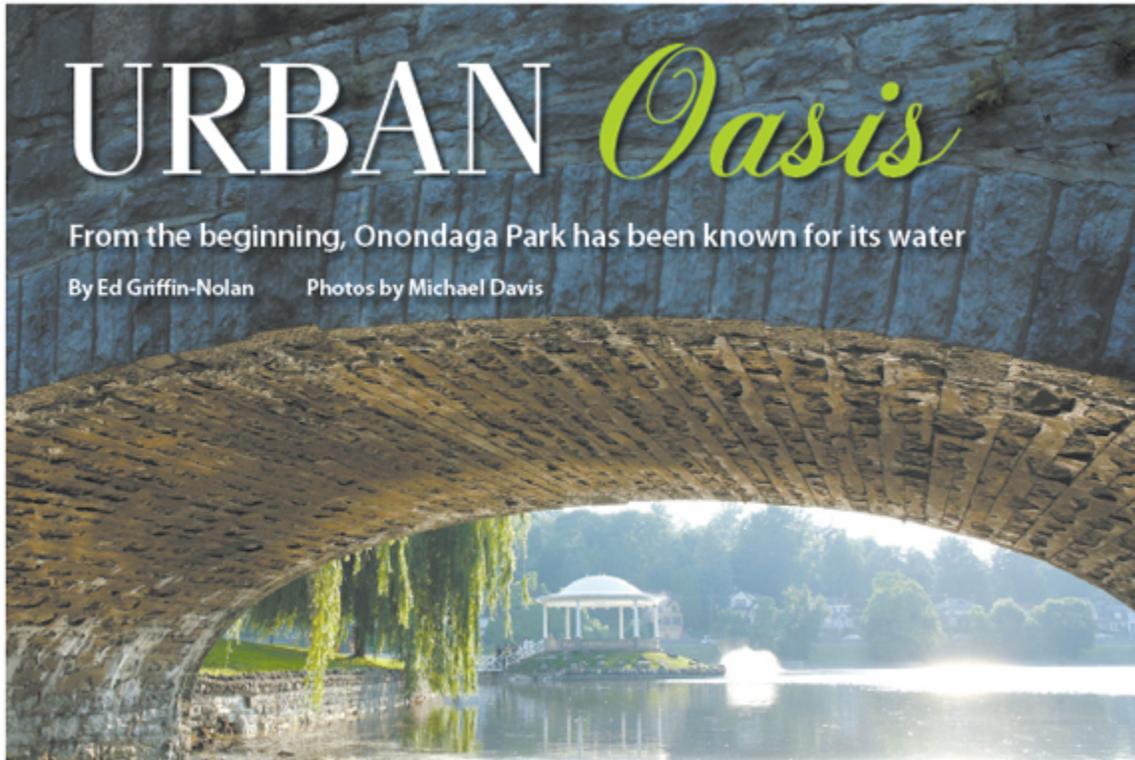


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URBAN OASIS

By Staff

<http://www.syracusenewtimes.com/newyork/article-4357-urban-oasis.html>



On the steamy summer days that bracketed the Fourth of July weekend, there was no better place to enjoy the city than the watery, wooded hillside oasis that is upper Onondaga Park. If the Syracuse parks constitute, in Frederick Law Olmsted's famed concept, a necklace running through an urban landscape, then upper Onondaga Park, perched between the rough and tumble of the South Side and the stately manors of Strathmore, is the emerald in Syracuse's jewel collection.





Like Thornden Park in the Syracuse University area and Schiller Park on the North Side, Onondaga Park defines its neighborhood. It provides neighbors with a place of repose and recreation and affords urban dwellers a meeting place where the ever-changing mix of old timers and new arrivals can get to know, or at least observe, one another at leisure.

Pastoral majesty: Among the many diverse images at Onondaga Park are a bridge (above), joggers in action (right) and Mayor Stephanie Miner holding outdoor office hours (left).

Even within the panoply of very special parks in Syracuse, there is something that sets upper Onondaga apart. It's not just the acres of old oak, maple and hickory in the Olmsted Grove. It's not just the magnificent views of the Carrier Dome and downtown from the knoll on the northeast corner. It's not the playground, or the basketball and tennis courts, which are found in many parks. It's not even the fire barn, which housed an engine company until 1980 and is now awaiting renovations.

It's the water.

It all began with the water. According to Onondaga Historical Association curator of history Dennis Connors, the central feature of the park, Hiawatha Lake, was originally the site of the Wilkinson reservoir, which served as one of the young city's water sources in the 19th century. The city acquired the water company and 80 acres in 1900.

Tranquil settings: Details of the gazebo (right) and the bathhouse (left) are some of the visuals one can find at Onondaga Park.

"The water system was owned by a private company," says Connors, "and they weren't getting the job done. There were issues of water quality, and water pressure for fighting fires. This was before we had the Skaneateles Lake system supplying our water. When the city took over the water company, they had to buy all the land around it, where the pipes ran through.

"The park really came in the back door," continues Connors. "The lake was there and once the streets around it began to be developed into residences, then people began to think of it as a park."

