

## **Milwaukee's "Gardens of the Poor": Placing urban nature in the Liberal City, 1880-1905**

Judith Kenny  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

Lauren Platt  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

Milwaukee's development of municipal parks in the late nineteenth-century reflects the pursuit of improved access to nature for an increasingly large and diverse urban population. Throughout the nation, and as demonstrated in Milwaukee, these new park spaces emerged as local governments took on different roles and increasing levels of responsibility for the provision of municipal services. In this paper, we argue that the parks became an integral aspect of a changing governmentality for a liberal, modern American city. As part of this examination, we consider the ideological underpinnings of the municipal park system and contrast it with the distribution of Milwaukee's earlier spaces devoted to leisure and civic activity. While questioning the city's effective allocation of "Gardens of the Poor," the paper also identifies the necessary changes in Milwaukeeans' financial responsibility required to achieve the civic consciousness of a twentieth-century progressive, modern American city.

### **Milwaukee's "Gardens of the Poor": Placing urban nature in the Liberal City, 1880-1905**

Late-nineteenth century Milwaukee Park Board President Christian Wahl offered an assessment of the city's parks in discursive terms that would be familiar to contemporary urban reformers when he stated:

...in fulfilling their more immediate object of furnishing "playgrounds for the public," (the parks) not only supply those who are forced to live in the narrow, crowded alleys with a wider elbow-room, as it were, but better still these "Gardens of the Poor" give all sorts and conditions of men an opportunity for the enjoyment of those softening beauties of nature which otherwise are largely a prerequisite of the rich." (Wahl 1895)

Taken from his 1895 report on the city's park system, this passage emphasizes the physical amenities and moral uplift associated with urban nature and the need for the local government to compensate for the public's inequitable access to such benefits. Not only are these comments unremarkable during this period in American urban development, Wahl notes that Milwaukee "may perhaps be more backward than many other cities in so realizing these facts." In the same report he acknowledged the city's tardiness in developing its park system when

compared to other upper-Midwestern cities such as Chicago and Minneapolis. Yet, over a relatively short time period, Milwaukee gained the sites of urban nature deemed necessary to achieve status as a progressive, modern American city. Such change included landscapes as diverse as Lake Park (Figure 1), which satisfied those who equated urban green space with the transcendental vistas of an Olmstedian design, and Kosciuszko Park (Figure 2), intended to serve the active, recreational needs of a primarily Polish, working-class neighborhood. Whether these parks or any of the other five new municipal parks served as “gardens of the poor,” as claimed by Wahl, warrants critical evaluation (Figure 3).



**Figure 1:** Lake Park; Steel Foot Bridge built in 1892 (Source: Milwaukee County Parks archive)

In its most basic task, this paper examines the first decades of Milwaukee’s plans for an urban park system to determine whether the city achieved the goal of improved access to urban green space for its population regardless of class. Beyond this apparently simple assignment, however, such an evaluation engages numerous questions related to these new urban spaces and the politics associated with their production. America’s municipal parks became a necessary element of a city’s plan not only to benefit individuals but also to contribute to society. Various critical geographies of the emerging form of the nineteenth-century industrial American city explore the class landscapes of these parks, analyzing the ideological implications of nature in the city (Gandy 2002; Young 2004), the appropriation of such spaces for the city elite’s purposes (Domosh 1998), and the social-spatial changes in park design linked to a changing concept of how parks contribute to the improvement of society (Young 1995). Arguably, however, insufficient attention has been paid to the Liberal notions that underpin these civil spaces as they became a common feature of *the* modern American city

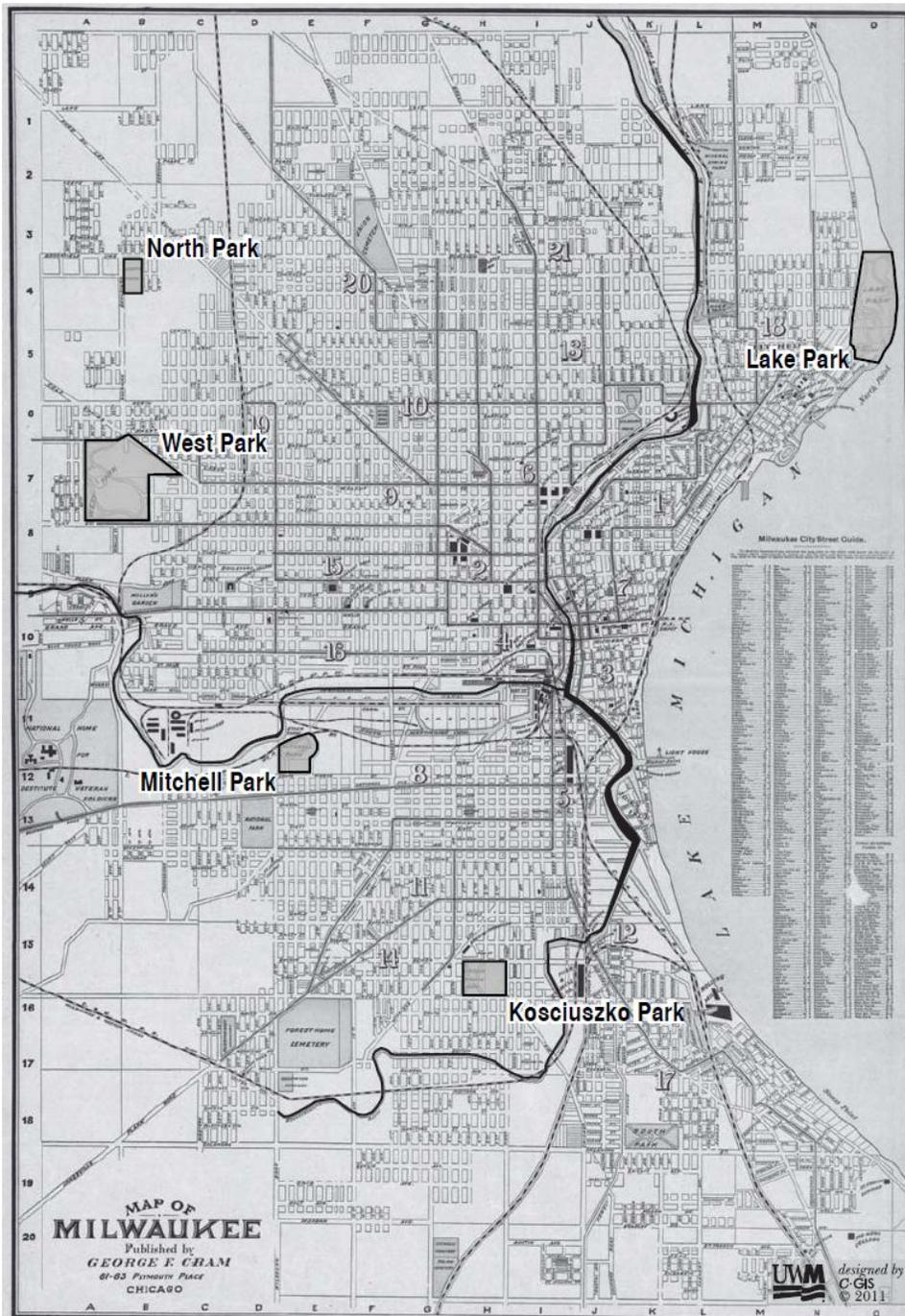
regardless of region, demographics or economic base. In the case of the agenda of Progressive Era Milwaukee, a dominant national ideology represented by the parks movement filtered through the leadership of a largely foreign-born and working-class population. This paper offers a means of evaluating this new municipal space as it is absorbed into the urban fabric of a city that epitomized the industrial, immigrant city.



