

## **Bloomington's oldest park turns 165 this week**

“How pleasant it is, immediately after the noontide hour of a hot summer’s day,” mused The Pantagraph in 1857, “to stroll away from the dusty streets of a noisy city, and spend an hour or two in sauntering through a shady park, or in reclining on a soft grassy carpet in the immediate neighborhood of a fountain of clear water.”

The “shady park” in question was Bloomington’s Franklin Park—which just so happens to turn a spry 165 years old on Monday. It was the city’s first public “leisure ground”—beating runner-up Miller Park by a full three decades.

Located seven blocks northeast of the old county courthouse (now the McLean County Museum of History), some early detractors believed the park was situated too far from the center of town to attract local residents.

The park was named for Bloomington Mayor Franklin Price, though why it wasn’t called Price Park remains one of those nagging local mysteries of little consequence.

Today, the park stands as one of the lovelier corners of the Twin Cities, but such was not always the case. Sadly, back in the 19th century, it was often a bedraggled sight—little more than a muddy expansive interspersed with neglected trees and weed-choked splotches of grass, with the walkways forever in disrepair.

Franklin “Square” (over the years “park” and “square” have been used interchangeably) dates to April 26, 1856, when a trio of prominent residents—Judge David Davis, William Allin and William Flagg—deeded to the city a 591 by 330 foot undeveloped parcel “as a place of public resort, pastime and recreation, for citizens and strangers forever.”

The three benefactors placed several conditions on the donation, such as prohibiting the erection of permanent buildings on the grounds. Most importantly, they required the city to “ornament” and maintain the grounds, with failure to do so resulting in the forfeiture of the land back to the donors or their heirs.

The city, though, dragged its feet when it came to necessary improvements, thus setting the stage for what would become decades of municipal indifference toward Franklin Park. In late August 1857, The Pantagraph ran an open letter signed “Medicus” urging action before title to the land fell back to the donors. “An ounce of ‘caution’ is worth a pound of cure,” noted the frustrated Medicus. “Does anyone take the hint?”

The answer was apparently not, for the situation remained frustratingly unchanged for more than a quarter century. At the August 24, 1883 city council meeting, a petition headed by Judge Davis and signed by more than 100 of the “wealthiest and best citizens” called for renewed attention to the park. The Pantagraph wholeheartedly concurred,

noting the grounds had been “shamefully neglected” over the years, and “in many spots the weeds have overpowered the grass, and the trees have become shaggy and broken.”

Despite Franklin Park’s often-ragged condition, some of the city’s leading citizens, including Illinois Gov. Joseph Fifer and U.S. Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson I, built or moved into stately residences lining the square.

Three of Bloomington’s best-known architects—George Miller, Paul Moratz and Arthur Pillsbury—designed home’s on the square, and members of the Funk family had no less than four homes constructed on its south side. Many of the houses date to the Victorian Era and represent a wide variety of styles, including Italianate, Queen Anne and Georgian Revival.

In its early years, the park’s center featured an elaborate 49-foot monument dedicated to the 700 county residents killed in the Civil War. Yet much like the park grounds, the Civil War monument weathered official neglect.

In 1898, one of four marble soldiers standing atop octagonal columns broke away and fell to the ground “with a frightful crash.” Twelve years later a second soldier toppled over. Gov. Fifer, a Civil War veteran himself (he campaigned as “Private Joe”), led an effort to raze the unsafe memorial and erect a new one at Miller Park.

The lower half of the Franklin Park monument survives today as a relic in the Briarwood neighborhood at the corner of Linden and Emerson streets.

Notwithstanding the less-than-manicured grounds—to say nothing of falling marble!—Franklin Park was from its establishment an invaluable public space for recreational, social and political activities, ranging from church picnics to election-season torchlight parades and rallies.

In early April 1890, W.L. Evans, one of the three park commissioners, acknowledged the less-than-ideal appearance of the grounds. Evans said that the park “has been left in the rough since it was laid out and now bears the marks of neglect.” He called for \$1,000 to \$1,500 in long-overdue improvements.

One month later, The Pantagraph cheered a \$400 city appropriation, most of which was set aside for the laying of brick walkways so one could take a stroll “without destroying the turf.” As it was, the park grounds had become little more than a “sea of mud.”

Fortunately, better days lay ahead. Today the park is best known for its mature trees and simple beauty, unadorned as it is without much of the brick-a-brac (such as brightly colored plastic playground equipment) common to newer parks.

In 1976 the park and the nearby residences were listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and three years later the neighborhood was designated a local historic district.

Franklin Park still retains much of its 19th century character, minus, thankfully, the “sea of mud.”