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Paul D. Nelson

Macalester College, pnelson2@macalester.edu

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The Life and Death of Central Park

Paul D. Nelson

A pedestrian wandering today east of the Minnesota State Capitol would sooner or later come upon a surprising chunk of real estate: two and a third acres jutting up from Martin Luther King, Jr., Avenue and molded into four terraces sloping smartly to the south, adorned by trees, grass, shrubs, tables and benches, and offering a fine view of downtown. A bronze plaque on the site bears just these words: Central Park.

But, is this really a park? The terraces are concrete, resting on concrete pillars. The grass, trees, and shrubs are adornments only, pleasant but unconvincing add-ons. If people stop to enjoy the view, they do so walking to or from their cars; this Central Park is a

thousand-stall State of Minnesota parking ramp.

Nothing remains of the original Central Park, once the lovely, postcard-worthy center of an affluent neighborhood. Nothing remains either of the neighborhood that surrounded it, except photographs and memories.

The Central Park story begins in 1884. St. Paul then was just 45 years old, a steamboat burg transformed by the railroad into one of the boomtowns of the continent. Lured by the promise of work or gain, immigrants crammed the city; between 1880 and 1890 the population (so far as the Census Bureau could make it out) grew from 31,000 to 133,000. Development rushed up from the downtown basin in all directions: south across the Mississippi, east across Trout Brook, west

toward Minneapolis, and north. By 1884 most of the land between downtown and Washburn (now Capitol) Hill on the northern skyline had been platted, and much of it built.

On Bluff, an east-west street just beneath University Avenue, where Minnesota Street reached its northern end, stood the enormous houses and grounds of the Lamprey, Lindeke, and Dawson families. From their perch above downtown they surely watched the city grow and computed the rising values of their real estate holdings. Immediately below them lay the last several acres of unplatted land between them and the river. The Lampreys and Dawsons owned most of it.

Above, looking south along Central Park Place East, 1909. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

In this pre-zoning era of free-for-all growth and speculation, buildings flew up without regard for visual harmony. An 1886 photograph, too poor in quality to reproduce here, shows what the Lampreys, Lindekes, and Dawsons would have seen just two blocks to their south: a gaggle of small, unpainted frame houses, some neat, some glorified shacks, all firetraps, looking (and threatening to march) uphill. A contemporary newspaper account described Minnesota Street in that part of town as “repulsive, unpleasant, forbidding.” The neighborhood in general had an untidy, unplanned, unfinished look.

Creating a park and a neighborhood

While they could not control the forces of growth and immigration that swirled around them, these wealthy families did have the power to control the land that lay before them. A park, the right kind of park, offered the prospect of buffering their neighborhood from helter-skelter growth and creating a pleasing, protected environment. And while they would have to donate the land, the cost of park development and maintenance would fall to the city. Perhaps it occurred to them too that a park might raise the value of the real estate they retained

In the fall of 1884 Uri and Jeanne Lamprey, William and Mary Dawson, and William and Rose Lindeke, joined with William Dawson, Jr., and wife Maria, Theodore and Caroline Schurmeier, and Gustave Schurmeier, to plat a portion of their lands as “Central Park” and dedicate it to the city of St. Paul. Though no record of city council action has been found, the park deal had already been made.

The platting (and replatting of one small parcel) altered the layout of these several acres. Minnesota Street was shortened by 500 feet, moving its northern end one block south. Instead of ending at the Lindekes’ front fence, this north-south artery stopped at the southern end of the park, at East Summit Avenue (later East Thirteenth Street, now Columbus Avenue.) The platting also created two new parallel north-south streets, Central Park Place East and Central Park Place West, flanking the park. Both were narrow and one block long. Any traffic moving up Minnesota Street would be stopped by the park and forced left or right. It was a simple, effective design: access to the park would be permitted but discouraged.

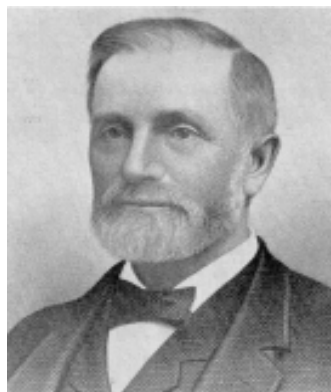
The Central Park donors were a powerhouse group. Dawson was president of the First National Bank and had been mayor of St. Paul. His son, also a

banker, was married to the daughter of another former mayor, Edmund Rice. Jeanne Lamprey had come to St. Paul in 1845 (at three weeks of age), when the town was a muddy hamlet. She came to join her father, one of the most successful of first settlers, Louis Robert (for whom Robert Street is named.) Husband Uri Locke Lamprey had made a pile in the practice of law and by 1883 had quit law for real estate. Prussia-born William Lindeke owned a flour mill and was founding partner of one of the region’s leading wholesale merchant firms, Lindeke, Warner and Schurmeier. Theodore Schurmeier, another partner in that firm, managed its finances. Brother Gustave married a daughter of William and Rose Lindeke, and was a principal in Foot, Schulze, St. Paul’s leading maker of boots and shoes. All lived or owned real estate nearby.

