A Glance at the Garden of Eden

by the Editors

The river; the miles of distant hills extending along the Kentucky side of the stream; the less remote high lands of Ohio, rolling away in multitudinous waves of improved lands; the suburbs of the city to the north and east, and the city at the foot of the hill, teeming with its busy thousands, make up a prospect so rare that it may be said the park, for location, hardly has its peer. The avenues meander by graceful curves through the grounds, at every turn shutting out something the visitor has just seen, but revealing another landscape filled with new beauties.

It hardly seems credible that Eden Park, described so glowingly in 1870, the year of its dedication, could just twenty-four years earlier have been dismissed as “broken hill land too poor to raise sauer kraut upon.” Yet this was the rebuff which Nicholas Longworth met in 1846 when he proposed that the city buy a portion of his lands atop Mount Adams. Longworth had in fact tried for years—as early as 1818—to interest the city fathers in acquiring some of his land for park use, without success. In 1842 he offered suitable acreage at $500 an acre, which he claimed was well below its actual value, but his proposal was declined. The price, he was advised, was too high.

With the refusal in 1846 of his latest offer, Longworth grew exasperated. The following year he published an article renewing his earlier offers and “remarking that he knew they would all be refused, but that he wished to stand on record as having offered to the city ground which would be in time worth five, ten, and twenty times its value then.” Stung by the implication that his motive lay more with profit than with public service, Longworth declared that one day the people would be asking why sites on the hills had not been purchased earlier when land prices were low. It took only a short time to confirm his prophecy: in less than three years the value per acre of what Longworth had offered at $1,400 was $10,000 to $14,000.

Longworth was not the only farsighted Cincinnatian to anticipate the day when parks would be considered vital to the life of the city. James Ferguson, Jacob Burnet, and other prominent citizens also met with rejection in their initial attempts to sell, or even donate, land for park purposes. It was not until the 1860’s that the city began to realize that parks could no longer be considered merely a luxury. In his report of 1867, Mayor Charles F. Wilstach
stressed "...the absolute necessity of securing a large body of land contiguous to or beyond the limits of the corporation, to be converted into a People's Park."

The practical motive preceded the aesthetic, however, for it was to provide an urgently-needed new reservoir that Eden Park came to be developed. In 1866 residents were drinking untreated Ohio River water which not infrequently was contaminated with wastes from Deer Creek industries. On one occasion a distillery burned, permitting large quantities of whiskey to merge with the creek effluence and providing Cincinnatians an unexpected alcoholic nip with their morning ablutions. Even more disconcerting must have been the discovery that "several species of marine fauna, including eels, a 16-inch catfish and an 18-inch salamander strayed through the pipes and stopped hydrants from flowing."

Such misadventures left little doubt that a new reservoir was required to replace the existing one above Front Street east of Broadway. A site on Mount Adams was proposed as the ideal location for the new reservoir, and here, in a parcel of Longworth property called the Garden of Eden, the work was begun in 1866.

Thus, having refused Nicholas Longworth's offer for years, the city now was eager to acquire his property from his heirs. In December 1865, arrangements were made with Joseph Longworth, Nicholas's son, to lease 143 acres of suitable reservoir land for $28,080 per year. Except for a small section of adjacent property which had been purchased six years earlier from John Burt, all of the original Eden Park acreage was leased from private owners—a procedure which the city would find embarrassingly expensive in the years to come. In January 1869, the city leased additional property surrounding the new reservoir from Joseph Whittaker, John Bates, and Washington McLean, for a total of over $45,000 a year. At the same time the city acquired a 99-year lease for another twenty acres from Joseph Longworth for $5,500 annually.

Not until 1880 and 1881 did the Board of Public Works rectify the city's costly policy by purchasing all the rented Eden Park lands—with the exception of those last twenty Longworth acres—for $743,000. When added to the $648,000 already paid in rentals over the years, each acre cost over $6,900, a far cry from the $1,400 which Nicholas Longworth originally would have accepted. Adding insult to injury, the city continued for nearly a century to pay Longworth's heirs $5,500 annually for the four-acre triangle between Kemper Lane and Luray Avenue in Walnut Hills and the sixteen-acre portion along Parkside Place in Mount Adams. In 1965 half of this land was finally purchased from Nicholas Longworth's great-great-granddaughter, Mrs. William Henry Harrison III, and her father, Giuseppe Fiamingo, for $57,894.74, though the Western-Southern Life Insurance Company retained its portion of the estate. By 1965 rentals for this modest acreage had totaled

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over $590,000, more than $29,000 an acre. The bulk of the 183 acres which constitute the park today were not, of course, so extravagantly obtained.

But the story of Eden Park is not one of reservoirs and land costs alone. It was the burgeoning interest in the development of urban parks as quiet refuges from the noisy confusions of city life that encouraged Cincinnati’s first decision to expand its original reservoir acreage in the Garden of Eden. Only Manhattan’s Central Park preceded Eden Park in embodying the concept of a “People’s Park”—a haven of natural beauty and serenity within the bustling confines of a city. Adolph Strauch, the noted landscape architect who also served as superintendent of the Board of Park Commissioners during the 1870’s, was intent on keeping the park a naturalistic retreat. Like many others of his day, he was convinced that “most people visit parks and gardens for the purpose of enjoying nature and very seldom stone and mortar.” Thus while he conceded the necessity of roadways through the park, Strauch would have preferred that no other manmade encroachments detract from its beauty. He could not have been the only one who viewed with misgivings the decision in 1882 to give twenty acres to the Art Museum Association for the construction of a permanent headquarters on a hilltop within the park.

