

OVERTON PARK:  
The Evolution of a  
Park Space

Memphis Park Commission  
City of Memphis, Public Construction Office

Prepared for Ritchie Smith Associates  
Overton Park Master Plan

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## OVERTON PARK: THE EVOLUTION OF A PARK SPACE

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## Introduction

The history of Overton Park and the Memphis Park System that follows was prepared at the request of J. Ritchie Smith of J. Ritchie Smith and Associates to guide the preparation of a master planning document to guide the future development and rehabilitation of Overton Park, a historic park resource listed upon the National Register of Historic Places. It is the intention of the author to provide a document that is not simply a review of historical events related to the creation of the park, but also to provide information on the evolution, intended purpose and design elements that form the historical character of Memphis' premier park space. In so doing, the planning process for the park, both at present and in the future, may proceed with care and respect for the elements of park design that make Overton Park worthy of our attention.

A careful effort at landscape planning may retain the various park elements that form its' historic integrity, but it is the management of these elements with respect while adapting the park to face its' growing needs and pressures that will insure its' preservation. Overton Park cannot be used as a "quick-fix" for the location of recreational or cultural facilities simply because it is a large space and serves some of these purposes at present. All public facilities face a breaking point when used carelessly, and in our own history, the Public Promenade set aside by the founders of our city is the prime example of what can easily happen if a public space is employed thoughtlessly. In the case of the Promenade, over two-thirds of its original space dedicated by the city fathers has been lost forever, now thoughtlessly occupied by parking garages and municipal services that compromise its' worth as a public recreational resource.

In the case of Overton Park, the demands upon the available park space may be quickly reaching a point where, without very careful planning and courageous administration, the park will soon face its' breaking point. Every bit of the park that is removed from greenspace for use of the expansion of a cultural institution or for the creation of parking presses the park closer and closer to this point. If we are to avoid "breaking the park", the Park Commission must accept its' ultimate role as stewards of this resource and opt for the preservation of the park space above all other demands. In the near future, it may become necessary for the Commission to make painful decisions that cause the relocation of some of the cultural institutions currently sharing the park space, both for the benefit of the preservation of Overton Park as a park, and for the benefit of the growth and survival of the cultural institution. In so doing, the Commission will not be causing the park to suffer a loss in its' civic function, but will be improving its' function as a park that can face the demands of the public for decades yet to come.

" I am a great believer in the  
aesthetic as applied to cities.  
I consider it as an important  
an element as in a private resi-  
dence, and even more so. The  
city that is attractive in ap-  
pearance has the advantage over  
the city that is not..."

-Judge L. B. Mc Farland  
August 3, 1898

## The Flowering of American Landscape Architecture

The practise of landscape architecture is a relatively new pursuit in the United States, having grown from the avocation of the dilettante in the early 19th century to a fully developed and respected part of the architectural and design fields by century's end. Although no one person can be given the credit for originating landscape architecture in America, the person largely responsible for bringing its' importance to the public' attention was Andrew Jackson Downing ( 1815- 1852 ), noted author of numerous books responsible for setting the principal architectural design trends for much of the 19th century. Though the principal subject of his many books (which sold in the millions of copies each) was devoted to architectural design, he eloquently provided an important argument for the importance of the setting for a structure, while also advocating the need for a public role in the reservation of natural spaces for parks.

In spite of the importance of Downing as an author and trendsetter (and also as a result of it), Downing's greatest contribution lay in his campaign with William Cullen Bryant to establish a major public park for the City of New York-- an effort rewarded by the state legislature in an act passed the year prior to Downing's tragic death. The legislation-- the first of its kind in the nation-- established the precedent of a government's recognition of park projects as a necessary public service. Central Park was the first of the major public parks built under the enabling legislation. It was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (1822-1903) in the 'picturesque' or 'romantic' landscape style favored by Downing, and served to firmly establish Olmsted as the premier landscape architect of his time.

The growth of landscape architecture came about in part as a response to the growth and industrialization of the American city in the 19th century. Public parks were of little importance prior to the Civil War since the undeveloped, open countryside was still nearby. As cities became more densely populated, the remaining areas of natural growth were developed, pushing the open spaces farther and farther away. Nature and natural settings were romanticized as an ideal, far removed from the struggles of the growing smell, smoke and noise of the industrial city. Parks offered a moratorium from these ills while providing a needed social and recreational outlet for young and old. The importance of recreational activities for the well-being of children was just being realized, thus adding further justification for the park advocates.

The success of Central Park in New York provided for the growth of landscape architecture as professional discipline. Major commissions were offered for projects in nearly every city of the Northeast in the decade that followed the Civil War. Most of these were concentrated in the older, densely-developed cities where conditions demanded park development as a pressing need for the public welfare. The 'newer' cities of the Midwest, South and the West soon followed suit, though the urgency of park development was of less-critical concern. To their benefit, the 'newer' cities were much less constrained by the density of urban development which allowed the inexpensive acquisition of larger and more numerous tracts for park development.

By in large, the narrower streets of the European-style cities of the East did not allow for the interconnection of individual parks into an integrated park system. The cities of the Midwest, West and South were still evolving as urban areas, thus allowing for the integration of new ideas into the growing urban plan. With the established leaders of the landscape architectural occupied by major projects in the

East, civic leaders in the west turned to a few of the younger, lesser-known landscape architects to develop a new, more comprehensive approach. With these men came innovative ideas that broadened the scope of landscape architecture beyond that of simple park planning.

George E. Kessler (1862-1923), architect of the Memphis Park and Parkway system, was one of the few in his time who saw the need to integrate landscape architecture and civil engineering into an approach towards order on the larger scale--that of urban planning. Kessler's ideas were first formed in his days as a student in Europe and put in to practise in 1892 with his design for the Kansas City park and parkway system. In this project Kessler implanted a series of parks and public spaces, interconnecting them with the city's residential and commercial areas by a complex overlay of boulevards and parkways. His approach to this task was likely influenced by the pioneering work of H. W. S. Cleveland (1814-1900), who proposed a similar method in an 1873 publication and put it into practise in the design of the Minneapolis park and parkway system of 1883. Both men, in turn, were influenced by the work of Georges Eugene Haussman, who was responsible for the design of the system of parks, plazas and radial boulevards that were overlaid on the ancient Roman city plan of Paris between 1853 and 1870.

The scope of Cleveland's and Kessler's work was what largely separated them from that of the other notable figures in the late-19th century world of landscape architecture. Calvert Vaux, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and Charles Eliot among others were designing parks, smaller park systems and interconnecting parkways (recreational drives contained within a park setting) like Boston's Fenway and Rock Creek Parkway in Washington, D.C. Kessler and Cleveland, however, were concerned with the larger picture-- the design of a city-wide



systems that employed more functional roadways to inter-connect their parks to the larger urban framework. Called boulevards, these roadways were designed as heavily-landscaped, divided corridors with a good deal of access to the main city street network. Parkways, on the other hand, provided little access to the main city plan and were intended more as a linear park. The purpose of a boulevard was to connect one point in the city with another, while providing a pleasing setting for the drive along the way. Residential development was allowed along the right-of-ways, though deep setbacks and landscaping were often required as a buffer. The desirable traits of the boulevards acted to spin off residential and commercial development nearby, thus enhancing the appeal of this approach with the leaders of the newer, developing cities.

Armed with this new approach towards the design of the "City Beautiful", landscape architects like Cleveland and Kessler departed from the traditional role of the their profession and began the approach towards a system of urban planning and design, a profession that would blossom unto itself in the 20th century. In this way, Kessler's plan for the Memphis Park System stands as an important step towards this end, not simply as an organized park planning and development commission.

### Early Park Developments

The history of park development in Memphis prior to 1898 is not a complementary one, in spite of the best efforts of the original town proprietors. The proprietors-- Andrew Jackson, James Winchester and John Overton -- provided four public squares and a long public promenade along the Mississippi River bluff as part of the original town plan of 1819. Public squares like those contained in the Memphis plan were quite common in American town planning by this point in history, so it is not at all unusual to find the squares included here. However, the feature of the public promenade was quite unusual for its' time. The promenade allowed for the development of Memphis' large public landing at the river's edge, later proving to be the major asset in the growth of Memphis as a commercial hub for river transportation. In addition, the promenade served as a recreational resource for picnicing, strolling or watching the river and its traffic roll by. The commercial importance of the promenade was a factor in its' deterioration as a public resource as squatters set up warehouses and river-related businesses or as the city leased off parts of the promenade for other purposes. Still, the fact that the land was still held in public hands did allow for its' rehabilitation in later years, though much depreciated from the proprietors original intention.

While the public squares were available for development as park spaces, they remained largely undeveloped for the majority of the 19th century. Often, the public squares were simply used for the grazing of animals like the public commons of New England a century before. The exception lay at the town's center at Court Square, which was first improved in the 1840s and 1850s. The square was more formally developed in 1876 around the "Hebe" fountain, installed in honor of the nation's Centennial. Even so, the other original town squares remained in an undeveloped state, with little appeal for use as park spaces.

Numerous other attempts to establish major recreational resources met with limited success during the 19th century. Bickford Park in North Memphis was established in the 1850s and remained a viable public space well into the 20th century. Its' remote location from the urban core and the lack of public transportation caused the park to be used more as a neighborhood resource than a city-wide one. Even so, other park-building attempts were much less-successful. Central Park was established in 1868 through the gift of a 100-acre preserve by a private citizen. The park, located just east of the present site of the Mid-South Fairgrounds, was improved with \$15,000 of city funds and was quickly accepted by the public. However, the park fell as another victim of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1873 and its subsequent economic backlash. The city returned the property to its donor in 1874 to relinquish the responsibility and cost of maintenance through its dwindling tax revenue. Estival Park, which lay near the intersection of Vance and East Street, shared a similar fate. It was acquired by the city fathers in the 1880s, and then sold to real estate speculators in the 1890s for the development of house lots.

The scarcity of public parks gave rise in Memphis, as in other cities, to the development of private parks that proved much more successful. Private parks in Memphis were developed by investor groups associated with the various street railway companies, particularly the Memphis Street Railway and the Citizens East End Railway. Montgomery Park was a combination horse-racing track and pleasure grounds that occupied the site of the present fairgrounds. Also known as the New Memphis Jockey Club, Montgomery Park was begun in 1887 and proved highly successful until the prohibition of pari-mutuel betting in 1905. The same was true of the North Memphis Driving Park, where world records were established at its harness track for the mile distance. It, too, faded with the removal of legalized gambling at the track in 1905. Of all of the private parks, East End Park was perhaps the most ap-

preciated. Established by the Citizen's East End Railway Company, the park was designed as a combination amusement park and pleasure ground, complete with rides, games and ample picnic grounds. The park remained a favorite from its beginnings in the 1880s until the late-1920s.

Finally, the most interesting of the city's private parks was Church Park, a six-acre complex developed by Robert R. Church in 1899. Church invested in excess of \$100,000 in the design and construction of the park's facilities and grounds, which included gardens, picnic grounds, a bandstand and the like. Its centerpiece was the 2,000 seat Church Park Auditorium, which served as a primary resource for the social interaction of Memphis' black population. Programs exposed the audience to a wide variety of cultural, political and social activities for several decades. In its own way, Church Park was as impressive as any park resource available to white citizens-- this was especially important, since blacks were not allowed to enjoy the private or public parks of Memphis until the establishment of Douglass Park in 1913-1914.

