stop trying to unload his farm on the city for such an exorbitant sum and go back to Washington, D.C., where he lived part of the time while serving as postmaster of the United States Congress. He later represented Minnesota in the U. S. Congress from 1875 to 1877.

In 1883 King resurrected a dormant Board of Trade, which functioned as a chamber of commerce for Minneapolis. One of the first actions of the revitalized board, with King as its secretary, was to draft a bill – and convince the legislature to pass it – that created the Minneapolis Board of Park

Commissioners. The legislation was approved by voters in a referendum on April 3, 1883. Charles Loring, the first president of the new park board, credited King with getting the bill through the legislature.

William King served as a park commissioner 1883-1887. Before his donation of land for Lyndale Park, King was the actual donor to the park board of most of Lake Harriet.

The acquisition of Lyndale Park and King's Highway was a tangled affair. In May of 1890 Minneapolis newspapers trumpeted the generous donation by William and Caroline King of land that one paper said would become the "picnic ground par excellence" of the park system. The donation was of land to the north and northeast of Lake Harriet. It would take the park board more than a year, however, to accept the donation, because King's donation had strings attached.

King attached a few conditions to the donation that the park board was reluctant to accept. One

condition was easily met. King stipulated that he would donate forty acres of land if Lakewood

Cemetery would also donate thirty-five acres of its land just north of the lake. That was no problem.

King had been one of the cemetery's founders in 1871 and the cemetery's board of trustees was still

controlled by King's friends, such as Charles Loring and George Brackett, who had been so instrumental in the creation of Minneapolis parks. In a short time, the cemetery association delivered a deed for its land to the park board.

The other conditions proved more complicated. First King asked for improvement of the park, including construction of a road through it within one year of his donation. The park board, strapped for cash after its initial park acquisitions and improvements, couldn't promise that. King eventually relented on that condition and extended the time for improvements to five years, which removed one major hurdle to the acquisition. King also asked that his remaining land in the area be exempted from assessments for park improvements until those assessments reached \$100,000, the value King placed on the land he was donating.

Neither of the two conditions was unusual at the time, but the sum of money was. Many donations of land to the park board at the time had similar conditions attached. The donation of land for parks was motivated at times in those days by the likely appreciation of adjoining land when a park was created.

Park-front property was highly desirable. In fact, that had been one of the arguments for the creation of a park board: parks would pay for themselves in the increased valuation of other land nearby and therefore higher real estate tax collections. This proved true in the case of Lyndale Park even before King's donation was accepted. Newspapers reported that lots near the proposed park nearly tripled in value when the donation was first announced, and

many lots that had been for sale in the vicinity were taken off the market in anticipation of further appreciation.

The other problem was that King didn't own outright all of the land he proposed to donate. Much of it was mortgaged. The primary mortgage holders were Charles Loring and his partner in real estate investments, Henry Brown.

Nearly a year after the original proposal of King to donate land had grabbed newspaper headlines, the board voted to accept the donation on King's terms. But that was not the end of the story. The final chapter would not be written for another ten years.

The issue of the mortgages held on the land by Loring and Brown was apparently not completely resolved at the time, because in 1893 park commissioner Patrick Ryan, who had defeated Charles Loring for a seat on the board in 1890, inquired into the status of that mortgage. The inquiry was referred to the park board's attorney. Loring had been elected to the park board once again in 1893 and was again the president of the board at that time. However at the end of 1893 Loring resigned his position on the park board, he said, to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest in a matter then before the board.

While that conflict of interest was never defined, action by the park board in early 1894 may explain it. On May 7, 1894 the park board, without explanation, issued a quit claim deed to Loring and Brown for four lots the park board owned south of Lake Harriet. Reading between the lines, one could surmise that the four lots were deeded to Loring and Brown in exchange for a release of their mortgage on the land at Lyndale Park. It is highly unlikely that the property deeded to Loring and Brown had a value near the \$50,000 mortgage they had held on King's property. Twenty-four years later, William Folwell wrote a letter to the park board claiming that he had it on good authority, perhaps from his friend Charles Loring, that Loring had been the true donor of Lyndale Park to the city. A small clipping from park board proceedings that year, referencing Folwell's letter and its claim, was pasted by Loring in his scrapbook. That Loring considered the note of enough importance to save, one of the only clippings from park board proceedings in his scrapbooks, lends credence to Folwell's claim.