Dedication of the completed museum in 1886 opened the way for the erection of further buildings, monuments, and pavilions. Though they may have been lamented by purists, such manmade attractions have surely been in large measure responsible for the park’s enduring popularity. This sylvan marriage of cultural and natural attributes has been a happy and successful one. It gives every indication of continuing to prosper, as the onetime Garden of Eden enters its second century.
Eden Park’s Major Memorials

HEROES GROVE. Thirty-three oak trees brought from Valley Forge battlefield, planted April 27, 1876, by A. E. Jones as a centennial commemoration of the heroes and patriots of the Revolutionary War. (East of water tower)

PRESIDENTS GROVE. Granite boulder markers designating a tree honoring each President. First planting (Presidents Washington through Arthur) on April 27, 1882, by the American Forestry Congress as part of Cincinnati’s first Arbor Day celebration. (South, east, west of water tower)

PIONEERS GROVE. Thirty-six deciduous trees to honor pioneer settlers of Cincinnati. Planted by the American Forestry Congress as part of the Arbor Day celebration of April 1882. (South of Presidents Grove)

AUTHORS GROVE. Thirty-five trees planted to honor “philosophers, poets, statesmen, scientists, and various other honored representatives in the paths of literature.” Planted by the American Forestry Congress as part of the Arbor Day celebration of April 1882. (West of water tower)

FREDERICK W. GALBRAITH MEMORIAL. Dedicated in 1923 by the American Legion to honor one of its founders and its first national commander. White granite seat with a bronze tablet executed by sculptor Clement J. Barnhorn. (Twin Lakes overlook)

BATTERY F., 136TH FIELD ARTILLERY MEMORIAL. U-shaped stone seat erected in 1925 to honor the 324 men in this First World War unit. (Twin Lakes overlook)

G.A.R. MEMORIAL FLAGSTAFF. Dedicated in 1930, on the occasion of the 64th encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, by the Daughters of the Union Veterans of the Civil War in honor of these veterans. (East of Melan Arch Bridge)

NAVIGATION MONUMENT. Thirty-foot granite obelisk erected by the Ohio Valley Improvement Association to commemorate the canalization of the Ohio River from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Illinois, a distance of 980 miles. Dedicated in 1929 by President Herbert Hoover. (Upper Ohio River overlook)

CAPITOLINE WOLF STATUE. Copy of a sixth-century Etruscan sculpture depicting Romulus and Remus. Presented to the City of Cincinnati by the Italian Government in 1931. (Twin Lakes)

Mimeographed reprints of the text of this feature on Eden Park, accompanied by a map with thirty-three identified points of interest in the park, are available without charge from the Education Department of The Cincinnati Historical Society.

From 1874 until 1949 a double-decked viaduct spanned the Gilbert Avenue entrance to the park. Views of the Deer Creek Valley to the west and Eden Park to the east could be seen by trolley passengers on the upper level as well as by carriage riders and pedestrians, below, on the lower deck.
Architect Charles Hannaford won the city's competition to design a valve house for the waterworks. Since 1883 his medieval castle wall with its twin battlements has effectively camouflaged its more prosaic function. It is better known as the Elsinore gateway to the park.
Free band concerts have been a popular feature of Eden Park since 1872 when the small wooden stand, opposite above, was built. It was replaced in 1901 by the larger stand, above, at Fulton Avenue and Eden Park Drive. From 1914 until the construction of the Seasongood Pavilion in 1960, the tile-roofed bandstand, opposite below, in the vale facing the Historical Society attracted thousands to alfresco concerts.
The thatched-roof spring-house was erected in 1900 over a spring which, according to local legend, provided medicinal benefits.
Since 1904 when the octagonal arched gazebo replaced the early springhouse, it has been a familiar landmark.
It required twelve years, from 1866 until 1878, to complete the double basin reservoir, an engineering feat in its time and place. The carriage-way on top of the retaining wall, below, was named the David Baker Pass as a tribute to the public official who encouraged the reservoir project.
A quaint custom enjoyed by Cincinnatians was the municipal picnics, complete with music and dancing, which were often held inside the reservoir when it was periodically emptied for cleaning.
Cincinnati's horticultural traditions culminated in the construction in 1894 of this municipal greenhouse and the landscaping of formal gardens. The Irwin M. Krohn Conservatory, dedicated in 1933, is the third greenhouse to occupy this site.
The Joseph Melan Arch bridge, built in 1894 and named for its designer, is the oldest reinforced concrete bridge in the United States. The four stone eagles flanking the bridge were originally part of the Chamber of Commerce building, which burned in 1911.
A view looking toward Walnut Hills from Eden Park Drive shows the Twin Lakes, created in 1891 on the site of the quarry which had provided limestone for the retaining wall of the reservoir.
The panorama of the Ohio River as seen from the Twin Lakes overlook is Eden Park's most popular scenic attraction.
This moment for him is past —
but as Eden Park enters its second century
it holds countless moments in trust
for new generations who visit Cincinnati’s
“People’s Park.”