



HISTORIC BRIGHTON

NEWSLETTER AND JOURNAL

Celebrating our Town's history and educating our community about Brighton's past.

VOLUME 19, No. 2

SPRING 2018

2018 Historic Brighton Board of Trustees

OFFICERS

President

Matthew Bashore

Vice-President, Membership

Janet Hopkin

Vice-President, Communications

Marjorie Searl

Secretary, Recording

Carol Yost

Secretary, Corresponding

Monica Gilligan

Treasurer

Michael Brandt

Nominating Chair

Arlene Vanderlinde

MEMBERS

Jessica Lacher-Feldman

Grant Holcomb

Joan Martin

Marjorie Perlman

Ron Richardson

Ray Tierney III

Jeff Vincent

David Whitaker

JOURNAL CO-EDITORS

Christopher Brandt

Michael Lempert

EX OFFICIO

Mary Jo Lanphear, *Town Historian*

SPRING MEETING OF HISTORIC BRIGHTON

125 Years of Rochester's Parks

Presented by: Katie Eggers Comeau



View of the duck pond and band stand in Seneca Park, c.1918

Sunday, April 29, 2018 | 2:30 pm
The Wintergarden at St. John's Brickstone
1325 Elmwood Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620

All Historic Brighton quarterly meetings are
free and open to the community.

Historic Brighton acknowledges with gratitude:



150 Highland Avenue
Rochester, NY 14620
(585) 760-1300

*for their generous support and sponsorship
of this issue of the Historic Brighton Journal*

Excerpts from: 125 Years of Rochester's Parks

By Katie Eggers Comeau

One-hundred and twenty-five years ago, Rochester embarked upon an ambitious scheme to develop a world-class network of public parks. Although modest in budget, the city's plans were vast in scope. Frederick Law Olmsted, the famed landscape architect who designed Rochester's first three major parks, commended Rochester as the first city of its size to undertake such an ambitious system. The city leaders who in 1888 hired the nation's premier expert in park design and committed to his grand vision made the bold choice to make public space a priority. Twenty-first century Rochesterians are beneficiaries of their foresight and of the dedication of those who carried out the vision of a city replete with beautiful landscapes available to all.

Over the years, Rochester's park system - one of only four complete park systems Olmsted designed in the United States - expanded and adapted to national and local shifts in aesthetics, popular activities, budgets, and demographics.

Rochester's Earliest Recreational Spaces

The earliest public spaces in what would become the city of Rochester were created in the spirit of private enterprise. As a way to boost their prospects, early nineteenth-century founders of competing settlements near the Genesee River's waterfalls each set aside land for a county courthouse. After the courthouse was built in the One-Hundred-Acre Tract developed by Col. Nathaniel Rochester and his partners, two property owners whose sites had not been chosen donated their planned courthouse sites for public use. These became Brown Square and Washington Square. Other nineteenth-century small parks, such as Mechanics' Square (now Susan B. Anthony Square) and Plymouth Circle (now Lunsford Square), and street malls, such as those on Arnold Park, Oxford Street, and Lakeview Park, were left open by their developers to enhance surrounding properties and

increase property values. Although conceived primarily as real estate amenities, these early squares and street malls served as valuable breathing spaces as the city's density increased.

Cemeteries were likewise valued as open space, with Mount Hope Cemetery in particular providing scenic terrain for strolling and picnicking. Established on the city's outskirts in 1838, Mount Hope was the first American rural cemetery planned, developed, and maintained by a municipality. It eventually was expanded to include 200 acres and is still active today.

The cemetery, designed in the mid-nineteenth-century Romantic style, provided not only a burial place, but also a scenic landscape the living could enjoy. In the absence of similar spaces designed for recreation, the cemetery became a popular destination for fresh air, natural and exotic vegetation, and unstructured



An 1839 engraving of Mr. Hope Cemetery. Original squares, street malls, and burial grounds provided public spaces for recreation before the advent of the park system.

From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division

recreational activities such as walking and picnicking. The presence of this beautiful space heightened residents' awareness of a need for recreational space.

Opportunities for outdoor recreation began to appear in Rochester between 1840 and 1870 in the form of private facilities geared toward specific activities, such as fishing, bathing, hunting, and horse racing. Picnic groves, a fisherman's lodge, dressing booths at the beach, and a few horse racing tracks were among the limited recreational facilities built in and just outside the city before the Civil War. Rochesterians interested in outdoor activities could play in one of two cricket clubs established in 1847, enter a sportsmen's association organized in 1849 for excursions to the Thousand Islands and other locales, join one of a number of baseball teams founded in the 1850s and 1860s, or row crew with the Resolute Regatta Club

created in 1858. These and several other organizations established in the mid-nineteenth century reflected an increase in leisure time, a new interest in outdoor activities, and enthusiasm for community events.

Rochester's outdoor enthusiasts found their interests aligned with others pursuing similar goals; humanitarians, business leaders, philanthropists, and public health advocates began to champion the need for extensive public space in the late-nineteenth century. The creation of Central Park in New York City in 1858 and of the Buffalo Park System in 1868 provided early examples of municipalities reserving and improving generous amounts of land for the benefit of their citizens.

A gift of land from nurserymen George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry provided the impetus for formal establishment of a commission to

create parks in Rochester. In April 1888, after considerable lobbying by park advocates (and over the objections of the city's frugal Common Council) the state legislature authorized an independent Board of Park Commissioners, commonly called the Park Commission, "to float bonds for \$300,000 and to finance the purchase and development of desirable lands for a park system, which would be maintained with charges to the city not to exceed \$20,000 a year."

The Olmstedian Ideal: The Origins of Rochester's Park System

One of the first activities of the Rochester Park Commission was to confer with colleagues in Buffalo, who recommended their landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted (1822-1903) was a Renaissance man. Notable as a writer, editor, abolitionist, and head of the federal Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, he had also tried his hand at scientific farming and managing a gold mine before finally devoting himself full-time to landscape architecture. He is best known as the father of the landscape architecture profession, although even that honor understates his vast influence on the development of the American landscape and urban design.

Olmsted's best-known project, New York City's Central Park, was his first foray into landscape design and the first public park in the United States. With architect Calvert Vaux, his partner on this and some of his other projects, he developed many of the design principles he would use in other landscapes and began to formulate his influential ideas about the purpose of public parks in American



This c.1890 photograph from Highland Park looks towards the Children's Pavilion and captures Olmsted's preferences for blending his parks with nature. The three-story circular pavilion was 62 feet in diameter and 46 feet high, and was demolished in 1963.

From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division

democracy. Having established his credentials with his innovative work at Central Park, Olmsted went on to design dozens of city parks, private estates, campuses, and residential communities across the country and in Canada, including such prestigious projects as the Niagara Reservation at Niagara Falls and the U.S. Capitol grounds, a remarkable body of work that had a profound impact on the shape of late-nineteenth-century American cities.