## Yellow Fever and the Growth of the Progressive Reform

The development of the Memphis Park System and the progressive reform movement that championed its establishment are intrinsically linked to the devastating circumstances that arose from the Yellow Fever epidemics that plagued the city from 1867 to 1879. Unlike the majority of Southern cities, Memphis escaped the ravages of the Civil War in relatively good condition. Its agricultural-based economy suffered little from the effects of the War, and Memphis was able to emerge quickly into the promise of the post-War period. These conditions fostered a certain confidence and optimism that the city would quickly join the ranks of the nation's major economic and population centers. Unfortunately, the promise of the times was cut short by the onset in 1867 of the city's first encounter with Yellow Fever, which brought the city to the brink of collapse by the late 1870s.

The devastation of the Yellow Fever epidemics cannot be understated, as it set the city's economic and social destiny for the next half-century. While the outbreaks of 1867, 1868 and 1873 set the stage for a severe economic downturn and stymied growth, it was the severity of the epidemics of 1878 and 1879 that provided an attitude of total despair that was to last for the ensuing fifteen years. The panic brought about by the severity of the 1878 epidemic of 1878 reduced the city's population by half; eighty per cent of those persons remaining contracted the disease while a quarter of those contracting the disease died. The side effects to the city's economy compounded the tragedy by causing the city to lose its charter, and thereby, its taxing powers.

The response taken by the community was as aggressive as the epidemics were devastating. The response took the form of a radical program to reform the sanitary conditions of Memphis

that also set into motion a series of events that ultimately led to the establishment of the Memphis Park System. The program developed to address the problem of disease began with the retention of Colonel George E. Waring, Jr. to design a thirty-mile long system of gravity-fed sewers which were constructed at a great cost in 1880 and 1881. The establishment of a Board of Public Health and its rudimentary programs was paired with the physical improvements of the sanitary sewer to dramatically effect the health of the Memphis environment-- this, in spite of a lack of understanding of basic germ theory. Waring's system for Memphis was to revolutionize public sanitation throughout the nation and the world, it being the first effective means of reducing the breeding places for the carriers of water-born diseases. In so doing, the system also established a critical link between municipal responsibility for public health and the need for effective urban planning to accomplish this end. It was a concept not lost among the civic leaders of the day, since it caused an awareness of the need for effective control over the urban environment through public works and programs as an assurance of civic improvement.

The recovery of Memphis from the setbacks of the epidemic years was a slow process, compounded by the expense of the construction costs of the Waring system. While the Waring system did accomplish its intended task and brought about a return of public confidence at home and away, the lack of taxing powers by the city left little ability to pay debt service on it or other public improvements. Contributions from the private sector were difficult, especially since many of Memphis' older, monied families had fled the city during its dark hours and had not returned. The void left in their wake was soon filled by the ranks of new sources of private investment that came to the city as its confidence returned. With these new investors came a flood of new ideas and demands upon the economic and social status quo. Entrepreneurs took up the slack for the lack of public monies to fund municipal im-

provements, giving rise to private ventures like the Artesian Water Company, Memphis Light and Power, the Memphis Street Railroad and the Memphis Gas Company-- all considered the most basic of public services today.

In spite of the contribution by the private sector to the improvement of Memphis, the public sector continued to lag behind other cities of similar size in the provision of improvements for the public welfare. The return of home rule and taxing powers to Memphis in 1891, coupled with the construction of the "Great Bridge" (Frisco Railroad Bridge) in 1892 provided a great stimulus to the local economy, but the public investment in improvements continued to lag far behind. The impatience of the public for these improvements was led by the ranks of the 'new' entrepreneurs, who had begun to assemble great political clout by the mid-1890s. The urge to reform the stymied direction of the city and its role in funding progressive public improvements drew great public appeal. In 1897, the demand for progressive reform emerged in the form of the 'Greater Memphis Movement' to enter a political ticket in the municipal elections of that year.



## The Agenda of the Greater Memphis Movement

Public interest in the development of park facilities coincided with the growth of the larger agenda of the progressive reform movement. By the mid-1890s, the progressives had formulated a well thought-out plan for Memphis which carefully dovetailed the drive for city expansion, parks development, public health, sanitation and expansion of public schools in the mayoral race of 1897. John J. Williams was selected to lead the progressive ticket, based upon his experience as a multiple-term county trustee. Backed by the city's newspapers, especially the Memphis News-Scimitar, and with the support of black voters led by Robert R. Church, the progressive ticket swept the election of Williams over the incumbent Lucas Clapp. With Williams as Mayor, the election also brought Hu L. Brinkley and H.H. Little to the city's Legislative Council to provide a progressive majority to that body.

Williams assumed his term as Mayor of the City of Memphis in January of 1898. Once installed, Williams and the other leaders of the Greater Memphis Movement moved with remarkable speed to carry out the progressive agenda set during the election. A number of legislative actions were initiated on both the state and local level to enable the aggressive plan. Though Williams' fourth term as Mayor was marred by scandal, the accomplishments of his six-year tenure were nothing short of remarkable:

1. Proposed and won state legislation to establish  
Park Commissions within Tennessee- 1898, 1899
2. Carried out Annexation of the land within the  
Parkways- 1899



3. Began extension of streets and sanitary sewers into the newly incorporated area- 1900
4. Established the Memphis Park Commission- 1900
5. Began comprehensive street paving program- 1900
6. Began purchase and development of public parks- 1901
7. Upgraded and extended the powers of the Memphis Board of Health; campaigned to upgrade public health standards; instituted mandatory small-pox inoculations for public school children- 1901
8. Began purchase of right-of-way for Parkways- 1902 (construction delayed until 1904 due to lawsuit)
9. Purchased the privately-owned Artesian Water Company, extended water lines into annexed area- 1903
10. Began planning for construction of expanded city school system- 1903

The reform program carried out by the Williams Administration dramatically reshaped the size and appearance of the city of Memphis, preparing it for the dramatic growth and demands that faced the city in the early decades of the 20th century. The monetary costs of these efforts was staggering; a fact that was criticized at the time and in retrospect by contemporary historians. It was, after all, a huge investment for a city whose population only numbered 100,000. However, it

must also be remembered that it was these very steps that provided a period of great prosperity in the next few years. Development within the annexed area began immediately and escalated rapidly in the ensuing decade. With this, impressive new sources of tax revenues were derived to offset the costs of the reformers programs. Additionally, the renewed appearance and confidence in the city's abilities encouraged the rapid investment in new industries, spurring further economic development, population growth and new tax revenues. Momentum generated by the far-sighted interests and programs of the 'Greater Memphis Movement' lasted for better than thirty years; the milestones set in place continue to be appreciated and employed for the city's benefit to this day.

## The Genesis of a Modern Park System

In spite of the unfortunate history of the public park in Memphis during the 19th century, the acceptance of parks as a critical municipal concern by the Williams administration quickly reversed previous shortcomings. The origin of this aspect of the Greater Memphis Movement agenda can certainly be derived from current national and international trends in favor of parks, but its importance as an issue of local concern can be traced to the vision and tenacity of one man-- Judge Louis B. Mc Farland(1843-1910).

The spark of Mc Farland's interest in municipal parks development is not exactly known, though it is likely that his interest in the subject began during his travels at home and abroad in the 1870s and 1880s. His role as the leading light of the local parks movement emerged on December 29, 1889, when he penned a letter to the editors of the Memphis Appeal advocating the adoption of parks development by the mayoral candidates of that year. Though his plea fell upon deaf ears, the letter by Mc Farland remains as an eloquent statement-- both for its position of the municipal responsibility for park development and for its foreshadowing of the progressive reforms that came to the forefront in the municipal election nine years later. A copy of Mc Farland's letter is included in the appendix of this report.

While Mc Farland's original proposals for park development centered on the redevelopment of the city's riverfront promenade and the development of a park on the site of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad yards at Court and Marshall, the scope of his appeal broadened with the addition of ideas and refinements provided by the other strategists of the Greater Memphis Movement. When coupled with the move for annexation of the area contained within George Kessler's Parkways, the larger purpose

neatly dovetailed the progressive agenda into a single package. In so doing, the progressives gelled many of the city's disparate special interests into a unique agenda unlike any other in the city's history before or since. In return for Mc Farland's unwaivering interest and support in providing the parks portion of the progressive platform, he was selected by Mayor Williams to chair the first term of the Memphis Park Commission when it convened in 1900.

Once established in power by their public mandate, the Williams administration ticked off the progressive plan for Memphis step by step. The primary element of the plan began with the move to expand the city's boundaries to absorb communities like Madison Heights and Idlewild. The expansion, which roughly corresponded to the boundaries of the present Parkways, was completed in 1899 after clearing some minor political and legal hurdles. It was a bold move for a city whose numbers already exceeded 100,000, since it increased the city's taxable area by over four hundred percent-- an annexation of over twelve square miles of territory. When completed, the new boundaries were roughly enclosed by Trigg Avenue on the south, Cooper on the east and Vollentine on the north. In spite of the strong and vocal opposition heard here and in Nashville, the progressives had taken the first important step to lead Memphis into the twentieth century.

The issue of annexation settled, Williams and his supporters took on the parks and sanitation issues with equal speed. Early in William's first term, he appointed a Park Committee from among the members of the city's Legislative Council to tackle the parks issue. Unfortunately, the committee was forced into inaction due to the lack of appropriate state enabling legislation to regulate the powers of municipal park commissions. The city government engaged the support of the county's legislative delegation to press for the needed public act in Nashville, and then sought out expert guidance to frame the legislation at the

state and local levels.

In 1890, Hu Brinkley had employed the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted & Co. for a project in Nashville. Through his influence, the City of Memphis was able to convince John C. Olmsted of the firm of the Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts for the guidance that the city needed in framing its park legislation and commission structure. The Olmsted Brothers-- successors to the firm of the elder Olmsted, who had retired from practise in 1898, were still considered the leading landscape architectural firm in the country. The firm had, in its' many years, built an international reputation for the design of parks and parks systems. Notable examples of the firm's work include Central Park in New York, Prospect Park in Brooklyn and the magnificent grounds of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago from 1892-93.

Brinkley was able to arrange for the visit of John C. Olmsted through correspondance which noted that "our city contemplates laying out a system of parks and drives." on October 15, 1898. Olmsted's visit to the city on the 10th and 11th of November in 1898 was employed as a means of cultivating public support for state enabling legislation being planned in Memphis and Nashville. Mayor Williams personally escorted Olmsted about the city, leading him to Lea Woods, the site of what was to become Riverside Park, the roadways thought of for the parkways, and other existing and potential park sites. It is not surprising, then, that Olmsted demonstrated a particular interest in a "dense area along Riverside (Cow Island) Road and Lee's Woods(sic)" along the Raleigh Road when questioned at a press conference on the evening of November 10th. The concurrence with the park plans of the progressives worked to achieve its' objective; the resounding support of the press and the public pushed the park planning to the forefront of the public agenda.

Correspondence between the Olmsted Brothers firm and the city continued for nearly three years as the landscape architects negotiated to secure the commission for the design of the Memphis park system as the city moved to secure the necessary legislation and funding for the project. During this time, the firm was also consulted for opinions and recommendations of pertinent examples of legislation, local ordinances, park commissions' structures and other technical matters, all at no fee being charged to the city. While the Brothers ultimately did not gain financially from the Memphis project, their experience and expertise did provide the city with a major foundation for the establishment of its park commission. The first major hurdle in this effort was cleared on March 27, 1899 with the passage of "An Act to Provide for the Creation and Organization and Definition of Powers of Park Commissions..." by the state legislature, which was signed into law four days later.