But even with the mysterious deeding of land to Loring and Brown in 1894, the final chapter of King's donation of Lyndale Park was not yet written. In 1901, King's widow, Caroline, and their son, Preston, filed a claim against the park board for not complying with the condition that Lyndale Park be improved within five years of the donation. By that time the park board had acquired, in part through a foreclosure sale, most of the former Lyndale Farmstead, including the barns and other buildings. The park board settled the King's claim by paying them \$5,325 and swapping title to some property at the farmstead. Caroline King reclaimed title to the land which the old farmhouse occupied, and gave the park board title to the three remaining lots it did not own.

The claim and the settlement prompted William Folwell to write in the annual report of 1901, "The

transaction is another testimony to the unwisdom of accepting titles with conditions, unless under

exceptional circumstances.” Not to challenge the counsel of William Folwell, who had a vision for

Minneapolis parks that was matched by no one, but with the benefit of one hundred years of hindsight, the acquisition of Lyndale Park from the Kings and Lakewood Cemetery for such a small sum, would today qualify as exceptional circumstances that justified the aggravation at the time.

The actual development of the property took some time, as the entire nation plunged into recession in 1893. The impact on the park board was dramatic. For years, the board had no money to

spend for acquisitions or improvements. The park board had to borrow money just to maintain a few of the city’s parks and the maintenance of most parks was neglected completely.

The first improvements to Lyndale Park occurred in 1904 when the park board built a road over the

lowlands between Lyndale Park and the pavilion at Lake Harriet, created a concourse at the top of the hill near King’s Highway overlooking the lake, and planted trees in the park. The work was done based on a plan by landscape architect Warren Manning, with some changes suggested by Charles Loring.

Several prominent landscape architects were associated with Lyndale Park. In 1894 the sons and successors to the landscape architecture business of Frederick Law Olmsted were consulted about designing the new park. Olmsted was the famous designer of many parks in the United States, most notably Central Park in New York City, (By that time age and illness had incapacitated Horace Cleveland, who had designed most of the city’s first parks and still lived in Minneapolis at the time.) The park board had little money, however, and the Olmsteds never actually developed designs for the park.

Five years later, the park board hired Warren Manning to develop plans for the park, but those plans were not implemented. Manning also submitted a review of the entire park system, which was appended to the park board’s 1899 annual report. In 1904, with Minneapolis’s economy booming again, Manning was hired to revise his plans for Lyndale Park and the first improvements were made to the park.

The transformation of Lyndale Park, however, awaited the arrival of Theodore Wirth as park superintendent in 1906. At the end of his first year in Minneapolis, Wirth submitted in the 1906 annual report extensive recommendations for the improvement of Lake Harriet and Lyndale Park. (Wirth noted that Lyndale Park was really a part of Lake Harriet Park and one name should embrace the “entire territory.”) Wirth had two ideas. First, the area from the pavilion east would be filled with material dredged from the lake to create playing fields surrounded by groves of trees. Second, the eastern and southern sections of the park would be devoted to “educational purposes on plant life.” His first suggestion for Lyndale Park was never followed; his second was, with spectacular results. Wirth proposed two types of gardens for the area. First, a rose garden, which would, in addition to providing “beauty and pleasure,” provide “an instructive lesson on what roses to grow and how.” Above the rose garden, he proposed “a garden of trees, shrubs, and wild and cultivated flowers of every description.” The garden would be planted so that in every season

something would be blooming and each plant would be properly labeled. It was the beginning of gardens that have been loved by generations of Minneapolis citizens. The first project to be initiated in 1907 was the rose garden.

Wirth had created the first municipal rose garden in the United States in his previous position as superintendent of parks in Hartford, Connecticut. Under the direction of newly hired park florist Louis Boeglin, Wirth set out to replicate that success. (Boeglin eventually became the head of all horticulture in Minneapolis parks and remained in that position until 1940.) The rose garden was completed in 1908 and a perennial flower garden was begun. The road from King's Highway to Lake Harriet was built in 1910. Over the next few years, the gardens were gradually developed, but had not yet caught on with the public.

In 1914 Wirth called the rose garden an inspiring scene, but lamented that it was "remarkable that only a small proportion of our population visits this ground, or even knows about it." The public visibility of the gardens got a boost beginning in 1917 when the first playground pageant was performed on the hill above the rose garden overlooking the lake. The playground pageants included performances written specifically for the occasion and featured children in costumes from every park in the city. The first year the pageant drew a crowd of 15,000 and in later years the performance was extended to two evenings and played to crowds of 40,000. The pageant remained a popular annual event, with a hiatus during the Depression, until 1941. The pageants drew such large crowds that in 1930 the park board considered building an 18,000-seat amphitheater on the hillside at Lyndale Park to accommodate pageant crowds and host other outdoor concerts. With the onset of the Great Depression, however, funds for such a project never materialized.