The city probably began landscaping the park in 1885. Its first known public use came early in 1886, when the first ice castle of the first winter carnival was built there. The ice castles returned in the next two years, and these appear to have marked the last time the park served as a city-wide destination. From then on, as the donors surely had hoped, Central remained a neighborhood park.



Uri Lamprey. MHS photo.



William Dawson, Sr. MHS photo.



William Lindeke. MHS photo



Looking northwest across the park, 1886. To the left of the ice castle, Evangelical Trinity Lutheran church. To the right, the Lamprey and Lindeke houses.

The landscaping was formal. Sidewalks and shrubs surrounded the grounds, a rectangle 500 feet north to south and 200 feet wide. Walkways led in from the corners toward the center and, by curving trajectories, converged on the park's central feature, an ornate fountain located about one-third of the way up from the southern edge. The fountain likely was not installed until after the 1888 Winter Carnival.

Costly and promising development around the park began in 1886. The junior Dawsons built a \$15,000 home, designed by Edward P. Bassford, at 668 East Central Park Place, across from the northeast corner of the park; lumberman Charles T. Miller outdid them with a \$26,000 mansion next door at 654; and down at the south end of the block Gustave Schurmeier erected a lovely red stone, three-story set of five Queen Anne-style rowhouses designed by Augustus Gauger. Two years later James Humphrey, president of the Minnesota Soap Company, chose the lot just north of Gustave's for a giant double dwelling. These four buildings would own the east side of the park until 1908,

leaving just one open lot in the center of the block. Except for the Dawson house, all survived into the 1960s.

West Central Park lagged a bit in building but not, when it came, in wealth or ostentation. Its first house (1887) was the finest. Independent investor George C. Stone built a memorable Richardson Romanesque double house at 665-667, on the northwest corner across Central Avenue (as Bluff Street was renamed) from the Lamprey

House. Stone and his wife Kate built the house to live in, and also to give away. Upon its completion they gave the northern half to their daughter Clara, wife of paint magnate Thomas C. Blood. From then on, until it came down, the house was known as the Blood mansion. They gave the southern half to their daughter Ella, wife of W. Adams Hardenbergh. These were generous gifts -- the Stones paid \$16,500 for the land and another \$26,000 in building costs -- but the gifts came with a price: George and Kate reserved for themselves the right to occupy for life a set of adjoining rooms on the second floor of both sides of the house. The in-laws would be staying.

While the Stone house was going up, building began also on the south side of the park. Theodore Schulze, a founder of the Foot, Schulze company and Gustave Schurmeier's business partner, put up a relatively modest two-story, \$9000 dwelling at 64 East Summit, where Central Park Place West reached its southern end. The Schulzes moved in in 1887.

Up the block the Stone-Hardenbergh-Blood clan solidified its



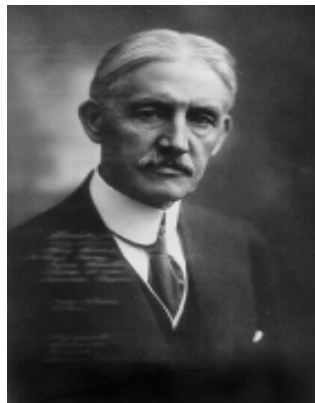
Looking east across the south end of the park, 1886. Left to right, the Charles Miller house, the James Humphrey double house, and the Schurmeier Queen Anne rowhouse.



The Thomas Blood house, with the the Theodore Schulze house at the immediate left in the background. This view from the Lamprey house. MHS photo.

hold on the northwest corner of the park with a \$12,500 house built at No. 655 by and for Mary Hardenbergh. She was the widow of Peter Hardenbergh, who had built a big “wholesale leather, findings, saddles, and fitted uppers” business. She was also the mother of her new next-door neighbor, W. Adams Hardenbergh; he had taken over the family business and added his own interest in a “horse collar machinery” enterprise.

Joseph Paul Frye had, like so many of St. Paul’s early rich, started in the dry goods business. By the time he and his wife Nannie built their \$9,000 house at 643 Central Park Place West in 1890, he had, like his new neighbors the Lampreys and Dawsons, moved on to real estate, in the firm of Frye and Jenkins. The Fries’ would be the last single-family dwelling built on the park. Just four years after it began, the first stage of Central Park development had come to its end. There were four new houses on the east side, three on

