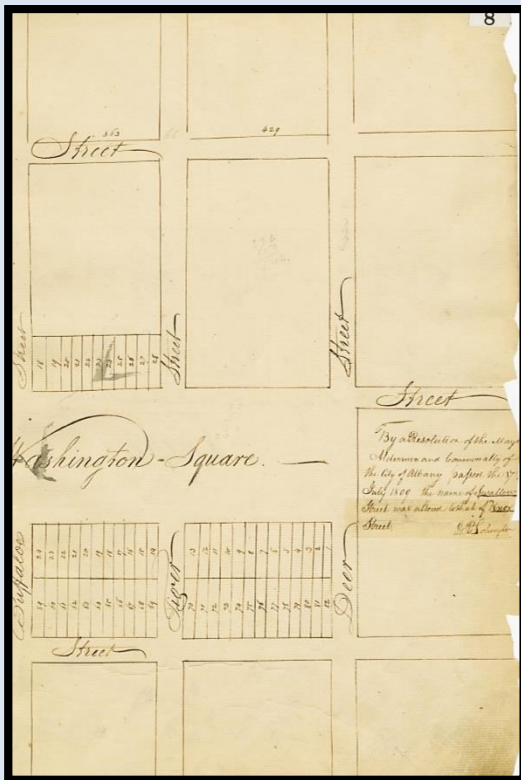


Washington Park: 'Albany's Breathing Space'

In Howell and Tenney's *History of the County of Albany, 1609-1886*, Washington Park is referred to as the “gymnasium and breathing space of Albany.” Occupying land set aside “for pious and charitable use” by the Dongan Charter in 1686, the Park, as public property, would inherit a place that was once home to a cemetery, public square, parade grounds, the County Penitentiary and County Almshouse farm.

In 1802, the needs of the times required that a portion of this land be used



86-00552. City Engineer, Lots on Washington Square 1809. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

for a gunpowder house, and by 1806, the area between Willet and Knox Streets and State Street and Madison Avenue, had come to be known as “Middle Square.” The area between Knox to Robin Streets, and State Street to Hudson Avenue, was taken for a cemetery, while the area west of the cemetery became the Almshouse farm and Penitentiary grounds.

In 1809, Middle Square was briefly renamed “Washington Square,” then later, the “Washington Parade Grounds.” In 1868, the cemetery remains with their headstones were reinterred to Albany Rural Cemetery. The people of Albany had developed other plans for this land: a green space accessible to all. In short, the people of Albany wanted a park.

The New York State law that established Washington Park in 1869 (Ch. 519, L. 1869) also created a Board of Park Commissioners to oversee it. Construction for a park began in 1870 and took 25 years to complete, though

much of the major work was done by 1876. In the 1870s, work on the parade grounds and former cemetery was completed along with the damming of the Beaverkill to form Washington Park Lake. A footbridge was built over that lake in 1875, utilizing about 15 acres along Madison Avenue from Lake to Robin Streets.

In the 1880s, the Park was enlarged by the acquisition of lots on Hudson Avenue and Hamilton Street that provided the setting for the Moses statue, just north of Madison Avenue.

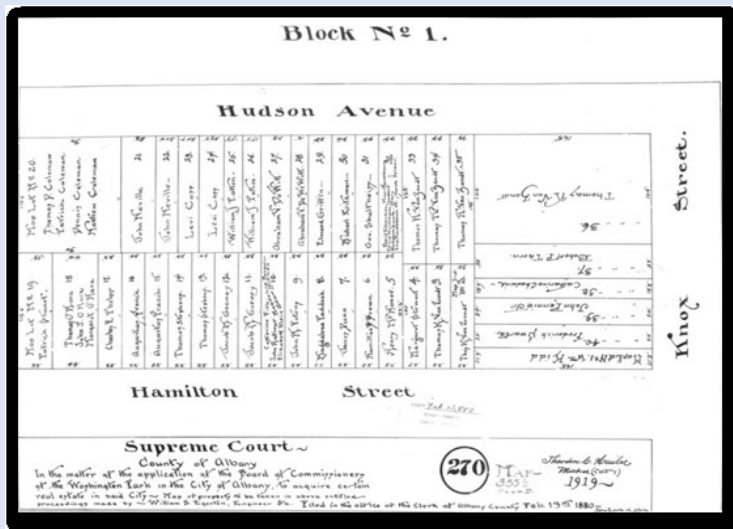


Washington Park Lake House, 1903. Courtesy Private Collection.

