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HISTORY OF THE UNION COUNTY PARK SYSTEM



FROM THE
INITIAL PLANNING STAGES
IN 1921 BY THE
OLMSTED BROTHERS
 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS 

SPECIAL FEATURE: WARINANCO PARK
ITS ORIGIN, ELEMENTS, ARCHITECTURE AND GARDENS



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Quote from the Olmsted Brothers proposal to the Union County Park Commission, 1921.

“The attractiveness of much of the County, therefore, is to be found in its pleasantly undulating topography and the quiet pastoral character of the countryside, in which the chief details of lively interest are the many streams of water and ponds along their way. These streams and ponds, under the circumstances, become particularly important in any consideration of the natural physical features of the country.”



On the heritage of the Union County Park System

“The prime legacy of the Union County Park Commission’s 50 years is the land, for with that securely in hand, nearly all else can change—the habits and desires of people, the endless growth of population, the park personnel. As long as those in charge of the parks continue to recognize that each generation finds its own way and makes its own rules, the land can only become more important than ever.”



A reflection on Warinanco Park

“Warinanco blossomed with gardens, trees, a pleasantly long mall near the lake, winding drives for motorists, baseball fields, tennis courts, and open playing fields. Here was a park for the people, if ever there was one.”



“The availability of Union County for purposes of residence in particular, because of its gentle topography and distribution of its lines of communication, is a striking feature and is an important factor to be kept in mind in the selection, the character and the extend of any system of parks to be determined upon. That the residential population is making a fairly rapid growth at the present time may be seen from the following records of the four largest communities in the County. In the decade prior to 1920 Elizabeth increased 30.3% in population, Plainfield increased 34.8%, Rahway 18.3% and Summit 35.7%, an average increase in population of about 30%.”

From the report submitted to **Mr. H. S. Chatfield**, Chairman
UNION COUNTY PARK COMMISSION
from the **Olmsted Brothers** JULY 5, 1921



Postscript

Union County residents voted to change the county’s form of government in 1974. As a result of that governmental reorganization, the Park Commission was abolished and responsibility for the parks transferred to the Union County Department of Parks and Recreation. Today, with more than 6,148 acres of land, and 36 parks, the County carries on the original Park Commission’s dream and credo, to develop a park system, “To Benefit the Whole Population.”



In 1958, a concrete handball court wall replaced a wooden one that had been destroyed by fire. And, for the convenience of the many people who then owned cars, a parking lot was installed near the softball fields



Mr. Newell, the refectory clerk, serves a crowd at Warinanco refreshment stand

and another near the lake. 1959 saw the replacement of the original wooden refreshment stand. A temporary boathouse was built on the site of the original that had also been consumed by fire.

While the original Olmsted Plan included an artificial ice skating rink, it was not built until 1961. In 1964, a circular building was constructed containing



a warming room, skate shop, concession stand, restrooms and manager's office. By 1974, walls were added to allow skating during inclement weather.

By 1983, a fitness trail followed the route of the parkway loop. In 1985, lighting was installed at field number three (making Warinanco Park the first in the system to play night games), and a permanent boathouse had been constructed.

The prime legacy of the Union County Park Commission's 50 years is the land, for with that securely in hand, nearly all else can change—the habits and desires of people, the endless growth of population, the park personnel. As long as those in charge of the parks continue to recognize that each generation finds its own way and makes its own rules, the land can only become more important than ever.



Children gathered around fireplace near the Ice Center refreshment stand (left); A woman exercises on the fitness trail (above)

HISTORY OF THE UNION COUNTY PARK SYSTEM

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

By the early nineteenth century, shipping and commercial trade was the main industry in the port of Elizabeth. Rivers provided power for mills to process grain, cotton, paper, wool and lumber for the growing economy. However, residents used the same sources of water for fishing, drinking, bathing and swimming and, by the turn of the twentieth century, water pollution was a potential social issue.