Fundamental to Olmsted's work was his goal of making each landscape a coherent whole, in which every detail was subordinate to the overall aesthetic effect and contributed to the emotional experience he wished to cultivate. His two basic landscape styles were the "Pastoral," a peaceful landscape intended to calm and restore the visitor's spirit, and the "Picturesque," suitable for rugged, complex terrain where he sought to inspire a sense of mystery and awe. In contrast to what he saw as the artificiality of garden-design styles of his day, Olmsted based each of his compositions on the unique character of the site, enhancing existing topography and vegetation to produce a specific effect. Although his designs often required extensive earth moving and replanting, the desired impression was of a landscape untouched by human hands the opposite of highly formalized, geometric French or Italian garden styles.

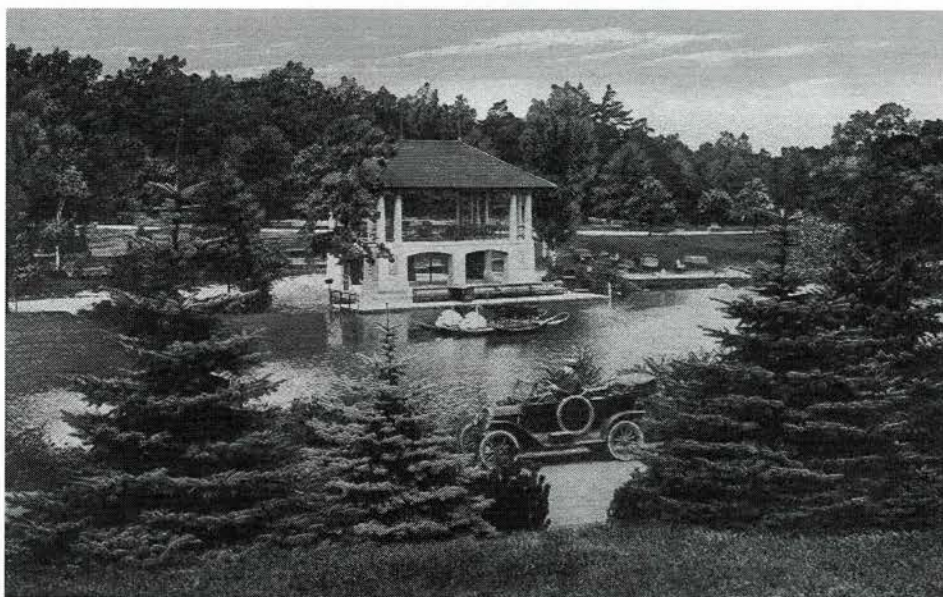
Olmsted's work in Rochester, coming near the end of his illustrious career, was undertaken at a time when his design skills and characteristic styles had been fully developed through hundreds of previous projects. His advice to the Rochester Park Commission was to focus first on acquiring and developing generous

public parks along the Genesee River, the city's greatest natural asset. His two riverfront parks highlighted the contrast between the dramatic river gorge north of the city and the gentler terrain to the south. The gentle meadows in what he called "South Park" (Genesee Valley Park) were designed in his signature Pastoral style, while the rugged gorge in "North Park" (Seneca Park) was an example of his Picturesque approach. Less characteristic of Olmsted, yet still masterfully executed, was the hilltop arboretum in Highland Park, which protected views of the city and distant Bristol Hills while respecting the wishes of the donors Ellwanger and Barry for a world-class plant collection. To connect the parks and foster residential development around them, Olmsted planned a network of parkways, broad tree-lined boulevards, often with landscaped central street malls. Seneca Parkway, which remains today, is the best example.

When Olmsted designed Rochester's park system, the rural sites of what would become Genesee Valley

and Seneca parks were considered remote, and some people doubted whether sites several miles from downtown were practical. These concerns proved unfounded, as the parks soon became readily accessible. Regular train service was established to Genesee Valley Park in 1891 and to Seneca Park in 1892; streetcar service was extended to both parks in 1892. Crowds of thousands thronged the parks for special events such as concerts (sponsored by the Rochester Railway Company and the Chamber of Commerce), fireworks, and May Day celebrations, or simply to admire the flowering shrubs in Highland Park. Just a few years into the vast project of establishing the park system, the park commissioners reported that "our citizens have come to have a strong personal and civic pride in our public pleasure grounds. Nothing possessed by the municipality is so especially owned and occupied by the people as the parks."

Olmsted envisioned parks as restful retreats from urban life, but he also recognized the power of his parks and parkways to shape city



The bandstand on the western bank of Seneca Park's Trout Lake. Also visible is one of the famous swan paddle boats that offer Rochester park-goers rides around the lake. The attractiveness of the pavilion reflects Rochester's willingness to challenge the Olmstedian ideal of naturalism.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division

development. He expected that they would encourage high-quality, suburban-style development in the surrounding areas, whose property values would inevitably rise once the parks were established. In Rochester, as in other cities that embraced Olmsted's designs, well-built, single-family houses soon lined the streets in neighborhoods named for the parks. Not coincidentally, the street railway lines that provided access to the parks facilitated this growth by also functioning as commuter lines for the "streetcar suburbs" that developed between the parks and downtown. The parks thus proved fundamental to the direction and character of the city's growth from the last decade of the nineteenth century until well into the twentieth. Neighborhoods near the Olmsted parks remain some of the city's most desirable today.

"Active Agencies for Social Service": Reform Park and Practice

The Olmstedian ideal of tranquil, naturalistic settings where visitors could immerse themselves in calming

scenery was soon challenged by a new vision of the purpose of public parks in American life. The emerging "Reform Park" philosophy was a byproduct and manifestation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Progressive Era, a period of social activism and reform that encompassed politics, social welfare, education, economics, and many other aspects of American life. Causes such as temperance, woman suffrage, public health, and education reform all fell within the purview of progressive activists.

With missionary zeal, reformers sought to eradicate poverty by imparting middle-class values and living conditions to families - often immigrants - living in crowded city neighborhoods. Activists believed exposing the poor to classical music and great literature, educating them in scientific hygiene and cooking, and providing them with access to constructive and socially acceptable recreational activities would help curtail the social ills they associated with poverty, unstructured time, and, to some extent, immigrant culture.

Promoting civic welfare had always been the goal of public parks, but to reformers, passive immersion in naturalistic scenery - Olmsted's antidote to the stresses of urban life - was insufficient to promote social change. Parks would have to do more.

By the turn of the twentieth century, even as Olmsted's pleasure grounds were still under construction, the Rochester Park Commission began to adopt the progressive Reform Park philosophy. The park commissioners' break with the Pleasure Ground concept was made explicit in their 1911 report, in which they noted that "it has been the purpose of the Park Commission to make the parks of Rochester not simply beautiful pictures, which would serve the people in a passive way, but to make them active agencies for social service." The commissioners noted that concerts of classical music performed by the park band were being used to educate the taste of Rochester residents, while at supervised playgrounds children were "mothered and fathered and . . . taught to play and many other good things," and taking classes in sewing and industrial arts, nature, reading, sports, and music.

The emergence of Reform Park philosophy occurred just as Olmsted's plans for Rochester were being implemented and also coincided with a transitional period for the Olmsted firm. Olmsted's declining health and eventual incapacity forced him to reduce his workload; he retired in 1895. The firm continued under the leadership of Olmsted's proteges, including his stepson, John C. Olmsted (1852-1920), who had been a partner in the firm since 1884. In 1898, John C. Olmsted and Olmsted's son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (1870-1957), formed a partnership known



Probably taken in the 1910s, this picture from Maplewood Park captures the Progressive-era shift in Rochester parks philosophy. In this instance, the Parks Department sponsored a series called "Rochester Playground Library" in which librarians read stories to children.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

as Olmsted Brothers. The firm would survive until 1961.