### The Establishment of the Memphis Park Commission

Formal organization of the Memphis Park Commission began on July 6, 1900 with the appointment of Judge Louis B. Mc Farland, Colonel Robert Galloway and John R. Godwin as interim commissioners by Mayor Williams. The summer months of that year were spent in preparation of information and analysis for a detailed report to the city's Legislative Council on the park acquisition and development, estimates for their costs and the means to pay for the improvements. It was not until November 6, 1900 that the Commission first met in formal session, electing Judge Mc Farland, the elder statesman of the city's park movement, as the Commission's first Chairman.

The new Commission set about its tasks with great speed, armed with the determination to use their newly acquired powers of eminent domain as set forth by the legislature. The report to the Legislative Council by the Commissioners was warmly received, and authorization was given to negotiate options on the Riverside and Lea Woods tracts on November 30, 1900.

The Commission was able to close the sale of Lea Woods on January 26, 1901, though the development of the property had to await the sale of \$250,000 in city bonds to pay for the land and to begin its development. The sale of the bonds was finalized on October 29, 1901, allowing the Park Commissioners to enter an immediate suit against the many reluctant landowners to acquire the Riverside Park tract through eminent domain. The suit was dropped a day later as a settlement was reached with each of the property owners.

Its funding and major park purchases behind it, the Commission moved to the selection of a landscape architect to guide



the further planning of the park system and to guide the development of each of the park sites. Invitations to submit proposals may have been sent to a number of firms in the country, but only two were read before the Commission at its November 7, 1901 meeting-- the first from the Olmsted Brothers firm; the second from the little-known landscape architect, George Edward Kessler of Kansas City, Missouri. A visitor to the meeting, Robert Brinkley, brought it to the Commissioners' attention that Kessler was by coincidence visiting in the city on that day, and would be available to discuss the park system project. The Commission adjourned after extending its invitation for Kessler's appearance before the Commission's meeting the next day.

In spite of the endorsement by Robert Brinkley on his behalf, Kessler's presentation to the Commissioners must have been impressive, for "after extended consultation and negotiation with him (Kessler), on motion of Mr. Robert Galloway, Geo. E. Kessler was employed as Landscape Architect to the Commission for the term of three [3] years beginning on the 16th day of November, 1901". He was charged in his contract to provide "complete maps, plans & drawings of Several Parks, including complete preliminary and final grading and planting plans for all walls bridges terraces walks drives and buildings of every character and also plan for such boulevards and drives connecting said Parks as the Commission may require...".

While the selection of Kessler as the Landscape Architect of the Memphis park system was likely made purely on economic grounds, there may have been extenuating circumstances that also contributed to this end. Based on the limited information available, the bid of the Olmsted Brothers for the Memphis was made at \$17,000, and contained no reference to the "driveways" that the progressives desired. Kessler's bid, on the other hand, was received at \$9,000. Both bids concerned services to be rendered over a three-year period, though the Olmsteds also required the



services of a local architect to oversee the project in their absence. Kessler offered to oversee the project in person on an "as need" basis. The key difference between the two, however, may have been Kessler's experience in dealing with the issue of "drive-way" or "boulevards". Boulevards were nearly Kessler's trademark from his ambitious work in Kansas City; in Memphis, it was the progressive movement's key to uniting the city in a massive, planned period of urban development and expansion.

George Edward Kessler (1862-1923)

George E. Kessler, landscape architect and city planner, was born in Frankenhause, Germany on July 16, 1862 to Edward and Antoine Kessler. His father was a successful merchant who moved his family to Hoboken, New Jersey in 1865, and later to Dallas, Texas in ca. 1873. The younger Kessler demonstrated an early appreciation for gardening, and was taken back to Germany by his mother in 1878 to attend the school of landscape architecture at Weimar. There, Kessler studied botany, forestry and design for several terms before taking up more intensive studies at the Charlottenburg Polytechnicum. He then taking on a degree in civil engineering at the University of Jena.

After completing his studies Kessler returned to the United States and began his career in 1882 as the landscape architect for Merriam Park, a recreational park developed by the Kansas City, Fort Scott and Memphis Railroad. He was also asked to apply his knowledge of botany to develop a tree farm for the railroad to produce lumber for railroad ties. Both ventures proved highly successful and profitable, thus securing the attention of potential patrons in Kansas City. His work eventually brought him to the attention of William R. Nelson, owner of the Kansas City Star and the city's leading park advocate, who was able to catapult Kessler into the role of the city's landscape architect for its' new park commission. Kessler worked with the city and Nelson to define and establish the commission, and was formally named its' secretary and landscape architect in 1892.

Kessler's aggressive system of boulevards and parks began to transform the rough and tumble appearance of Kansas City by overlaying the system upon the existing street plan. The approach provided the city with an innovative network that eased traffic flow, increased property taxes, spurred residential and commer-

cial development and transformed the city's rough image. His work to establish and develop this massive park and boulevard network is still recognized as one of the most innovative and beautiful systems of its' type in the nation.

Kessler's successful approach to the development of the Kansas City park system brought his name to the attention of Robert Brinkley and the Park Commissioners in Memphis. Even though his services were eagerly sought by the Memphis group, it was only the fourth major commission to be tackled by Kessler since beginning his private practice.

The appointment of George Kessler as the landscape architect for the Memphis park system must have received considerable attention in the trade journals of the day, especially since he was able to win his selection over the venerable Olmsted Brothers. His reputation began to steamroll with the Memphis work. The planners of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition retained Kessler to design the fairgrounds between 1902 and 1904, thus providing Kessler with his first true national exposure. Following the Exposition, Kessler was afforded the unique opportunity to return the grounds to a park setting after the close of the event. The area of the Exposition is now known as Forest Park.

Kessler established a branch office in St. Louis during his work on the Exposition grounds, and then moved permanently to the city in 1910 while retaining his position as landscape architect for Kansas City. By this time, Kessler was being sought out far and wide for his expertise in the development of park systems, eventually working on the design of nineteen such systems by the end of his life. In addition to Memphis and Kansas City, Kessler was also responsible for the park and boulevard systems of Dallas, Denver, Cincinnati, Syracuse and Salt Lake City.

Kessler's integrated planning approach was also well-adapted

for the design of smaller systems-- namely colleges and university campuses. Miami University of Ohio, Missouri State University and even the Baptist College of Shanghai, China are credited to Kessler's talents.

Kessler's abilities to interface the design of parks and transportation systems within the plan of an existing city lead to a natural involvement in the area of city planning-- a fledgling field of expertise even during the first decade of the 20th century. Kessler was selected as the city planning consultant for six cities during his career, including Dallas, Kansas City, Oklahoma City and Mexico City. His most notable effort in this field occurred in his work with the firm of Hare and Hare in the design of the new city of Longview, Washington. Longview is considered by most historians of city planning and engineering as being one of the milestones of the profession due to its creation of a large-scale urban environment entirely from scratch.

Three other major projects to Kessler's credit were his design work on the Great Park Avenue Development project in New York; his design of Bronx Park as part of the Bronx River Parkway project, and for his innovative approach to the design of the Palisades Park along the Hudson River bluff in New York City-- a design that shares a kindred spirit to the design of Riverside Park in Memphis with its' stunning river views.

Kessler's abilities as a city planner and landscape architect were recognized by his peers as an established national leader in these fields. Consequently, Kessler was chosen to serve on numerous professional boards and commissions. Most notable among these were his selection by his peers to guide three national professional associations, by serving on the executive boards of the American Civic Association, the American Society of Engineering Contractors, and the American Institute of Planners--

for which he was also a charter member with the likes of Harland Bartholomew and John Nolen Olmsted.

At the height of his career after recently completing his final design work on the Longview, Washington project, Kessler died while on a Midwestern business trip in Indianapolis, Indiana on March 19, 1923.

## The Design of the Memphis Park and Parkway System

George Kessler's plan for the Memphis park and parkway system unfolded slowly from the conceptual ideas first garnered in consultation with the Park Commissioners in their meeting of November 8, 1901. Unfortunately, the surviving public record offers no clue of whether Kessler offered an actual proposed plan at this time, or whether he simply used materials from his work in Kansas City in support for his ideas for Memphis. It is known, though that Mayor Williams and the Commissioners already possessed a firm concept for what they wished from Kessler. Kessler's ideas merely acted as icing on the cake. His presentation to the Commissioners fell on welcome ears, perhaps gelling the concepts for the park system first envisioned by Mc Farland and the other members of the Greater Memphis Movement. In so doing, Kessler did not create his plan from a vacuum, but refined and solidified a variety of ideas by adding a few of his own. The result was a unified plan that brought together the old city and the new into focus.

Kessler's plan for the Memphis system provided a means for the orderly development of the area annexed by the city in 1890. This area was not entirely undeveloped, but did contain small clusters of development that were widely dispersed through the area. Once Kessler's efforts were underway, the area exploded with residential development at an unprecedented pace-- a pace that would not slow for thirty years or more.

Kessler's approach to the development of the Memphis system proceeded in a similar way to that of his work in Kansas City-- he began with a group of parks spread widely over the city, and interconnected some of them with a parkway to turn the parks into destination points. Other parkways would be added later to connect the remaining parks with the residential developments that had



occurred since the development of the original parkway. In the example of Kansas City, more than forty years were required to develop their system within the city limits of 1892-- and the work was done piece by piece as the funding and the demand arose. The same was intended for Memphis, though the effort wilted in the mid-teens before the system could reach its full potential.

In Memphis, Kessler's objectives were four-fold: 1) to redevelop the five extant city parks and promenade; 2) to develop a series of small, new parks in the previously developed area of the city; 3) to develop two major recreational parks in the under-developed areas of the city and its' vicinity; and, 4) to develop transportation corridors to connect the larger parks and to spur development in the annexed area of 1899. When he was selected to accomplish this task, the only parts of this large puzzle that were in place were the extant city parks and promenade, and the as yet unpaid contract for the purchase of Lea Woods.

With the issue of the landscape architect resolved and their funding assured, the Park Commission was able to quickly resolve the purchase of and develop their holdings. Acquisition of Overton Park was resolved through a single payment to Overton Lea, and the issue of Riverside was completed before the close of 1901. The Commission received an unexpected boost with the donation of a large tract by John Gaston (1828-1912) that adjoined his home. The Park would become known as Gaston Park, and it was the first of the Memphis parks to receive Kessler's attention at the beginning of 1902.

General plans for the development of Riverside and Overton Parks were prepared by Kessler and ready for implementation by the late winter of 1902. Grading of the roadways and shaping of the general topography for both was underway by May of 1902. Other improvements, such as the main pavilion, were authorized in the month of May and begun immediately. No specific reference to the presentation of a formal plan for the parks and parkway system

is recorded in the minutes of the Park Commission's meetings, but it is believed that the plan was completed by July 25, 1902, when the Commission authorized the acquisition of property "for a system of Parkways and Boulevards...". A final plan for the parkways was proposed by Kessler on December 3, 1902 and accepted on December 11, 1903.

No original rendering of Kessler's comprehensive plan is known to exist, though a sketch of such was published in its' proposed form in the Memphis Evening Scimitar of January 1, 1902. In spite of minor exceptions, the sketch is remarkably accurate.

The initial plan for the system connected Riverside Park, south of the city limits, with Overton Park, which straddled the eastern central city limit by means of a five-and-one-half mile parkway. The parkway was planned to be built by redeveloping the existing right-of-ways of Kerr and Trigg Avenues, then proceeding with a new route running north north-northeast across the rough grid-pattern of streets to Overton Park (the route of the East and South Parkways was established along its existing route in Kessler's final plan, set at the end of 1903). The parkways was designed to be a divided, tree-lined route with a minimum width of 150 feet. The median was designed with a meandering path at its center, intended for the use of pedestrians and those on bicycles or horseback. Traces of these paths are still visible on East Parkway South, South Parkway East, and South Parkway, and now comprise portions of the 'Flowering Tree Trail' established by the City Beautiful Commission. North Parkway was established between Manassas and the Louisville and Northern Railroad viaduct in 1904. It was known for a short while as the "Speedway". North Parkway was extended to Front Street (if in name only) in the 1930s.