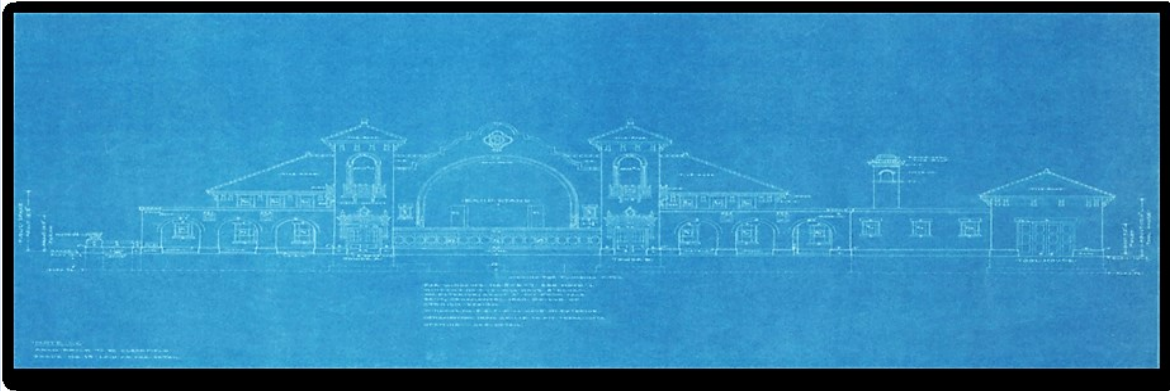
Subsequent acquisitions would expand the park to fill the area between Madison Avenue, State, Lake and Willett Streets.

Last to be purchased, in 1889, were the grounds of John Taylor's residence which would become the site of the tennis courts. At its completion, the Park stretched to 81 acres with the 5.2-acre Washington Park Lake, a roughly 1,600-foot-long and 140-foot-wide body of water, in the southwestern corner.

87-09704. County Clerk Property Maps Book 13 – Maps 270-271.. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.



Washington Park soon became a place for restoration of the spirit; while incorporating design concepts of prominent landscape architect, Frederick Law

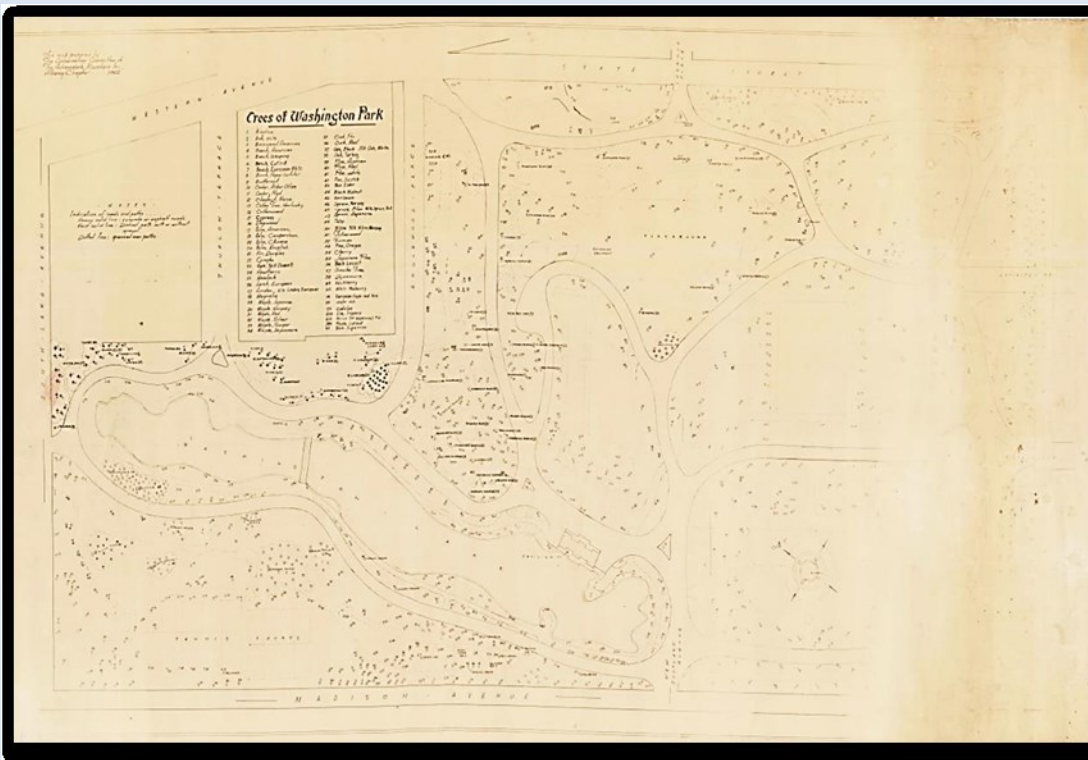


85-03496 City Engineer. Washington Park Lakehouse 1928. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