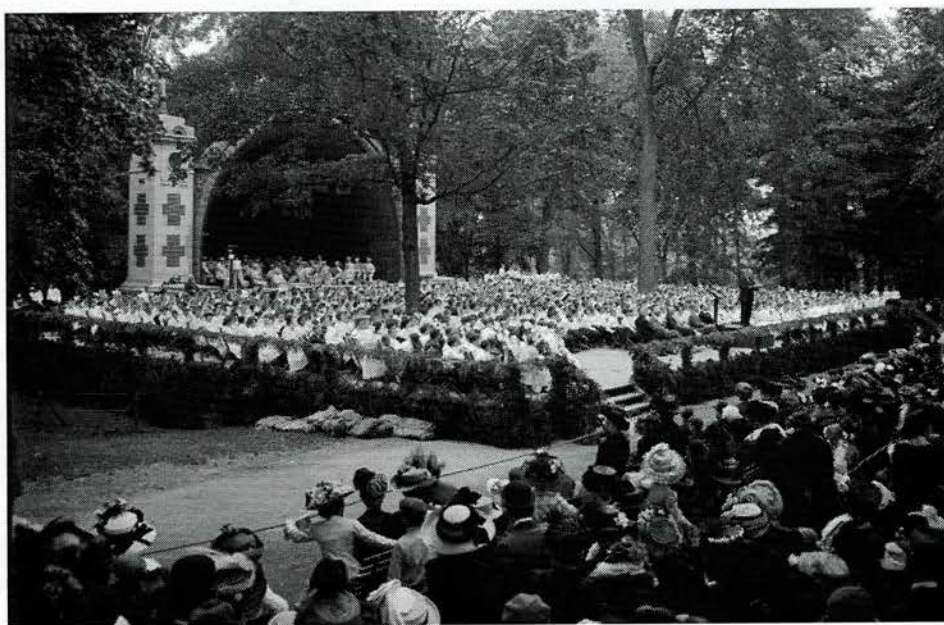
As the trend toward providing ever-larger and more structured activities in the parks grew in the early twentieth century, the park commissioners asked the Olmsted firm to provide designs for bandstands, pavilions, sports facilities, and other new additions to the large Pleasure Ground parks to accommodate new interests. John C. Olmsted, who visited Rochester throughout the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century to supervise park development, sought to balance the original pleasure ground designs with the increasing demand for reform-oriented facilities. Although he tried to ensure adherence to the aesthetic ideals of his stepfather, the younger Olmsted was thoroughly attuned to Reform Park theory, in its ideological and practical aspects, and he tried to help with the sensitive integration of newly popular park facilities into Rochester's park system. For example, in a letter responding to a query as to the appropriate size of running and bicycle tracks and whether these were likely to be short-lived fads or lasting interests, John C. Olmsted revealed a detailed knowledge of the requirements of the various sports and provided some guidance as to their implementation in Rochester. He advised the Park Commission that while bicycle races were likely to wane in popularity, track and field appeared to have more longevity; thus the Commission should "provide a running track and field for running, long and short jump, pole vaulting, shot-putting and other field athletics, but...postpone the bicycle track on account of the expense."

Genesee Valley Park experienced the greatest pressure to accommodate

the kinds of outdoor activities and programming that became popular in the Progressive Era. The original Olmsted plan designated a peripheral area on the west side of the river, north of Elmwood Avenue, for modest, low-impact athletic facilities, such as ball fields and a small cluster of boathouses, leaving broad swaths of meadow east and west of the river and the great majority of the river's edge on both banks free from development. Even before the original plan was fully implemented, the Park Commission began fielding requests from private boat clubs and athletic organizations which, undeterred by the original plan's intent to minimize waterfront development and preserve unspoiled river views, wanted to construct new facilities on the west river bank south of Elmwood Avenue. Although Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. strongly advised the Commission to reject any proposals for waterfront structures in that area, he and other members of the firm nevertheless attempted to provide the Commission with some guidance as to the location and design of new buildings to minimize their obtrusiveness. Within a few

years boathouses and other public and private athletic facilities lined the west river bank.

The Olmsted firm also advised the Park Commission on projects such as development of Lamberton Conservatory in Highland Park and the Maplewood Rose Garden. Meanwhile, the Commission also proceeded with projects with little or no input from the firm, such as golf courses in Genesee Valley and Maplewood parks and a zoo and bandstand in Seneca Park. After one visit to evaluate the system's progress, John C. Olmsted noted, "It seems a pity we should not have been consulted as to plans of the various buildings built this year. . . They seem to be getting a lot of comfort for the money, but the architects are entirely out of harmony with all our ideas of style and fitness and the designs are markedly commonplace and crude." Although the Commission's work was not always up to John C. Olmsted's standards, the firm's assistance proved invaluable during the process of rerouting the Erie Canal to create the Barge Canal System,



This photograph of a bandstand in Genesee Valley Park was taken in 1922. Progressive Parks Department planners organized concerts to enrich and improve the cultural tastes of Rochester citizens.
From the Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center

announced by the state in 1903. After considerable study of ways to divert the canal from downtown Rochester, the state settled on a route that would take the waterway directly through Genesee Valley Park. Although bemoaning the bisection of the park, the firm provided recommendations that helped to “make the best of a bad job,” as Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. put it. Particularly notable were the five graceful arched bridges that elegantly spanned the Canal and Red Creek to connect the circulation systems on the waterway’s north and south sides. While Canal construction “temporarily render[ed] the park useless,” enthusiastic park use resumed after completion of the project in 1918.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., who in the early twentieth century established a national reputation as a leading landscape architect and urban planner in his own right, was one of three authors of *A City Plan for Rochester*, a report prepared for the Rochester Civic Improvement Commission in 1911. His contribution was a section titled “The Park System,” which

melded the values of his father’s Pleasure Ground philosophy with new Reform Park thinking, and proposed building on the existing system by, for example, creating new parkways to link existing and new parks.

Emergence of a Modern Park System

The fruitful, 27-year partnership between the Park Commission and the Olmsted firm came to an end in 1915 after the Park Commission was abolished and responsibility for maintaining and improving the city parks was given to a new Department of Parks, headed by a commissioner appointed by the mayor. This reorganization had been proposed in 1900 when other city functions were brought under the control of the mayor, but the Commission had retained its independent status. Upon hearing of the commission’s dissolution in March 1915, John C. Olmsted noted,

“I need hardly say that my sympathies are all on the side of the Park Commission. I have

repeatedly advised persons interested against the well nigh universal modern movement to put parks in charge of a Commissioner of Public Works or directly under the charge of the Mayor or some other single official... In a general way I think it is true that to create a work of art a single designer must be responsible, but to preserve the parks from unwise alterations, a board of men of good taste is more apt to act conservatively and wisely than a single official who is selected primarily either for political reasons or on account of his general business efficiency rather than for his good taste.”