What was a practical response to a thirsty city's needs has become a picturesque marvel. Today the walls of newlyweds' apartments all over Syracuse are covered with wedding day portraits taken inside the gazebo that juts out into Hiawatha Lake. The 15-acre lake and the park have been for decades one of the favorite backdrops for young couples to snap their wedding pictures. The spot is so popular that young lovers (and older lovers, for that matter) are urged to have their photographers contact the city Parks and Recreation Department to schedule their photo op, to avoid premarital conflicts with another corps of bridesmaids and groomsmen.



The Green Mile

Even if you're not getting married, Onondaga Park has something to offer you any day of the year. It has some of the finest tennis courts, eight of them in all, available to the public. During the renovation of Corcoran High School, those courts were used by the Corcoran team to practice.

Every summer it hosts a fishing derby, and in the fall the Onondaga Park Association hosts the Park Run, a 4-mile race that benefits local charities, including Sarah House, a respite home for families of the hospitalized, which is within walking distance of the park. Four years ago the Mountain Goat Run altered its 10-mile course to give thousands of amateur masochists a brief respite by steering them through the park as they make their way from the hills of Strathmore down toward Onondaga Avenue and Salina Street.

Rain or shine, the 67 acres that comprise upper Onondaga Park always offer great places to bike, walk or run. The perimeter road, for those who want to know just how far they are going, is almost 1 mile around. In the morning you can find energetic men and (mostly) women power-walking off a few extra pounds, dedicated runners putting in their miles before work, and retired couples walking hand in hand contemplating the day ahead, or reminiscing about dog walks of yesteryear.

It is a place for power walking—literally. For some reason the streets bordering the park have always attracted their share of movers and shakers. Thirty years ago you may have watched a bright-eyed blonde girl playing with her siblings and cousins. Today the girl who grew up on the edge of the park is now the county executive, but Joanie Mahoney still comes back every Friday night for pizza at the Crossett Street home where her parents live.

If you are up early enough you may find Common Council President Van Robinson and his wife Linda walking their dogs (and moving at a pretty good clip) in a loop starting from their home on Parkway Drive. And if you can commune with the ghosts of mayors past, you may even feel the spirit of the Golden Greek himself, Lee Alexander, who, before becoming a guest of the federal penitentiary system, lived in a stately brick home on the corner of Crossett Street and Summit Avenue.



Then there is the music. For longtime residents, there is only one place to be on Tuesday nights in July—on the slope that forms a natural amphitheater above the gazebo. By 6 p.m. on a summer evening the lawn is covered with blankets and lawn chairs as families settle in for barbecues and picnic dinners. Young parents roll coolers and strollers as teenagers circle the lake on their bikes, waiting for the music to begin.

Then there's the pool. How do they keep that pool gleaming all winter? Hundreds of people cavort, paddle, swim laps (there are six lanes) and frolic in the 50-meter swimming pool at Onondaga, which mirrors a similar watery hole in Thornden, and yet every day in July and August it seems that the park staff keep that water shining like it was just poured from a pitcher at Pastabilities.

The bathhouse, built by funeral director John McCarthy when the lake was still used for boating and swimming, now houses the restrooms and shower rooms for the pool.

Be kind to the lifeguards. When it gets crowded in there, they have as tough a job as you could want on a steamy afternoon, keeping up to 352 bathers safe and happy, and the water free of foreign objects.

For those who don't want to suit up, there is a fountain nearby for the kids to run through and for adults to wet the back of their neck just enough to keep their calm on those noisy summer afternoons.

Just over the hill from the pool, in the direction of West Colvin Street, is the Bissell Wood, also known as the Olmsted grove. It was acquired in a land swap from a family named Olmsted in the early 1900s, completing the current outline of the park, and perhaps along the way giving rise to a persistent urban legend—that Frederic Law Olmsted, the architect of New York's Central Park, actually designed Onondaga and its sister parks. He did not.

"There have been rumors of Olmsted's involvement," says Connors, speaking of the man who invented landscape architecture, "but no indication that he ever did any work on the park. The only connection here with Olmsted is the Geddes farm in Fairmount."

In the 1840s the Geddes farm was, according to Connors, one of the leading farms in New York state. George Geddes was using state-of-the-art cattle breeding technologies at his farm and Olmsted, long before his role in Central Park, contacted Geddes and inquired about the possibility of working with him. Geddes took on the young man as an apprentice and Olmsted came to work in Fairmount for several months in 1846.

"Their connection lasted several years, and had quite an impact on Olmsted," notes Connors. "People think that Frederick Law Olmsted influenced the development of Syracuse, but in fact, Syracuse influenced him. Central New York had a role in educating Frederick Law Olmsted, as opposed to the other way around!"

To schedule the gazebo at Onondaga Park, download an application from the city's website at www.syracuse.ny.us/parks/pdf/WeddingPermitApp.pdf. Reservations are also required for groups wishing to hold picnics or barbecues in the shaded grove above the pool and lakeside. Call Parks and Recreation at 473-4330.