



View near Falls Field, an early fairgrounds and picnic site now known as Upper Falls Park. This stereopticon view from the collection at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House shows several mills in the distance and the elevated railroad bridge.

Birthpangs of the Parks: 1834-1888

Of course it was during its hegemony as the Flower City that a number of Rochester's farsighted citizens launched the park system. The earlier Flour City, still struggling to harvest the logs and remove the stumps of the primeval forest that shrouded its valley hinterland and even bordered the lower Genesee falls, had little need for parks. Its residents were content with the open squares earlier provided by several of the original land developers—notably Brown Square, set aside by the Brown brothers in the center of their 200-acre plot extending west from the main falls, and Washington Square, laid out by Elisha Johnson at a junction of streets in his 80-acre eastside plot at the small Upper Falls, both projected as sites for Monroe County's first courthouse, which Colonel Rochester garnered for his own more centrally located court square. These pioneer squares, with four others set aside by nearby subdividers, whether inspired by the "village greens" of colonial New England or by William Penn's pattern of "public squares" at Philadelphia, provided the bustling Flour City with a total of fifteen park acres. But it was not until the mid-forties, a decade after the adoption of

the first City Charter, that the Common Council assumed any active responsibility for these tracts. And its initial action was negative in effect—fencing them in and planting trees to forestall their use by militia clubs and other disturbers.

Yet, even in its Flour City era, Rochester acquired other antecedents of its later park system. Old Falls Field, (on the east side of the river), overlooking the main falls (now generally designated the Upper Falls), served as an unofficial park providing a site for occasional circuses and picnics, as well as a favorite promenade for visitors. Mt. Hope Cemetery, laid out on the rugged hills east of the river on the city's southern border in the late 1830s, provided a popular sylvan retreat for many years. The initiative of Josiah W. Bissell, one of the city's early nurserymen, in planting trees along East Avenue in the mid-1840s, provided Rochester with a model for street beautification—a responsibility later assumed by the Park Commission.

Just as Rochester was awakening in the 1840s to its horticultural potential through the promotional efforts of a half-dozen pioneer nurserymen, notably

George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry whose blossoming fields and blooming hothouses along Mt. Hope Avenue attracted nation-wide markets, so the city was discovering new needs for recreational space as its young men developed a nascent interest in sports. First, in 1847, rival cricket teams organized by British-born residents, and a decade later, rival baseball teams required fields for practice and for an increasing schedule of games. Some of the early games with visiting teams were played on the university grounds on Prince Street, or on the Fairgrounds south of the city, but pressure mounted for the use of one or another of the city's public squares. Jones Square, the largest, 6.7 acres in size and still under proprietary management, with a high fence to block out nonpaying spectators and gates to control admissions, provided the favorite ballfield for major contests during the sixties and seventies until an improved diamond was laid out on the Fairgrounds in 1877.

The Common Council, which maintained a tighter control over the five smaller squares, granted the use of a portion of Brown Square's 4.5 acres to local militia units for a parade ground in the late fifties, and that and Washington Square sometimes served as sites for religious and other public gatherings. Thus a crowd, generously estimated at 6,000, assembled on Washington Square on May 9, 1842, expressing sympathy with the current revolution in France—a demonstration seldom recalled in local annals.

Despite the mounting demand for improved public facilities, the Common Council's restraining ordinances continued to curb or at least to frown upon many activities, imposing \$2.00 fines on offenders throwing balls in the streets, bathing in the river or in the canals, flying kites within the precincts, racing horses in the streets and other malefactions, but a reaction favoring a more active outdoor life was surfacing. Rowing clubs were appearing on the upper and lower Genesee River, properly garbed bathers of both sexes were congregating at Charlotte and Sea Breeze in the summertime, picnickers were flocking to Maple Grove at the northern end of the Lake Avenue horsecar line, and skaters welcomed the clearing of ice above the Court Street dam for their enjoyment in successive cold winters.