The Department thereafter kept park design work in-house and no longer employed the Olmsted firm. Fortunately, the new department retained a number of individuals with extensive experience in the park system who had worked closely with the Olmsted firm and absorbed the principles that had guided the Park Commission. Alexander B. Lamberton, named the second president of the Park Commission in 1902, was appointed Commissioner of Parks; other key staff members who stayed on and made lasting contributions were William S. Riley, Calvin C. Laney, John Dunbar, and brothers Bernard (Barney) and Patrick Slavin.

Reform-era trends in park programming and design were manifested particularly well in the city’s smaller parks and playgrounds, which brought the benefits of park facilities and programming into urban neighborhoods. These parks were intended to be within easy walking distance “a distance so insignificant that it will not deter the little child, or the tired mother with a baby, from going to the park for half an hour’s recreation when the chance comes” of every family in the city.



Some popular parks features, such as the Seneca Park Zoo and Genesee Valley gold course, were developed without input from the Olmsted firm. This 1905 postcard depicts the early zoo in Seneca Park. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

Playgrounds were particularly important to social reformers, who saw them as educational facilities where children would be “taught systematic playing.” The city’s first official playground was developed at Brown Square, a mid-nineteenth century public square redesigned by the Olmsted firm in the 1890s and converted into a playground in 1903. New facilities were added, including a brick shelter, toilets, a wading pool, swings, teeters, basketball courts, and other playground equipment. More playgrounds soon followed throughout the city. Thousands of children participated in structured activities in these playgrounds. Indeed, according to a 1911 Park Commission report: “At Brown Square, Washington Playground, and Hartford Street inner playgrounds in the congested district there are 12,000 children a week in summer on the average; and sometimes 2,500 on a single day.”

These numbers continued to increase, with well over 400,000 children (more than 8,500 per day) using the playgrounds in the summer of 1915. By 1929, there were 29 playgrounds in the city of Rochester, a figure that included 10 playgrounds on school property, one on private property (at the University of Rochester, accessible to city children during summer vacation), and seven in the large city parks.

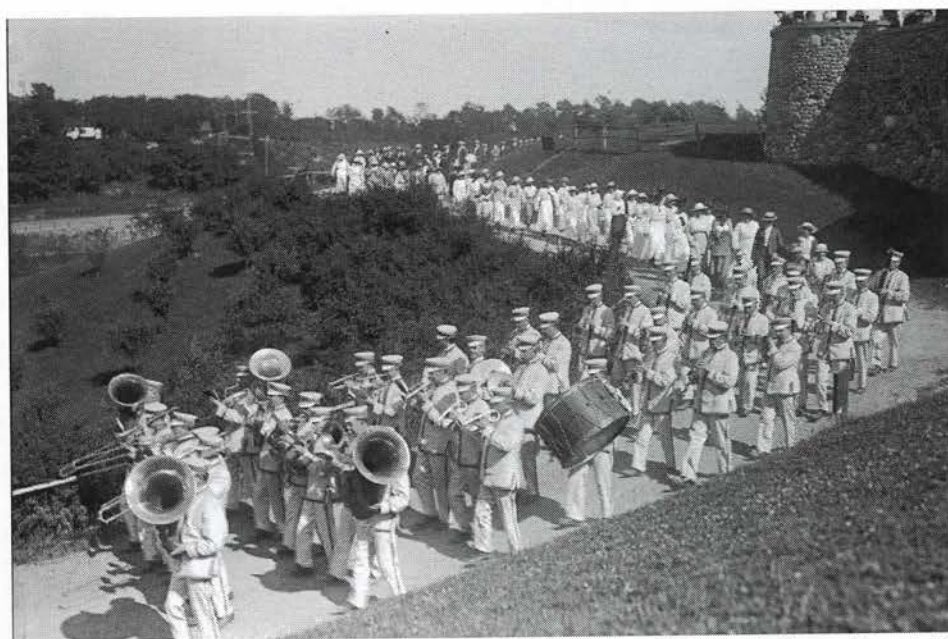
In addition to the playgrounds, four substantial parks were added to the system during the Reform Park era: Durand-Eastman Park and Cobbs Hill Park in 1908, Exposition Park (now Edgerton Park) in 1911, and Ontario Beach Park in the early 1920s.

In 1907, Dr. Henry Durand, an accomplished local surgeon,

persuaded George Eastman, founder of the Eastman Kodak Company, to purchase land adjacent to Durand’s lakefront estate in Irondequoit so the two could together donate a major new park to the city. The gift, made final in February 1908, encompassed 512 acres, including a substantial amount of beach land. The Olmsted Brothers provided valuable advice on the location of roads, grading, and a dam in 1908, but as development of the landscape took place over the next two decades, implementation and further elaboration of the plan was constructed around the designs of Bernard Slavin, assistant superintendent of parks from 1910 to 1926 and superintendent from 1926 to 1942. A self-taught horticulturist, Slavin took a particular interest in Durand-Eastman Park, which, of all the parks acquired during this period, offered the most diverse natural landscape and needed the most extensive horticultural treatment. Slavin turned this originally barren area into a lush, naturalistic arboretum so much in keeping with Frederick Law Olmsted’s design principles that it is often mistakenly believed to have

been designed by Olmsted himself. The park’s popularity flourished in the 1910s and 1920s with the development of a nine-hole golf course in the mid-1910s (expanded to 18 holes in the 1920s and redesigned by famed golf course designer Robert Trent Jones in the 1930s), a popular vacation camp for boys, a refectory, a 1,000-locker bathhouse, and a zoo.

Cobbs Hill Park was developed around a new city reservoir in a former quarry. The park was located in the southeast quadrant of the city on a prominent glacial hill. In 1908, the same year the city began construction of the 144-million gallon reservoir, George Eastman donated 15 acres of land around the reservoir for the creation of a public park that would offer panoramic views. Local residents donated money for the purchase of an adjacent forested area, now known as Washington Grove, and the city purchased additional land, for a total of 61.5 acres. Plans created by the Olmsted Brothers for the reservoir area guided the plantings, grading, circulation system, and location of small buildings. In keeping with



The opening of Durand-Eastman Park, summer 1916. A brass band led a parade of eager citizens to the park's formal opening ceremonies. The land for the park was given by Henry Durand and George Eastman.
From the Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center

Reform Park trends, additional facilities soon followed, including tennis courts, a winter skating shelter, and ball fields.

In 1911, the city acquired the 42-acre former site of the Western House of Refuge, a reformatory school established in 1846 and renamed the State Industrial School in 1886. The site, which the city renamed Exposition Park (now Edgerton Park), contained substantial residential and school buildings. The park was conceived as a major cultural center for the city, with space for the Museum of Arts and Sciences (the precursor of today's Rochester Museum and Science Center), a library branch and office space, and the Rochester Historical Society, as well as a bandstand, zoo, aquarium, buildings for industrial exhibits, a restaurant, midway, and a large playground. Expositions and other special events were held each year until Depression-era funding cuts brought them to an end. The buildings associated with the reform school and with the park's early development were gradually lost, with the exception of one former wing of

the school that became an assembly hall for the expositions and then was used as a gymnasium before becoming part of a recreation center.