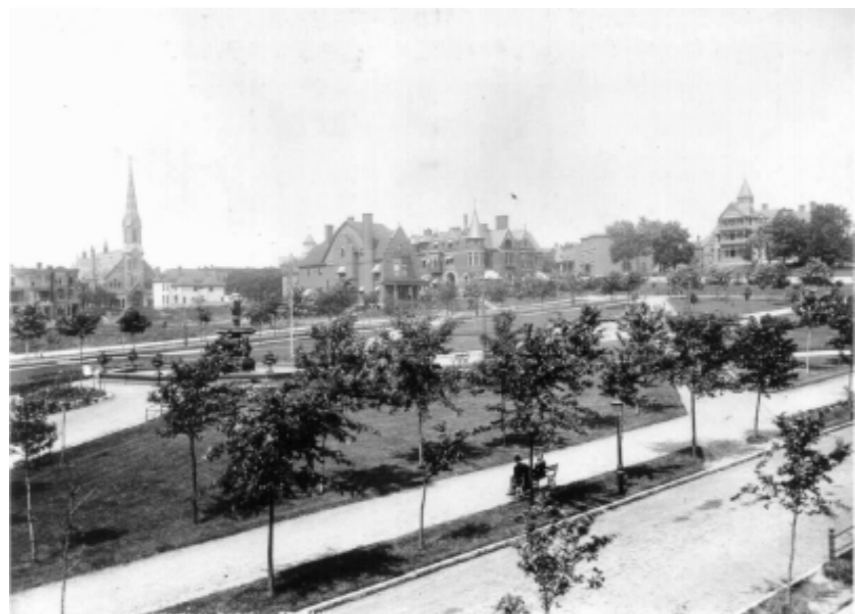


Clarence H. Johnston. MHS.

the west, one on the south; the much older Lamprey, Lindeke, and Dawson houses presided, unchanged, on the north.

The new Frye, Hardenbergh, and Blood houses shared not only the desirable Central Park address but also the same creative source, the eminent St. Paul architect Clarence H. Johnston. He or his firm, Wilcox and Johnston, designed them all. This is probably just coincidence -- Johnston was the hot residential architect of the time -- but a suggestion survives that there may have been some design coordination. The *St. Paul Globe* reported in November of 1885, before any building had begun, that the houses on the park “will all be erected in a peculiar style suitable to the location.” However it came about, the fact that these five houses of the first eight built on the park came from the same architectural mind must have given the nascent neighborhood a rare stylistic integrity. It would not last long.

Below, looking northwest across the park, 1900. Evangelical Trinity Lutheran Church is at left, the Hardenbergh and Blood houses in the center, and the Lamprey house at the far right. MHS photo.



The second stage

The second stage of park development began in 1891, when physician John Conrad Nelson put up a three-story apartment building at 56-6- East summit, next to the Schulze home. This soon proved a modest beginning. Planning was already in motion for something far grander. Real estate man Fred S. Bryant, doing business as St. Paul Apartment House Co., bought the southern four lots of Central Park Place West, engaged architect Charles A. Wallingford, and in 1892 brought forth *The Macey*. Ninety-five feet wide at the street, 84 feet deep, and 65 feet tall, two wings joined by a transverse hall, this masonry mass weighed down the southwest corner of the neighborhood and balanced the rowhouses (117 feet wide, 45 feet tall) across the park. Though we do not know how many units it had then, a fair guess is 40 ample flats. *The Macey* (later called *The Virginia*, and then again *The Macey*) by itself tripled the number of housing units on the park.

The next year William Reed put up a three-story apartment building at #645, between the Frye and Mary Hardenbergh houses: Clarence Johnston's architectural monopoly of the northwest corner of the park had been broken. The Reed building (later known as *The Genesee*) also ended the second phase of Central Park development. Two events would soon intervene to interrupt, then irrevocably alter, Central Park's fate. The first was the depression of 1893, which suppressed all kinds of investment and economic activity for the rest of the 19th century. Though several lots around the park remained open, and St. Paul continued to grow, nothing would be built on them until 1901.



Looking south across the park, 1898. The steeple in the center belongs to Central Park Methodist Church. The apartment block at right is the *Macey*, and above it the tower of the old State Capitol. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

The next event, one that assured Central Park's eventual destruction, occurred in 1894, when the State of Minnesota chose land just a few hundred yards west and slightly north of the park as site of its new Capitol.

Though state government was still small at the end of the 19th century, the gravitational pull (in Thomas O'Sullivan's apt phrase) of the state's single most important building could not fail to be powerful. In the short run, every investment and building decision nearby would have to be made in reference to it. In the long run, the need for additional government buildings would pressure all buildable land nearby, including the 2.33 open acres called Central Park.

The choice of Cass Gilbert to design the Capitol (he won the commission in 1895) affected the park too. The big-thinking Gilbert coupled his building design with landscape design: He imagined a vast esplanade extending south from the Capitol through downtown all the way to Seven Corners

(where the Xcel Center stands today.) Though little of this ever took shape, Gilbert's vision powerfully influenced all of the decades of debate and planning about the Capitol Approach that followed. Most of the plans offered over the succeeding decades included some variant of a mall stretching south along Cedar Street, with new government buildings on it. The buildings on Central Park West all stood on a narrow block with their backs to Cedar Street only a few dozen yards away. Any new building on that block of Cedar would consume their back yards at the very least.

Thus while the works of St. Paul's two most eminent architects, so near, may have complemented and enhanced one another for a time, Gilbert's creation threatened Clarence Johnston's'. Though it would take half a century and more, the statehouse doomed Central Park. The wrecking ball would swing from the Capitol dome.