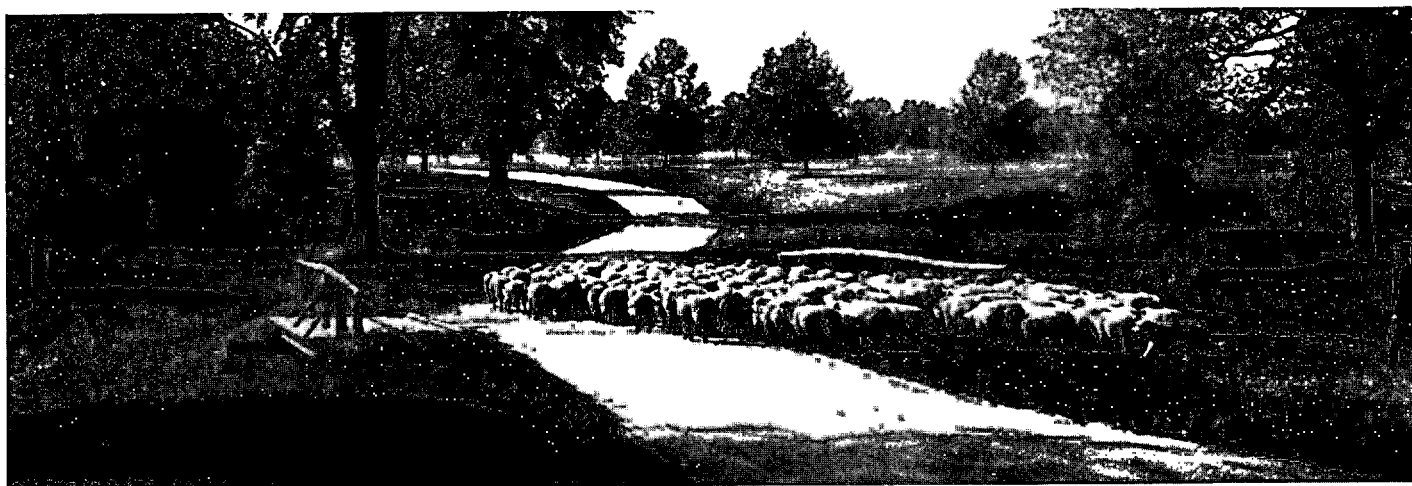
Rochester's increased interest in outdoor activities and its mounting appreciation of landscape gardening were developments shared with many cities. Local ball clubs battled rivals from towns large and small, and the Flower City's nurseries vied for orders from park administrators in New York and Boston as well as Buffalo and Cleveland, among others. Indeed, parks and recreational developments elsewhere began to serve as a persistent goad for action in Rochester. Dr. Edward Mott Moore, the city's most distinguished surgeon and medical practitioner, who spent several winters lecturing at distant medical schools, including one at Buffalo where he witnessed the launching of its park system in the late sixties, was not the only Rochesterian to return from distant journeys with high praise for the parks he had seen and earnest pleas for action in Rochester. A correspondent of the *Democrat*

and *Chronicle*, who signed himself as "A" in May 1883, urged the city to provide a park similar to Prospect Park in Brooklyn. H.H. Warner, the city's widely traveled patent medicine king, offered to head a fund drive to enable the city to purchase the highly desirable but costly estate of attorney Horatio G. Warner and a portion of the adjoining Pinnacle Hills on the city's south-east border for a memorial park to honor its Civil War veterans, a proposal that Sam Wilder and others endorsed. Bishop Bernard McQuaid of the Rochester Catholic Diocese repeatedly recommended acquisition of lands suitable for athletic use, "even on Sundays," as he boldly put it.

As the agitation mounted in the summer of 1883, D.D.S. Brown, past owner of the *Democrat* and promoter of a subdivision on the city's western border, offered a 30-acre tract there as a free gift to the city provided it be accepted as Lincoln Park and landscaped within two years. The Common Council hastened to accept that offer, but tabled Ellwanger and Barry's offer of 20 acres from their nursery grounds adjoining the reservoir on the city's southern border. Most aldermen opposed further expenditures in that already favored district, and moreover, heavy outlays on waterworks extensions and other pressing civic needs also tabled action in behalf of Lincoln Park, which was then diverted to commercial development.

Citizen appeals for a public park continued to surface. An excursion train packed with Rochesterians eager to join the throngs at the dedication of the country's first state park reserve at Niagara Falls in 1885 stirred new enthusiasm for parks in Rochester. Alderman George W. Elliott pressed the cause vigorously and, as chairman of the Common Council's parks committee, urged the acceptance of both the Lincoln and reservoir park offers and the development of a park boulevard to connect them as the first stage in the extension of a park boulevard around the entire city. Elliott, a far-sighted alderman, presented his plan as a promotional scheme to encourage residential development of a superior quality in adjoining tracts, which would then be drawn within the expanding city and swell its assessment rolls sufficiently to meet the city's mounting budget. He was able to report a renewal of the Ellwanger and Barry offer and, by citing a list of cities, including Syracuse, that already had sizable parks, prodded the council to accept the Ellwanger and Barry offer late in 1887. Opposing aldermen voted a repeal of that ordinance at the next meeting, but Elliott and his backers secured its final adoption in January 1888, enabling Mayor Cornelius R. Parsons to formally accept the 20 acres from Ellwanger and Barry on January 27, 1888.