**Figure 2:** Kosciuszko Park; Ice skating on the pond with St. Josaphat's Basilica in the background. (Source: AGS Kwasniewski photo; Milwaukee Neighborhoods digital collection)

Park Board President Christian Wahl's words set the stage for this inquiry as we focus on the discourse of urban reform that over time naturalized the benefits of the parks, the necessity of local government's involvement in providing those public benefits, and the extent to which such urban amenities became the standard of a progressive, modern city. This discourse tends to be associated with the paternal control of liberal planning in many critical studies. Yet as David Harvey notes in his assessment of late-nineteenth century planning efforts, such spaces provide benefits that few other components of the built environment can claim over one-hundred years later (1996). To draw some insight from this historical perspective, we seek to explicate "the modern, Liberal city" as its contemporaries understood the relationship between urban spaces, the citizens and municipal government. Such explorations should contribute to

this process of political and spatial transformation – and offer a valuable contrast when one hundred years later we seek to better understand today’s “postmodern, neoliberal<sup>1</sup> city.”



**Figure 3:** Milwaukee’s Municipal Parks, 1889-1895 (Designed by UWM Cartographic & GIS Center)

<sup>1</sup> In contrasting “the liberal city” with “the neoliberal city”, we refer to political economic changes taking place since the 1970s that involve shifts toward privatization and a retrenchment of social services as influenced by the impact of neoliberalism (Harvey 2008).

To conduct this analysis, the paper first provides a brief overview of the dominant history of nineteenth-century American park design and the symbolic order associated with it. We then offer a parallel history of Milwaukee's experience beginning with the period prior to the municipal park system, when regional and ethnic traditions were present in the form of private parks and beer gardens. In this instance, German Milwaukee's valued beer gardens and other private parks competed with the concept of a public park system. As certain Milwaukeeans attempted to remedy its "tardiness" in establishing its park system, late-nineteenth-century civic leaders step into a national movement that emphasizes public access as well as certain design qualities. The question that Milwaukeeans dealt with involved not only what parks should look like and where they should be located but also how they should be financed. To evaluate the implications of this, the discussion considers the politics of parks through the 1880s debates about *municipal* financing as opposed to *ward* financing of park development. Finally, we conclude by examining the site selection for the initial municipal parks, considering both Wahl's claim that they developed "Gardens of the Poor" and the early twentieth century park commission slogan that they sought to provide "the greatest good for the greatest number"(MCPA 1910)

## **MUNICIPAL PARKS AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN CITY**

### **Liberalism and the Nineteenth-Century City**

Christian Wahl's 1895 report on the progress of Milwaukee's park development employs numerous metaphors to describe its newly constructed urban green spaces. Such phrases as "playgrounds for the public" and "gardens of the poor" resonate with many twenty-first century Americans as fitting images for parks (even as a growing number of such systems are losing public funds in this era of neoliberalism). Despite this popular image, however, these concepts grew out of the specific era of nineteenth century liberalism with its potentially conflicting interpretations based on competing strands of meaning. Liberal ideology draws upon both the concept of Lockean liberalism, in which individual freedom appears a natural right, and those of the British Utilitarians, in which the state seeks to respond to the "greatest good of the greatest number" by managing the problems of society (see Kenny 1992). Although the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) coined the term indicating that the "measure of right and wrong" was based on a calculation of benefits to the greatest number of people, John Stuart Mills (1806-1873) further developed it in *Utilitarianism* (1863) in his discussion of the "greatest happiness principle." Over time, Progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt embraced this measure, explicitly citing the principle of the "greatest good for the greatest number" in one instance when he called for controls that would limit the impact of "the short-sighted men who in their greed and selfishness will, if permitted, rob our country of half its charm by their reckless extermination of all useful . . . things" (1916). The individual freedom associated with capitalism required balancing with the interests of the public, thus creating a role for government.

The view of government's role regarding municipal matters evolved in American governance through the nineteenth century into the twentieth. As such, it retained a traditional concern for the rights of individuals while absorbing the more progressive notion that government might assert responsibility for the protection of its weaker members to facilitate "positive freedom" for each member of society. By extending positive benefits to the individual

citizen, they presumed that the cumulative effect would be positive for society as a whole. The absorption of Utilitarian liberal ideas through the exchange of various planning solutions linked social and spatial prescriptions for the modern, industrial city in metropolitan ideology – whether in America or Europe (Rodgers 1998). Sociologist Patrick Joyce’s arguments regarding nineteenth century liberalism and the modern city addresses primarily the British experience (2003). During a period of tremendous growth and change in nineteenth century western cities he argues that governments experimented with “the rules of freedom” – the notion that extending individual freedom is a formula for exercising power. This exploration of hegemony at the urban scale suggests that “freedom” was served by improving mobility within the city, particularly by giving increased public access to government facilities and services, and by creating inclusion in civil society through such diverse opportunities as shared public space and participation in government. In the case of Britain, changes in public accessibility to various aspects of urban life in its earliest stages preceded the enfranchisement of British subjects. Not until the Reform Act of 1867 did British working-class men receive the right to vote and thus the rights to participation in representational government (Joyce). Universal male suffrage finally replaced a conservative standard of inclusion based on property and education. In the case of the United States, debates involving issues of freedom and mobility were weighed against controlling individuals in urban society according to class, race/ethnicity and gender differences (see Baldwin 1999; Domosh 1998). As these debates progressed, we would argue, the hegemonic underpinnings of the “freedom of the city” became entangled with democratic practices and the expectations of class coalitions. To understand such implications for the municipal park as an element of the American city, we might pull apart the term – considering first the meaning attached to the park landscape and then evaluating changing aspects of government as it relates to municipal financial responsibilities.