A 1907 Cass Gilbert Capitol Mall design extending to Seven Corners. MHS.

Deciphering the real estate dealing around the park is easier than figuring out what people did inside the park, at least in these early years. Some activities leave a trail; others do not. What we can surmise about how people used the park during its prime years, 1885 to 1905 or so, comes mainly from what it looked like — its design and the photo record. Park design encouraged only sedate activity. It was small, of course, with no broad open spaces and no playground equipment. The benches, curving walkways, summer flower plantings, and fountain promoted sitting, strolling, gazing, circumambulations in the carriage. These must have been the kinds of uses the park's donors had in mind. Central Park's popularity as a postcard subject suggests that it achieved a certain status as an urban oasis. In use and to a lesser degree appearance it resembled the Irvine Park of today.

Transition

But the park's uses were about to change, because the neighborhood changed around it. When building resumed in 1901, the open land filled with apartments, then structures that made

clear that Central Park's days as an exclusive neighborhood had already passed. Architect James Brodie built a three-story flats near the corner of East Summit and Cedar, just to the west of the park's southwest corner in 1901. Eli Warner, a founder of the McGill-Warner printing company, built four stories of flats at 78 East Summit (later known as The Brewster) in 1905, and W.H. Griffin added two-and-a-half stories more at 74 East Summit the following year. Griffin himself now lived in the former Theodore Schulze house next door. Schulze, along with quite a few other prominent businessmen, had moved to the Aberdeen Hotel. Another huge building rose next to The Macey in 1906, the Minnehaha (later Van Niel, then Mayfair) Apartments — 90 feet wide, 108 feet deep, four stories tall, three wings, probably another 48 units. And now multiple-unit housing invaded the east side of the park; in 1908 Dr. and Mrs. William J. Hurd built a four-flat building at #638, between the old Humphrey and Miller houses, both Wilcox & Johnston creations. With the exception of the block east of Minnesota Street at the south end of the park, all land fronting the park had now been

built.

Now, however, the parcels north of the park, the Uri Lamprey, William Lindeke, and William Dawson lots came into play. Lindeke had died in 1892, Dawson in 1906, and Lamprey had by 1905 moved to Forest Lake. The founders had gone. In 1909 the city authorities made a decision that expressed unmistakably how the zone had changed: They chose the former Lindeke and Dawson properties for the site of the new Mechanic Arts High School. No neighborhood or enclave could call itself exclusive, or even fashionable, with 1200 high school kids coming and going every day.

If that were not enough, in 1911 the Minnesota Bread Co. began work on a new bakery at 77 East Twelfth Street, one block south of the park. What in time became the Taystee Bakery (and lasted into the 1990s), filled the entire block bounded by 12th and East Summit on the south and north, by Minnesota and Robert on the east and west. Henceforth a tenant mounting to the towers of Gustave Schurmeier's Queen Anne rowhouses at 612-620 Central Park East would look down not on the common people of St. Paul — kept at a comfortable distance — but on the backside of an industrial oven complex. It had taken just 25 years: The Central Park vision had been made reality, and then slipped



The Hurd, 1910. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

away.

As though to make the point in bold, in 1916 one of the first houses built on the park, William Dawson, Jr.'s 1886 mansion, came down to be replaced by the Filben Court, an apartment building. In 1915 the Uri Lamprey house came down, replaced the following year by the new headquarters of the Minnesota Historical Society, designed by none other than Clarence Johnston, giving him now a remarkable six buildings on the park. These would be the last buildings built on Central Park for half a century – and the next one built, in 1958, would bring the park's destruction.

This, then, was the Central Park neighborhood from 1918 until its end: Moving clockwise from the corner Cedar Street and East Central Avenue (formerly Bluff Street): the Minnesota Historical Society Building and Mechanic Arts High School, where the Lamprey, Lindeke, and Dawson mansions formerly stood. On the east side the Filben Court apartments, the Charles T. Miller house, the Hurd apart-

ments, the James Humphrey house, and the Gustave Schurmeier (for lack of a better name – Schurmeier himself sold the building for a small profit in 1887) rowhouses sloped with the land from north to south. Across the street (once East Summit, now East Thirteenth) the white, fragrant Taystee Bakery took up the whole block. Moving west across Minnesota Street, the four-story apartment building built by Eli Warner (The Brewster), then the smaller one put up by W.H. Griffin, the old Theodore Schulze house, Dr. Nelson's flats and, at the Cedar corner, James Brodie's three-story flats. Moving up Central Park West, The Macey, the Mayfair, the Frye house, the three-story Reed apartments, the Hardenbergh mansion, and the finest of all, the Thomas Blood double house.