In 1919, James E. Warner, county sheriff and Cranford resident, wrote a letter to the *Cranford Citizen* urging that remedial steps be taken. The letter caught the attention of committeeman, D. C. Newman Collins, an engineer and architect who suggested that only a coordinated system of county-owned parcels of land could resolve the situation. He rallied support from hundreds of supporters for the creation of a park commission, the second in the state after Essex County.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE UNION COUNTY PARK COMMISSION

When the county census of 1920 came up 100 residents short of the 200,000 required by legislation for the appointment of a park com

mission, residents canvassed every household to get signed affidavits from those who had not been present during the official census. The new count of 200,157 made the county eligible to establish a commission and in 1921, the Union County Park Commission was established.



Original members of the Union County Park Commission. From left to right: seated, Commissioners Charles Hansel, Henry S. Chatfield, Caxton Brown. Standing: W.R. Tracy, Engineer and Secretary, Commissioners Charles A. Reed, Arthur R. Wendell, David Armstrong, Counsel

THE OLMSTED BROTHERS PLAN

The Park Commission soon hired the Olmsted Brothers Firm of Brookline Massachusetts, the renowned landscape architectural firm originally established by Frederick Law Olmsted. The firm consisted of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870-1957), son of the man known as the founder of American landscape architecture,

and his step-brother, John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920). The firm designed a comprehensive system to consist of urban and suburban parks, a mountain reservation, and parkways along the Elizabeth and Rahway Rivers to create a variety of active and passive recreational opportunities for county residents.

The plan represented a major development in environmental, social and urban history and supported the 20th century movement to protect natural resources and to enhance quality of life in urban areas. Development of the park system was a massive undertaking. Acquisition of land was made by purchase; corporate, private and municipal donation; and, in some cases, by condemnation. The first acquisition was a four-acre tract along the Rahway River donated by the Wheatena Company in 1922.



The Rahway River lined with poplar trees in Wheatena Park (above left); Park Police pose with the Park Commissioners in front of the Administration Building in Warinanco Park (above right)

Both the Commissioners and the Olmsted Brothers envisioned a park system that would serve all municipalities within Union Coun-

ty, protect scenic areas for outdoor enjoyment and enhance quality of life for residents. The Union County Park System would become part of an interconnected regional park system linked to Essex County, the first New Jersey park system designed by the Olmsted Brothers.

EXECUTION OF THE PLAN

Construction of three parks was underway by the fall of 1923

with three more planned by 1929. By September 1925, the commission had amassed 2,000 acres of the 3,100 acres that had been targeted. Essential buildings were completed by 1926. Captain Lyman L. Parks was hired in 1926 to supervise a police force of 14 of-



An Erie Shovel digs the lake at Nomahegan, 1926



ficers whose duties included maintaining order and administering first aid. F. S. Mathewson was hired in 1927 as the full-time Superinten-

track and field events and county-wide school events in which 10,000 students participated or attended. Additions to the park were made over the next several years due to eager and growing user demand.



The newly built tennis courts, 1928

GARDENS OF THE PARK

The original plan for landscaping changed as time went on because so many people used the park. New additions were avidly received by visitors. Japanese cherry trees surrounded the lake. The Azalea Garden, originally featuring fifty-seven varieties of plants, grew to 3,500 plants by 1957 and still exists in the northern section of the park.



The Azalea Garden, 1950

In 1938, the formal Henry S. Chatfield Memorial Garden opened, named for the former commission president, who served from



Visitors enjoy the tulips in the Henry S. Chatfield Memorial Garden, 1940

1921 to 1927. Continued plantings resulted in a spectacular array of 14,000 spring tulips and equally beautiful displays in summer and fall. Chatfield Garden continues to be the setting for photos of special family events such as weddings, proms, first communions and, more recently, Quinceaneras (**Hispanic tradition of celebrating a young girl's passage from childhood to maturity, her 15th birthday**).

Warinanco blossomed with gardens, trees, a pleasantly long mall near the lake, winding drives for motorists, baseball fields, tennis courts, and open playing fields. Here was a park for the people, if ever there was one.

CHANGES TO THE PLAN, NEW CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS AND PARK MAINTENANCE

During the 1940s and 1950s, the plan was altered somewhat reflecting the desires of park users and current economics. In 1948, pre-cast concrete curbing replaced the original wooden curbing that surrounded the track.