Well within the arc of the parkway in Kessler's original



plan lay the smaller parks, both old and new-- Court Square, Market Square and Auction Square from the original city plan; Bickford Park from the ca. 1850s; and the new parks, Forrest Park, Winchester Park, Confederate Park and Gaston Park. All lay within the boundaries of the old city with the exception of Gaston Park.

Kessler's parks emerged from his drawing board with an individual flavor or purpose given to each. Confederate Park was rehabilitated from the site of the dilapidated Confederate Hall in ca. 1907. The topography of the site was raised to the level of Front Street, and shaded promenade was created to provide a spectacular overlook of the Mississippi River, ornamented with vintage cannons pointed towards the river on the western edge. It was intended as a semi-formal setting for sitting or strolling, with the obvious focus on the overlook of the river. Court Square was redesigned in a similar way, with its focus at the "Hebe" fountain, yet its radial walks belied the understanding that it was a park to be passed through by the pedestrian walking from one part of downtown to another. It also served as a gathering place around its bandstand, which often featured band concerts during the day and evening hours of the spring and summer months.

Auction, Market and Bickford Parks were designed to serve the residential areas which surround them. Plenty of simple open-space was provided in each for passive recreational activities such as picnicing and "pick-up" games of football or baseball. Active recreational games played on formal playing fields were left for the larger parks. Winchester Park was created by rehabilitating the ancient Winchester Cemetery which had stood neglected for the better part of a half-century. It, too, was designed to serve the immediate neighborhood that surrounds it. Its design was similar to the other neighborhood parks, though its irregular site lent its design to more of an informal treatment with many more trees.

Forrest Park on the other hand is a seemingly odd mixture of formal and informal elements, necessitated by the circumstances of its' development. The name for the park was first selected by the Park Commission on December 28, 1901 to honor General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Kessler was empowered by the Commission to provide a plan for the park in November of 1902, which emerged as an informal plan of open space on the south and dense tree cover on the north. A small ornamental pond was located in the southwestern portion of the park to complete the informal air of the space. The formal part of the existing plan did not emerge until 1904 when the Forrest Monument Association approached the Commission for permission to erect a statue in the park. Kessler altered his informal plan through the placement of a grid pattern of six walks to create a setting suitable for the setting of a monument. The walks and the statue lent a formal, classical appearance to the southern end of the park, a feature unlike any other of Kessler's park spaces.

In contrast with the smaller parks, Riverside and Overton Parks were provided with dramatic contrasts in terms of design, character and intended uses. Riverside was intended as the great informal, natural park setting, leading to its' commanding view of the Mississippi River. For many years after its' inception, Riverside was a park intended fully for passive recreational uses-- it was meant as a total escape from the noise and bustle of the growing city, its' smoke and smells, its' stress and demands. It was a showplace for the city, but its' prominence was eventually usurped by Overton Park as the shift of the population gradually flowed into the area developing out of the farm lands annexed in 1899.

Overton Park, on the other hand, was a park designed to serve many functions-- or at least it was designed to accept the many functions that the city chose for it to serve. While the park's earliest plan denotes little in the way of Kessler's intentions for the park site and its' future, it is quite obvious that the park was intended to grow in terms of its function to the community. This had been Kessler's hallmark of his Kansas City park work, it is doubtful that he would have changed his successful formula in designing the Memphis work. However, there are no precedents within the Kansas City plans that reflect the combination of park uses that developed in Overton Park-- the mix of cultural facilities with active and passive recreational activities. This mixture seems to have developed in a unique fashion by the consultation of the landscape architect and the members of the Park Commission. Their model was seemingly that of Fairmont Park in Philadelphia.

On a number of occasions during the early planning for Overton Park, trips by members of the Park Commission and by Kessler were noted to visit Philadelphia and Fairmont Park, largely at the urging of Colonel Robert Galloway. The Philadelphia park had been well-established for decades, having served as the site for the United States Centennial Exposition of 1876.

Fairmont Park was different from the majority of American urban parks, containing as it did not only fine expanses of wooded and open spaces, but also a number of the cities cultural institutions-- the Philadelphia Zoological Society, the Museum of Arts, the Philadelphia Arboretum and others. It is both an educational and recreational space--much in the same way as that which developed over numerous years in Overton Park.

### Overton Park

Compared to the other parts of Kessler's park plan, it was Overton Park that emerged as the more heavily-developed and visited of the city parks. Unlike Riverside, which was almost completely covered with forest, and unlike Auction Square, which hardly had a tree at all, Overton Park was designed to provide nearly an equal balance of open space to that of forested space. The desirability of the Overton Lea tract along Poplar Avenue and Tresvant Street as a site for a public park had been recognized for many years, long before its "discovery" by John Olmsted in 1898. Its acquisition was considered a top priority by the Park Commission due to its single ownership and "by reason of its location, geographically and with reference to means of ready access, its' topography fitting it specifically for landscape engineering, and its' growth of natural forrest (sic) trees...", as the Commission reported in its proposal to the Legislative Council on November 27, 1900.

Lea Woods, as the tract was known, had been a favorite picnic spot for Memphians in the latter decades of the 19th century. It was owned by Overton Lea of Nashville, and had been the site of the Lea family farm for many years. The property was bisected by the trolley line of the Raleigh Springs Railroad and by a portion of Cooper Avenue. The part of the tract lying west of Cooper was mostly open meadowland; the part east of Cooper was largely made up of a thick stand of virgin hardwood forest.

The Park Commission met with some minor difficulties in their negotiations with Overton Lea, who refused to sell the entire tract that the Commission desired. An option was taken on the 175 acre portion to the west of Cooper, even though it was not

considered adequate for the type of park envisioned by the Commission. The Commission was able to convince Lea to offer an option on the remaining eastern tract after using gentle persuasion bolstered with an explanation of the Commission's condemnation powers. The sale of the land was agreed upon on February 1, 1901, and paid for in the amount of \$110,000 on November 14, 1901.

Originally dubbed "East End Park" or simply "East Park" by the Commissioners, the park was renamed "Overton Park" to honor the Overton Family, and particularly John Overton, for their contributions to the history and development of the City of Memphis. The change in name ended the confusion of Overton Park with East End Park, a privately owned amusement park located near the intersection of Madison Avenue and Tucker Street.

Kessler's plan for the early development of the landscaping, drives and building improvements must have been approved by May of 1902 when the Commissioners voted to expend \$7500 for "improvements on East End Park", not to include the cost of the roadways and related elements. The Main Pavilion was built from this fund and was completed in August of 1902; the drives, bridges and sodding were mainly completed by the end of the same year.

The plan for Overton Park emerged as a significant example of the "picturesque" or "natural" style of landscape design in the tradition of Andrew Jackson Downing, Calvert Vaux, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and others-- as such, it holds a kinship as a design with Central Park in New York City and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York. The similarities with the milestones of landscape architecture lie in the system of irregular, curvilinear walks and drives and the interest in showcasing the irregular



beauties of nature within a setting usable by man. In the case of Overton Park, the system of walks and drives was carefully woven through the dense forest and rolling green spaces within this rather simple rectangular tract.

What sets Overton Park apart from the other well-known municipal parks of this type was: 1) the availability and retention of large, undeveloped areas of dense tree-growth; 2) the relatively low percentage of open space contained within the park tract; and, 3) the definition of the park as a multi-purpose natural space containing both active recreational, passive recreational and civic uses within the same facility (indeed, these uses are all worked into the limited open space available for use).

To a much lesser degree, many of the factors mentioned above may be found in other great municipal parks established during this period, but none contain the predominate mass of forest found at Overton Park. The protection of this forest while adapting the tract for park purposes was Kessler's greatest challenge. His development plan achieved this task with minimal disturbance by placing built improvements far away from the forest. A system of drives, walks and bridle paths was carefully installed in the forest to display it simply for the appreciation of its' rugged beauty. The drives did not necessarily lead to any one feature of the park as they pass through the forest, rather, they simply make circuitous routes that take maximum advantage of the isolation and natural beauty.

Kessler's justification for his approach to the design of Overton Park was stated simply:

"In Overton Park you have saved the other chief characteristic of this region by preserving in the forest conditions the virgin forest upon that property. Nowhere in the United States, except in the Pacific Northwest, will you find tree growth as luxuriant as in the Western Tennessee and Eastern Arkansas forests, and in the two hundred acres of virgin forest in Overton Park you have a property which, as a heritage to the public for the enjoyment of nature, equals in value the cost of the entire park system to the present time."

-George E. Kessler, 1911

Intrusions to the park space such as the right-of-way of Cooper Avenue and the old Lea farm site were removed and then folded back into the terrain. Undesirable open spaces or "bald spots" within the forest were filled with hardwood plantings to reclaim the forest appearance. Key intersections of the roadways within the forest were enhanced with ornamental plantings of shrubs and trees to contrast with the hardwoods of the site.

The park's open spaces are concentrated in two areas along the western and southern sides of the Lea tract, the survivors of pastures and farm lands from the farming activity of the previous owners. Kessler relieved these open expanses by placing small clusters of trees to compress the vista across the space, revealing a glimpse of the continuation of the greensward beyond. In this way, Kessler was able to create small "pockets" of open space that afforded a more intimate sense for each area. Some of these "pocket" spaces were developed later as the sites for many of the memorials and public institutions for the park, such as the Brooks Museum and the Higbee Memorial.

The park's center of activity was the Main Pavilion, which stood from 1902 to ca. 1939 on the eastern edge of the existing Formal Garden. The Pavilion served as a public gathering place and rest station that also featured a second-story observation tower overlooking the playing fields to the east. Activity flowed around and through the Pavilion to the active park areas such as the baseball field and playground or the passive areas such as the small lake and the Formal garden. The Pavilion also served as the center of many major sight lines within the park, especially from its major "entrances" in the early years-- the drives into the park from Poplar Avenue, and the station building of the Raleigh Springs trolley line.

Development of the various park facilities continued to enhance the role of the Pavilion as the Park's center until the building of the Shell in 1936. The demolition of the Pavilion in ca. 1939 left the park without its' focus, a problem that continues today.

#### The Development of Overton Park: 1900 - Present

The development of Overton Park and its' history of use by the public has undergone a number of periods of ebb and flow as affected by local and national trends. In sum, by decade, the park has developed as follows:

##### 1900-1910

The first decade of the 20th century witnessed the establishment of the park and its' basic infrastructure improvements of walks, drives bridges and landscaping features. The park facilities developed at this time included the construction of the main pavilion, the picnic pavilion, the formal gardens, main-



tenance facilities and the two small lakes. The park's first institution, the Memphis Zoo, was begun in 1906 and developed rapidly from its' tentative origin. Monuments, such as the Higbee and Conway Memorials were donated and developed carefully to enhance the landscape design elements. Recreational facilities-- particularly the baseball fields and the golf links (fore-runner of the existing course) were established to round-out the multi-dimensional use of the park. Major planting programs were undertaken to establish tree growth in the bare parts of the forest and the open space, while a variety of ornamental trees and shrubs were planted to decorate the various features of the park.