The last major park added to the system was Ontario Beach Park in Charlotte, at the mouth of the Genesee River. Long a popular recreational destination for Rochester residents and visitors, the village of Charlotte and its adjacent beach became easily accessible when a railroad connected the village to downtown Rochester in 1853. Commercial attractions at the beach began to develop in the Civil War era, starting with a restaurant with boating and bathing facilities. Restaurants, hotels, and cottages followed in the 1860s and 1870s. The beach and surrounding area developed into a popular amusement park, coming to be known as "the Coney Island of Western New York." Featuring rides such as "Slide the Bumps," "Helter Skelter," and "The Whip," as well as exotic architecture, large hotels, food stands, and an auditorium and band shell, the park typically drew 70,000 visitors on hot summer weekends, with stunts and

concerts drawing particularly large crowds.

Progressive-Era reformers viewed Charlotte, with its lax liquor laws, seedy hotels, and beer gardens, as an affront to their vision of orderly society. A desire to bring Charlotte under the purview of the Rochester police was a major motivator for the city's annexation of the formerly independent village in 1916, as was the goal of controlling Charlotte's commercial port. After annexation, the city purchased the amusement park, demolished all the rides except the carousel, and substituted what were seen as more wholesome public recreational pursuits - swimming, bathing, and picnicking - for private commercial activities. Unlike the other large city parks, Ontario Beach Park's historic composition was the result of gradual development rather than a planned design.

The acquisition of Ontario Beach Park marked the close of the period of major expansion of the city's park system. Although not part of Olmsted's original plan and, for the most part, not designed in accordance with his aesthetic ideals, the development of Cobbs Hill, Durand-Eastman, Exposition (Edgerton), and Ontario Beach parks was consistent with his goal of providing public access to a wide variety of landscape types, with an emphasis on natural topography and water features. The city's ability to acquire and improve four more large parks only decades after purchasing hundreds of acres for the original system, is a testament to the public's embrace of Rochester's parks in what proved to be their heyday.

To read this article in its entirety, please visit:
http://www.rochester.lib.ny.us/~rochhist/v75_2013/v75i2.pdf

HB



Exposition (now Edgerton) Park during the 1910s. The original compound included a library, museum, bandstand, aquarium, and even an indoor zoo, which can be seen in this postcard.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

William Chase Pitkin Jr: A Forgotten Master of Landscape Architecture

By Christopher Brandt

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Rochester has very appropriately been called The Flower City. From its dominance of the nursery industry during the mid-to-late 1800s, to its landscaped boulevards including Seneca Parkway and Oxford Street; to its Olmsted designed park system, to its early "ordinance requiring the planting of street trees"; it would seem that one could not come up with a more fitting designation.

This horticultural fervor inspired three young local men to pursue and establish nationally renowned careers in the fledgling field of Landscape Architecture: Alling Stephen DeForest (1873-1957), William Chase Pitkin Jr (1884-1972), and Fletcher Steele (1885-1971). Mr. DeForest's diverse accomplishments included designing the grounds of grand estates including those of George Eastman and Harvey Firestone, academic campuses, most notably Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, and residential neighborhoods including Nunda Boulevard and Long Meadow in Pittsford. Mr. Steele, while born and raised in Pittsford, spent the majority of his career practicing in Boston before returning to his family home during retirement. He is nationally recognized for his designs of several country estates including Mabel Choate's Naumkeag in Stockbridge, MA, and Edith Vanderbilt's Frith in Asheville, NC. While Mr. DeForest and Mr. Steele are enshrined in many Rochesterians' memories as masters of their craft, the equally significant works of William Pitkin Jr. have largely faded from memory.

William Jr. was the second of three children of William and Helen (Chase) Pitkin. Helen's father Lewis Chase was one of three brothers who founded the Chase Brothers Company in 1857, which grew to become a direct competitor of nursery giant Ellwanger and Barry Co. William Sr. began working at Chase Brothers as a clerk and eventually rose to be president of the company by the 1910s. William Jr. attended Cornell University, where he likely studied under Bryant Fleming at the brand new Department of Landscape Art. Mr. Fleming's influence on the young Pitkin, can be seen in his career-long specialization in residential landscape design. After graduation, William Pitkin Jr. returned to Rochester and established a partnership with another landscape architect, Ralph Weinrichter, in 1909. Pitkin and Weinrichter quickly found work designing the grounds of Minnie Nester's estate in Geneva, the campus of the Toledo Museum of

Art, and Brighton's first residential sub-division, Homes Acres.

Home Acres was built in 1912 on a tract of 128 acres that had been used by the Ellwanger and Barry nursery for cultivation of plant stock since the 1870s, and had formerly been owned by early Brighton denizen



William Chase Pitkin Jr in 1918.
Democrat and Chronicle Archives



Rendered view of Home Acres showing gateway walls and extensive plantings, c.1912.

Gideon Cobb. Pitkin established a precedent with his design of deep setbacks and dense plantings of trees and shrubs that was to be repeated in his subsequent neighborhood design commissions, and mostly notably as adapted by the Brown Brothers for their Browncroft neighborhood in 1914.

Building off his experience with Home Acres, Mr. Pitkin designed the smaller, but more exclusive and topographically complex subdivision of Highland Heights in 1913. He laid out a meandering U-shaped drive within the twelve acre tract that follows the contours of Cobb's Hill as it climbs near to the ridge of the glacial moraine before descending back to Highland Avenue. Large existing trees and the woods of Washington Grove were preserved and irregular lots were arranged so that each house constructed had a unique and unobstructed view to the Genesee

Valley and Bristol Hills to the south. This emphasis of working with and enhancing the existing topography and vegetation of the site became a consistent hallmark of Pitkin's subdivision designs.

The following year Pitkin formed a new partnership with his brother-in-law Seward Hamilton Mott, a talented civil engineer, to assist with the design of a large subdivision he been commissioned for by General Motors in Flint, Michigan. Seward and Mott quickly developed a national reputation for their grand estate and residential subdivision designs. Before moving their practice to Cleveland, Ohio in 1919 they completed the designs of Upper Arlington in Columbus, Ottawa Hills in Toledo (at that time one of the largest sub-divisions in the country at 1200 acres) in 1915, Beverly Hills in Brighton in 1915, and Eclipse Park in Beloit, Michigan in collaboration with New York

architect George B. Post and Sons in 1916. The latter was published in *Architectural Record* and was celebrated for its moderately priced homes for the working class and distinctive curvilinear streets radiating along a diagonal central boulevard. The Beverly Hills subdivision located at the northeast corner of North Landing and Penfield Roads and directly north of Corbett's Glen Park in Brighton was modeled after Roland Park in Baltimore, the first planned subdivision in the country and designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. All of Pitkin and Mott's sub-division designs of this era and into the 1920s elaborated on the key design components Pitkin established in Home Acres and Highland Heights: curving streets that followed the natural topography of the site, deep setbacks, dense plantings that complemented existing mature trees and framed scenic vistas.

