

Brittingham Park

I went for a walk in the park this morning. Read that sentence again – within this simple, everyday statement lie complex ideas about pleasure and recreation, aesthetic ideals, and the purpose of public space. On this particular morning, I didn't walk for pleasure, but for research: I went to find out what it meant, in both the present and the past, to go to the park. More specifically, I went to discover how present-day Brittingham Park has been shaped by historical developments, both physical and ideological. As a result of this walk, other walks tracing the same path in previous weeks, and outside research, I've begun to form narratives that connect my lived experience of the park to its history. I've read many things in Brittingham's landscape, but three in particular have stood out: human ideas about natural beauty, nature's function in an urban area, and the relationship between social classes in public spaces. This paper attempts to unravel, through careful examination of how these themes are etched into the geography of Brittingham Park, the historical strings that tie the turn of the twenty-first century to the turn of the twentieth.

I walked two blocks from my house on Erin Street to West Shore Drive, the winding low-traffic road hugging Monona Bay, and up three blocks to Brittingham Park. Once in the park, I walked slowly along the shoreline until I reached the intersection of Main Street and Brittingham Parkway, where the path curves and heads south. Here, I turned around to assess the landscape through which I had walked. What I saw, and what I had been contemplating during my short walk, was the accumulation of one hundred years of history. The land I stood on had been dredged and filled from the bottom of Monona Bay in 1906 and 1907, and has since then taken its physical shape from the visions and desires of

Madisonians. What I saw was not what the founders of Brittingham Park saw, or what the twentieth century park-goers saw. How has the picture changed, and what prompted those changes? It's best, perhaps, to begin at the beginning.

What people saw on Monona Bay prior to the creation of Brittingham Park is best described by George Stacy's address at the annual meeting of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association in May of 1904. Stacy, a Madison-based traveling salesman, reminded the MPPDA that 90 percent of those traveling to Madison saw "this unsightly, filthy and detestable portion of Monona Lake" through the windows of their railroad passenger cars.

The bulk of his short speech elaborated on these "abominable conditions":

...a body of water, the surface of which is covered with a green, nasty, obnoxious scum, slimy in its nature, very unsightly to the eye of cleanliness and beauty, detestable in a manly mind [...] Through man's lack of care and negligence and utter disregard for things beautiful, we behold filth and dirt on every hand [...] dead fish lining its broken and unkept [sic] banks; the dumping of kitchen garbage here, the throwing out of the winter ashes there, and seemingly a general rush from all quarters to see who can do the most destruction to whatever is left of things beautiful to the eye of man. (MPPDA, 1904, p. 71-72)

In addition to bemoaning the state of the bay and its impression on travelers, Stacy criticized Madison citizens for tolerating such an environment: "What a shame, what a disgrace to every citizen of this municipality, to be content with such a disease breeding hole without rising up [...] and demanding its immediate restoration to a thing of beauty" (ibid, p. 72). Stacy called for the creation of a park, a "glittering reality" that would rise "out of the gloom and filth and stagnant waters" of Monona Bay (ibid, p. 71).

A picture of Monona Bay in 1904 solidifies Stacy's claims (Mollenhof, 2003, fig. 6.50). The shoreline is soggy, uneven, and overgrown with weeds, and muck covers the stagnant water. Litter lines the shore in front of a dilapidated, presumably abandoned house. More than anything, it looks *messy* to me. This opinion, also held by those who wanted to 'improve' the bay by creating a park, reveals our preference for "pretty" nature. Of course, no one prefers a "stench from the bay that almost took your breath away" (ibid, p. 318), but

Brittingham Park was as much an act of beautification as it was of sanitation. On my walk this morning, I found no trace of that “hopeless” bay; a border of white, gray and pink boulders neatly defined the shoreline, the water rippled blue in the sunlight, clear except for a few fallen leaves, and the grass was neatly trimmed and green.

This end result was undoubtedly in the minds of the MPPDA members and generous citizens who contributed financially to the “veritable explosion in the amount of Madison parkland” (Mollenhof, 2003, p. 311) around the turn of the century. Between 1902 and 1909, about one household in ten contributed money to Madison parks (ibid, p. 315). One Madison citizen in particular, Thomas E. Brittingham, donated a total of \$24,500 toward his namesake. The vision of a transformed Monona Bay was inspiring. In their 1904 annual report, the MPPDA suggested that “such an improvement ... will go far toward making Greenbush ... one of the choicest of the residence portions of the city” (MPPDA, 1904, p. 55). In 1906, a local newspaper wrote, “The completion of this improvement will produce, perhaps, a greater transformation than any other work thus far undertaken by the [MPPDA]” (*Scrapbook of Materials*, 1906). In the same year, another newspaper published more amusing praise:

With the improvement of this last shoreline, scarcely a vestige of the old weedy portion of the bay would remain. No greater surprise [...] will be found anywhere than in this transformation [...] Even the carp in the bay are astonished and jump out of the water high in the air to get a glimpse of the work and watch the machinery that is destroying their natural habitat, shallow water and mud. (Ibid)

Indeed, the carp had reason to be astonished. As I saw it this morning, Brittingham Park was a generally weed-less, smell-less, sanitary landscape. Unlike Madisonians of one hundred years ago, I could once again see the “once beautiful surface” of the bay lamented by George Stacy (MPPDA, 1904, p. 72).