In 1924, Louis Boeglin, the park board horticulturist, planted a large new garden of perennial and annual flowers on the northern edge of the park west from King's Highway. The garden was 1,000-feet long and from four- to twenty-feet wide and contained 10,000 plants. Wirth noted that the new planting attracted an unusual amount of attention and thousands of visitors. That year Louis Boeglin also proposed a rock garden planted with Alpine plants to the west of the new garden stretching toward the lake. With the creation of the perennial garden Lyndale Park replaced the Armory Garden at The Parade as the premier garden in the city. In fact, Wirth proposed that with the decline in the Armory Garden and the need to replenish the soil there it would make sense to concentrate floriculture and plant collections at Lyndale, instead of renovating the Armory Garden. He went so far as to suggest that the Armory Garden might be better devoted to tennis courts.

Boeglin's idea for a rock garden at Lyndale Park took a few years to develop, but he finally implemented his plan in 1929. He brought in Oneonta dolomite rocks collected from the Mississippi River bluffs in Wisconsin for the garden and planted alpine plants around them. Unfortunately, the rock garden fell into disrepair in the 1940s after Boeglin retired from the park board and was eventually overgrown with trees. It was not rediscovered and resurrected as a Rock Garden until the 1980s and was later transformed into the Peace Garden.

A fountain was installed in Lyndale Park in 1947 thanks to Frank Heffelfinger. Heffelfinger had seen the bronze and marble fountain in Florence, Italy, bought it and had it dismantled

and shipped home to Minneapolis. He donated it to the park board and it was dedicated in Lyndale Park in 1947.

Heffelfinger's donation came shortly after the addition of an official test rose garden for the All America Rose Selections in 1946. The patio around the fountain was installed in 1988. A second fountain was installed in the park in 1963. The Phelps Fountain or "Turtle Fountain," had

originally been a gift from long-time park commissioner Edmund Phelps in 1915 for The Gateway in

downtown Minneapolis. When the Gateway neighborhood became the focus of urban renewal in the

early 1960s and the city bought the original Gateway park from the park board, the fountain was moved to Lyndale Park. A new perennial garden was built around the newly installed fountain as part of a five-year expansion of the gardens in the park, and the old perennial border garden along the park's northern border was abandoned. The former perennial border garden was later converted to a perennial test garden maintained by the Men's Garden Club of Minneapolis.

The transformation of the Rock Garden into the Peace Garden had its roots in 1963, when the Japanese American Society donated cherry trees to be planted in Lyndale Park. At the time the Rock Garden itself was overgrown with trees. That changed in 1981 when a tornado blew through the park and knocked down many trees. In the process of clearing the toppled trees, the Rock Garden was rediscovered by park horticulturist Mary Lerman, who launched an effort that over the next 17 years re-established the rock garden and led to the creation of the Peace Garden. The transformation relied largely on donations from the public and a great deal of volunteer labor as well to implement a new design for the garden created by Betty Ann Addison.

A wooden "peace bridge" was installed in the lower garden in 1985 flanked by stones donated from the post-atomic bomb wreckage of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. In 1988 a peace pole, a gift from Japan to Minneapolis Mayor Don Fraser, was installed nearby. The pole is inscribed in four languages with the phrase "May peace prevail on earth."

In 2005 the "Spirit of Peace" sculpture by Caprice Glaser was added to the garden. The twelve-foot-tall bronze sculpture depicts the folding of an origami paper crane. In addition, the original peace bridge was replaced. Both improvements were accomplished primarily with donations.

Robert's Bird Sanctuary

One very important development at Lyndale Park was its official designation as a bird sanctuary in 1936. The designation had been requested by the Minnesota Audubon Society. One of Christian Bossen's first acts as the new park superintendent in 1936, after Wirth retired, was to request the park board designate the park as a bird sanctuary. The park board went him one better and designated all city parks as bird refuges. One of Bossen's favorite places in Minneapolis parks was the trail through the wetlands north of Lake Harriet.

The bird sanctuary was named in 1947 for Thomas Sadler Roberts, a retired doctor who had become a professor of ornithology at the University of Minnesota and director of the university's museum of natural history.

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