### **Symbolic Order and Park Design**

America’s early landscape architects and planners received inspiration from the traditions and landscape design of the European romantics, particularly British and German designers. The romantic associations with “natural” green space and the improving effect of nature emerged in Europe and the United States just as cities were increasingly burdened with both population and pollution. European standards of art, nature and beauty were significant in supplying the rationale for urban park design throughout the United States with civic leaders subscribing to the intentions of the elite circles to establish “pastoral” and “romantic” visions of nature within the urban setting. Frederick Law Olmsted, considered by many to be America’s pioneer landscape architect, quite explicitly cited the influence of his European travels in the 1850s on his landscape taste (Rodgers, 40). American Transcendentalism and national symbolism, however, reinforced values associated with the natural world and rural images. As Gandy and others have debated, designs for America’s first major urban parks such as New York’s Central Park reinterpreted symbolic order, drawing value in relation to the pastoral attributes of an American “Jeffersonian rural idyll” as well as its “wild nature”(pp. 77-114; Rosenzweig 1992).

Evolving discourses of nature and urban reform originated with the bourgeois elite of the era, but ultimately expanded to supply “the working man” with an opportunity for leisure and recreation amidst the bustle of the metropolis as well. Architect and landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing phrased it in 1850 by stating: “every man, every laborer is a possible

gentleman, not by possession of money or fine clothes – but through the refinement of moral culture”(Taylor 1999). Frederick Law Olmsted, inheriting Downing’s pioneer role in defining American landscapes, held a similar position and argued that parks possessed the ability “to raise the working man up to the loftier status of the man of leisure and accomplishment.” The mid-nineteenth century park movement arose when the social meaning of public space had to be negotiated in dense pedestrian-scaled environments where a nascent middle-class and a burgeoning working-class found themselves in close proximity (Pipken 2005). Interpreting Downing’s and particularly Olmsted’s influence leads to the understanding that park advocates promoted this land use not just as a pastoral retreat from the city for members of the elite but, holding a liberal view, anticipated their ability to pacify class conflict (Taylor). In the midst of perceived disorder, these areas of visually appropriated nature were tied to agendas of – on the one hand, social display and improved property values – and, on the other, individual moral and civic improvement. Increasingly, their purpose became so integral to the perceived needs of urban life and order that concerns related to the lack of appropriate municipal parks extended across socio-economic boundaries.

With this emphasis, park advocates – including leading landscape architects such as H.W.S. Cleveland, Robert Morris and Frederick Law Olmsted – argued the need for the creation of a system of parks that might provide proximity to green space for a larger portion of the population than would a centrally-located park (Domosh 1998a, 150-151). This shift can be seen in Olmsted’s personal advocacy of Boston’s park system in 1870 even as workers completed his and Calvert Vaux’s design for New York’s Central Park, developed between 1858 and 1873 (Domosh 1998a, 150; Schuyler 1986). Access to park space became as clearly articulated in the movement as was concern over the composition of the landscape itself. Such observations do not detract from recent scholarly critiques that romantic designs and elitist values underlay the development of the municipal parks – and that access to parks continued to be unequal in large part. None-the-less, Geographer Terence Young makes the assertion, and our case studies demonstrate, that even as most park planning drew upon elite aesthetics, ideas about the *use* of parks resonated clearly with those of the larger society. Immigrants, workers, and other non-elite groups reflected on the possibility of producing park spaces that moved beyond the Anglo-valued landscape of romantic pastoralism, seeking instead retreats that were decidedly more civic and oriented to recreational activities (Young 2004).

Such evidence underpins our argument that, beyond landscape design issues, the parks became an integral aspect of a changed governmentality in the workings of the liberal city – particularly in the case of the American city. Despite the lead that European cities had in the urban parks movement and their ideological influence, America’s *municipal* park systems were generally described as unparalleled in size by 1900. An 1898 special issue of the quarterly *Municipal Affairs* made this claim quite explicitly by stating that the cities of the United States presented “a better showing” in terms of parks than the cities of any other country (Maltbie, p. 101). With the exception of London, no British or German city exceeded the amount of land devoted to parks in American cities such New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Saint Louis, Boston, Baltimore, or Cleveland. Cities with populations over 100,000 were evaluated in the *Municipal Affairs* article and praised for having several hundred acres of municipal park land. As to quality, one British observer noted as early as 1881 that “in no country in the world are there such extensive and delightful public parks and pleasure-grounds as in America” (Dufferin Hardy).

Over several decades in the late-nineteenth century, the *municipal park* was transformed from a novelty to a standard part of the American urban landscape. Terence Young provides further empirical evidence by noting that by 1908 only one of the 157 American cities with a population in excess of 30,000 lacked a park (2004, xi). The mining town of Butte, Montana held that dubious distinction.

According to Young, urban parks in America developed in two phases – romantic and rationalistic. Wahl’s imagery – “gardens of the poor” and “playgrounds for the public” – reflects the two different phases of park-making with the first corresponding to the romantic phase and the second to the rationalistic. In parks, individuals were to find both civic beauty and settings for organized leisure if not a retreat into pristine nature. Thus, over time, ball fields, museums and specialized uses such as children’s play areas as well as picnicking areas became the important elements to provide in urban park spaces (Young 1995). When Milwaukee formally organized the city’s parks commission in 1889, its park advocates assumed the contemporary rationalist model while simultaneously incorporating elements of romantic design in major park projects. The following discussion considers the evolving sense of this municipal duty by examining the various voices and interests in the city’s “tardy” development of a park system.

## **METROPOLITAN MILWAUKEE AND THE RISE OF PARK PLANNING**

### **Civic Self-consciousness and the Progressive City**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when explaining the city’s status and progress from a frontier town to an American metropolis, Milwaukee’s local chroniclers made the distinction between “Pioneer Milwaukee” or “Alt (Old) Milwaukee” - and the major metropolis that it had become. As these two narratives explained, by the 1870s Milwaukee’s rapid expansion and industrializing economy raised its citizens’ civic consciousness with “inevitable” consequences for the city’s services (Conrad 1895). The population grew from just over 55,000 immediately after the Civil War to approximately 204,500 in 1890 as manufacturing firms’ contribution to the local economy more than tripled (Gurda 1999, 101). By 1910, it boasted a population of 373,857 and nationally-known local author Zona Gale claimed in an issue of *Good Housekeeping* that her city had acquired “civic self-consciousness” (cited in Still 1948, 258). A scholarly account of the city’s transformation illustrated Gale’s point by noting that in the last decade of the nineteenth century Milwaukee was investing in its urban infrastructure with “greater and more varied expenditures than (in) any period of equal length before”(Larson 1908, 152). These expenses included the new parks as well as construction of a city hall, library and museum, bridges and viaducts, new schools, and experiments in asphalted pavement and street lighting. Contemporary commentary along with this list of accomplishments underscore the extent to which a liberal agenda suited not only Milwaukee’s “civic self-consciousness” but fit the dominant discourse of expectations related to a modern American city. Access to government in the new City Hall and public services (such as parks, libraries and museums) provided for the improvement of its citizens just as its modern civic infrastructure proved necessary to meet Milwaukee’s standards as a modern city.