Kids take over

The twenties and thirties were hard on the neighborhood and on the park itself. Though the twenties may have roared culturally, they sputtered economically in St. Paul. Lean times in farm

country tightened belts in the city. And though people did not yet know it, the railroads, source of so much of St. Paul's wealth and employment, had already passed their peak; only decline lay ahead. A great deal of St. Paul's housing stock had built in the 19th century and hurriedly, and poor economic times accelerated its deterioration. By the mid-30s, St. Paul had some notoriously bad slums. A writer from *Fortune* magazine touring the Twin Cities in 1934 found St. Paul's slums to be "among the worst in the land. . . . Above all, there is the atmosphere of a city grown old."

Neighborhoods near Central Park participated in the slide, and Central Park did too. The apartments and flats on the park began to be divided into smaller units; The Hurd, built as a fourplex, by 1930 held 14 units; the Van Niel (first the Minnehaha and later the Mayfair), probably 48 comfortable apartments originally, had become 74 in 1930, 21 of them vacant; The Macey's likely 40 had been converted to a similar number. Even some of the mansions were cut up; James Humphrey's double house at 624 Central Park East had become the LaCove apartments, 20 units. The Frye house had three units on the second floor, and the first floor stood vacant. Many of the apartments were simply sleeping rooms. Many of the Central Park became a working class neighborhood.

And kids took over the park. The fountain, once pure ornament, became a wading pool; the elegant female figures that had adorned it were removed. The city continued to maintain the grounds, but there was no need to preserve a pretense of antique charm. In a 1930 report the Department of Parks and Public Buildings commented that Central Park "had gone into decay due



A 1916 plat map of Central Park and surroundings. MHS.



Enjoying the Central Park fountain, 1928. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

to the fact that it was used both as a playground and as a park.” The neighborhood children might have argued with the parks commissioners over the word “decay.” For them a fountain to splash in on hot afternoons had to be an improvement on one they could only look at.

As that 1930 report described, the city gave in to the children and decided to turn the center of the park into a playground. “The park was regraded in 1929 and a stone wall enclosed playground area was built in the center so that area where the children play would not be an eyesore for the rest of the people.” A front-page *Dispatch* piece heralded the installation of a true wading pool. The fountain came out. A curved, partial wall went up on the south end, and whatever grass and sidewalks remained in the center of the park were replaced with a gravel surface. An off, half-moon structure, purpose now forgotten, went up at the north end. No wading pool was ever built, and for the rest of its days Central Park bore an unfinished look. Neighborhood kids called the oblong, gravel-paved central area “the bowl.”

Tom Roy and Beverly Dunbar (nee Hanson) grew up on opposite sides of Central Park in the 1940s and early 1950s, he in The Mayfair, she in The Hurd. Though acquainted, they ran in different circles and their parents did not know each other. Both recall Central Park as the center, literally and figuratively, of a kid-friendly, kid-dominated world. For Mr. Roy, the park meant sports and chums, during good weather from morning till dark, football in the

fall, softball in spring and summer. With home plate tucked at the southern point of the narrow “bowl,” softballs and baseballs flared left or right ended up in the street – so the neighborhood lads developed the rule that anything hit there meant an automatic out. “I learned to hit to center field, and that stayed with me the rest of my life.”

For boys, at least, friendships made in the park tended to stay in the park. Tom Roy and his friends rarely visited each other in their homes. “I didn’t know anything about my friends’ families, or even if they had families at all.” There was one annual exception to the no-visit practice – Halloween. The older kids liked to congregate at O’Malley’s Hamburger Shop in the Mayfair. Some of the Mechanic Arts kids liked to go there to smoke. And Tom Roy got his first paying job there.

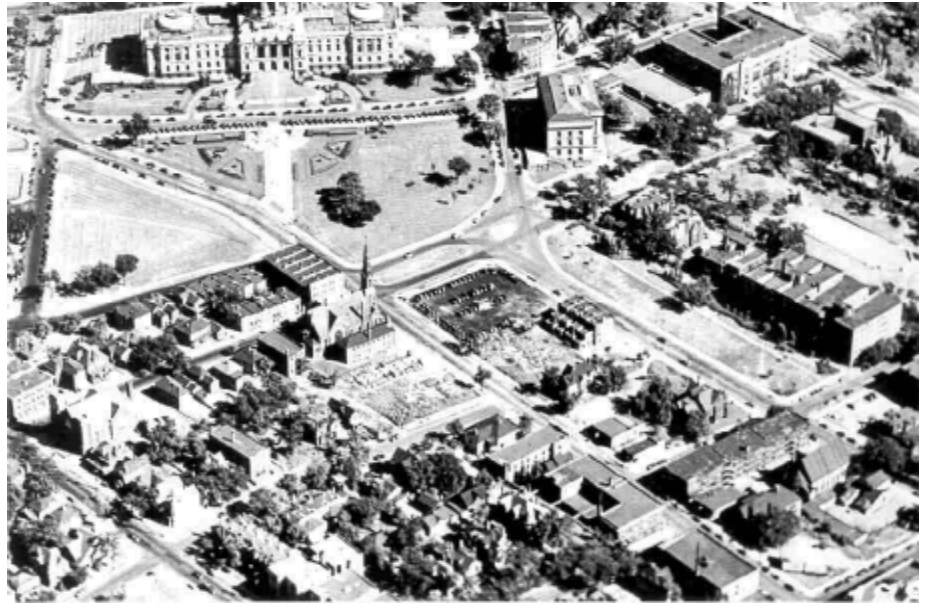
For Bev Dunbar, life “on the park” offered everything a kid could want. First and most important, friends: “You could never walk outside that there weren’t groups of kids . . . There were probably about 15 kids my age who hung out on the park all the time.” The