#### 1910-1920

The decade of the teens saw the park begin to fill out to its' intended appearance as the plantings became well-established. Planting programs were continued to landscape specific components rather than general areas-- such as the golf course, which was formally established at this time. The playground and the Duke Bowers wading pool were established as additions to the active facilities of the park. The Zoo saw the establishment of its first permanent structures and continued to grow in the hearts of Memphians especially after the establishment of the Memphis Zoological Society in 1910. The decade also saw the establishment of the Memphis-Brooks Museum of Art in 1916, which helped to reinforce the cultural and educational aspect of the park's multi-dimensional purpose. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the park's development at this time was the rehabilitation of the small lake into the Japanese Garden in ca. 1914. While strictly ornamental, the garden served to familiarize the public with the mystique of the Orient, a fascination that continues to the present. The last major occurrence of note was the total replacement of the wooden "rustic" style bridges originally built for the park with some of the stone ones still in use. The reconstruction was made necessary by the influx of the automobile as the pr

pleasure vehicle to ply the ways of the park and the need to adjust the bridges to carry the greater load.

### 1920-1930

The third decade of the 20th century brought little change to the physical aspects of Overton Park as a sense of maturity settled over the grounds. For the most part, the park and its' development had reached a sense of equilibrium with the public and the city fathers, thus directing park funds to other areas and projects. The use of the park by the public continued strong, but the care and quality of the park's design caused little momentum for the development of additional facilities. The golf course was fortunate to receive its' clubhouse at the gift of Abe Goodman, replacing an earlier structure too cramped to serve its purpose. The "Doughboy" monument was dedicated in 1926 as the park's first true piece of public statuary, and it remains today as one of the most endeared pieces of public statuary existing in Memphis. The Zoo received a much-needed revival in 1923 with the reincorporation of the Memphis Zoological Society after an unfortunate lapse of several years, leading to a renewed growth in its' facilities and exhibits. The Brooks Museum also prospered when designated as the home of the Southern Art League. The association brought exhibits of contemporary artists to the facility along with traveling exhibits from larger museums across the country.

### 1930-1940

The onset of the Great Depression brought both fortune and tragedy to Overton Park. While the programs of the New Deal were able to provide new facilities and new life to the park, the decade also brought an unfortunate end to earlier parts of the park facilities. A freak storm in 1936 was responsible for leveling the Conway Memorial and severely damaging the main pavilion, which

required demolition a few years later. This loss subtly altered the focal point of Kessler's park plan. In its place, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded the construction of another cultural facility, the Overton Park Shell (now known as the Wallenburg Shell), built for the use of the Memphis Open Air Theater (MOAT). The Shell quickly became a favorite for Memphians seeking an inexpensive evening's entertainment during the warm months of the year. The WPA was also responsible for the restructuring of the site plan for the Zoo through the funding of construction of new animal exhibits throughout the facility. Damage to the plant materials by the 1936 storm was repaired by installing new plantings throughout the park. This is the last known period of work on the park's plant materials, many of which have well-exceeded their prime today. Another subtle change was the removal of the Raleigh Springs trolley station and its' replacement with simple covered platforms remaining today. The change was brought about by the replacement of the city's street railway with motorized buses. Consequently, the "entrance" to the park by way of the trolley line was ended, thereby shifting the entire burden to the Poplar Avenue entrances.

#### 1940-1950

Development projects in Overton Park ground to a halt with the onset of World War Two. The emotion stirred by the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 vented itself on the Japanese Garden, which was ransacked by vandals within days after the tragedy. The park served as a public stage for war bond rallies and scrap metal drives through out the war era. No other development activities of any consequence occurred during this decade.

### 1950-1960

The major development in Overton Park during the 1950s was the establishment in 1959 of the Memphis Academy of Art (now Memphis College of Art) on the site of the Japanese Gardens. The Academy was the fourth and last of the park's institutions, and its construction helped to reinforce the role of Overton Park as the cultural center of Memphis, a role that remains today. Because of the construction of the Academy, the Higbee Memorial was removed to its present site. The first addition to the Brooks Museum was also constructed at this time, completed in the summer of 1955. The park's appearance was also enhanced through the construction in 1955 of the Poplar/Tucker Street entrance gate, the placement of the Crump Memorial in 1957, and the donation of the replica of the Statue of Liberty in 1950.

### 1960-1970

The proposal by the U.S. Department of Transportation to construct a direct leg of Interstate 40 through Overton Park posed its' greatest challenge, perhaps the greatest the park will ever face. The interstate highway was proposed for construction along the existing right-of-way first used by the Raleigh Springs trolley line, thus effectively bisecting the park. Citizen reaction to the proposal was strongly sided in opposition, and the issue was lead in opposition by the Citizens to Preserve Overton Park (CPOP). The issue dragged on through the 1970s and in to the 1980s until being settled (of sorts) by a court ruling based upon a technical interpretation of government regulation. Beyond the interstate controversy, the park's institutions flourished. The Memphis Academy of Art required an addition to its' original building in 1967, and the Zoo was enlarged by adding additional facilities late in the decade. More importantly, though, was the full integration of the park that was finally accomplished in the mid-1960s. Previously, the park was not open to blacks save for Thursday afternoons, when blacks

were allowed into Overton Park to visit the Memphis Zoo and Aquarium. The only other park facilities available to blacks for most of the 20th century were Church Park on Beale Street and Douglass Park, which was specifically developed for use by blacks in 1914.

#### 1970- Present

Since the onset of the 1970s, the park has begun to show its' age as the plantings moved well into or beyond their maturity and the facilities began to strain from over-taxation by park users. Recreational facilities for the park were expanded to suit a more active type of user, including the addition of extra baseball diamonds, expanded playground facilities, the establishment of jogging courses along the forest trails. Maintenance costs and liability questions resulted in the draining of Rainbow Lake, now awaiting a renewed purpose and design. The Memphis Zoo upgraded and expanded its facilities to include new breeding and rehabilitation areas. The Brooks Museum gained another addition in 1973, and the Memphis Academy of Arts expanded for a third time to better suit its' students and faculty in 1975. Of great interest during this period was the death and rebirth of the Overton Park Shell, which was closed by the city in the 1970s, and reborn in September of 1986 with a series of popular musical programs.

#### The Future

Overton Park has provided the City of Memphis with an incalculable worth in the more than eighty years of service. The park was in service before the historic neighborhoods that surround it were even conceived-- indeed, its' development was a large factor in spurring interest in residential expansion away from the pre-1899 city. Nearly every citizen who has



lived in Memphis during this century shares fond memories of a picnic on a sunny day, a stroll along the shaded drives, an evening of music at the Shell, or a trip with the children to share in their amazement and delight at the antics of a monkey at the Zoo. It was their playground, their public backyard, their escape from the bustle and pressures in life, their stop on a tour to share the assets of the city with out-of-town company. Its' worth was cause enough to launch a seemingly quixotic tilt at the windmill of federal authority which sought to compromise its' value with an interstate highway.

Can its' future be any less than its' past?

Apart from the value of Overton Park as a fine park resource is its' value as a historic resource duly recognized through inclusion of the park as one of few landscape features listed upon the National Register of Historic Places. The integrity and quality of its' design was paramount in this distinction, representing as it does a well-preserved example of international trends in landscape architecture and urban planning at the dawn of the 20th century. It is also the best-preserved element of Kessler's plan for the Memphis park system. Those who oversee its maintenance and those who direct the resources contained within it share the responsibility for its preservation. If we are to preserve its particular design qualities, it is a responsibility that must supersede attempts at its' compromise.

The dual value of the park--that of park resource and historic resource--relies on the Park Commission to champion its' preservation as stewards for the generations yet to come. It deserves the same, if not greater, sensitivity to its design and integrity as would be afforded the conservation of a historic building. It is not a resource to discard, like so many other urban parks of value in other cities. Once a mistake is made, its correction is difficult and its cost is overwhelmingly expensive.

It would be wise for the Park Commission to respond to the challenge posed by Overton Park through the development of a comprehensive preservation policy to guide their decision-making process. Once adopted, the policy should be adhered to with strict authority against challenges. This is not to say that change be eliminated from the future of the park-- change has been a complementary part of the park's development for the most part. Instead, the policy should be used to minimize the potential for undesirable impact, while encouraging useful, constructive change.

In general, some of the points that should be considered in the development of a preservation plan are:

#### 1. Forest

The virgin forest of Overton Park cannot be compromised by development, especially in the area to the south of the bus lane right of way. Historic research should be carried out to identify and locate ornamental plantings now missing to be reestablished on the grounds. Aged, diseased or dead trees should be removed and replaced with new plantings.

#### 2. Open Space

The strains of over-use and over-development have begun to compromise the limited open space areas within the park. Further development of these areas will greatly deteriorate the historic design qualities of the park and limit its visual appeal. This is especially true when considering the expansion of existing parking facilities. In short, parking lots are a wasteful use of the small amount of passive open space area remaining today. Though expensive, a high priority should be placed on the development of below-grade parking in the visible areas of the park and low-rise parking garages in less-visible areas, such as the current parking east of the Zoo.



### 3. Park Institutions

As stewards of Overton Park and its' historic legacy, the Park Commission must exercise control over the expansion of the institutional interests within the park. Building programs must be held below the point where the institution dominates or over-shadows the primary purpose of Overton Park-- that of an enjoyable park space. By the nature of the Commission's regulatory powers, the park's institutions reside within the park at the Commission's discretion-- guests of the park, if you will. If an institution grows beyond the capability of the park to sustain it, or if it grows beyond a state of compatibility with the landscape architecture of the park, then it would be in the best interests of the institution and the park to relocate to another site.

### 4. Rehabilitate Rainbow Lake

Rainbow Lake is the only remaining water feature from the original park design, and for that matter, is the only remaining water feature from any of the Kessler parks. The rehabilitation of the lake should be a high priority for funding in the near future, if only in part for its' importance as a visual feature within the park design. Development of the small plaza or promenade along the western side of the lake as shown in Kessler's original plan would be a useful enhancement to this feature, especially if outfitted with park benches and pedestrian-scale lighting.

### 5. Reconstruct the Conway Memorial and Pavilion

The Conway Memorial and the Main Pavilion for the park served important social and visual roles in the early history of Overton Park. The Park Commission should strongly consider the participation of private funding sources in financing the recon-

struction of these two important facilities to return a sense of the "center" that they once served for the park. The pavilion could be built as an open-air structure containing a static educational exhibit to educate the public of the history of the park, while directing visitors to the various facilities and institutions of the park.

#### 6. Relocate Maintenance Facilities

The time is at hand to consider returning the valuable park space now occupied by the Park Commission's maintenance facilities to park use. While the facilities provide invaluable service to the maintenance of the park and the other areas under the Commission's control, the constraints on the existing space within Overton Park no longer justify their location within the park. Relocation should be given a top priority over the next few years, perhaps with the exception of the facilities directly needed for Overton Park's needs.

#### 7. Public Education Programs

The Park Commission might consider encouraging the Audobon Society, the Nature Conservancy or other non-profit groups to assist the Commission in the development and implementation of a series of on-going programs to educate the public on the natural resources of Overton Park. Walking tours to identify plant species, birds animals, wildflowers and other natural assets would increase public appreciation for the forest resources and the park itself.

## 8. Exhibition of Overton Park History

An exhibition detailing the history of the Memphis Park Commission, Overton Park and the development of the Memphis park system would be an excellent way to promote the work of the Park Commission and to celebrate the eighty-fifth anniversary of the opening of Overton Park. Funding for the exhibit could be gained from a variety of federal, national non-profit and corporate sources. The logical place to hold the exhibition would be at the Memphis-Brooks Museum, thus allowing opportunities to integrate the exhibit with its physical appearance. An exhibit could also provide a great deal of exposure and support for the Commission's goals, funding needs and projects.