ARCHITECTURE OF THE PARK

The design called for more formal elements in the landscape although many were not implemented because of the onset of the Great Depression. A semi-circular terrace would have formed a music court near a large ornamental fountain. An amphitheater or music grove would have formed a venue for live music for boaters on the lake and picnickers in nearby groves.



The Administration Building

Structures designed by C. Godfrey Poggi, one of New Jersey's earliest licensed architects and Cranford resident, gave a sense of romance to the park. The Administration Building, built between 1924 and 1925 on the Elizabeth edge of the park, was designed in the Tudor Revival style with half-timbered walls and slate roofs. Paneling and fireplaces created a fitting interior for the Commission's headquarters. The building also housed the park system's security and maintenance operations.

In the southeastern section of the park, Poggi designed a comfort station and pergola for the Little



The wading pool and shelter building near #1 playground

Children's Playground, completed in 1925. The Craftsman-style structure had elaborate brickwork, a cupola, partially exposed beams and a slate roof. In addition to playground equipment, the area included a circular wading pool and sandbox.

Plans for playing fields and sporting facilities were included because of the growing interest and popularity of sports and sporting events. Fields built throughout the park covered a total of sixty acres and designed to harmonize with the picturesque elements of parks. There were baseball, football and soccer fields and ten tennis courts for the public's use. An ornate concrete stadium, designed by Poggi, sat 3,500 people and had restrooms, lockers and showers. It was the venue for football games,



Ivy-covered rear entrance to stadium



Superintendent of Recreation, F.S. Mathewson, awards a prize at the 1937 Union County Marble Tournament

dent of Recreation expanding recreation opportunities and overseeing staff. Park attendance increased by some 300% with the addition of professional staff. Park events included field and track meets, water carnivals, pet shows, battle reenact-



Left to right: Park Commissioner Caxton Brown; 1928 U.S. Open Champion Johnny Farrell; Galloping Hill golf pro Jack Hiner; and Golf Course Architect W.B. Wilkinson., 1928

ments, equestrian shows, exhibition golf matches, baseball and football championships, girl- and boy-scout activities and holiday festivals. By 1930, seven parks were completed



Clockwise from top left: Boy Scouts from the Union Council sit in front of a teepee in Echo Lake Park; participants in period costumes at the 1928 Union County Historic Pageant at Echo Lake Park; fans enjoy a baseball game at Mattano Park, 1926; a man releases a ball on the bowling green at Green Brook Park

on a total of 4,168 acres.

Many services generated income for park operations including eleven concession stands (refectories) and fees for swimming pool admissions, canoe rentals, trap-and skeet-shooting, golf and horse boarding and rentals. As predicted by the Olmsteds, land values increased on properties adjacent to the parks.

EVENTS THAT ALTERED THE PLAN

Park operations suffered during the Great Depression. Capital expenditures for acquisition and development of land for parks ceased. In 1930, the number of park employees decreased from twelve to one department head and two part-time employees. Federally sponsored labor relief programs, such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), supported parks operation between 1931 and 1939.



World War II caused a labor shortage as well as material shortages and transportation and lighting restrictions.

Once the war ended in 1945, residents enthusiastically went back to using county parks.

The development of a road and highway system in the 1950s was a blow to the Union County Park System. By 1954, the Garden State Parkway ran north and south through Union County but with no direct links to Union County parks. The park-going experience was interrupted by travel on residential

Development of the park began late in 1923. Wooded areas were thinned, lawns were planted, foot paths and bridle trails were laid out, and a circuitous roadway was paved. A flock of Dorset sheep, guarded by a Scotch collie named Bob, added interest to the landscape while keeping down the grass, especially in wooded areas where mowing was difficult

OLMSTED ELEMENTS OF THE PARK

Natural elements of the site, including topography and existing trees, did not conflict with each other but formed the base for development of a park with a variety of recreational features with smaller units that would not mar the larger landscape scenes integral to the property as a whole.

[See Olmsted Plan on previous page](#)

The Olmsted Brothers began drafting a series of grading plans for the property in 1923 resulting in recommendations, such as incorporating Linden Road in the park's circulation route and building the commission's administration building in the park. The plan



Lagoon in Warinanco Park, 1938

was approved on January 5, 1923 and was begun shortly after that.