Construction of the never-finished wading pool, 1929. The Taystee Bakery is behind it. *St. Paul Dispatch* photo, Minnesota Historical Society.

kids spent a great deal of the time in the park itself: “We played every game possible, baseball, football, red rover, anything you could think of.” It was an innocent place, too, the most sinful activity being the older boys’ nighttime crap games in the bowl. Little Bev Hanson sometimes earned a nickel warning the players of an approaching squad car. Some of the craps players went on to become policemen themselves.

And there was endless fun to be had without leaving the shade of the park’s tall elms. There was Bill’s, the “crummy, narrow little store” in the basement of The Mayfair, where everybody shopped and where the park kids hung out. “We’d spend all of our money at Bill’s store, getting gum or candy or Babe Ruth bars or Bit o’ Honey or comic books. Thursday night was comic book trade night. We’d get together in the park and trade . . . there were enough people that you’d have a big selection.” The girls would go over



The Capitol Approach, 1945. Central Park is at the far right. MHS photo.

to the bakery and call down to the bakers working in the basement, “Throw us up some rolls!” and often get them. They climbed to the roof of the red flats (their term for the Schurmeier rowhouses) and leapt from roof to roof, or went down to the cellar of the His

torical Society building and roller skated through the tunnel to the Capitol. In summer when the ice man made his rounds, “as soon as he’d go into a building we’d run in the back of the truck and get pieces of ice – then we’d really have a treasure.” Just going into the buildings around the park offered wonder (or plunder.) The Mayfair had elevators marvelous to behold, “brass, beautiful, ornate, absolutely gorgeous,” and glassed in so that visitors could watch. The Filben Court had a magazine stand in its lobby. “If you wanted a magazine you’d sneak up to The Filben Court and go through their magazines, and then run out.”

Some of the old buildings on the park held fascination for the neighborhood kids. The old Charles Miller house they called “the castle,” and no one knew what went on inside. The Thomas Blood mansion had by this time been cut into many rooms; it retained its beauty and kids could tell it had once been fine – so how come poor people lived there? The red flats had spires and turrets. This was a neigh-



Part of the “screen of ugliness,” 1930. At center right is the Macey; the white apartment building at far right is The Brewster. MHS photo.



The park and neighborhood, 1955. In the center, the Minnesota Historical Society building; to the right, Mechanic Arts High School; across from it to the south, the Filben Court, then the Miller house and The Hurd. MHS photo.

borhood in physical decline, and surely much more interesting for children than a groomed subdivision of today. What kid wouldn't love to have two or three ancient, mysterious, down-at-the-heels mansions nearby?

Except for the absence of people of color (and of course St. Paul was overwhelmingly white in those days), the Central Park neighborhood of this era seems to have been an admirably egalitarian community. As Mr. Roy and Mrs. Dunbar recall it, almost everyone (except perhaps those at the toney Filben Court apartments) lived at about the same lower-middle-class level; no ethnic or religious groups dominated. They were all just kids from Central Park. They went to different grade schools, Catholic Schools for many, but for high school they all attended to Mechanic Arts. Probably because by now all the apartments on the park were small, families were small too, many of them with just one parent. Neither Bev Dunbar nor Tom Ray remembers any stay-at-home mothers; all parents worked. When war came,

many families sent sons off to serve, and those who stayed behind felt united in their patriotism and shared sacrifices. Standing in line together waiting for the rare shipment of Duz detergent was a bother, but also a statement of solidarity.

The screen of ugliness

Today any proposal to destroy a city park would incite insuperable op-

position. But those were different times. There seems never to have been a public announcement that Central Park would be converted to other uses. Its abandonment was simply allowed to become inevitable.

From the moment the Capitol was completed in 1906, agitation about the capitol approach never ceased. The disorderly and increasingly run down neighborhood in front (south) made a jarring contrast with the Capitol's gleaming marble grandeur. Over the decades many voices had called for removal of this "screen of ugliness." In 1929 the St. Paul *Daily News* ran a series of ten front-page "photo editorials" illustrating the problem and calling for city and state action. The Capitol, wrote the paper, stands "isolated in its graveyard of building horrors." Behind these calls lay the memory of Cass Gilbert's plans for a majestic capitol mall. Depression, war, and a host of other obstacles long prevented action, but in the postwar years a modernizing spirit took hold in St. Paul. Eyes brightened by prosperity looked with heightened disdain on old buildings. Many, many of them would have to go: urban



