

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

February 2007

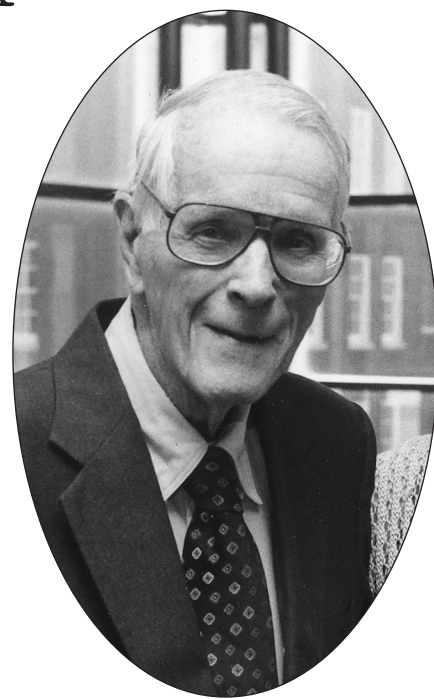
An Evening in Celebration of Parks and People



Our Speaker: Tupper Thomas, director Prospect Park. *Photo courtesy Prospect Park Alliance.*

PLEASE JOIN US TUESDAY, February 27, 2007, for a look at Birmingham's exciting park developments and a talk by Tupper Thomas, director of Prospect Park. Thomas will share her decades of experience working with urban parks and her understanding of what a great urban park can be. We'll also see a great DVD on current Birmingham Park projects including the Ruffner and Red Mountain Parks, the Railroad Reservation and the Shades, Village and Valley Creek Greenway projects. Clarus Group produced the "Greenways Showcase" DVD which was funded by McWane, Inc.

Our annual meeting honors the service of Richard A. Bowron, first elected a Trustee of the Society in the 1950s, reelected President of the reconstituted Society in 1976, and Secretary and wise counsel to Society Officers and Trustees ever since.



Our Honoree: Richard A. Bowron. *Photo courtesy Jim Strickland.*

Tupper Thomas

In 1979, when the bronze statue of Columbia fell over in her chariot at a formerly grand entrance to Prospect Park, everyone knew that the declining urban park needed help. When concerned citizens successfully lobbied politicians to fund upgrading the park, Tupper Thomas was appointed to oversee the first \$10 million campaign. She's been raising private funds and enhancing this urban oasis ever since.

Prospect Park is considered one of Olmsted's finest parks and Tupper Thomas is legendary in her ability to enthuse Brooklyn's diverse residents to love and support their park and others to help enjoy it.

About Prospect Park & The Alliance

The Park

Prospect Park is a 585-acre urban oasis located in the heart of Brooklyn, New York City's most populous borough. The masterpiece of the famed landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who also designed Central Park, Prospect Park features the 90-acre Long Meadow, a 60-acre lake and Brooklyn's only forest. The nation's first urban Audubon Center, the Prospect Park Zoo and the Celebrate Brooklyn! Performing Arts Festival are just a few of the cultural attractions that make their home at the Park.

With over seven millions visitors a year, the Park borders diverse neighborhoods and attracts both locals and tourists. Popular activities range from skating and birding to pedal boating and picnicking on the Long Meadow. The Park also boasts a stunning variety of natural and geological features.

About Prospect Park Alliance

In partnership with the City of New York and the community, the Prospect Park Alliance, a private non-profit friends group, restores, develops and operates Prospect Park for the enjoyment of all by caring for the natural environment, preserving its historic design and serving the public through facilities and programs.

The Alliance was formed in 1987 to restore the Park after years of budget cuts and a steady deterioration of both its natural areas and usership. By supplementing