That, of course, was only a start, and Elliott and his friends, fearing that even the newly approved Memorial Park, as it was called, would suffer the fate of Lincoln Park if left to the mercy of the contentious aldermen, had already drafted a bill creating an independent park commission. Composed of 20 respected citizens named in the bill, it was empowered to float bonds for \$300,000 and to finance the purchase and development of desirable lands for a park system,



The parks used sheep to crop the vast acres of lawn at Genesee Valley Park to an acceptable height, for sheep, if tended properly, do not chew the grass down to the roots as cows and horses do. In addition, the sale of wool and lambs was a source of income for the parks. Photograph from the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.

which would be maintained with charges to the city not to exceed \$20,000 a year. The final passage of the bill by the legislature in Albany on April 17, 1888 provided a sound basis for the development of the Rochester Park System.

Designing and Launching the Parks System: 1888-1902

The Parks Commission held its first organizational meeting on May 7 and promptly chose Dr. Edward Mott Moore as president. After some discussion of potential park sites, the commission decided to invite Calvin Vaux, one of the landscape architects of New York's famed Central Park, to come to Rochester for consultations, and it scheduled a journey to Buffalo to examine its 20-year-old park system. Both Vaux and the park directors at Buffalo recommended further consultations with other park experts, including Frederick Law Olmsted, the country's leading park designer. Consultations with the various experts progressed during the summer and fall of 1888, and the commission reached a consensus accepting Olmsted's recommendations that Rochester should focus park developments on the river, its most scenic asset. They hastened to acquire needed titles for a north and a south park. The commission agreed to develop a small memorial park around the reservoir, based on the Ellwanger and Barry gift, and to explore the prospect of support by suburban lot promoters for a park boulevard to encircle the city, but it gave priority to the purchase of riverbank lands north and south of the city.

The Park Commission's first year proved to be a stormy one, especially in its dealings with the Common Council. Disgruntled over the alleged infringement of their authority, some aldermen called for a revival of the Lincoln Park project; others favored acquisition of the Pinnacle Hills tract; still others advocated a circular boulevard connecting a string of small parks. When the commission dismissed these proposals as too

costly, and announced its decision for the North and South parks, speculators began to boost the prices of riverfront properties south of the Clarissa (now Ford) Street bridge and north of the Driving Park bridge. The commission's committee on land acquisition was enabled, as a result, to proceed quietly with the purchase of lands farther south around the Elmwood Avenue bridge and farther north along the lower river gorge. When these purchases, all beyond the city limits were announced, several aldermen bluntly vowed never to appropriate funds for the maintenance of such "salubrious but inaccessible" tracts. Fortunately, a public meeting called to protest this example of "taxation without representation" attracted barely 200 citizens, not all of them hostile, and even the aldermen failed to agree on the dispatch of a condemnatory resolution to the legislature.

Reassured by the limited protest, the commission proceeded with its plans. It retained Olmsted as a continuing consultant and at his suggestion engaged Calvin C. Laney, a civil engineer, to prepare contour maps of the newly acquired tracts on which Olmsted worked out his landscaping plans. The distinctive features of each park were emphasized—the rolling pastoral fields of South Park (Genesee Valley Park) and the rugged grandeur of the river gorge in the north.

Superintendent Laney and his workmen removed some of the old farm buildings and aging trees and planted thousands of young trees to provide masses of foliage that would accentuate folds in the terrain, supply shade for picnic groves, and hide the railroad tracks that skirted two sides of the South Park. The railroads, though objectionable as unsightly barriers, supplied a possible answer to the major criticism of the parks—their inaccessibility—and Dr. Moore secured a promise from the Erie Railroad, and later from the other lines, to run excursion trains to the parks on balmy Sundays and holidays.