Since water was an important element and needed to complement the pastoral character of the landscape, an eight-acre lake and lagoon were constructed as a picturesque feature and to enhance



An automobile parked on St. George Avenue near the bus turn-around (above); the retaining wall for the same bus turn-around (below)



drainage capabilities. A flowering meadow surrounded the lake designed for seasonal boating and skating.

With an emphasis on accessibility of the park, entrances were planned for both pedestrians and vehicular traffic. The main entrance was located at the widest street entering the property with plans for seven secondary entrances. An elevated loop was designed to allow bus passengers to be dropped off or picked up at their own entrance along a major roadway.



Swimmers in John Russell Wheeler Park pool with the fountain and cars in the background, June 1943 (above); the snack bar at Ash Brook Golf Course, 1952 (right); WPA workers construct a dam in Echo Lake Park (below)



WARINANCO PARK: ITS ORIGINS, ELEMENTS, ARCHITECTURE AND GARDENS

“The plan of any County Park System should be based on the principle that such system would benefit the whole population of the county, that it should be convenient and easily accessible to the large centers of population, and that above all else, it should take over and preserve for park purposes land adaptable for parks before it is utilized for residences, factories or other purposes.”

– UNION COUNTY PARK COMMISSION, 1921

ORIGINS OF THE PARK

By 1920, Elizabeth’s population was 95,783, making it the largest city in Union County. The Park Commissioners agreed with the Olmsted philosophy of creating a place where city dwellers could find respite from the struggles of city life in a pleasing and peaceful setting. Therefore, they made plans to develop a county park in Elizabeth. It would be called Warinanco, for one of the three Lenni Lenape chiefs who sold the area to a group of Englishmen in 1664.

The Commissioners chose a 204 acre tract of land, located in the City of Elizabeth and the Borough of Roselle, and bordering Linden Township. Selection was based on the availability of undeveloped land, accessibility to visitors who arrived on foot or via mass transit, and space for a county athletic field and related equipment.

The site consisted of five farms, which were acquired or in the process of acquisition by 1922. The site was bounded by one major



Sign stating Warinanco Park is under construction

road and two local streets, connected to a trolley system, and within walking distance of three railroad stations. There was ample space for a stadium and athletic field, the construction of which was advocated by the county’s school superintendents.



Lake area under development before landscaping was completed.

and commercial streets. Over fifty-eight acres of park land were given over to the construction of the Parkway. Additional acreage was lost in



Skaters at Warinanco Ice Skating Center; the renovated bath house at the Rahway River Park pool

1958 due to the construction of the New Jersey Turnpike.

Establishment of vehicular parkways did not happen in Union County as it did in other New Jersey and New York park systems because, as the park system evolved over the years, priorities for the park system changed. A new focus in the 1970s provided upgraded recreational facilities and a greater range of activities to suit the wants and needs of park users including an ice skating rink and swimming pools.

THE FUTURE OF THE PARK SYSTEM

The tradition of protecting open space and providing outdoor recreational opportunities took another major step in 2000, when residents approved the public referendum to establish the Union County Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund. The ten-year master plan included land acquisition and

maintenance, creation and maintenance of recreational fields, and acquisition and preservation of historic landmarks.

The Trust Fund created a dedicated revenue source that makes the county eligible for state funds, and facilitates county funding for nonprofit organizations and municipalities for their own open space, recreation and historic preservation needs. The initial goal of the Trust Fund was to preserve one hundred additional acres of land in ten years. By 2009, well over 300 acres had been acquired.

Today, twenty-seven parks totaling over 6,600 acres make up the Union County Park System. It includes two golf courses, athletic fields, tennis courts, pitch and putt courses, a riding stable, swimming pools, an indoor skating center, boating, bicycle paths, hiking trails, fitness courses, picnic facilities, a state-of-the-art nature and science center and many other recreational amenities –all within the beauty of nature and peaceful surroundings for all to enjoy.

Because people and times change, continued alterations to the plan are inevitable. Ten years have passed and it’s now time to take a look at the Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Plan. The Board of Chosen Freeholders encourages citizen input through questionnaires and public meetings. Meeting the needs of park goers ensures continued use and enjoyment of the public lands in the historic and expanding Union County Park System.