Perhaps most notable of Pitkin's residential landscape designs during the 1910s were his design for Syracuse architect Ward Wellington Ward's personal home, Lemoyne Manor, in 1917 (It is possible that Pitkin and Ward also collaborated on the architect's many refined residential projects in Rochester and Syracuse.), and the landscape of the Frank Lloyd Wright designed E. E. Boynton House.

In addition to residential gardens, Pitkin was also frequently chosen during the 1910s to lead the design of the annual Rochester Garden Show at Edgerton Park. His contemporary, Alling DeForest, collaborated with Pitkin on these elaborate events or would also be the head designer on a year that Pitkin was not chosen for the job.



Plan of the Eclipse Park Development. Note curvilinear and axial street grid with central park.
The American Architect, Vol 113, 1918

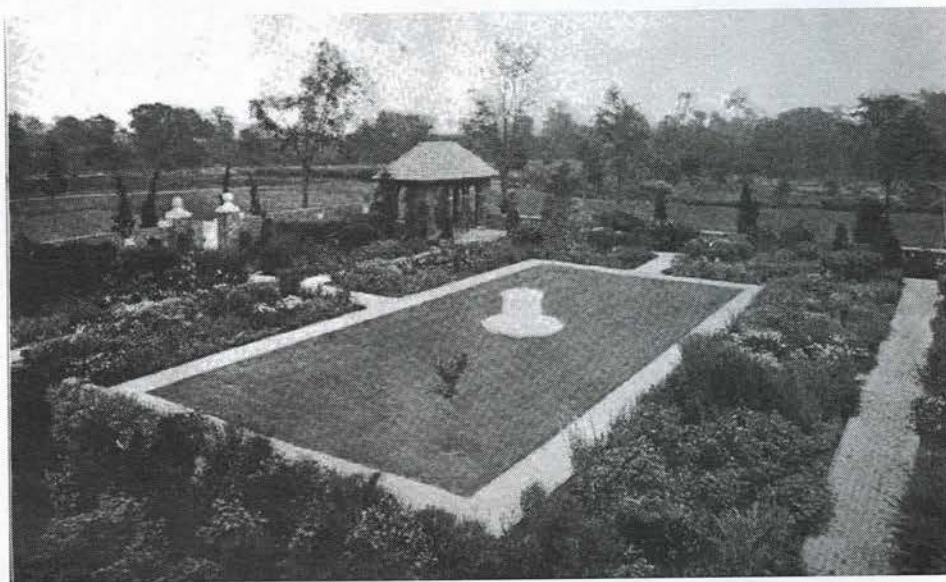
Pitkin and Mott moved their operations to Cleveland in 1919 as they were continuing to get larger and more significant commissions in Ohio and the Midwest. During the 1920s and into the 1930s, they designed the grounds of several large country estates, the most notable being Kingwood in Mansfield, Ohio and Applewood Estate in Flint, Michigan which are both now a botanical gardens open to the public. Their designs for these grand estates "blended naturalistic design with a restrained formality and featured well-laid-out approaches and paths, formal sunken gardens, water features, and a wide variety of garden types and planted features... [their] combined talents enabled the firm to take on ambitious projects that required close attention to natural topography and stream, and to create idyllic, pastoral, and naturalistic environments." Pitkin in particular emphasized using native plants, preserving mature existing trees, and providing green foliage during all seasons, all of which were earlier design elements that he incorporated into his early designs like Home Acres. The firm also continued to design residential subdivisions across the country that further elaborated on their early design principles and continued to garner recognition in professional publications. In one of these sub-divisions in particular, Forest Glen Estates in Youngstown Ohio designed in 1923, Pitkin and Mott employed all of their design hallmarks to great effect on a dramatic sloping site of 130 acres in a creek valley adjacent to a large park designed by Warren Manning (a protégé of Frederick Law Olmsted). This distinctive suburban landscape and its many architect-designed homes was recognized by listing on



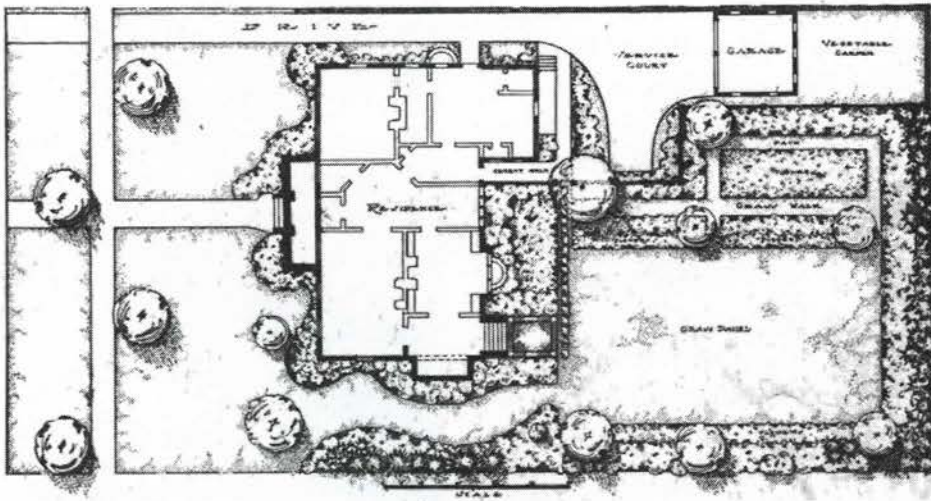
*E. E. Boynton House and gardens before the 1920s subdivision of the lot.
Concrete and Stucco Houses, Oswald C. Hering, 1912*



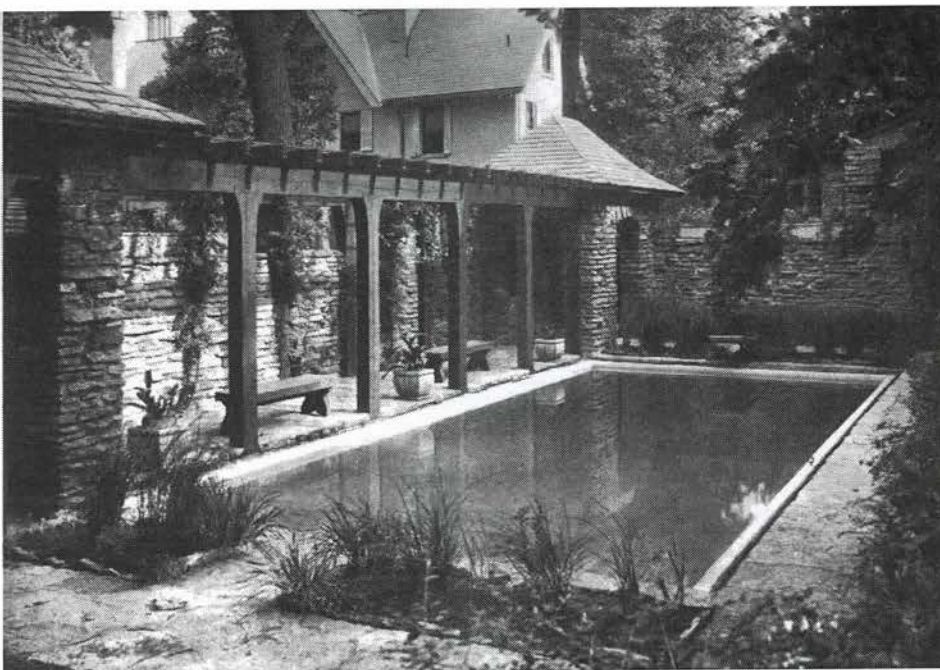
*Ward Wellington Ward's personal home, Lemoyne Manor, c.1920.
Forgan Photo Archive - Syracuse Then and Now*