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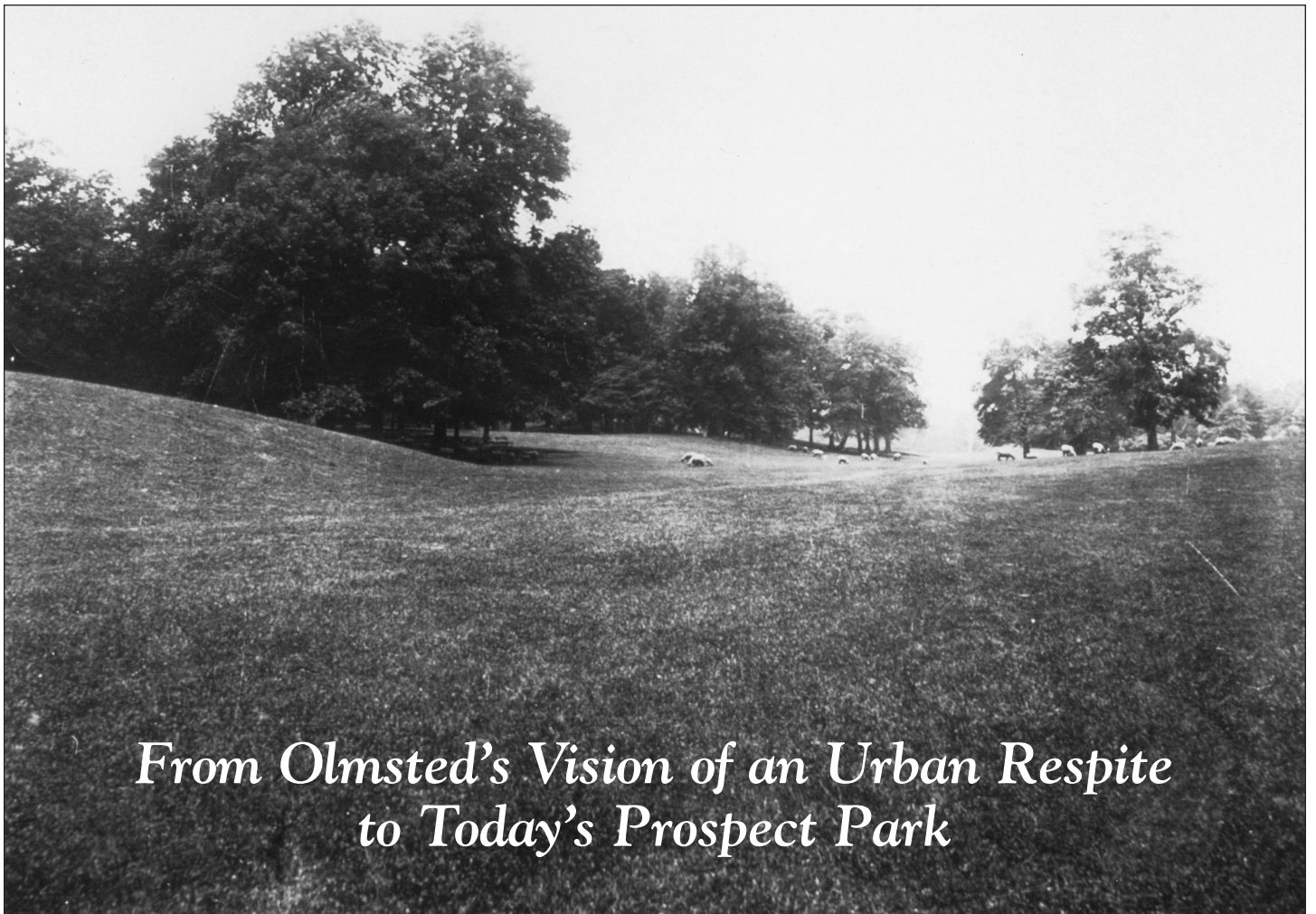
the Park's basic operations with private funds, the Alliance has initiated a large array of capital projects and community programs. The Alliance has boosted public awareness of the crucial role parks play in the urban environment, while gaining support from donors and volunteers for the restoration projects that have brought Prospect Park back to prominence. Tupper Thomas is director of the Alliance.

The Alliance has not only been active in the restoration of Prospect Parks' physical well-being, but also its transformation into an important cultural institution. It was instrumental in the restoration of the 1912 Carousel, the transformation of Lefferts Historic House into the first children's historic house museum in the United States, the renovation of the Park's playgrounds and the capital campaign to save Brooklyn's only forest – a restoration of 150 acres of ailing woodlands in the Park's Ravine. Still recovering from decades of overuse that caused soil compaction and erosion, the Ravine and surrounding woodlands have been undergoing restoration since 1996. The Alliance formed a trailblazing partnership with the National Audubon Society that resulted in the nation's first urban Audubon Center. The center opened in 2002 at the park's historic Boathouse. Ongoing projects include the renovation of Bailey Fountain in the Grand Army Plaza and the long-term reconstruction of the 40-acre Parade Ground.



The Alliance's efforts combined with the support of many business partners, private donors and Alliance members, have increased Park usership by 300%, while making critical improvements to its fragile ecosystem and preserving its historical and architectural treasures. Today, a Community Committee representing more than 80 local organizations and a Youth Council advise the Park Alliance on Park improvements and programs.