In conclusion, Overton Park continues to serve recreational and educational needs of the city as it has for eighty-five years. The design formula directed by George Kessler continues to function as he envisioned even in the face of the tremendous stress placed on the facility by modern park users. The historical value of the park's design characteristics are noteworthy and deserve sensitive treatment to preserve these traits for the future. The best method for insuring this level of control would be through the preparation of a historic preservation plan and policy to guide the Park Commission in its' administration of the property. Without recognizing these qualities and their importance to the success of the park in serving its' intended function, the park will cease to be the Overton Park known to the city's collective memory.

## Appendix A: Park Institutions.

In its' philosophy for the development of Overton Park, the Memphis Park Commission and George Kessler imagined the space as a setting for a number of mixed uses, among them: 1) the development of a viable park space useful for passive and active recreation, 2) a viable natural space for the appreciation of native plant and animal species, and 3) for the setting of public events and the use of public institutions to better the growth of Memphis and its individual citizens. The example of Fairmont Park in Philadelphia was largely in their minds during the early years of planning and development-- both Robert Galloway and George Kessler traveled to Philadelphia to visit Fairmont Park in the first years of the Park Commission's existence. What they saw in Philadelphia was planned for Memphis-- a balanced plan combining natural features, recreational spaces, civic monuments and public institutions combined in a single, massive park setting. The various entities of Fairmont Park were separated by beautifully crafted landscaping to create its' own space. Kessler's approach was much the same at Overton Park. Though it took longer to develop the institutions for Overton Park that were in place in Philadelphia, a place for them within Overton Park was foreseen, at least in part.

In historical order, the public institutions are:

### 1. The Overton Park Golf Course: 1904

Even though Kessler's original plan for Overton Park did not include a golf course (or any of the spaces for the existing institutions within the park), it did provide ample open spaces for its' construction-- as though Kessler expected that a course would be laid out early on in the park's development. The first mention of an interest in a course occurred in the

Park Commissioner's Minutes of March 9, 1904, whereupon the motion of Judge L. B. McFarland, the Commissioner's moved to establish a "golf Links". The only other golf course at that time existed at the Memphis Country Club. The "Golf Links", as they were called for over a decade, were a rather informally landscaped course when compared to modern standards. Indeed, an early photograph of the fairway of the #1 hole (now, #8) showed the playing area to be very little improved-- and thus, a true challenge to the player!

A move to establish a more formal course began on August 17, 1910 upon the urging of Commissioner J. T. Willingham. Walter Sherwood, then the golf professional at the Memphis Country Club, assisted George Kessler and C. W. Davis in the task of designing and laying out the course. Construction work was completed in early summer of 1915, and the course opened on August 11 of that year.

While the landscaping of the course has little changed since 1915, it remains as one of the city's-most used public recreational facilities. Over 75,000 rounds of golf were officially recorded in 1986. It is quite safe to say that every major golfer from the city of Memphis got their start on the Overton Park course.

Part of the golf course includes its' club house, which dates from 1926, the gift of park commissioner Abe Goodman. The English Tudor Revival cottage replaced an earlier structure from ca. 1912-1913, which, in turn, was developed from the old cast-iron bandstand that once stood on the site of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.

## 2. Memphis Zoo and Aquarium: 1906

The story of the founding of the Memphis Zoo and Aquarium is a colorful tale recounted again and again to children and adults, natives and tourists alike. From its' accidental beginnings, the Zoo and Aquarium have grown to be a major attraction for the city, drawing upwards of a half-million visitors a year to view the 400-odd species within its' thirty-six acre facility.

The Zoo's accident came in the form of a black bear by the name of "Natch", given in 1903 to Memphian A. B. Carruthers for partial payment of a business debt. The bear soon outgrew Mr. Carruthers patience and ended up in the hands of the captain of the Memphis baseball team, Mr. Charles Frank, who accepted the animal as their mascot. Natch managed to outgrow its' handlers once more, and ended up chained to a tree in Overton Park.

Natch quickly caught the public's fancy in his new home and began the public interest in establishing a zoo. The first motion to this effect was offered by Robert Galloway on March 9, 1904, but the motion was vigorously opposed by J. R. Godwin and subsequently tabled. The issue arose again in June of 1905 at the urging of the Memphis News-Scimitar. This time, the Commission bowed to public pressure by approving the zoo in concept, but allocating no funds for its' development. A site was recommended for the consideration and counsel of the landscape architect, George Kessler. The site suggested fronted Poplar "half-way between Cooper & Trezvant (East Parkway) on which is located an old house.". This site was apparently in the approximate location of the Tanglewood Street entrance off of Poplar.

Finally, a resolution supported by a petition of several thousand signatures was offered by Galloway on April 4, 1906 and was passed by the Commission. An initial allocation of \$1200 accompanied this resolution to establish a Zoo Department. The site selected by Kessler was approved for development in the north-western corner of the park, north of the Memphis Street Railway



right-of-way-- an existing boundary. From Kessler's point of view, it seemed that the Zoo would be well-served in this location without disrupting the other open spaces and by providing the Zoo with its' own identity as a part of the park.

The budget allocation for the establishment of a zoo was coupled with private donations to build a series of simple enclosures to house the fledgling animal population. The next year saw larger allocations for the purchase of animals and for the construction of the zoo's first permanent structure, Galloway Hall. The present Carnivora House and Elephant House were added in 1909 as the new zoo gained momentum and public recognition. A citizen's support organization, the Memphis Zoological Society, was incorporated on October 25, 1910, adding a basis for volunteer support and independent financial assistance for special zoo projects, animal purchases and the like.

The aggressive growth of the zoo brought it to a great deal of national attention, ranking it second among the nation's free zoological institutions. Unfortunately, the flush of success brought on a long period of public apathy, resulting in the deterioration of the facility and jeopardizing the health of the animal population. The Winter of 1922 saw the renewal of interest in the Zoological Society, which re-emerged in a reorganized form on February 6, 1923. The state of the zoo facilities began to improve rapidly soon-there-after.

In spite of the economic depression of the 1930s, the free admission to the zoo kept attendance high as citizens sought out inexpensive entertainment. A major expansion of the zoo was begun under the assistance of the Works Progress Administration in 1936, resulting in many improvements to the animal compounds. More importantly, however, was that the improvements reshaped the zoo's site plan away from the plan first developed around the original drives and walks first installed in this area in ca. 1902-1903. It was the first known deviation from Kessler's basic site plan for the development of the park.



One other part of the 1930s expansion resulted in one of the zoo's most recognizable and most-photographed features-- the massive entrance gate. The gate piers support stone lions with enigmatic expressions that lend their photographic appeal. The lions were salvaged from the Van Vleet family mansion on Poplar, now the site of the William R. Moore School of Technology.

Since the 1930s, major building programs have been undertaken on the average of every seven to eight years. One of the major additions to the zoo came in 1959 in the form of the Memphis Aquarium, donated through the philanthropy of Abe Plough. Admission fees collected at the aquarium are used to purchase other animals for the zoo, as a condition of Mr. Plough's gift. The zoo itself did not require an admission charge until 1968.

Today, the Memphis Zoo and Aquarium is known widely for its aggressive breeding and rehabilitation programs for mammals and wildfowl. The demands for expansion of the facility have now challenged the design community and the Park Commission to seek the necessary facilities with the least disruption to the plan and plantings of its historic park setting. It is hoped that the zoo will meet this challenge with the same inventiveness and sensitivity as it has given its' own facility in the previous eighty years.

### 3. Memphis Brooks Museum of Art: 1916

Designed by James Gamble Rogers, architect of the Shelby County Courthouse and of the Gothic Revival campus buildings at Yale and Princeton, the Italian Renaissance Revival facade of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art truly deserves its nickname as the "jewel box" of Overton Park.

Construction of the building was funded through the gift of Mrs. Bessie Vance Brooks, second wife and widow of the wealthy wholesale grocer, Samuel H. Brooks (d. 1912), who gave \$100,000 for the museum in the memory of her late husband. Brooks and his first wife, Linda Ballance Brooks (d. 1898) had begun the movement to establish a civic museum in the 1880s, an interest continued by Brooks and his second wife after their marriage in 1902. Groundbreaking for the museum took place in 1914 on a site selected by the collaboration of Mrs. Brooks and Mr. Rogers. The completed building was dedicated on May 26, 1916 amid great pomp and ceremony, thus ending a forty year effort by the Brooks family to establish "a visible credential" of Memphis' appreciation for the cultural arts.

Miss Florence McIntyre, founder of the Memphis Art Association, accepted the position as the first custodian of the museum at the urging of the Park Commission and Robert Galloway. Its first exhibit opened to the public on July 10, 1916.

Over the next few years the museum grew slowly but offered a steady diet of exhibits of the works of local artists and traveling exhibits that were provided through the Southern States Art League and the American Federation of Arts. Its permanent collections lagged behind the quality of its exhibitions until the donation of the McCall Collection in 1943, and the Doughty Bird Collection, begun in 1943 and completed in 1959.

The growing museum began to be severely cramped in its original building, prompting the construction of its first addition.

The addition was designed in a highly modern style of architecture by Memphis architect Everett Woods and opened in June of 1955. The addition greatly aided in expanding the exhibition space available to the museum while increasing its facilities for the professional conservation and management of art works. The new addition was soon complemented by the donation of the Kress Foundation Collection in 1958. The Kress Collection provided a solid credibility for the museum by making a notable set of Renaissance and post-Renaissance master works available for permanent display.

In the last quarter-century, the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art has grown in reputation and visitation at an admirable pace. A second major addition was required by the early 1970s as the public's interest and appreciation for visual and decorative arts flourished. The third addition to the museum opened in January of 1973, designed by the Memphis architectural partnership of Walk Jones and Frances Mah.

Today, the museum continues and aggressive program to further its standing as a major facility for art appreciation and education. Recent exhibits have reflected this desire, including the national premiere of the "Memphis in Memphis" exhibit of contemporary decorative arts and interior design which has helped to launch a worldwide trend in styling. The museum has also played a major role in launching the national tour of the Ramses II exhibit of ancient Egyptian art and artifacts, due in Memphis in the Spring of 1987.

4. The Memphis College of Art: 1936; Overton Park building, 1959

Art education and training has enjoyed over a half-century of development in Memphis at the hands of the Memphis College of Arts, a tradition which it continues today. The College's beginnings can be retaced to the James Lee Memorial Art School, which was established by Miss Florence McIntyre in 1923. Miss McIntyre left her position as director of the Brooks Memorial Gallery of Art to establish the school within the rooms of the Fontaine and Lee Houses on Adams Street, in the area now known as Victorian Village. The school grew quickly by filling the need in Memphis for a center for arts training and education.

A splinter group of progressive faculty artists and students differed with the conservative arts philosophy of Miss McIntyre and left to form the Memphis Academy of Art in March of 1936. The new Academy established itself in a donated loft space on Front Street until space on the third floor of the Crockett Technical School became available for the new Fall semester, where it remained until 1941. In the meantime, Miss McIntyre's school had failed in the late 1930s, leaving the Fontaine and Lee Houses vacant and in the hands of the City of Memphis. The Academy was offered the use of the property as a more permanent home, thus returning arts education to Adams Street for another twenty years.

Though commodious, the Adams Street buildings were not designed for the teaching and display of studio arts. The growth of the Academy in the 1950s soon proved unmanagable within the space available to its' 50 full-time and 130 part-time students. Encouraged by Mayor Frank Tobey to move into a space closer to the city's colleges and university, a site was selected in Overton Park and a design competition was held for the new

building. The design submitted by the team of William Mann and Roy Harrover was selected as the winning entry and was awarded the contract for the facility in 1957. The design of the structure accommodated its' construction in phases, the first portion of which opened in February of 1959 on its current site in the park. An expenditure of \$500,000 was required to build the new structure, which was raised from public and private sources.