*One of several gardens designed as part of the master plan of the C. S. Mott Estate, Applewood.
The House Beautiful, June 1920*



A Small City Garden for Mrs. Angell, Detroit; showcasing Pitkin's ability to work at varying scales.
American Architect and Architecture, Vol. 42, March 1920

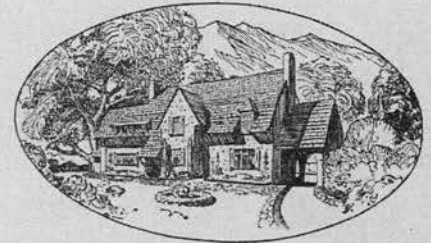


An intimate and carefully designed pool and garden in a small backyard by Pitkin.
House and Garden, June 1922



View of Forest Glen Estates, c.1927.
Courtesy of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society Archives

Period advertisement for Bel-Air emphasizing its lush landscape and proximity to Cobbs Hill.
Democrat and Chronicle, March 28, 1926



Buying A Homesite

DOESN'T MEAN MUCH TO SOME PEOPLE

TO OTHERS

BUYING A HOMESITE

means a great deal. They have a very definite idea of what constitutes an ideal homesite, and they seek to satisfy that idea.

To Which Class Do You Belong?

Are you one of the "SOME" or "OTHERS"?

AN IDEAL HOMESITE

Must have accessibility, be close to the social activities of the community, must have good environment, protective restrictions, high-class improvements, for these things are highly essential and necessary to the permanent beauty and desirability of a home place.

Bel-Air

the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

Although the majority of Pitkin and Mott's work during this era was in the Midwest, they returned to their hometown twice for two significant commissions. In 1924 they teamed with the Garfield Realty Company (their former development partners for Home Acres) to redevelop a sloping tract of farmland along Highland Avenue into the Bel-Air neighborhood. The gentle curving drives and plentiful plantings were all similar to the many subdivisions they designed in the Midwest, but with the unique addition of public playgrounds for the children of the neighborhood. In 1934, just two years before dissolving their partnership, William Pitkin was commissioned by the University of Rochester to design the gardens of their new river campus. The University had already developed the master-plan of the campus in

collaboration with the Olmsted Brothers firm, but turned to Pitkin to design the plantings and gardens throughout the campus. By the 1930s, Pitkin had begun to develop a personal reputation for collegiate design with his several commissions at the Universities of Michigan and Illinois during the 1920s. He would continue to work on the University of Rochester design until returning to Rochester in 1936, during which time he was invited to speak to the Allyn's Creek Garden Club at their March 1935 meeting.

Following the death of his father William Pitkin Sr in 1936, Pitkin returned to Rochester to lead the operations of the Chase Brothers Company. The depression had financially strained the large company, and Pitkin made the

choice in 1940 to restructure it, selling "a large portion of the assets to the Stuart Nursery in Geneva," but retaining their retail store and warehouses on Gould Street and operating under the new name of Chase-Pitkin. The new company focused on selling gardening supplies, and would go on to become our region's dominate and popular home improvement chain under its subsequent ownership by Wegmans beginning in 1974, with a total of fourteen locations at the time of its closure in 2006.

Soon after his return to Rochester, Pitkin was appointed to take the place of Barney Slavin as Superintendent of Parks in 1943, after the former's retirement in 1942. Superintendent Slavin had been part of the City parks bureau since 1890,

Beautiful Home Grounds

are not only a source of pride to the owners but they also add greatly to property values.

How About Your Back Yard?

If you are not satisfied with the appearance of your rear yard why not let us help you make it over into a beauty spot—an outdoor living room where the entire family may rest and play throughout the summer months?



Our Landscape Department

offers the services of capable graduate Landscape Architects who not only are prepared to plan your plantings but carry them through to completion at a surprisingly low cost. Whether your grounds are large or small they will be glad to go over them with you and suggest the best arrangement for your particular needs. Consultations are free and entail no obligation.

—FREE BOOKLET—

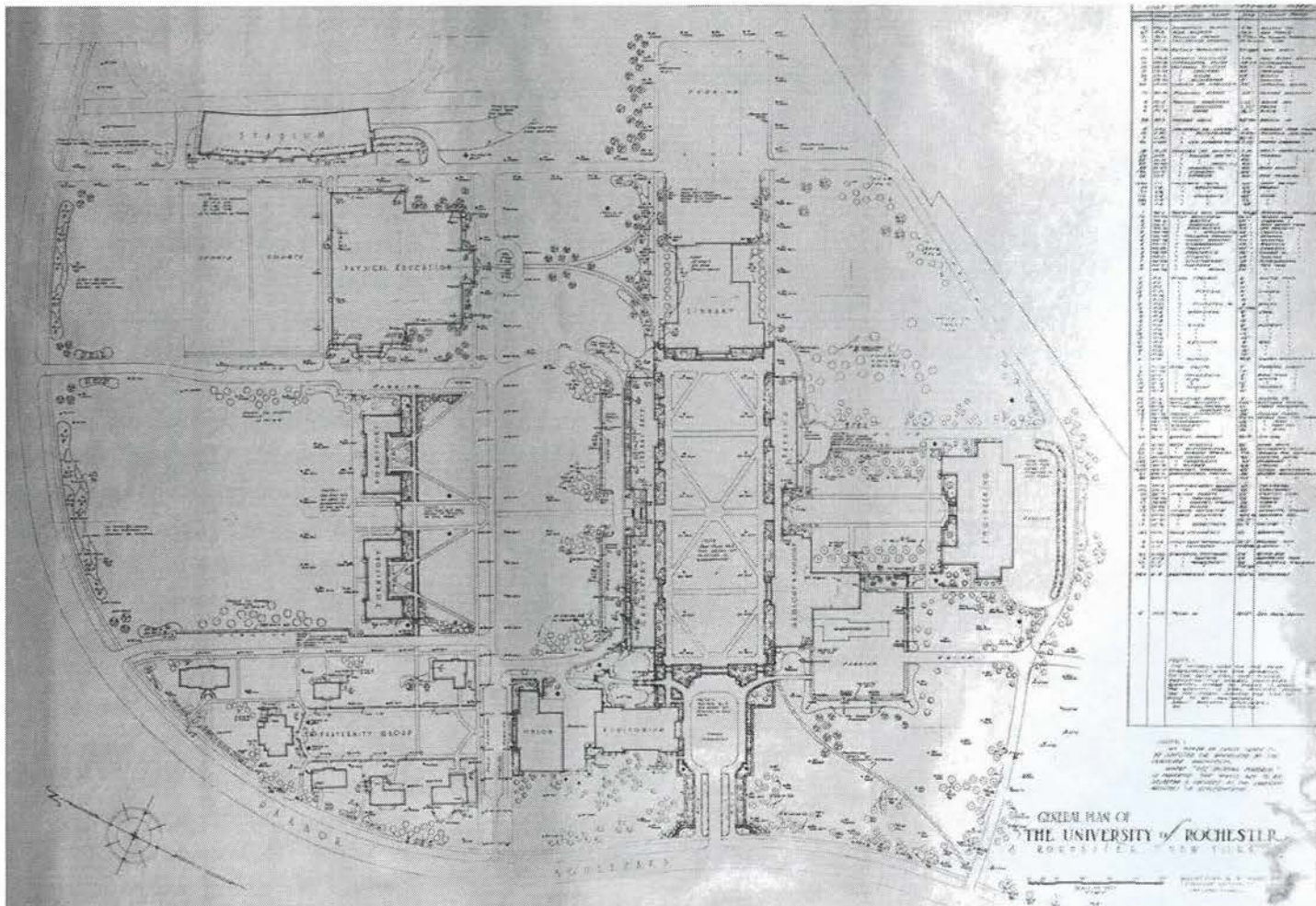
To interested home owners who will write on attending this ad, we will send instantly free a copy of our valuable 40-page booklet, "The Home—Its Front and Backyard." It is practically illustrated and tells what and how to plant and care for shrubs, trees, flowers, etc.