Accompanying its demographic and economic growth and municipal extension of service, Milwaukee earned the title of being the “most European of America’s large cities” with nearly forty percent of its population foreign born (Larson, 154). One contemporary assessment of the city’s population concluded: “The chief matter of interest touching the population of

Milwaukee, is, however, not its number but its composition. Milwaukee is a cosmopolitan city” (Larson, 154). While Milwaukee held the distinction of being one of the “most foreign born” cities, he described a social geography for the city that was not significantly different from other American industrial cities in that it consisted of socially and spatially discrete populations arranged to a large extent ethnically. At its founding, three town plans – Juneau Town, east of the Milwaukee River; Kilbourn Town, west of the Milwaukee River; and Walker’s Point, south of the confluence of the Milwaukee and Menomonee Rivers – defined early Milwaukee and contributed to its differentiation as the settlement grew (see Gurda). East of the Milwaukee River and north of downtown, the city’s native-born American middle-class developed neighborhoods, such as Yankee Hill, and extended their claim on the city’s East Side over the decades. To the west of the river, German settlement dominated the city’s early social geography. The neighborhood map of Milwaukee’s West Side became increasingly complicated as the decades of the nineteenth century passed yet the area was stamped with the German’s early influence. Despite the prevalence of German and German-American residents south of the downtown and beyond the Menomonee Valley, after the late-1870s Milwaukee’s South Side became associated with Polish immigrants and their descendents.

This class- and ethnically-influenced map of the city’s neighborhoods requires consideration in the evaluation of Milwaukee’s early park development. It has been argued, however, that the 1880s marked the decade in which class rather than nationality began to assert dominance in the city’s politics as tensions grew between laborers and commercial and industrial elites (Still, p. 356-395). The changing nature of the city and city government in that decade draws together questions about competing interpretations of the necessary urban environment for Milwaukee’s citizens and the political culture influencing its growing civic self-consciousness. Practical questions related to finances as well as social/cultural preferences influenced election outcomes. To evaluate the evolving nature of Milwaukee’s governance and the rise of parks as a distinctive municipal function, we ask what arrangements for civic space and urban nature required negotiation during the early decades of the park movement in America.

### **“Pioneer” and “Alt” Milwaukee’s Parks (1830s – 1887)**

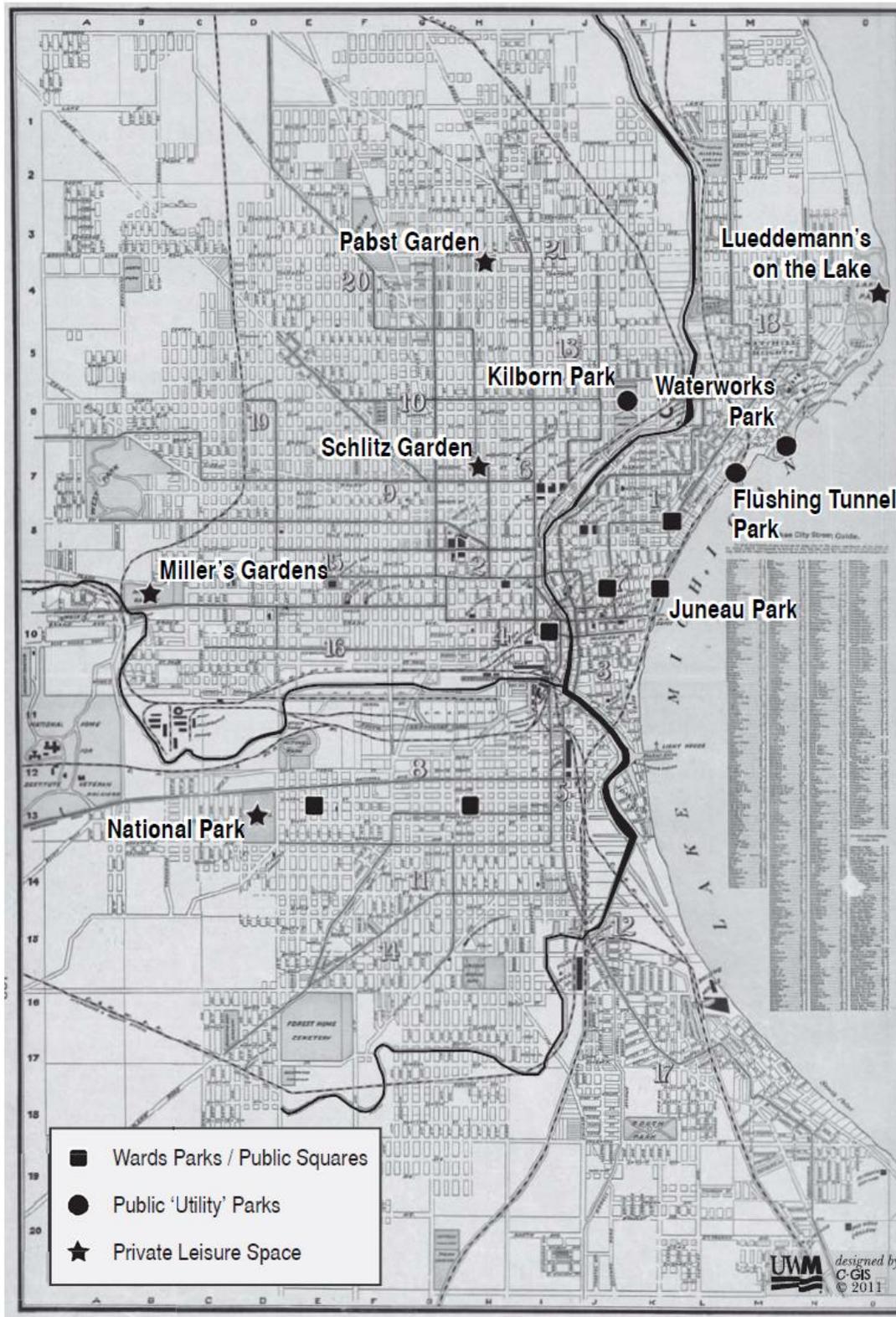
During the first few decades after Milwaukee’s incorporation in 1846, the commercial city’s municipal ornamental space consisted primarily of small squares of an acre or less (see Figure 4) and smaller parks adjacent to public utilities along the shores of Lake Michigan. These fell short of the romantic vision for a pastoral retreat within the city. If they drew upon any other model of green, common space, arguably, it would be either the New England town commons or a public version of residential squares. Narratives of “Pioneer Milwaukee” noted decades later the generosity of the city’s founding fathers in terms of donating public squares in the three original town plats (see Figure 5). To explain the lack of other park amenities they commented on the ease of escaping the city for nearby fields and forests in those early decades.