Aesthetics were not George Stacy’s only concern. “I hope to see the day,” he said,

when any weary toiler, after a hard day's work, can seat himself with his partner in life and his little ones, on one of the rustic benches of Monona Park, there to enjoy the balmy breeze from off the lake and to have wafted around him the aroma of thousands of the choicest flowers, there to look up into the starry heavens and thank his God for living in such a day. (Ibid, p. 75)

This sentiment echoes MPPDA president John M. Olin's conviction that "contact with nature provided urban dwellers with an opportunity for physical and spiritual renewal" (Matterson, 1994, p. 5). A park on Monona Bay would not only remove a stinking eyesore from Madison, but would better the lives of its citizens. "According to the then popular theory," historian David Mollenhof writes,

contact with nature ... transported people from artificial city life to the natural environment in which humans had evolved. With the help of serpentine lagoons, rolling meadows, clusters of trees and flowering shrubs ... harried working people could restore frazzled urban nerves and reset their compasses with a true and timeless reality. (Mollenhof, 2003, p. 317, 319)

Although I saw no lagoons or rolling meadows in Brittingham Park this morning, the 'natural' ideal was evident in the landscape. Large shade trees, planted every twelve feet or so, line West Shore Drive. Along the bay inside the park, Stacy's "rustic benches" are strategically placed to orient the sitter to picturesque views. More trees shade these benches, frame the contours of the bike path, and create a canopy for the park shelter. Boulders define a meandering series of curves along the edge of the water, serving to "keep the shore line in perfect shape" (*Scrapbook of Materials*, n.d.), This "perfect" – natural – curvature is, of course, decidedly unnatural; it was created when the bay was filled in with land dredged from the bottom of the lake. In fact, everything about Brittingham was necessarily modeled after an idea of what a park – or, rather, nature – should look like, for it was literally created out of nothing and planned entirely by a landscape architect. I would argue that Brittingham gives a new meaning to the term "built landscape" – it wasn't a structure, but rather *nature* that was built here.

Although I am a critical, perhaps at times even cynical, 'modern' environmentalist, I still took pleasure in this 'fake' nature. Walking up West Shore Drive to the park, I stopped

to watch the early morning sunlight dance across the bay.¹ As I approached the shore, a group of ducks began quacking and waving their wings, splashing the water. I drew closer and noticed a small, sleek, but long animal (a beaver? I'm no naturalist) swimming just below the surface of the bay. As the animal emerged, jumped just barely above the water and dove back downward, the ducks took off in flight, their webbed feet dragging through the water for a few seconds before folding back underneath their bodies in midair. The sunlight shone brightly through the water as it sprayed up and settled back into the bay. I was enthralled. At that moment, something overhead caught my eye, and I looked to my left to see the shadow of a bird, wings outstretched, travel slowly across the road. Honestly, these few moments *did* restore my “frazzled urban nerves.” Although I was one hundred years away from Brittingham’s advent and a different clientele than originally targeted – no park planners, I’m sure, foresaw a 22 year-old jeans-wearing, iPod-listening female college student armed with a notebook and pen – I was taken in by the park’s charm.

Apparently, so were Madisonians in the early twentieth century. The city had truly “picked out [one] of the most unattractive, offensive and unhealthy places and converted [it] into [a] place of beauty and healthful recreation” (MPPDA, 1905, p. 49). This morning, I saw traces of it: two old-looking swing sets sit behind the shelter, and a field perfect for picnics, games, and strolling lay open beside it. Pictures also tell stories: a photograph of Brittingham Beach in 1910 shows a number of people swimming, wading, standing, and boating on the shore (Mollenhof, 2003, fig. 6.51). Another photograph shows a group of children posing in front of swing sets and slides at the Burr Jones Playground in 1909 (*ibid*, fig. 6.52). One local newspaper referred to Brittingham as a “pleasure resort every evening”

¹ It’s interesting that people not only have a similar idea of what “nature” is, but that there are established ways of describing that nature. Hence, light dancing across water.

(*Scrapbook of Materials*, n.d.). The park had become precisely what its advocates desired – a retreat from the hectic city life.

What I could not help but notice this morning, however, was that, save for a few men standing in a huddled group underneath the overhang of the shelter, I was alone in the park. And although I've been to Brittingham before, this morning was the first time I walked slowly, observed the wildlife, or sat on the rocks. At other times, I am either biking or running on the bike path, or cutting through the park on a shortcut home. In addition, the only people I've seen on other days – besides the men and women who stay in the shelter area, whom I'll address later – are runners, bikers, and dog-walkers. In other words, people go *through*, not *to* Brittingham Park. Although there still are swing sets, they're not swarming with children as they were in 1909. The open field, called a "playground" on the Madison Parks website (*Brittingham Park Master Plan*, 2004), is only intermittently used in warm weather. If, as seen by my experience, the park still has the capacity to reorient city dwellers to the rhythms of nature, why is it frequently empty? The MPPDA succeeded in cleaning up and bringing people to Monona Bay; why didn't they succeed in keeping people there?