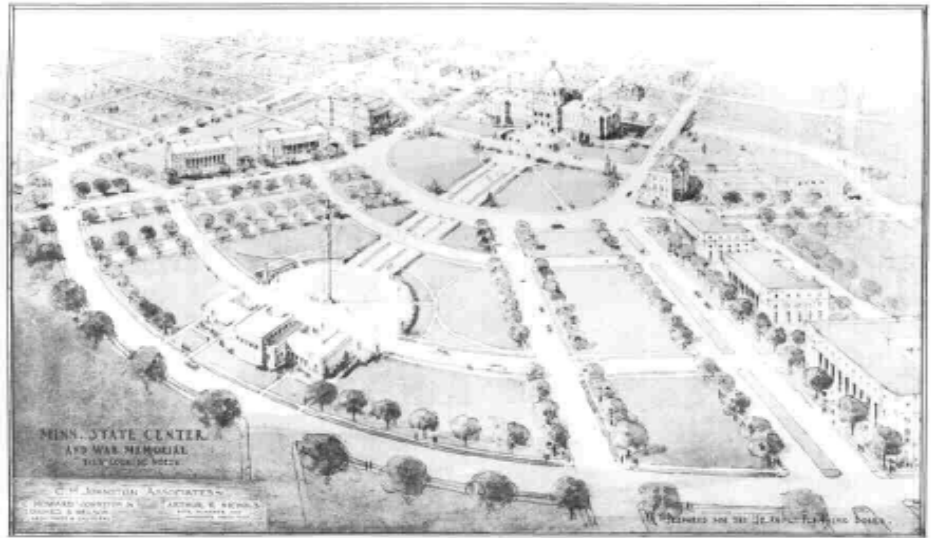
The north end of the park, with pergola, 1960. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

renewal.

In all of the years of Capitol Approach planning, wrangling, and revising, Central Park itself was rarely mentioned, though it fell squarely within the development area. There seemed to be a tacit understanding that the park, or the neighborhood, or both would have to be sacrificed. Indeed, Clarence Johnston himself drew up a plan in 1941 in which the park survived, but all of the houses he designed on its east and west sides were razed. Architects can be unsentimental about their own creations. In the late 1940s and early 1950s plans for clearing the screen of ugliness and extending the capitol mall took concrete form as the state government began building again. The mall was enlarged to its current size, and the old building horrors taken down to make room for new ones.

First came the Veterans Service building, due south of the Capitol, commissioned in 1946 and opened in 1953. Next came the Highway (now Transportation) Building on the west side of the Capitol and just south of the State Office Building, built 1956-1958. The next logical building site, the only would that would restore balance to the mall's layout, was on Cedar Street, just south of the Minnesota Historical Society building—that narrow block whose east side faced Central Park. The state's choice of the land on Cedar St. between 13th and East Central for its new office building, named Centennial for its construction in 1958, the 100th anniversary of Minnesota statehood, quietly sealed the fate of Central Park. Every building on Central Park West had to go to make way for it.

The wrecking began in 1956: The Macey, The Mayfair, The Genesee, the old Frye and Hardenbergh houses, and at last the finest of all, the Thomas



A Clarence H. Johnston Capitol Mall plan. Central Park, sans neighborhood, is at the right.

Blood double house, one by one fell. By 1958 the block lay barren for the first time since 1885. The Centennial Building rose. The vestiges of Victorian elegance gave way to sterile, airless utility. Progress.

The park as a neighborhood did not die immediately. The houses and apartment buildings opposite the park's southwest corner gave way to the new National Guard Armory in the spring of 1960. On East Central Park Place, the red flats went first, in August of 1960. The old James Humphrey double house

fell in early 1965 and The Hurd in autumn 1966. The last of the single-family residences, and the last Clarence Johnston design, the Charles Miller house, enjoyed a final season of utility and renown as the first headquarters of the State Planning Agency from the summer of 1967 until it mid-1969; it came down the following April. The last apartment building, The Filben Court, perished in March of 1974. Mechanic Arts High School held on until 1976, and the Taystee Bakery till 1993.

The fate of the park land itself lay



The Brewster comes down, 1960. Minnesota Historical Society photo.



Central Park Place West, to the left, has been cleared, 1958. The Macey, the Blood mansion, and all the others are gone forever. MHS photo.

for a few years in bureaucratic limbo. In 1967 the Legislature created the Capitol Area Architecture and Planning Board (CAAPB) to oversee development near the Capitol, from Jackson Street on the east to Rice Street on the west, University on the north and the future path of I-94 on the south. The Board recognized that the automobile would have to be appeased; there must be more parking. One imaginative plan called for a parking area to be built over the freeway, in front of where the Stassen Building stands now. Only when this was judged infeasible did official attention focus on Central Park.

In February of 1970 the CAAPB announced a design competition for a parking facility to be built on the park site. The design specification booklet noted, "Originally this site was a park but since has been converted into a parking lot" — Central Park's only official epitaph. Architect George McGuire of Minneapolis won the competition, defeating second-place finisher Ralph Rapson, architect of the Tyrone

Guthrie Theater.