Criticism of the parks subsided as their development progressed. The changing attitude appeared in a popular discussion of the proper names for the parks. George Harris, the local authority on the area's Iro-



Hundreds of people attended the dedication of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument and heard the speech of President Benjamin Harrison at Washington Square Park on Memorial Day, May 30, 1892. The square was originally set aside by Elisha Johnson as a potential site for a courthouse. The land became a public square when the Monroe County Courthouse was built on Nathaniel Rochester's west side site in 1822. Photograph from the Local History Division of the Rochester Public Library.

quois predecessors, proposed Indian names and, while the specific names he suggested proved too difficult, the more familiar Indian names, Seneca and Genesee Valley, won favor as the official titles of the northern and southern parks, respectively. A decision to erect a Soldiers and Sailors Monument as a Civil War memorial on Washington Square freed the reservoir park of that name. Responding to a request by George Ellwanger, who agreed to build an observation pavilion at his own expense on the hilltop adjoining the reservoir, the commission named it Highland Park and held the dedication of the Children's Pavilion on September 29, 1890, the first park ceremony.

In its first decade, the Park Commission, under the dedicated leadership of Dr. Moore, provided special features for each of its three parks. In response to Bishop McQuaid's advocacy, the commission voted to lay out a baseball field on the west portion of Genesee Valley Park in 1891 and to move a farm building to the riverbank to serve as a boathouse. As the number of eager players increased, the commission added a second diamond, a bicycle track, two tennis courts and leased sites to several canoe and rowing clubs for boat houses. The commission acquired a flock of sheep to help crop the grass and create a pastoral atmosphere on the rolling fields east of the river where it located several pic-

nic groves. In 1898 a nine-hole golf course was laid out, the fourth in the nation to be maintained at public expense. The extension of the newly electrified Plymouth trolley line into the park, with charges limited to the regular city fares, assured Genesee Valley Park of increasing use.

Though somewhat delayed because of difficulties in acquiring properties needed to assure its accessibility, the improvements at Seneca Park increased as the decade advanced. The commission dammed a spring to form Trout Pond, which provided free fishing opportunities to children and a center for skating parties in cold winters. The Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railway opened a station near the park, and the commission laid out a ball field and fenced off enclosures for a pair of American Elk, a white-tailed deer, and a black bear, which with several large bird cages, provided the nucleus by 1897 of a projected park zoo. The development of paths in Seneca Park was based on the Indian trails already in place in the park. The park designers expanded and extended the network for general use as a hiking trail offering spectacular views of the gorge.

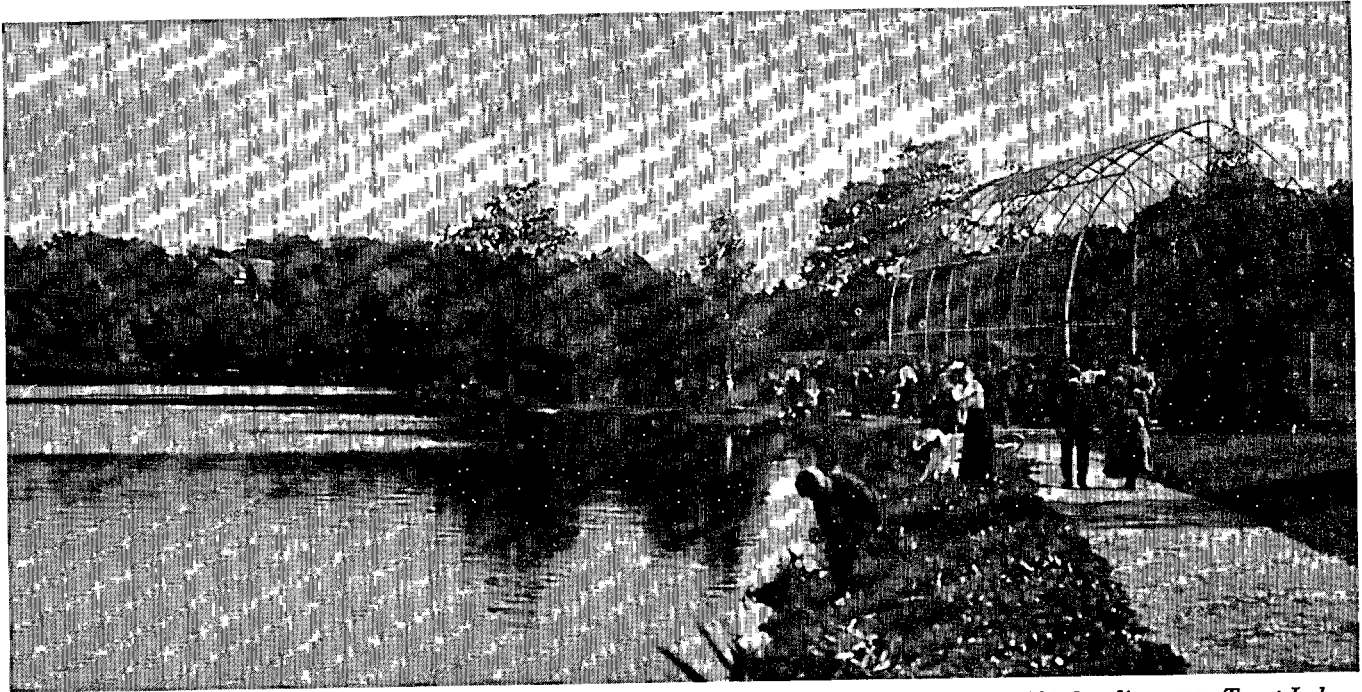
Olmsted's contributions to the landscaping of the two major parks were significant, but it was to Highland Park, despite its small size, that he gave particular



