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Item Type	Article
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Publisher	Commercial Appeal
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Download date	2025-06-19 16:48:20
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/30061

75 Years Of Growth On Overton Park's Green Acres

By PAUL R. COPPOCK

There were sharply worded objections in 1901 when Mayor Joe Williams supported use of city tax money to buy a big park on the eastern edge of Memphis. The newly formed Park Commission had bought Lea's Wood and named it East Park, later renamed Overton.

This city had been born with a fine set of parks given by the developers before they sold the first lot. But aldermen had established a Memphis tradition of frittering away a large part of the land intended for public use and neglecting the remnants.

THE ALDERMEN WENT beyond that. In 1868 a citizen donated a 100-acre park in the country near what is now Josephine at the Southern Railway tracks. The city had named it Central Park, put \$15,000 into facilities, used it for big events — and then given it back in 1874.

Aside from the tradition there was a more immediate objection. Only a little more than a year before the East Park purchase the city had made such a huge annexation that the city line suddenly included four times as much area as had been accumulated during 80 years of growth. Some persons thought it was unreasonable to pile park expense on top of the money needed to provide new parts of town with sewers, pavements, bayou bridges, schools and such necessities of city life.

But the Park Commission went ahead. The commissioners were L. B. McFarland, chairman, Robert Galloway and J. R. Godwin. In 1899 city officials had brought to town William Olmstead, one of the brothers who designed Central Park in New York. He reported that Memphis had grown so big without a park system that it would be difficult to make a satisfactory plan. But he proposed two large parks, one on the eastern line and one on the river bluff to the south, with a parkway connecting them.

Park Commission minutes show that on Nov. 29, 1900, the commissioners recommended to the Legislative Council purchase of the Lea tract, about 400 acres. This was part of the original 5,000-acre tract owned by Judge John Overton. One of his daughters was Mrs. John M. Lea, whose son was Overton Lea of Nashville. All three park commissioners made a trip to call on Lea at Nashville, accompanied by another Overton grandson, John Overton of Memphis.

LEA DECLINED TO set a price but agreed to come to Memphis. He then proposed to sell at \$400 an acre the 175 acres west of Cooper, but he would keep the woods along Trezevant Road (now East Parkway).

In "Memphis During the Progressive Era" William D. Miller explains that Lea felt his sale of the entire woods would push up the value for speculators at his expense. He wanted to keep 162 acres and have some of the gain.

The Park Commission minutes say the decision was that the price was too high and recommended that the city con-

demn the Lea land. But on Jan. 26, 1901 the commissioners authorized more negotiations at \$110,000 for 337 acres. That was the purchase price.

That was 75 years ago but there are a few persons old enough to remember the attacks on Mayor Williams for such extravagance. One of them is Barron Deadrick of 261 North Avalon, who still feels that an injustice was done by protestors to the Williams family. They moved to Florida.

For the record, J. J. Williams was elected the mayor in 1898 and was re-elected in 1900, 1902 and 1904. He was defeated in 1910, but was Criminal Court clerk in 1919 when he again ran for mayor and was defeated.

IT IS PROBABLE that more than a majority of the public supported the park program, but a loud minority made themselves heard.

The Overton name was chosen by the public in a contest conducted by The Evening Scimitar. During months of voting about 80,000 coupons were clipped, with 50,000 favoring Overton.

The park has always been broken by a roadway. Persons who have held back the expressway seem to have never heard of this old route for streetcars and buses through the woods. Their pleas sound as though virgin timber would be violated by paving.

Actually the proposal is to widen a way in use since 1892. Duke tobacco money built the Raleigh Inn spa and the streetcar line to get there. It was expensive to build such a long line and a generating plant to feed the trolley wires. Some track-smoothing features were omitted with the result of a bouncing, lurching ride behind a clanging bell. Small boys and girls were thrilled with the perils of a trip to Raleigh for a picnic, or just for a ride.

EVEN IN ITS first report to the city fathers the Park Commission called attention to the opening in the woods for the Raleigh Electric Line. But the administration wanted that land and the public accepted it.

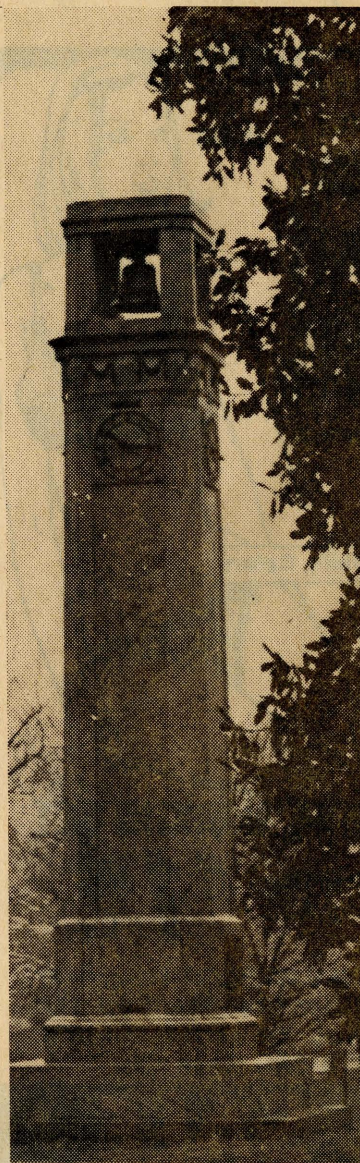
Quickly, the commissioners made Overton Park the showplace of the new park system with winding drives and wide green sod. Public support grew.