[This information and the photograph above are used with permission of the Prospect Park Alliance. For more information, see www.prospectpark.org]



From Olmsted's Vision of an Urban Respite to Today's Prospect Park

Long Meadow is a superb example of Olmsted's ideal park space. While a flower garden or lake bring pleasure, only in wide, sweeping vistas, Olmsted theorized, is one drawn from his personal world into a more peaceful and restful sphere. With its undulating hills, the viewer never sees the entire

Frederick Law Olmsted, who grew up on a farm in Connecticut during the 1820s and 1830s, had strong beliefs about the function of public parks. To Olmsted, a great park should be a tranquil, rural landscape where people could recuperate from the incessant pace of city life. He believed

90-acre Long Meadow at once, but rather restful and infinite distances without borders or distractions. (There is plenty of activity in other Prospect Park spaces!). Photograph courtesy Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Design School.

this pleasure belonged to people of every social class, not just the wealthy who could travel to find such experiences. Prospect Park, designed in the 1860s, would be for everyone, but especially Brooklyn's poor, who would find solace in their own back yard.

The Society's Olmsted Project

The contribution of Frederick Law Olmsted and his successors to urban and landscape design in the United States is frequently unappreciated. In Birmingham, Alabama, the Birmingham Historical Society has been rediscovering the Olmsted legacy and studying current projects in light of Olmsted's vision and principles. To date, the Society's Olmsted project has produced a republication of the 1925 Olmsted plan for Birmingham parks, an illustrated history of historic and current park planning in Birmingham and a DVD and exhibit illustrating the discoveries.

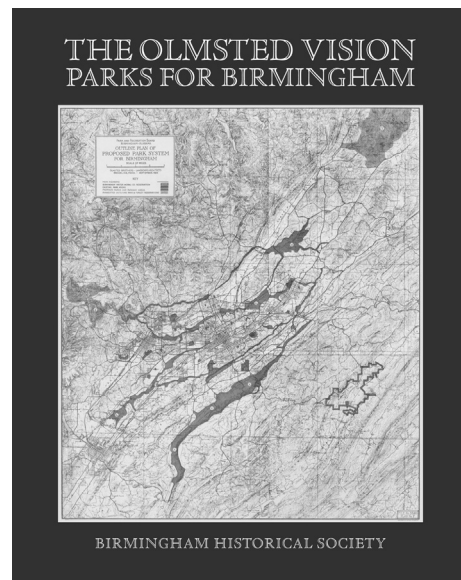
Birmingham was founded in 1871, a few years before Frederick Law Olmsted completed Central Park. By 1924, a little more than 50 years later, Birmingham was the South's largest industrial center and civic leaders thought the city's parks "wholly inadequate." They addressed the issue by hiring the Olmsted Brothers to develop a comprehensive park plan for the region.

With the encouragement of Olmsted scholars Charles Beveridge and Arleyn Levee and Phoebe Cutler, the Society has mined the archives of Fairsted (the firm's former office in Brookline), the Library of Congress and

local sources to understand and assess the impact of the Olmsted 1925 report on park development. The Society has also reviewed from the perspective of the Olmsted heritage the current phenomenal development of new parks and greenways. In the greater Birmingham area more than 5,000 acres of park lands have been acquired in the last six years and developments similar to those envisioned in the Olmsted report are either planned or under way along major creeks and mountain ridges.

To encourage, inspire and educate current and future generations, the Society faithfully reproduced the 1925 Olmsted Brothers' *A System of Parks for Birmingham* and published *The Olmsted Vision-Parks for Birmingham*, a full-color, 11" x 14," 116 page volume with historic and current plans and photographs assessing the 1925 report and its impact. A DVD highlighting current park and greenway projects furthering the Olmsted plan has also been produced by the Clarus Group with funding from McWane Inc. In final editing and preparation for printing in 2007 is the 1920s correspondence between Birmingham park advocates and the Olmsted firm.

Current BHS research focuses on the integrity of the Warren Manning



plans for the residential suburb of Mountain Brook and newly discovered Olmsted Brothers plans for Vestavia, the Medical Center and Indian Springs School, plans completed in the 1940s and early 1950s. With hundreds more plans for our community listed in the Olmsted data base, we will be seeking the assistance of the archivists at Fairsted for many more years.