Built in 1890 and dedicated to the children of Rochester in the first park ceremony, this three-story open air Children's Pavilion was a popular gathering place. Its location on the summit of a hill by the Highland Reservoir provided a beautiful view of the surrounding countryside. Bands often performed on the second floor. The building was torn down in the 1960's because of disrepair. Photograph from the Department of Parks, Recreation and Human Services.

attention. Yet he was, in a sense, responding to local interests, for Rochesterians had for decades delighted in the blooming fields and gardens of the numerous local nurseries, and Olmsted's plan to develop Highland Park as a horticultural preserve was fitting. Ellwanger and Barry lent encouragement by donating generous selections of rare trees and shrubs from their collections. Superintendent Laney made a listing of all trees and shrubs known to Western New York and undertook to gather healthy specimens for Highland Park.

When, at Olmsted's suggestion, the commission decided to order additional shrubs from Europe, Laney saw the need for a full-time horticulturalist and brought John Dunbar, a trained gardener from Long Island, to take full charge of developments at Highland Park. Dunbar took special pride in assembling a collection of 109 varieties of evergreens for a pinetum on the north side of the hill, but it was the hardy lilacs blooming on the south slope that attracted popular favor. The commissioners were somewhat surprised when in May, 1898 a reporter estimated the number of visitors



One of the earliest attractions in the Seneca Park menagerie, the aviary housed many species of birds adjacent to Trout Lake. Photograph from the Department of Parks, Recreation and Human Services.

on one Sunday as exceeding 3,000. The plan to make Highland Park a public arboretum was re-enforced by the popularity of the lilacs.

The city's pride in its parks increased as the commissioners responded to its changing needs and aspirations. Thus in 1894, when the depression threw many out of work, a mass meeting of several thousand unemployed craftsmen had gathered that January on Washington Square, demanding jobs, not charity. The commission hastened to provide jobs for 100 unemployed men, putting them to work constructing two needed park buildings and a number of picnic tables. It welcomed an offer the next year from the *Herald* to sponsor eight band concerts at Genesee Valley Park, drawing crowds that alerted the community to other possible uses of the parks.

The Park Commission accepted jurisdiction in 1894 over the city's several park squares and street trees and developed new plans for their beautification and use. It pressed ahead with the acquisition of properties to improve access and eliminate obstructions in its three major parks, increasing their size early in 1895 to a total of 562 acres, which compared favorably with most cities of Rochester's class. The *Democrat and Chronicle* hastened to report a comment by a park director from New Orleans who, after inspecting the parks of several northeastern cities, judged the spectacular potential of Seneca Park as superior to any he had seen and concluded that, despite its modest budget, the Rochester Park Commission had "done wonders with its parks".

By the turn of the century, the Rochester parks were definitely on the map, nationally as well as locally. Peter Barr, a distinguished horticulturalist from Lon-

don, declared after his tour of American parks in 1899. "I would rather have missed Yellowstone Park than...Highland Park," and added, "It is more like a botanical garden than a park." Professor Charles S. Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston was similarly impressed on his first visit a year later by the fifty varieties of hawthornes; the hundred varieties of lilacs and the astonishing assemblage of evergreens he found at Highland Park. He hastened to enlist the Rochester park officials in a long-term joint effort to locate, collect and exchange specimens of every plant growing in America. Local residents were, of course, more impressed by the annual floral displays at Highland Park, by the recreational facilities at Genesee Valley and Seneca Parks (where Trout Pond had now been expanded to accommodate swan boats), and by the band concerts, which in 1901 became an established Sunday afternoon feature, sponsored in part by the Chamber of Commerce at both Genesee and Seneca parks.