When the first, larger public park opened in 1872 it offered promise. It might be described as a transitional space since it conformed more closely to symbolic expectations while not offering the larger size or civic significance associated with other cities’ municipal parks. Originally called Seventh Ward Park, and later named Juneau Park, it provided a view of Lake Michigan to East Side residents. Designed by nationally known landscape architect H.W.S.

Cleveland, the park drew praise from one Milwaukeean who stated that “although small will be one of the most charming in the world”(Milwaukee Sentinel 1872). In a letter to the editor in the local paper, the author of this faint praise asked why Milwaukee had no park – launching into a plea that a park be built in keeping with other cities – such as Chicago’s Lincoln Park and New York’s Central Park. In contrast to the Seventh Ward Park, the reference to Lincoln and Central Parks suggest a dominant notion of the appropriate scale and design for a “true” park. The author argued that Milwaukee required a quick response lest industrial development eliminate the opportunity to “preserve” potential park land in the city. In reference to the growing number of individual sites being acquired privately, and the potential loss of natural beauty, the writer pleaded for park development “. . . before the primeval forest has been felled and the beautiful lake shore north of the city (the only eligible spot we have for a park, and one that is unsurpassed in any city in the county) is desecrated by chemical works and soap factories” (Milwaukee Sentinel, August 1872). This commentary lays out a clear landscape aesthetic associated with parks. The letter writer went on to argue the need for parks where “our citizens can breathe pure air, spend an hour or so for recreation, walk and ride without being surrounded by the *demoralizing influence of beer guzzling* . . . (emphasis added).” His reference to beer guzzling and a nearby “enterprising Teuton” pig-farmer in his commentary provides evidence of the ethnic tensions between the native-born American elite and the Germans (Teutons) as late as the 1870s.



**Figure 4:** First Ward Park; Land donated to the city in 1847 for public use. Taking its name from the northeast Milwaukee ward it was located in, this small green space (.6 acres) was renamed Burns Common and a statue of Robert Burns was erected in 1897. (Source: Golda Meir Library’s Milwaukee Neighborhoods digital collection)



**Figure 5:** Pioneer and “Alt” Milwaukee’s Parks, 1830s – 1887 (Designed by UWM Cartographic & GIS Center)

The 1872 editorial critiqued the Seventh Ward Park's design features. One might also comment on the extent that it served as a municipal space. As its name suggests, responsibility for its development depended on the financial support of the ward's residents. While it was a public park, it could not be characterized as a municipally funded park. In other contemporary cases, public utilities contributed to the early assemblage of Milwaukee's public parks including Kilbourn Park and Reservoir (1868, 1872, 1875), Waterworks Park (1872), and later the Flushing Tunnel Park (1887). Sufficient support existed in 1875 to pass an act for a park commission but although described as providing extensive power to the commission, the law was repealed the following year when arguments over the ability to develop parks in all areas of the city proved its undoing. Interestingly, competing notions contributed to its defeat. In keeping with members of the park movement nationally, advocates in Milwaukee called for sufficient funds to create parks throughout the city to provide equitable access. Others claimed that parks were not appropriate municipal expenditures. Who should pay to develop the parks also played a critical role in the debate. Would they be *Ward Parks* or *Municipal Parks*?

Arguing for public parks at a time when private pleasure gardens offered relaxation, entertainment and the timeless attraction of "beer guzzling" also proved to be a challenge. Milwaukeeans found opportunities to enjoy leisure within the city through various private parks - albeit not in transcendental natural beauty. Beer gardens, such as the West Side's Milwaukee Gardens, Schlitz Park and Pabst Gardens, and the East Side's Luedemann's-on-the-Lake and Luedemann's-on-the-River as well as larger private parks such as National, catered to those who could in fact pay for their outing. Tales of "Alt Milwaukee," the old German city, emphasized traditions imported by the large German immigrant population. From the city's incorporation, in the heart of the German Westside, places such as Ludwig's Garden provided inexpensive beer in a green, outdoor setting. Milwaukee's German community brought with it not only such folkways as the beer garden but also a particular vision of how society might be improved. A number of the Forty-Eighters, the German revolutionaries who established a stronghold in Milwaukee, were also members of the Milwaukee Turner Society. The Turnerverein (Turner Society) encouraged activities that would produce "a sound mind in a sound body." In contrast to the dominant aesthetic of the romantic park, active rather than primarily passive recreation was the model of outdoor leisure for many in Milwaukee's German community.

Schlitz Brewing Company, along with Pabst maintained a leisure-oriented, recreation-driven atmosphere for the guests who would partake in a day's respite at the park, providing ample opportunity for outdoor consumption. Schlitz Park opened in 1879 and quickly became a popular venue for city residents and their guests (Figure 6). Schlitz's theater and open-air concerts provided entertainment beyond the "guzzling" suggested in the earlier critique. Relaxing with friends, family and refreshment on a hot summer day appeared a perfect combination of early commercialism and civic/social interaction for Milwaukee's middle-class. Historian David Gerber's examination of German ethnic culture in Buffalo, New York argues the extent to which middle-class Americans appropriated German spaces and activities in the mid-nineteenth century as part of their leisure (1992). Although a fully-developed, scholarly analysis of that same influence has not been conducted for Milwaukee, popular accounts relay that same impression as the beer-gardens became the site of family-oriented entertainment as well

as the venue for special events (Still 1948; Holmes 1949; Meyer 1947). Such private spaces became the stage for labor gatherings, family picnics, and public entertainment, maintaining their significance until World War I and Prohibition (Rosenzweig 1983).



**Figure 6:** Schlitz Park; Entrance to the beer garden developed and operated by the Schlitz Brewing company from 1879 to 1909. The City purchased the land in 1909 and 1910 for Lapham Park (now part of Carver Park). (Source: Golda Meir Library’s Milwaukee Neighborhoods digital collection)

### **Park Politics, the 1880s**

As it achieved metropolitan stature, Milwaukee’s leaders continued to debate what range of municipal services should be provided. In a *Milwaukee Sentinel* news article, the reporter observed “Very little to boast of has been done in the way of improving realty at public expense” during 1882(January 1, 1883). That year, two park projects had been put before the voters in Wards Four and Seven. They met different fates. In the Fourth Ward, west of the Milwaukee River and just north of the Menomonee, ward voters rejected the tax that would be placed on property in their ward to fund purchase of the park property. Even the generally conservative newspaper noted that though the city as a whole would benefit from the new park, only those immediately adjacent to it would be required to pay for its development. Under that funding structure, the working class neighborhood rejected the proposition. Across the Milwaukee River, in the more wealthy Ward Seven, the park project received general

support from ward voters – and, as the newspaper indicated, was eagerly anticipated by both the interested property owners and the residents of the city as a whole since it would add to (a renamed) Juneau Park. A problem with legislation related to the improvement caused a delay. For the city to gain that additional ground, new legal authority was required that challenged Ward control. That tradition of local control at the ward-level gave ground over the next few years to a new understanding of city-wide responsibilities and benefits to permit municipal park development.