Olmsted, famous for New York City's Central Park and

Brooklyn's Prospect

Park. Olmsted saw such parks as rural retreats from the city, with a lake, a bridge, a pathway, flower gardens and different types of trees.

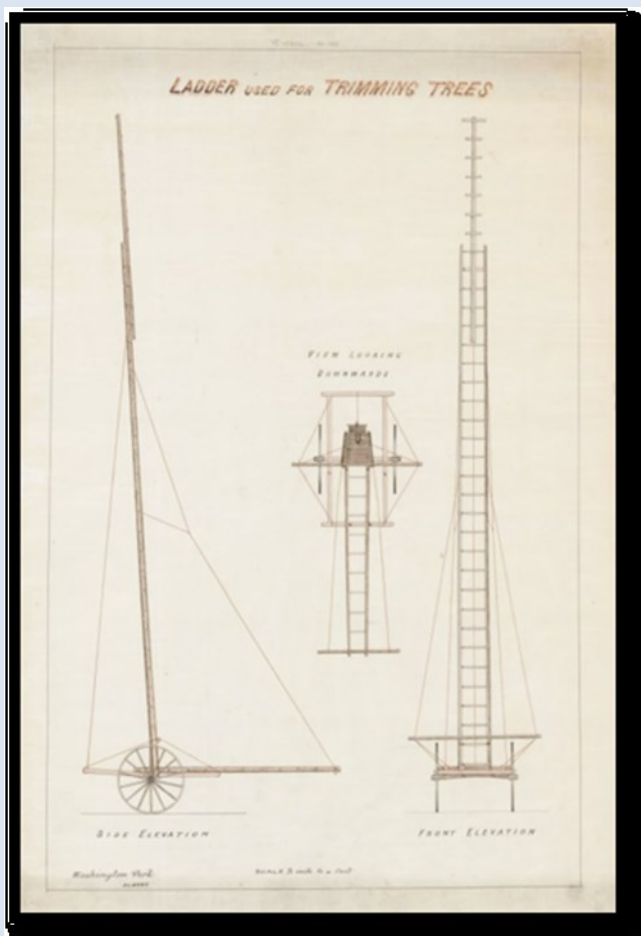


91-00298 Albany Development and Planning. Trees of Washington Park, 1962. Courtesy of the Albany County Archival Collection.

Olmsted believed that the common green space must always be equally accessible to all citizens and was to be defended against private encroachment – a principle now considered