The zoo was added by the public, without city planning. A. B. Carruthers had accepted a black bear cub in partial payment for a wholesale order of shoes from a Natchez, Miss., retailer. He tied the little bear to a tree in his yard at Galloway and Evergreen until one day when Mrs. Carruthers discussed with him the condition of her flower bed.

SO THE MEMPHIS BASEBALL team suddenly acquired a mascot, a small bear named "Natch," chained near the entrance to the ball park on Madison. "Natch" grew to be shoulder high and strong enough to break his chain. A ball player, Nash Buckingham, brought him under control by picking up the chain and swirling the bear in the air, as though he

was about to throw the hammer at a track meet. Then the bear mixed up with another man and had to be banished. A bigger chain was bought and the bear was tied to an Overton Park tree. The year was 1905.

There "Natch" became the "father"



Bell Tower In Overton Park

of the zoo. Other people with surplus monkeys, parrots and coyotes carried them to the park and the cages formed a line near the bear tree.

The interest increased until the donors and those who wanted to put money into it organized a Memphis Zoo Association with Mrs. Carruthers as the first president. In 1906 the Park Commission took notice by putting \$1,200 into zoo cages, on the promise of Commissioner Galloway to raise operating funds. The first elephant, Sara, came to Memphis in 1910.

For many years the large animals were gifts, especially from Henry Loeb, the laundryman. Some were given by Abe Frank, the cottonman. It was an irregular source but the city government could pro-

vide buildings more easily than it could bring itself to use taxes for buying animals. Eventually the pattern was broken when Abe Plough, the pharmaceutical and cosmetic man, was a park commissioner. He gave the city an aquarium on condition that admission be charged to see the fish, and the proceeds used to buy zoo animals. That was a step toward an admission fee at the zoo gate to provide animal purchase money.

It had been a mark of distinction that Memphis had such a large free zoo but the upkeep demanded regular and substantial income. There also should be a notation that, while the zoo was free to whites, the whole park, and all city parks, were closed to Negroes while they were new. In 1911 the Park Commission even voted against a proposal from Mayor E. H. Crump that a park be bought especially for Negroes.

There was a softening of the old custom long before the modern era of civil rights, however, when Negroes were allowed at the zoo — if they came on Thursdays.

OVERTON PARK WAS of some importance to the movement for playgrounds. It had one of the first three playgrounds, a kind of easily-seen demonstration of what the advocates wanted in other parks. It was also the scene of benefit baseball games between lawyers and doctors to raise funds in 1908 and 1909. The Memphis Playground association was organized in 1908 and installed equipment in Brinkley Park (Market Square) in 1909. Mayor Crump expanded it into a municipal program in 1914, but it was 1920 before it became a part of the parks operation and playgrounds got substantial tax money. The wading pool was the gift in 1914 of Duke Bowers, chain grocery pioneer.

One of the most distinctive sights in Memphis, the stones from the temple gateway in old Memphis on the Nile, was displayed at the entrance to the zoo, until they were moved to the lobby of the new City Hall.

Overton Park is the setting for the often admired architecture of Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, a gift from the widow of Hamilton Brooks. It was dedicated in 1916.

On nearby property the Academy of Arts was built in 1956.

Near the art academy is one of the earliest memorials in the park, a granite tower 30 feet high with a bell and clock that rarely runs, in memory of Judge McFarland, the first Park Commission chairman. His will provided money for the memorial, dedicated in 1930.

And near the clock tower is a tree that might have had some attention during bicentennial occasions. It is a direct descendant of the oak at Cambridge, Mass., under which Washington took command, July 3, 1775. It was given with an appropriate bronze tablet by the Colonial Dames.

In contrast, one of the most familiar of all Overton Park sites is the Doughboy, a tribute in statuary to World War I sol-

diers. The sculptor was Nancy Coonsman Hahn, whose work was unveiled Sept. 19, 1926. It is a gift of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Memphis has its own copy of the Statue of Liberty. It was given by C. Arthur Bruce, the lumberman, to the Boy Scouts, who presented it to the city in 1950. The original is 19 times the size of the copy.

One of the oldest memorials in the park was erected in 1908 by admirers of Jenny Higbee, who founded a fine school for girls. It is a composition of six Greek columns in marble around a drinking fountain, on the hill across the driveway from the Doughboy.

Much more recent is the statue of E. H. Crump, near the southwestern corner entrance. Donald H. DeLue was the sculptor, who left off the glasses Crump always wore. There were 1,496 contributors to the E. H. Crump Memorial Association fund for the statue unveiled April 21, 1957.

THIS IS NEAR the entrance with the decorative columns, which had been built in 1954, after some controversy about using \$20,000 in tax money for the purpose.

Overton Park is the place where thousands of men, women and children were introduced to golf. The nine-hole links

opened in the middle of May, 1911, the first municipal course, and one of the first of any kind for this town. Abe Goodman, businessman, gave the clubhouse, which was added in 1926.

Picnic grounds along East Parkway are enjoyed by hundreds, every season, with a pavilion where square dancing has gained some of its numerous devotees.

There was a kind of peak for park music when a shell was built at the foot of a slope near the art gallery. The works Project Administration (WPA) labor, associated with leaf raking in other cities, built the stage, orchestra pit and benches in 1936.

In 1938-51 the Memphis Open Air Theatre (MOAT) entertained enthusiastic crowds with operettas, for which ticket sales paid part of the expenses. The stage has been used since for music in various kinds, and the fences were taken down in 1973, establishing a policy of all-free music.

Overton Park has become 75 years old, a rare age for a Memphis Park, even though Court Square and Market Square are more than twice as old. During the three-quarters of a century it has been almost forgotten that the mayor was attacked for spending so much for park land. But Joe Williams stuck to his guns and it has worked out just fine.