The city's first German-born mayor and Turner Society member, Republican Emil Wallber gained office in 1884 on a reform platform of public parks as well as other public services such as a public library, museum, a natatorium and a new city hall (Still, 382). Even with his election, however, debates continued in regard to the appropriate expenditures of city government and more specifically the need for and/or form of a municipal park system. Drawing from competing interpretations of Milwaukee's built environment, municipal responsibilities, the proper role of parks, and the appropriate form of metropolitan nature, the full range of ideological interpretations of park space could be heard. The conservative local newspaper, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* responded to the park platform by insisting that the city still maintained access to nature just beyond its borders and that it continued to be a "residence park without a park" (Still, 382). Despite its majority on the park issue, Wallber's administration was plagued by other challenges including growing tension between labor and Milwaukee's power structure as industrialization changed work conditions in the city. Coalitions of Republican and Democratic leaders in Milwaukee joined to thwart the rising influence of labor. Arguably, paternalism rather than elitism influenced the rhetoric of municipal priorities when approval finally came for the development of a municipal park system in 1889. Plans for park development sought the public health benefits of urban nature and equitable access to this green space in a city long divided by geographic sectors along class lines, reinforced for more recent immigrants by an ethnically-based labor hierarchy (see Kenny 1997).

This urban separation was acknowledged in the appointment of the Park Board with members selected based on two criteria. Members would be "retired gentlemen" and from different areas of the city. South Side Milwaukeeans had long complained of being neglected in terms of city services, as reported in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, being left with only "the pest house (Quarantine Hospital) and the house of corrections" as public land uses (February 1889). To ease this slight, two South Side residents were appointed to the five member park board. Charles Manegold Jr., who operated the Ontario & Reliance Flouring Mill and Northwestern Marine Elevator, and John Bentley, of J. Bentley & Sons Contractors & Builders, served as South Side representatives. Two West Side residents joined the Commission as well, leading businessmen Calvin Lewis (Gogebic Mining Company) and Louis Auer (Louis Auer & Sons Real Estate). East Side resident and retired businessman Christian Wahl was named chairman of the board. From its creation in 1889, the Milwaukee Park Commission weighed competing interests in the development of this new urban space. Design, accessibility and financial issues required consideration. As an appointed board, its member juggled publically their understanding of what constituted a park system with public expectations to lay the foundation of Milwaukee's new municipal resource. Financial pragmatism and aesthetic concerns interwoven with liberal values, emphasizing access for all citizens, influenced the next steps related to site-selection.

## MUNICIPAL PARK SITE SELECTION AND DEVELOPMENT

### “To Avoid Sectional Partiality”

Within the first two years of operation, the Commission located and purchased land for five new municipal parks creating a park system consisting of nearly 400 acres (see Figure 3). Joining Juneau Park and the city’s smaller public parks, Milwaukeeans acquired access in 1890 to Lake, Kosciuszko (originally Coleman’s Woods and then Lincoln), and Mitchell Parks. In 1891, the City obtained Sherman (originally North), and Washington (originally West) Parks. In the 1891 Park Commission Report, the Commission described its accomplishments by stating:

. . . although custom has divided the city into three divisions, they have endeavored at all times to avoid any sectional partiality. . . . Without regard to “sides” they have chosen tracts of land so located that in the course of time the city will be completely surrounded by breathing places where all classes from the highest to the lowest may rest their tired brains and weary limbs; where the children of the crowded city of the future may romp and play; where every citizen may tread with the consciousness of ownership. (p. 53)

Prior to reaching this accomplishment, the Commission struggled with public opinion and the challenges of land purchases in a rapidly developing and remarkably dense city.

Early in 1889, a *Milwaukee Sentinel* editorial summarized its opposition to expanding municipal responsibilities, objecting to the city’s appeal to the state legislature for both funds to build a new city hall and to initiate purchase of parks in various sectors of the city (1889a). In regard to the parks, the newspaper called upon municipal leadership to drop its quest for park land in three sections of the city and instead select land along the Milwaukee River that would serve as the City’s large central park. Pointing to the area north of the downtown as a place offering “good dimensions” for a park of sufficient size with “variety of surface, natural beauty and adaptability as a pleasure resort,” the argument went so far as to label it the city’s Central Park (1889b). This elite conception of the purpose of a public park, reflecting a primarily romantic aesthetic and conservative civic sensibility, however, lost to the continued call for multiple, accessible parks. When the Commission first met in June 1889, each of the Commissioners was charged with examining appropriate sites within the sections of Milwaukee that they represented.

While accessibility to metropolitan nature for all of Milwaukee’s citizens won the day, the Commission took up a challenge to find sites that fit the concept of a park and stayed within the \$100,000 bond limit. The 1889 legislation establishing the Municipal Park Board required that park sites be selected from within the boundaries of the city. Although that appeared an obvious criterion for parkland that would serve its citizens, it quite quickly became viewed as a problem. Stiff competition over land for industrial and residential development stifled the ability of the Commission to acquire land. Milwaukee had grown rapidly in the later decades of the nineteenth century, with increasing numbers of immigrants, factories and subdivisions filling in vacant parcels throughout. Two decades later, the density at which Milwaukee developed would earn it the distinction of being the most densely settled city in the country following New York City (see Kenny 1997). This pattern was already well established. The 1890 census indicates that the greatest density included the older sections of the city west along the

river and just north of the Menomonee Valley's industrial development, including as many as 32,000 in the oldest west side neighborhoods (Platt 2008). New development on Milwaukee's southern edge, as the Polish neighborhoods grew, competed with these figures. By 1900, the Polish South Side would include the most densely settled neighborhoods in the city (Kenny 1997). With the exception of the pre-municipal beer gardens and private parks, this was a city that was quickly exhibiting major deficiencies in accessible park space for laborers.

Limited municipal authority did not encourage the purchase of developed land. Juneau Park's expansion in the previous decade had been delayed when it required the demolition of several residential properties. Land costs and such questions of municipal authority pushed park development farther from the city's older neighborhoods. Lake and Kosciuszko lay at the outer edges of the city limits when purchased. In April 1891, new legislation facilitated the acquisition of lands beyond the city boundaries allowing for the purchase of the west side parks (Washington and Sherman). Milwaukee's park planners embarked on a project that would seek not only to alleviate the increasingly congested conditions of the city but concurrently acquire lands that displayed the inherent scenic qualities deserving of the name park. Aesthetics as well as price inspired purchase of these peripheral sites since the commissioners sought land that had not been "denuded of timber by the ruthless axe of speedy Western civilization" and topographic features that would "lessen the labors of the landscape gardener" (Wahl 1895, 300-306). Financial pragmatism and aesthetic concerns interwoven with liberal values emphasizing access for all citizens were juggled in these choices. Arguably, the "gardens of the poor" suffered in comparison to those new civic spaces serving Milwaukee's middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. Certainly, the enthusiasm shown, and consequent investment in Lake (1890), Washington (1891), Mitchell (1890) and Riverside (1905) parks, raises issues with the egalitarian language in various Park Commission reports. Elitism and middle-class values prevailed in supporting Lake and Riverside on the city's east side. Developing middle-class neighborhoods and special features such as Washington's early zoo and Mitchell's Conservatory drew visitors and financial support to these civic spaces.