The new building provided the impetus for the aggressive expansion of the Academy's curriculum, resulting in the accreditation by the Southern Association of Schools of Arts and Design in 1961. The Academy was able to attract impressive talent for its faculty, including regional and nationally respected artists such as Burton Callicott to share their talent and foresight with the students.

Enrollment in the Academy doubled between 1961 and 1966, forcing the requirement for a second addition. The addition was carried out under the direction of Mann and Harrover along the design of the original 1957 proposal. It was completed in April of 1967 at a cost of \$800,000. A third addition was required in 1975 as enrollment swelled to more than 240 full-time and 340 part-time students. The third addition brought the building up to its' current appearance, and opened in April of 1975.

Now entering its' second half-century with a new name-- the Memphis College of Arts-- and a solid footing in the academic and cultural institutions of the South, the College continues to vigorously expand its' programs for the Mid-South region and beyond.



## Appendix B: Existing Monuments and Facilities

As noted in an earlier portion of this study, the general plan for Overton Park by George Kessler provided little direction in the organization and development of the park's facilities. A few suggestions for the placement of monuments were noted, but little else to suggest how the park would evolve over even the first decade of its service. Kessler's task in the development of the basic planting and grading improvements was a formidable one, let alone the division of his attention to the other parks and parkways being aggressively pushed by the Park Commission as set out in Kessler's overall plan. Instead, Kessler and the Park Commission wisely allowed the park to grow within the framework provided by the plan as the various needs and activities were defined by the public and by time. When the need arose, Kessler carefully fit the need into a respectful park setting. The resulting design gave Overton Park its' unique character of mixed uses, each within its own setting and separated by the landscape from the next.

The existing monuments and facilities of Overton Park date from the earliest development of the park through the present day. Presented in historical order, these features include:

### 1. Picnic Pavillion: 1904

The Picnic Pavillion is located on the eastern end of the park grounds near the boundary with East Parkway. It is the oldest surviving park facility in the park, save for its' drives and paths. The Pavillion was designed by George Kessler and built soon after the Park Commission's directive of April 27, 1904 to

"erect a pavillion sixty feet in diameter on the east end of Overton Park for picnic purposes &c." The pavillion remains little-changed from its' 1904 appearance, save for minor alterations of the "rustic" detailing of its brackets and railings. It remains a popular feature of the eastern picnic grounds on nearly every sunny weekend as it has for over eighty years.

## 2. Greenhouse and Maintenance Facilities: 1905

The Park Commission's Greenhouse and Maintenance facilities were begun with an appropriation of \$700.00 on February 14, 1905 "for the purpose of building a propagating house in Overton Park, the work to begin as soon as weather permits." The greenhouse was built in the Spring of 1905 to provide Overton Park and the other parks within the Memphis system with the wide variety of ornamental plants preferred by Kessler in his planting schemes. Tree plantings for the parks were by-in-large purchased from outside sources, rather than raised in the large hotbeds of the facility. Over the years, the complex was greatly expanded to include other greenhouses, a barn, maintenance and storage sheds, and even a horse stable to house the riding ponies rented to ply the bridal paths and drives of Overton Park. None of the original buildings remain today.

## 3. "Rainbow Lake": 1904

Although Rainbow Lake no longer intentionally holds water within its' picturesque curvilinear boundary, it remains as one of Overton Park's most endeared features. Scene of countless "fishing rodeos" for the city's children, the lake was added to Kessler's plan for the park on the order of the Park Commission which agreed "that a small lake and pond be put in Overton Park" on March 9, 1904 (the pond mentioned in this entry was originally located in the hollow now occupied by the parking lot for the Memphis College of Art). Kessler carefully placed the lake to act as the terminus of the long vista that swept from the Formal gardens and across the playing fields and ending at the edge of dense forest. It quickly became one of the park's most photographed features. The lake received its' popular nickname



following the installation of a curvilinear fountain within the lake in 1929. The fountain played a curtain of spray from its many jets, while colored lights set into the foundation gave the spray its rainbow appearance. The expenses of maintaining the lake and the uncertainties surrounding the Park Commission's liabilities in the event of a drowning caused the drainage of the lake in 1983. Its future remains uncertain.

#### 4. Formal Gardens: ca. 1905-1906

The Formal Gardens area of Overton Park was laid out and planted in ca. 1905-1906 behind the main park pavillion as a setting for the Clara Conway Memorial Pergola. Though the content of the planting beds has changed over the years, the layout of the planting beds and the walks remains unchanged.

#### 5. Playing Fields: ca. 1907

Thought the area to the east of the Doughboy monument has probably been used as a playing field since the first days of Overton Parks existence, the playing fields were not formalized until ca. 1907. Early photographs show the layout of a single baseball diamond in this area. While the intensity of use and the general arrangement of these fields has changed over the years, the fields remain in heavy use to the present.

#### 6. The Jenny M. Higbee Memorial Peristyle: 1909.

The Jenny M. Higbee Memorial Peristyle was dedicated on March 6, 1909 in memory of the famed Memphis educator who lived from 1839 to 1906. Miss Higbee was the first female to be selected as the principal of the Memphis High School, inwhich position she served from 1865 to 1875. Her most notable contribution to the educational needs of Memphis came with the establishment of the Higbee School in 1878, which she directed until her death. The Higbee School was considered to be one of the finest preparatory schools in the South until graduating its final class in

1914. The semicircular peristyle is a fine example of Neo-Classical Revival architecture that was donated by the Higbee Alumnae Association in her memory. The peristyle was originally located on the site of the Memphis College of Arts building-- it was removed to its present location in ca. 1956.

#### 7. Playground: 1911

The Overton Park Playground was installed in 1911 as the City's first public playground. Though primitive by modern standards, the swings, slide, merry-go-round and see-saws of the playground gave great pleasure to thousands of children in their first few years. Playgrounds were a facility highly appreciated by George Kessler and championed since the late-1890s by Judge Mc Farland of the Park Commission. Kessler was also one who championed the development of recreational facilities tailored to the nation's youth early in this century, which led to a national trend towards the establishment of playgrounds in parks and school yards. Kessler's overall plan for the city's parks included the playground envisioned by Mc Farland to be built in the Madison/Marshall Street area on what was a part of the Southern Railroad Yards. Condemnation efforts by the Park Commission dragged on for many years and were effectively cancelled by Mayor Edward H. Crump in 1910. The establishment of the playground at Overton Park compensated for the loss of this objective. The existing facility contains equipment that dates mostly from ca. 1979.

#### 8. The Willingham Pavilion, 1917

The Willingham Pavilion was put into service in December of 1917 as a rest and refreshment spot on the first tee of the original Overton Park Golf Course. It was constructed by C. W. Davis, superintendant of Overton Park, at the same time as the

Abe Goodman bench overlooking the #5 tee. Both features were named by Davis, who took the liberty of attaching the names of Commissioners while they were still serving their terms on the park board. Today, the Willingham Pavilion serves to honor the life and work of J. T. Willingham (1861-1933), who served as a Commissioner for twenty-six years, fifteen of which as its' Chairman.

#### 9. The "Doughboy" Memorial: 1926

Gift of the Shelby County Chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the "Doughboy" Memorial was sculpted was sculpted by Nancy Coonsman Hahn and unveiled on September 20, 1926. The statue recalls the appearance and nickname of the American trench soldier of World War One, but it was dedicated to the memory of all American military war dead, from Valley Forge to the Forests of the Argonne. The monument is one of the city's most endeared monuments as well as one of its finest pieces of public sculpture. Funding for the sculpture was raised from a variety of sources, but the portion raised by the pennies of the city's school children remains as the most familiar part of the public' memory.

#### 10. The McFarland Memorial: 1930

Judge L. B. McFarland is memorialized by the granite bell tower that stands in a grove of oak trees to the south of the Memphis College of Art. The memorial was designed by the prominent Memphis architectural firm of Hanker & Cairns, and was dedicated on April 20, 1930 in the memory of the Park Commission's first chairman. Born in 1843 in Haywood County, Tennessee, McFarland served in the Civil War and turned to the law after returning from his service. McFarland began his practice in Memphis in 1867. During the late 1870s, McFarland was appointed to the Tennessee Supreme Court, where he remained until retiring to private practice in 1898. He was appointed to the original

Park Board of Commissioners by Mayor J. J. Williams in June of 1900 and was selected as its first Chairman. McFarland remained on the Park Commission Board until his death in 1910.

#### 11. The Wallenburg Shell: 1936

The Wallenburg Shell Amphitheater was constructed in 1936 by the Works Progress Administration to serve as the Memphis Open Air Theater. Constructed of reinforced concrete in a design similar to the Hollywood Bowl Amphitheater, the "Shell", as it is commonly called, has witnessed hundreds of performances from the 1930s to the 1970s, ranging from theater to dance, classical music to the big bands, and even rock and roll. After numerous complaints from nearby residents over the noise and crowds from some of its events, the Shell was removed from use by the City and the Park Commission. Several efforts to revive the facility fell short of their goal. In 1985, a citizen's group named Save Our Shell took the effort in hand to raise the needed funds to repair the damages of time. The group succeeded in reopening the Shell for a performance on the fiftieth anniversary of the Shell's opening in September of 1986. It is hoped that the renewed effort will be able to maintain its momentum in the years to come.

#### 12. Street Railway Waiting Platforms: Ca. 1936

The simple wooden waiting pavillions near the entrance to the Memphis Zoo were constructed in ca. 1936 to provide protection from the elements for passengers awaiting the cars of the Memphis Street Railway on its run through Overton Park. A larger station once stood just east of this site in the years before the automobile became commonplace on the streets of Memphis. The Waiting Platforms were designed by the architectural firm of



Hanker & Cairns, and were placed in service only a few years before the entire street railway system was scrapped in favor of motorized buses. Even so, the shelters were kept in service, and remain so as the stop for the Memphis Zoo to this date. Elevational drawings of these structures are kept in the Street Railway Collection of the Memphis and Shelby County Archives.

### 13. Entrance Pillars: 1955

The formal composition that flanks the southwestern entrance to Overton Park at Poplar and Tucker was constructed in 1955. The entrance is a rather simple Italian Renaissance Revival composition of paneled stone piers sporting decorative urns, with a curvilinear balustrade to one side. The entrance was installed at a cost of \$20,000 and unveiled in May of 1955. The architect of this improvement is unknown.

The installation of this feature coincided with the construction of the first addition to the Memphis/ Brooks Museum of Arts. It is not known if the addition precipitated the construction of the entrance, or if other entrances of a similar nature were intended for the other parts of the park as a general improvement plan. If so, none were ever built.

### 14. Crump Memorial: 1957

Dedicated to the memory of Edward Hull Crump (1874-1954), the memorial was unveiled to the public on April 21, 1957 near the southwestern entrance to Overton Park. Mayor of City of Memphis from 1909 to 1919 and holder of numerous other political offices, Crump maintained a famous political machine after leaving office that played a major role in every aspect of local and state-wide politics until well after his death in 1954. The statue was sculpted by Donald Harcourt DeLue of New York City and is mounted on a base designed by William Henry Deacy.

## Appendix C: Non-Existing Facilities and Memorials

1. The Pavillion (also known as the "Dancing Pavillion" and the "Rest House"): 1902- ca. 1939.

The main Pavillion for Overton Park was completed in August 19, 1902 as the first structure built for the new park-- its construction was complete even before the drives was done! The Pavillion stood across from the "Doughboy" Memorial and in front of the Formal Gardens area and was the main focus of activity for the park during its first three decades. The building was constructed as a single-storied wood-framed structure that sported a second-story observation tower that overlooked the playing fields. It was the site of hundreds of public dances, concerts, civic events and war bond drives, making it one of the most important of public facilities. Sadly, the Pavillion was damaged by a freak storm that destroyed the Conway Memorial nearby. The Park Commission considered expending funds to restore the Pavilion on several occasions, however, the costs proved too prohibitive to justify doing so. The Pavilion was finally demolished in ca. 1939. The focus of social activity in Overton Park shifted from the Pavilion to the Shell at this time.