Designing the thing proved much easier than building it. Construction costs far exceeded what the Legislature had appropriated, so the Board had to go back for more money. What had been expected to cost \$2,000,000

ended up costing over twice that much.

The legislature boosted its appropriation to \$3,570,000, but by now, 1972, that was no longer enough; the Department of Administration rejected all bids because the estimated cost had risen over \$4,000,000. Wrangling over money went on (and costs continued to rise) until May of 1973, when the Legislature at last surrendered to necessity and authorized the five million and change now required. Construction began in late 1973 or early 1974, but work stopped in March of 1974 due to a dispute with the contractor. The ramp apparently opened for business some time later that year.

Four score and ten: ninety years spanned the life of Central Park, from plan to plat to living park to parking ramp. And then there is the plaque: A story persists that it is there on the pillar in the ramp to signify compliance with a legal obligation. Because the original donors gave the land as a park, the story goes, if it ceased to be one the land would revert to the donors or their



The "Central Park" parking ramp, fall of 2003. The street at right still bears the name, Central Park Place East. Photo by the author. Because of new construction, this view no longer exists.

heirs. This would explain the landscaping atop the structure – park-like accoutrements. The city of St. Paul maintains the thing as an official park to avoid the reversion. Alas, the story is not true. The donors' 1884 dedication specified, "to the public and for the public use forever." When the city and state replatted the land as part of the Capitol Grounds in 1961, they used precisely the same language, and a public parking facility is plainly a public use. The city stopped including Central in its list of parks at about this time.

In terms of measurable utility, parking may now be the best use public of the old Central Park space. It meets a daily need of hundreds of workers and the state government that relies on their labor. But this is also true: If the Central Park enclave had somehow survived it would be hailed today as a miracle of historic preservation, and celebrated as a source of St. Paul civic pride and pleasure.

About the sources

Readers may be surprised to learn that projects such as this one -- and this one for certain -- often involve many hours of fruitless groping and floundering for facts and leads.

This article began with a pair of questions. Years ago I came upon a postcard image of Central Park -- possibly the one shown on the cover -- and wondered, "Where was it and what became of it?" This year *Ramsey County History* gave me the opportunity to try to answer those questions.

At first finding the answers resembled assembling a jigsaw puzzle, but without having a picture of the completed puzzle or even knowing where all the pieces were. Hence the groping and floundering.

I had guessed that the destruction

of a city park would have raised a fuss in the press, so I spent hour upon hour going through newspapers and the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority clipping files at the Minnesota Historical Society library. I was wrong. I guessed also that public events might have been held at the park during patriotic holidays, and that these would have gotten a little press, especially in the park's early years. I was wrong about that too.

Tiny beams of light came from scattered sources. The 1930 City Directory reverse listings gave me addresses and the names of buildings on the park. The addresses gave me access to two invaluable sources: real estate records in the office of the Ramsey County Recorder, and the city building permits now held by the Ramsey County Historical Society. With these I could trace every building on the park from construction to demolition, and every real estate transfer.

Names were important. The names of the park creators and donors appear in the *St. Paul Daily News*, Nov. 9, 1919, the *Dispatch*, July 23, 1932, and in Lloyd Peabody's "History of the Parks and Public Grounds of St. Paul," in *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, vol. V, 1913. As these were all prominent people, they appeared in MHS's biography card file. These cards point the researcher to published material about the individuals. Obituaries are extremely helpful.

Maps were essential. One of the joys of local history comes from visiting the places that interest you: "Here. It was here. It happened here." Particularly wonderful are plat maps and the Sanborn fire insurance maps, because of their detail. They show individual lots and buildings.

MHS's photo record of Central

Park is, fortunately, numerous. With maps and addresses I was able, eventually, to identify almost every building on the park in a photo; the Joseph Frye house is the most prominent exception.

Good fortune raised its lovely head at various times. Lou Paul of the Ramsey County Recorder's office rescued me one frustrating afternoon, and pointed me to the little drawer containing microfiches of Dedications of Plats: there I found the Alpha and Omega -- the park's original 1884 platting and its 1962 replatting as part of the Capitol grounds. Through an organizer of Mechanic Arts High School's annual reunions, I found Beverly Dunbar, without whose generosity and enthusiasm this story would be much less interesting and complete. She led me to Tom Roy and, indirectly, to the descendants of Bill Woedevich, of Bill's Grocery. Maureen McGinn of the Ramsey County Historical Society gave me stuff that I would not have found on my own about the Charles Miller house and some of the Central Park area architects.

The Minutes of the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board yielded, though reluctantly it seemed, the story of the parking ramp. Two general works on the capitol area proved helpful: Thomas O'Sullivan's *North Star Statehouse* (Pogo Press, 1994), and Gary Phelps's *History of the Minnesota State Capitol Area*, prepared for the CAAPB in 1985. Paul Clifford Larson's *Minnesota Architect, The Life and Work of Clarence H. Johnston* (Afton Historical Society Press, 1996), is the essential work on Johnston.

Little by little these beams and others combined to make a light just bright enough to illumine this small plot of St. Paul's past.