If we examine the contemporary Progressive agenda, however, light is shed on interesting aspects of a changing governmentality. With this focus, the following section explores two contrasting examples of the first park development by examining the selection of Lake and Kosciuszko Parks. Looking at these two parks in Milwaukee during this period, we excavate the meaning of park use as a reflection of prevailing ideology, discourse and design of the late nineteenth century alongside some practical considerations.

### **Lake Park – "The Jewel in the Crown"**

Park advocates had long expressed concern about the community's access to Lake Michigan in an area unobstructed by railroad tracks. Reflecting this, one of the early descriptions of the city's parks by Commissioner Wahl conveyed the opinion that it was only natural that "the superb beauty of Lake Michigan should be considered first" (1895). His priority when the city purchased a beer garden (Lueddeman's on the Lake) along with farmland for the park system's "jewel in the crown" was to enlist Frederick Law Olmsted's design firm. Civic pride could be heard in Wahl's assessment of the new park site's superior natural features as he identified the task ahead as taming nature for the consumption of those who would ultimately use this space rather than having to construct the romantic ideal. Wahl synthesized this stating that "ravines

add greatly to the natural beauty of the landscape, and not only necessitate bridges, but make them possible; for in many cities which, like Chicago, lie absolutely flat, the landscape gardener has been obliged to first make a ravine in order to have some excuse for a bridge”(1895, 302-303). Along with pride in Milwaukee’s natural attributes he thus added a subtle claim to financial thrift, a highly vaunted city value.

As the particular patron of Lake Park, his writing also suggests the extent to which he lobbied for the city’s share in the cultural features of a great city. Wahl sought to embrace opportunities for increased nature in the city by building off the national success of Olmstedian parks in New York, Boston, Buffalo. He had in mind a more cosmopolitan standard for civic greatness as well, expressing a desire to replicate the great parks of Europe. Wahl’s first report on the Park Commission’s work cited, as a defining feature of the modern city, the “lungs of those great cities” such as Hyde and Regents Parks in London, Bois de Boulogne in Paris, Berlin’s Tiergarten, and Vienna’s Prater (1895). The status to be attained in developing this cultural product appealed to an external standard as well as the value gained through local consumption.

Following Wahl’s lead, the nascent Milwaukee Parks Commission embraced the concretization of pastoral desires implemented in the size and design of Lake Park. The city’s lowest residential densities were on the east side, including the most sparsely settled area on this northeast edge (Platt 2008). With Lake Michigan to its east and with dense foliage and large-lot single family homes covering boundaries to its west, Lake Park was envisioned as a pastoral retreat from the city, and therefore represented a potentially exclusionary, culturally elitist domestication of public space. This fact did not go unnoticed given Milwaukee’s expressed commitment to serving the city’s poorer population. Wahl and Olmsted, in fact discussed this point specifically and sought justification over equitable access for the city’s residents and this peripheral location. Lake’s superior landscape apparently required no prolonged rationalization given the aesthetics of this site and the power of urban nature (MCPA 1893). To balance the municipal commitment with accessibility, Olmsted and Wahl emphasized the need for streetcar access. Within a short period of time streetcars delivered park patrons to its southern entry and Lake Park claimed the largest attendance figures of the City’s parks on major public holidays such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Ironically, before transit accommodated the public, the city dismantled a private tollgate that stopped patrons before entering the park (MCPA 1891). The older system of private control of the city’s roadways was inconsistent with modern, liberal Milwaukee.

### **Kosciuszko Park – “the Polish/Workingman’s Park”**

During the late 1870s and the 1880s, the south side of Milwaukee quickly began to assume its present physical form in contrast to the relatively slower growth of Lake Park’s northeast side neighborhood. On the southern border of the city, the standard lot in the working-class neighborhoods was long with a narrow frontage, measuring 20-30 feet wide by 100-150 feet deep. Speculators constructed units of housing they deemed appropriate to the local neighborhood market, producing generally small, three- to four-room cottages. Ninety-five percent of this peripheral area was identified as German in 1880, but by the 1905 census the area was largely Polish. This reflected a rapid demographic shift in a very short time. Known as the Polish South Side, Ward 14 became the major center of the Polish community as the

population grew from 7,000 in 1874 to 71,000 in 1910. By the early twentieth century, Ward 14 (just west of the park) had the dubious distinction of the largest total population among the city's wards, the largest number of school-age children of any ward in Milwaukee, a very high rate of homeownership, and the city's highest mortality rate. In selecting the site that would become Kosciuszko Park, the concept of "gardens for the poor" prevailed, or at least it was well understood by this time that the Polish community in Milwaukee could not be ignored by any political party given its growing significance in city and ward politics.

The selection of potential South Side parks was announced by July 1889, as the commissioners debated the merits of three sites. The site that would eventually become Kosciuszko park, called Coleman Woods, was referred to as ". . . a nice site with wooded areas" but without any worthwhile natural features. Its only great advantage was its central location in the Polish neighborhood (1889c). The Commissioners found the aesthetics of the other two sites notable and in keeping with the romantic paradigm. Yet, it was Coleman Woods that would serve as the garden for the 14<sup>th</sup> Ward. The benefit of centrality emerged as the ultimate attribute in helping the Commission to select a park that would allow access and use in the ever-crowding neighborhoods surrounding the site. The other two sites, including the future South Park (Humboldt Park) and a site on the lake shore (South Shore), joined the park system in 1899 and 1909 respectively.