Birmingham's 1925 park plan (\$25), *The Olmsted Vision-Parks for Birmingham* (\$25) and the DVD (\$10) are available from Birmingham Historical Society, One Sloss Quarters, Birmingham, Alabama, 35222. www.bhistorical.org. Prices noted are postpaid.



Henry Martyn Caldwell (1836-1895)
Engraving by E. G. Williams & Bro., New York.

The recent controversy over renaming Caldwell Park led Highland Park resident Allison Glascock to research the neighborhood park's namesake. Here's what she found.

Henry Caldwell served as president of the Elyton Land Company, the real estate firm that founded Birmingham in 1871, for two critical decades in the development of that company and the city. Caldwell was trained at the University of Pennsylvania as a physician and surgeon. The Greenville,

The Caldwell of Caldwell Park

Alabama native took charge of the land company in 1875 when it and the city were at rock bottom. A cholera epidemic and national financial panic had devastated initial hope for the speedy building of the new city in the north Alabama mineral region, as well as significant early investment returns for land company investors. And an angry former employee had shot the land company's wheeler-dealer leader James R. Powell, leading to Caldwell's recruitment as president.

From 1875 to 1895, under Caldwell's leadership, the real estate firm helped make Birmingham grow into the Magic City. By 1895 when Caldwell died, Birmingham was the industrial center of the South, with a regional population of nearly 90,000 persons. The firm had provided inducements for industrial plants to locate here, helped found banks and other businesses, and built the fabulous Caldwell Hotel in the city center and the waterworks at the Cahaba River (The site is still in use today).

The real estate firm, later renamed Birmingham Realty Company, also developed its Southside and South Highlands properties, building the Belt line street railway to access industrial and warehouse sites on Southside and the Highland Avenue railway and Lakeview Park to open the highlands district along the northern slope of Red Mountain for initial residential development. The firm called this area: The "Highland Residence Park." Lakeview Park (today's Boswell Golf Course) became a popular pleasure resort, accessed by the street railway, at this time. Today's three small parks along Highland Avenue were originally ravines with springs. Engineers designed the railway "without cuts and fills" as it wound along the mountain slope. In the early 20th century, with prominent residences located along the avenue, land company officials sold the three ravines to the City for development as parks. In 1906, the City named Caldwell Park for Henry M. Caldwell.

SOCIETY NEWS



Trustees gathered at the Birmingham Public Library Gallery include Jim Strickland, Carolyn Satterfield, Henry Ray, Alice Bowsher, Richard Randolph, Carolyn Satterfield, Charles Caldwell, Hanson Slaughter, Lillie Fincher, Will French, Joe Strickland, John Gemill,

Regina Ammon, Richard Bowron, Marjorie White, Jim Baggett, Barbara Shores, Jim Emison, Carol Slaughter, Julius Linn, Louise McPhillips, Wayne Hester, Edgar Marx, Kaydee Breman and Harold Goings. *Photograph by Jim Strickland, December 2006.*

Endowment Thriving

The Endowment increased to \$680,500 during 2006 thanks to the contributions from 21 members and investment gains. Endowment funds are invested until the Endowment reaches \$1.5 million and thereafter a certain percent of interest may support Society needs. Thank you. Thank you to our donors.

New Trustees and Officers To Be Elected

Sara Ruiz de Molina, Chairman of the Nominating Committee, presents the following candidates to serve as Officers and Trustees: Lillie Fincher, President; Marjorie White, Chairman; Harold H. Goings, Louise McPhillips, Richard W. Sprague, Vice Presidents; Lillie Fincher, Edgar Marx Jr., Treasurer; Richard Bowron, Secretary, Carol Slaughter, Assistant Secretary. New Trustees: Cathy C. Adams, Mrs. James J. (Edna) Bushnell, William (Bill) A. Gilchrist, Sallie M. Lee, Chuck Lowe, Katie Tipton, David N. Wright. Members will vote on the Nominees at the Annual Meeting. Additional nominations must be received in the Society's offices two weeks prior to the meeting.

SOCIETY CALENDAR

The Annual Meeting

February 27, 2007, 7:30 p.m.
Birmingham Botanical Gardens

Preservation Awards

TBA May 5:00 p.m.
Comer-City Federal Building

Heritage Society Party

April 15, 2007, Noon
Sims-Crommelin House



One Sloss Quarters
Birmingham, Alabama 35222

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of Parks and People
The Annual Meeting
February 27, 7:00 p.m.**