2. Clara Conway Memorial Pergola: ca. 1905-1906, destroyed March, 1936.

The Clara Conway Memorial Pergola formed the third of the elements of the central complex of the park-- the Pavillion, the Formal Gardens, and the Conway Memorial. Placed at the far

western end of the Formal Gardens, the Conway Memorial stood in the design of a well-proportioned, collunated arbor. The Pergola contained a memorial fountain at its' center, which was alligned with the central walk of the Gardens. It was dedicated to the memory of Clara Conway (1844-1904)-- an educator, philanthropist philosopher and poet.

Miss Conway was responsible for the establishment of Memphis' first Kindergarten in 1877 as part of the primary educational curriculum of her Clara Conway Institute for Girls. The Institute was recognized nationally for its well-rounded educational programs for young women . The Institute foundered in the financial panic of 1893 and closed soonafter. Miss Conway died on November 16, 1904, and the memorial donated in her memory by the Clara Conway Alumnae Association. The Pergola was destroyed in a 1936 storm.

### 3. Japanese Gardens: (Pond developed 1904) ca. 1914-1941.

The Japanese Gardens were a colorful feature of the park's setting installed in the picturesque reflecting pond first established in 1904. The pond and the Japanese Gardens were located in the hollow that currently serves as the parking lot for the Memphis College of Arts. The Gardens were installed in 1914 through the influence and gift of Colonel Robert Galloway. Galloway's interest in sharing his impressions from a voyage to Japan emerged as a mosaic of features-- from its half-moon bridge to its' Shinto Torii gateway, its clutch of thatched huts, and even its plaster cast flamingoes at the water's edge! The Gardens were a highly-photographed attraction, though it may seem naive by current tasts. The Japanese Gardens met an unfortunate fate at the hands of vandals following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The remains of the Gardens were removed and a fountain was installed in the center of the fountain. The pond and the fountain were removed in 1956 to make way for the parking lot of the Memphis College of Art.



#### 4. Duke C. Bowers Wading Pool: 1914-1979.

Named for its donor, the Duke C. Bowers Wading Pool was installed as a complement to the Playground, much to the delight and refreshment of thousands of young children. Bowers (d. 1917), of the Bowers Grocery chain, was an early and successful competitor with Clarence Saunders in the self-service grocery business. The Wading Pool remained a welcome part of the summer for outings to Overton Park until the facility fell into disrepair in the early 1970s. The Pool was covered over during the expansion of the park's playground facilities in ca. 1979.

#### 5. Egyptian Temple: 1917- ca. 1966

The Egyptian Temple was dedicated on October 7, 1917 to house the gate stones from the Temple of Ptah in Memphis, Egypt, built by King Amasis during the 26th Dynasty, ca. 550 BC, now housed at the Memphis State University Gallery in their permanent collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts. The stones were brought to Memphis and donated to the City by Colonel Robert Galloway, who had traveled to Egypt in 1916-1917. The structure designed to house the stones was built in red sandstone as a small, domed peristasis pavilion sporting lotus leaf capitals. Fencing was placed between the columns to lessen the threat of vandalism. The temple originally stood near the entrance to the zoo, next to a small reflecting pond. The temple was removed in ca. 1966 when the stones were relocated to the new Memphis City Hall. The stones were again moved to their present home in 1983.

#### 6. Statue of Liberty: 1950-1975, pedestal still standing.

An eight foot-tall replica of the Statue of Liberty was placed on a nine foot-tall pedestal near the northern end of the playing fields in 1950. The replica was cast in Kansas City and was donated to the Boy Scouts of America and the City by

Arthur Bruce, the founder of Bruce Hardwood Flooring Co. The statue was damaged by vandals in ca. 1975, and the statue was removed soon thereafter. Only the pedestal remains today as a sad testament to Bruce's gift.

## 7. Miscellaneous Structures and Features

Throughout the Park's history, a number of minor structures were built to serve various purposes, but served short lives before being removed from the grounds:

### a. Spring Grotto: ca. 1902

A small underground spring once bubbled to the surface within a small stone grotto on the grounds of Overton Park. While the exact location of the spring grotto is unknown, it was likely in the area around the Memphis Brooks Museum of Arts. The last known photograph of the spring was taken in ca. 1911-1912, perhaps indicating that the spring was covered over for the construction of the Museum.

### b. Music Stand: 1904- ca. 1913, rehabilitated for Golf House, demolished 1926.

A cast iron bandstand once graced the park grounds in the area now occupied by the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. It was designed by George Kessler and installed in 1904 and was moved at the start of construction for the Museum to be rehabilitated into a new use as the "Golf House" at the park's golf links. It, in turn, was demolished in 1926 for the construction of the current Clubhouse for the Overton Park Golf Course.

c. Superintendent's Cottage: 1902

A Superintendent's Cottage was ordered built by the Park Commissioners in 1902. The structure is last mentioned in a park inventory of 1914. Its' location, design and fate are unknown.

d. Policeman's Cottage: ca. 1906

A small 'cottage' for the on-duty park police was constructed in ca. 1906. It was last mentioned in a park inventory of 1914, though its' location, design and demolition date are unknown.

e. Memphis Street Railway Station: 1902- ca. 1936

The Memphis Street Railway Company constructed a fine station near the entrance of the Zoo for passengers arriving or departing from the residential areas of Downtown Memphis or the suburban towns of Raleigh and Bartlett. It was constructed on the existing rail line that ran through the park after a request for service by the Park Commissioners. The station was replaced by the existing Waiting Stations in 1936. No photographs of the station have yet been located.

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December 29, 1889	November 16, 1904
July 23, 1890	January 13, 1905
August 14, 1895	March 15, 1905
August 14, 1897	May 16, 1905
November 19, 1897	April 28, 1906
November 30, 1897	September 16, 1906
January 1, 1898	May 7, 1908
January 28, 1898	June 30, 1909
June 2, 1898	September 28, 1909
August 3, 1898	September 21, 1910
October 12, 1898	November 26, 1910
November 10, 1898	November 28, 1910
November 11, 1898	June 1, 1911
November 13, 1898	July 30, 1912
August 20, 1898	August 13, 1912
July 6, 1900	May 10, 1913
July 7, 1900	January 11, 1918
October 11, 1900	January 12, 1921
February 1, 1901	July 11, 1926
October 29, 1901	September 20, 1926
October 31, 1901	February 15, 1931
November 18, 1901	January 10, 1933
November 30, 1901	January 11, 1933
July 26, 1902	November 17, 1949
November 6, 1902	April 17, 1953
December 4, 1902	September 24, 1954
April 2, 1903	January 26, 1959
May 14, 1903	April 13, 1967
June 17, 1903	August 22, 1978
October 2, 1903	August 2, 1981
May 22, 1904	May 5, 1983
	July 30, 1985

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September 13, 1900	June 3, 1929
October 29, 1901	January 10, 1933
November 8, 1901	July 8, 1942
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## OVERTON PARK CHRONOLOGY

- 1819 Original Overton Town Plan of Memphis established, includes four park squares and river Promenade
- 1870-1890 Attempts made to establish public parks; most are failures. Street Railway Companies and others establish private "parks", including East End Park
- 1889 Judge L. B. McFarland begins crusade for public park system in letters to newspapers.
- 1891 Kansas City Park and Parkway System adopted, from designs of George E. Kessler
- 1895-1898 "Greater Memphis Movement begun; includes annexation of "Midtown" and park system as goals
- 1898 J. J. Williams elected Mayor, begins to implement goals of "Greater Memphis Movement"
- 1898 John C. Olmstead (?) visits City to investigate potential park system
- 1899 State Legislature authorizes establishment of Park Commissions
- 1899 City of Memphis annexes land to Cooper, area now known as Midtown.
- 1900 City establishes Memphis Park Commission; appoints Judge L. B. McFarland as first Chair, Robert Galloway and John R. Godwin as Commissioners.
- 1901 Lea Woods acquired from Overton Lea; area named Overton Park later in year.
- 1901 Proposals to establish "System of parks, drives and boulevards" requested by Park Commission; Olmstead firm and George Kessler respond; Kessler selected.
- 1902 Plan for park system begun; plan and development of Overton Park begun.
- 1902 Riverside Park acquired
- 1902 Main Pavilion (a.k.a. Dancing Pavilion) constructed (demolished ca. 1939).
- 1903 Overton Park opens to the public
- 1903 Planning for Parkway System begun
- 1904 Picnic Pavilion constructed; Rainbow Lake developed; Golf Links established.

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- 1904 Acquisition of land for Parkways begun, halted by suit "Memphis v. Hastings"
- 1905 Conway Memorial Pergola constructed, developed beside new Formal Garden as part of Main Pavilion complex. Demolished by storm, 1936.
- 1905 Supreme Court clear Memphis in "Memphis v. Hastings", parkways development begins
- 1906 Memphis Zoo established
- 1909 Higbee Memorial Peristyle dedicated. Moved to current location ca. 1959.
- 1911 Playground established, first of its kind in Memphis
- 1914 Japanese Garden developed by gift of Robert Galloway, located in small lake on current site of College of Art. Destroyed by vandals after Pearl Harbor attack, 194
- 1914 Duke Bowers Wading Pool at playground opens. Filled in ca. 1979.
- 1916 Memphis Brooks Museum of Art built to designs of James Gamble Rodgers
- 1917 Willingham Pavillion (on golf course, near Brooks) built.
- 1917 Egyptian Temple developed near Zoo to house gate stone from Temple of Ptah (now at MSU), demolished ca. 1966, stones moved to City Hall, then MSU.
- 1926 Golf Clubhouse constructed, gift of Commissioner Abe Goodman, replaced original clubhouse of ca. 1910-1911.
- 1926 "Doughboy" monument installed across from Main Pavillion
- 1930 McFarland Bell Tower dedicated, designed by Hanker & Cairns (adjacent to College of Art).
- 1936 Wallenburg Shell (MOAT) built by WPA
- 1936 Street Railway pavilions constructed to replace ca. 1902 Station
- 1939 Main Pavillion demolished.
- 1955 First addition to Brooks completed
- 1955 Poplar Avenue/Tucker Street entrance gates constructed
- 1957 Crump Memorial dedicated; Donald Harcourt Delue, sculptor.

- 1959 Memphis Academy of Art moves to Overton Park from Victorian Village, designed by William Mann and Roy Harrover, architects. Higbee Memorial relocated, small lake drained for parking lot.
- 1959 Memphis Aquarium established at Zoo by gift of Abe Plough
- 1960s Unrestricted access to park afforded black citizens; prior to this, blacks only allowed to visit Overton and Zoo on Thursdays.
- 1960s-  
1970s Construction of Interstate 40 planned to pass through Park; Citizens to Preserve Overton Park formed, successfully halts construction.
- 1967 Second addition to Academy or Art opens
- 1973 Third addition to Brooks opens, Francis Mah, architect.
- 1979 Old Playground rebuilt; Bowers Wading Pool filled in.
- 1986 Zoo Plan unveiled
- 1986 Brooks expansion plan announced
- 1987 Art Academy changes name to Memphis College of Art; announces expansion.
- 1987 Master Plan for Overton Park begun
- 1988 "Overton Park: Visions and Inspiration" exhibit announced, to run June 18- July 30, 1989.