In the first year of operation, the new parks in general, and South Side parks in particular, received favorable review. The Park Commission's Annual Report of 1891 noted that "the south side parks were especially patronized by women and children" (p. 28). For Kosciuszko and its surrounding neighborhoods, the concern for relief and access was urgent as urban form and density mandated that greater attention be paid to this "playground of the public." By 1902, the Park Commission added nearly eleven additional acres to the original twenty-six given the residents' use of their park. At that time, a designer affiliated with the Olmsted office was brought in to integrate the park lands and improve the overall design quality. The original lagoon was expanded and additional walks, lawn area and plantings were completed. The popular boating area became the well-used skating pond during the winter months. Nationally-known local author Zona Gale commented in 1906 that the playground in Kosciuszko Park had become so popular in its one-year trial, a "great people's riot" would occur if the "experiment" were revoked (cited in Still, p. 201). Judging it a success for more than one reason, she concluded that this recreational addition was "making useful and intelligent citizens of our children." As patronizing as this statement might be judged, the Polish South Side residents claimed it as their own space on a daily basis and for community celebration. By the end of its first decade, naming rights went to the patrons of the park as they changed the name to Kosciuszko in honor of the Polish hero of the Revolutionary War and in 1904 the Polish National Alliance donated a monumental statue of General Kosciuszko to the park. As well as providing a space for active and passive recreation, the park supported the community's pride in its contribution to and place in the public realm. While limited in socio-economic clout, the size of the Polish community made it a force to acknowledge in municipal politics. Thus, while Kosciuszko was somewhat deficient in size and lacking in the standard picturesque amenities of parks in the Olmsted tradition, the demands of a growing community – both in numbers and influence – gave this space a civic importance. Kosciuszko addressed the need for a space of

respite and recreation in the Polish Southside in terms understood by the discourse of park planning and the working class, primarily immigrant patrons.

## **CONCLUSION**

Financial pragmatism and aesthetic concerns interwoven with liberal values emphasizing access for all citizens influenced the original choices for Milwaukee's municipal park system. Olmsted's signature parks, including Lake, were a physical response to wealthier neighborhoods' demands for urban nature and Milwaukee's understanding of the civic stature associated with such landscapes. The enthusiasm shown, and consequent investment in, Lake (1890), Washington (1891), Mitchell (1890) and Riverside (1905) parks, raises issue with the egalitarian language in various Park Commission reports. Elitism and middle-class values prevailed in supporting Lake and Riverside on the city's East Side and Washington's early zoo and Mitchell's Conservatory drew visitors and support to these civic spaces in the west. We leave this discussion of the metropolitan, ethnic and class values influencing the municipal investment for another paper.

However, while the more prominent parks cited above were larger and garnered more social and economic attention, the South Side Polish community could claim Kosciusko as their own. This particular case study underscores the potential opened to the public through the parks movement. Although not perfect in its execution of a policy promoting "playgrounds for the public" and "gardens for the poor," the shift from a conservative view of municipal government's limited role in serving its public to the expectations of a modern, liberal governmentality permitted accessibility to an urban amenity deemed necessary for urban life in the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century. Milwaukee's "tardy" adoption of a municipal park system resulted in parks on the outskirts of contemporary development but none-the-less shifted access and financial responsibility from a system dependent on the private pleasure gardens and fledgling ward park system to a municipally financed system. In this historical analysis, the park system sheds light on one aspect of a civic sensibility that encouraged consideration (albeit imperfect) of "the greatest good for the greatest number." Twenty-first century notions of governmentality provide evidence that this is neither "natural" nor necessary as we consider shifts to a neoliberal mindset and headlines decrying the disinvestment in public parks - such as that expressed by local historian John Gurda's in his editorial on the park system ("A work of generations is fading in our time,"2006).

## **Acknowledgment**

We wish to thank Terry Young for insight in the early stages of our research, the anonymous reviewers for editorial comments on the article, and Donna Genzmer of the UWM Cartography & GIS Center for production of the city maps. The Milwaukee County Parks archives, American Geographical Society Libraries and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Golda Meir Library kindly provided permission for use of photographs in their collection.

## References Cited

- Annual Park Commission Report (1891) Milwaukee County Park Commission Archive, Milwaukee, WI.
- Annual Park Commission Report (1912) Milwaukee County Park Commission Archive, Milwaukee, WI.
- Baldwin, P. (1999) *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850-1930*. Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Domosh, M. (1998) *Invented Cities: the Creation of Landscape in nineteenth-century New Haven CT.*: Yale University Press).
- Dufferin Hardy, Lady (1881) *Through Cities and Prairie Lands*. Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co.
- Gandy, M. (2002) *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Gerber, D. (1992) The Germans take care of our celebration. In K. Grover ed., *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1940*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gurda, J. (2006) A work of generations fades in our time. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. June 3.
- Harvey, D. (2008) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (1996) *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Kenny, J. (1992) Portland's Comprehensive Plan as Text: The Fred Meyer Case and the Politics of Reading. From T. Barnes and J. Duncan (eds), *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, 176-92. New York: Elsevier Science.
- Kenny, J. (1997) Polish Routes to Americanization. In Ostergren & eds., *Wisconsin Land & Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp. 263-281.
- Larson, L. (1908) *A Financial and Administrative History of Milwaukee*. Madison, WI: Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin.
- Maltbie, M.R. (1898) *Municipal Functions: a study of the development, scope and tendency of municipal socialism*. New York: Reform Club.

MCPA/Milwaukee County Park Archives (1891) Correspondence File – Park Commission.

MCPA/Milwaukee County Park Archives (1893) Correspondence File – Park Commission/Olmsted Firm.

MCPA/Milwaukee County Parks Archives, Milwaukee WI. Correspondence file, Park Commission Stationery (approx. 1912).

*Milwaukee Sentinel* (1872) “A Park for Milwaukee,” August 22, 1872.

*Milwaukee Sentinel* (1883) “Park Projects,” January 1, 1883.

*Milwaukee Sentinel* (1889a) “Proposed Loans,” January 29, 1889. p. 4.

*Milwaukee Sentinel* (1889b) “The Park Matter,” February 22, 1889. p. 4.

*Milwaukee Sentinel* (1889c) “Three Park Sites: Prospects for a South Side Park,” July 21, 1889.

*Milwaukee Sentinel* (1890) “Settled at Last: Park Sites are finally Selected,” June 17, 1890.

Pipkin, J. (2005) The Moral High Ground in Albany: Rhetorics and Practices of an ‘Olmstedian Park, 1855-1875, *Journal of Historical Geography* Vol. 31: 666-687.

Platt, L. (2008) Pastoral and Political Nature: Historical Planning and the Environmental Justice of Parks in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. PhD Dissertation in Geography, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

Rodgers, D. (1998) *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University.

Roosevelt, T. (1916) *A Book-Lover’s Holiday in the Open*.

Rosenzweig, R. (1983) *Eight Hours for what we will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenzweig, R., and Blackmar, E. (1992) *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Schuyler, D. (1986) *The New Urban Landscape: The redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Still, B. (1948) *Milwaukee: the history of a city*. Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Taylor, D. (1999) Central Park as a Model for Social Control: Urban Parks, Social Class and Leisure Behavior in Nineteenth-Century Americas, *Journal of Leisure Research* Vol. 31: 420-477.

Wahl, C. (1895) Public Park System of the City. From H.L. Conrad (ed.) *History of Milwaukee County from its first settlement* Vol. 1. Chicago & New York: American Biographical Publishing Co.

Young, T. (1995) Modern Urban Parks. *Geographical Review* 85/4: 535-551.

Young, T. (2004) *Building San Francisco's Parks: 1850-1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.