fundamental to the concept of a

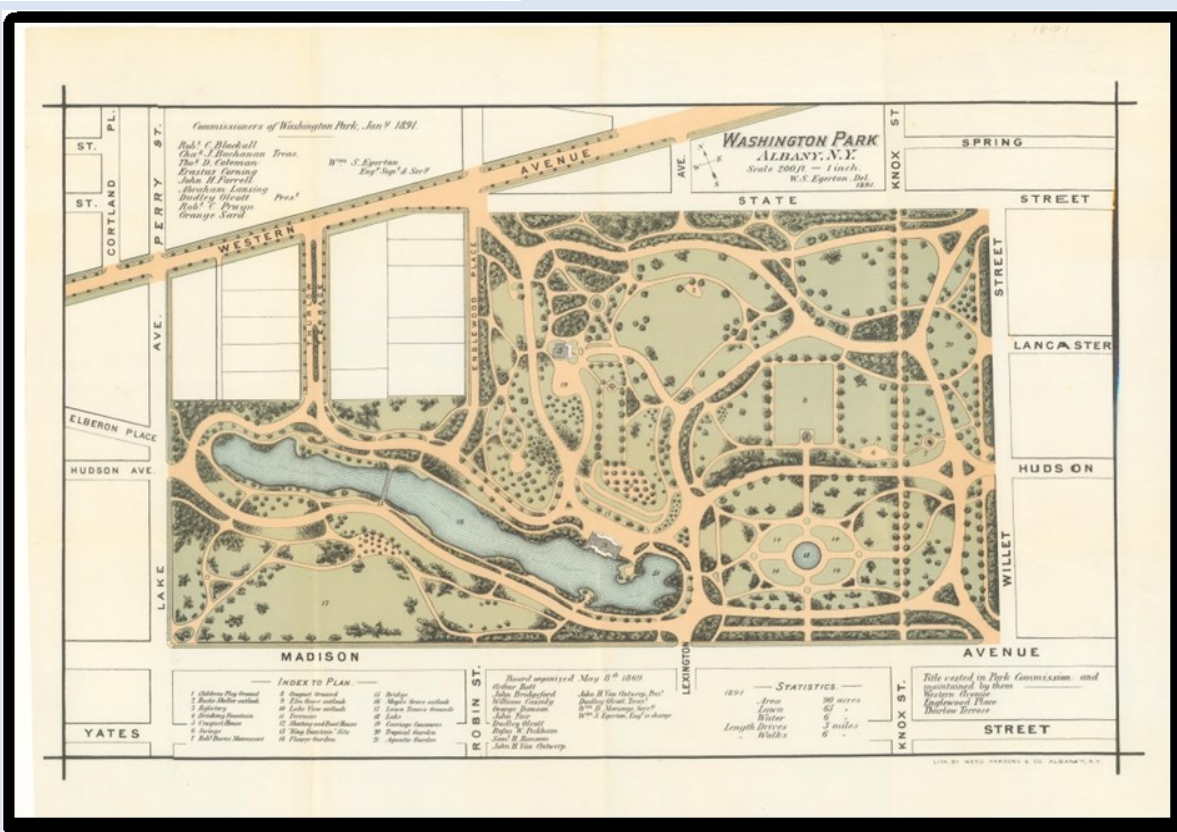
"public park." During its 25 years of construction, Washington Park incorporated the ideas of other prominent architects as well as a rapidly changing society.



The completion of the park was overseen by William S. Egerton, who incorporated the "gardenesque" style popular with the Victorians which was a more formal, ornamental approach reflected in floral exhibits and popular with Albany citizens.

85-03116. City Engineer. Washington Park – Ladder used for Trimming Trees, ca. 1890. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Collection.

The map index from the Board of Commissioners of Washington Park's original plan directs the viewer to swings, a croquet lawn, the Lake View Outlook and other restful areas:



01-00046. Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners of the Washington Park 1892 – 1897. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

The Board of Commissioners of Washington Park set the rules and regulations to keep it a quiet, reflective place. In the Park, the rate of speed of bicycles, tricycles and vehicles “could not exceed eight miles an hour;” people were forbidden to “molest or frighten the animals” or to “trample on the grass.”

Although this quiet atmosphere held 19th and early 20th Century appeal, modern changes and temperament would soon inject a livelier pace into Washington Park. In 1949, the Park saw its first Tulip Festival with the



01-04998. Albany Tulip Festival Photographs ca. 1970s. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

coronation of a Tulip Queen and live entertainment; it proved so popular that it became an annual event and Albany tradition.

In 1972, the Winter Carnival proved the park could be a venue for skating, snowshoeing and sleigh riding. In 1989, a free, open-air Park Playhouse Theatre opened, presenting professional Broadway musicals that rival any

production, drawing many spectators every summer.

Washington Park also memorializes several historical events and figures important to Albanians, beginning with the Dr. James H. Armsby memorial, founder of Albany Medical College and hospital. Next, there is the King Memorial statue of Moses Smiting the Rock, in memory of Henry L. King’s father, a prominent 19th century Albany businessman and benefactor.



15-01542. Albany Port District Commission Photograph Collection. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

There is a statue of poet Robert Burns, as well as boulder commemorating New York's Revolutionary War hero, Marinus Willett, and there is a memorial to the

Soldiers and Sailors of Albany

as well. Finally and most recently installed are the statues in memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and local World War I hero, Henry Johnson.

Today, Washington Park is not only a haven for outdoor activity but also a year round hotspot for many popular special events, displays and concerts. The Latin Festival, Gay Pride and Columbus Day Parades and Italian Festival are some more recent festivities held each year. In addition, the park plays host to several fund raisers including the Capital Holiday Lights display, American Cancer Society Walkathon and Freihofer's Run for Women. Washington Park has truly become the "people's park!"