The key to this question, I believe, lies largely in a discussion of social class. Class was also part of both George Stacy and John Olin's park ideology; as Stacy's "weary toiler" on a rustic bench implied, parks were to be accessible and classless: "be he rich or poor, old or young, black or white, the roses [nod] their beautiful heads of welcome to all" (MPPDA, 1904, p. 75). Olin, similarly, wished to bring the benefits of nature to the less affluent citizens of Madison; while pleasure drives oriented toward the elite did not do this, a park could (Matterson, 1994, p. 4). The impetus for Brittingham Park, then, was democratic; all social classes were meant to mingle in the soothing presence of nature.

The construction of Brittingham, however, while theoretically egalitarian, was at times framed in class terms. Before its development, Monona Bay was “...lined with a lot of disreputable boat houses, too often nests of crime [that have] for the past twenty-five years damaged Madison by unfavorable advertising” (MPPDA, 1906, p. 53). These “unsightly shacks,” inhabited by “people of humble means” (MPPDA, 1908, p. 40) – politically correct language in 1908! – were replaced by a park that provided ostensibly “better” means of recreation. These better means are visible in the park today: a more reputable boat house, benches, a bike path, concrete platforms for fishing, and stable wooden piers. I don’t want to put ideas in the heads of these park advocates, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there was an assimilation agenda implicit in the Brittingham Park plan; certain classes were denied old ways of recreation and handed new ones. I don’t know how well this assimilation worked in the early 1900s, or how often lower-class people used the park², but a distinct class division is evident on the landscape I walked through this morning, most notably in the Brittingham shelter area.

When the landscape architect O.C. Simonds designed the park, he included in the plan an extension of what is now Vilas Avenue into the bay. This “broad Concourse [sic],” as one newspaper called it, “extend[ed] nearly five hundred feet into the lake and at its outer end [is] a broad enlargement so that carriages may have ample room to turn” (*Scrapbook of Materials*, n.d.). In other words, Simonds extended a pleasure drive through the park and out into the bay – it was a turnaround intended for the carriages of the elite. Since the construction of the park, however, the water surrounding the extension has been filled in, and the Brittingham shelter stands at the center of what was the carriage loop. This

² I do know, however, that “poor and underprivileged children, particularly those who lived in congested neighborhoods” (Mollenhof, 2003, p. 320) were targeted with playgrounds in this largely progressive era. This, however, is beyond the scope of the paper.

transformation is particularly interesting when one contrasts the use of the two sites: the turnaround was, presumably, used by the affluent, while today, the shelter is largely occupied by (what I assume are) homeless individuals. While the class lines in the early 1900s may have been drawn between the turnaround and the rest of the park, the line today is drawn between the shelter and the bike path.

Let's be honest: I am a young woman, and many of the people who congregate around the shelter are older men. It's a bit frightening to walk past them, and I, along with many others, stay on the bike path – boundaries are drawn this way. Traveling on the bike path is not only a source of recreation, but also a convenient excuse to ignore “those people”: when you're running or biking, there's no possibility of interaction. This, I think, is one major cause of the park's emptiness (at least near the shelter). Class differences often bring out feelings of discomfort, guilt, and even fear in the “higher” class; again, many of us travel *through*, but rarely *to* the park. In this case, what's visible in the landscape is not the success of the park planners' visions, but a *perversion* of their intended goals. Olin and the MPPDA may have wanted to “do for the masses what the country drives had done for the rich” (Mollenhof, 2003, p. 317), but the most recent version of Brittingham Park seems to be discouraging anything more than a pass-through appreciation of nature for many.

I photocopied three visual documents of Madison in the Robinson Map Library: a topographic map from 1904 and two aerial photographs from 1937 and 1968, respectively. The topographic map depicted a wider Monona Bay than I saw this morning, the water separated from West Washington Avenue and Park Street by only a sliver of land. This sliver expands in the 1937 photograph into a sparsely vegetated, shelter-less version of what we today recognize as Brittingham Park. Thirty years later, we see the roof of the shelter

flanked by denser vegetation. Although the visual development of Brittingham Park documented by these pictures is telling, the human factor is missing: how did people view this land? Why was it changed? How was it used? How have relations between people in the park evolved? Hopefully, my walk through the park's landscape and examination of both primary and secondary texts have begun to offer answers to these questions. Of course, the paths I've traced are not the only paths, to use an obvious metaphor, but they've led me in enlightening directions. The development of Brittingham Park from sand underneath the waters of Monona Bay to a site of neglected open space and class tension is written into the landscape – it only takes a few morning walks to uncover it. This may not be a particularly scholarly way to end a paper, but I'm glad I had the chance to do so.

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