Chase Brothers Company

THE ROCHESTER NURSERIES

Over 75 Years in ROCHESTER, N. Y. The Flower City

Chase Bros had their own designers and was the city's largest home landscape business in the 1910-30s.
Democrat and Chronicle, April 6, 1930.

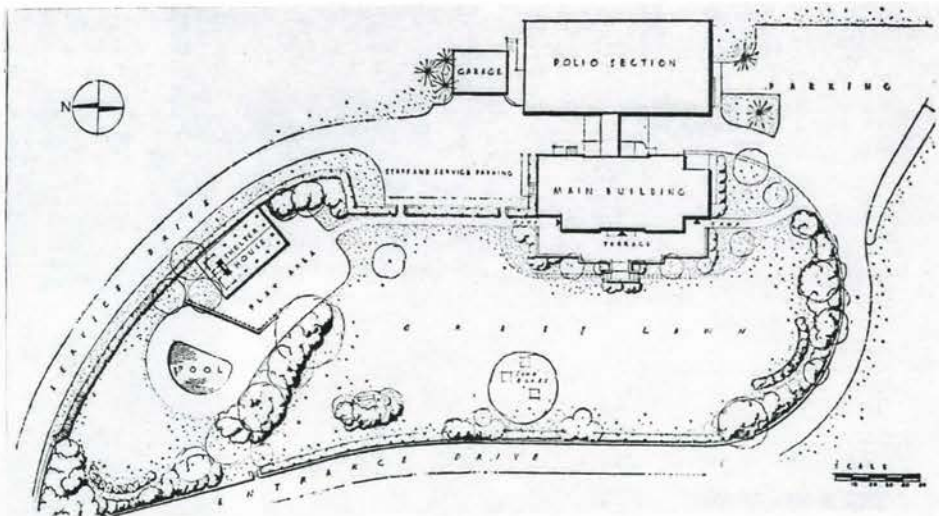


William Pitkin's c.1935 Campus Planting Plan for the University of Rochester: U of R Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation

and was largely responsible for the development of Durand Eastman Park and its arboretum. Pitkin's appointment as Slavin's successor was celebrated as a wise choice, but unfortunately would not last long, as he resigned from his position in 1950 citing the poor salary and his desire to return to private practice. Soon after his resignation William and his wife Marjorie Mott retired to Asheville, NC where they lived until their deaths in 1972 and 1970 respectively.

Although technically retired, William continued to practice landscape architecture until his death in North Carolina, designing the grounds of the Asheville Orthopedic Hospital (1954), the Liberty Life Insurance Company in Greenville (1960), and several subdivisions around the city limits of Asheville. He was an active member of the Asheville Garden Club, and directed their annual flower show as he had done early in his career for the City of Rochester.

The greater Rochester area is distinguished by the horticultural heritage present in the many natural and man-made landscapes, both public and private across our region. These spaces inspired three local men to pursue careers that immeasurably enhanced our community's scenic legacy. Although William Pitkin Jr may not have been ascribed the same level of public reverence during the past many years as his contemporaries Alling Deforest and Fletcher Steele, it is this author's hope that recognizing his many accomplishments begins to right this wrong.



Pitkin's design for the Asheville Orthopedic Hospital Grounds
Asheville Citizen Times, August 22, 1954



Liberty Life Insurance garden with sleek modern aesthetic and rock garden
Asheville Citizen Times, June 16, 1960

Sources & Credits for Photos and Historic Material:

125 Years of Rochester's Parks

- Please refer to the original publication for a complete list of sources.

William Chase Pitkin Jr: A Forgotten Master of Landscape Architecture

- Democrat and Chronicle Archives, Rochester, NY
- Rochester Times-Union Archives, Rochester, NY
- McClelland and Gleaves, "Pitkin, William Chase, Jr.," *Shaping the American Landscape*, UVA Press, 2009. p267-68
- McClelland and Gleaves, "Pitkin & Mott", *Shaping the American Landscape*, UVA Press, 2009. p269-71
- Reynolds, George, "Chase-Pitkin," *Upstate Gardeners' Journal*, Spring 1999.
- Asheville Citizen Times Archives, Asheville, NC

Historic Brighton Newsletter and Journal is edited by Michael B. Lempert and Christopher M. Brandt

Some Current Views of Pitkin Designed Landscapes

The Kingwood Estate, Mansfield, Ohio.

Image courtesy of the Kingwood Garden Center.



Geneva on the Lake (The Nester Estate), Geneva, New York.

Image courtesy of the William Schickel Design.



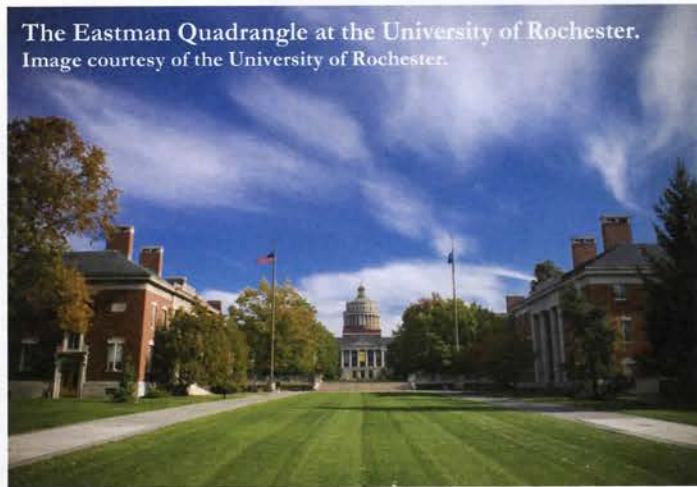
The Applewood Estate, Flint, Michigan.

Image courtesy of the Ruth Mott Foundation.



The Eastman Quadrangle at the University of Rochester.

Image courtesy of the University of Rochester.



Mid-century aerial postcard view of Highland Park during lilac season with Colgate Rochester in the background.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division

