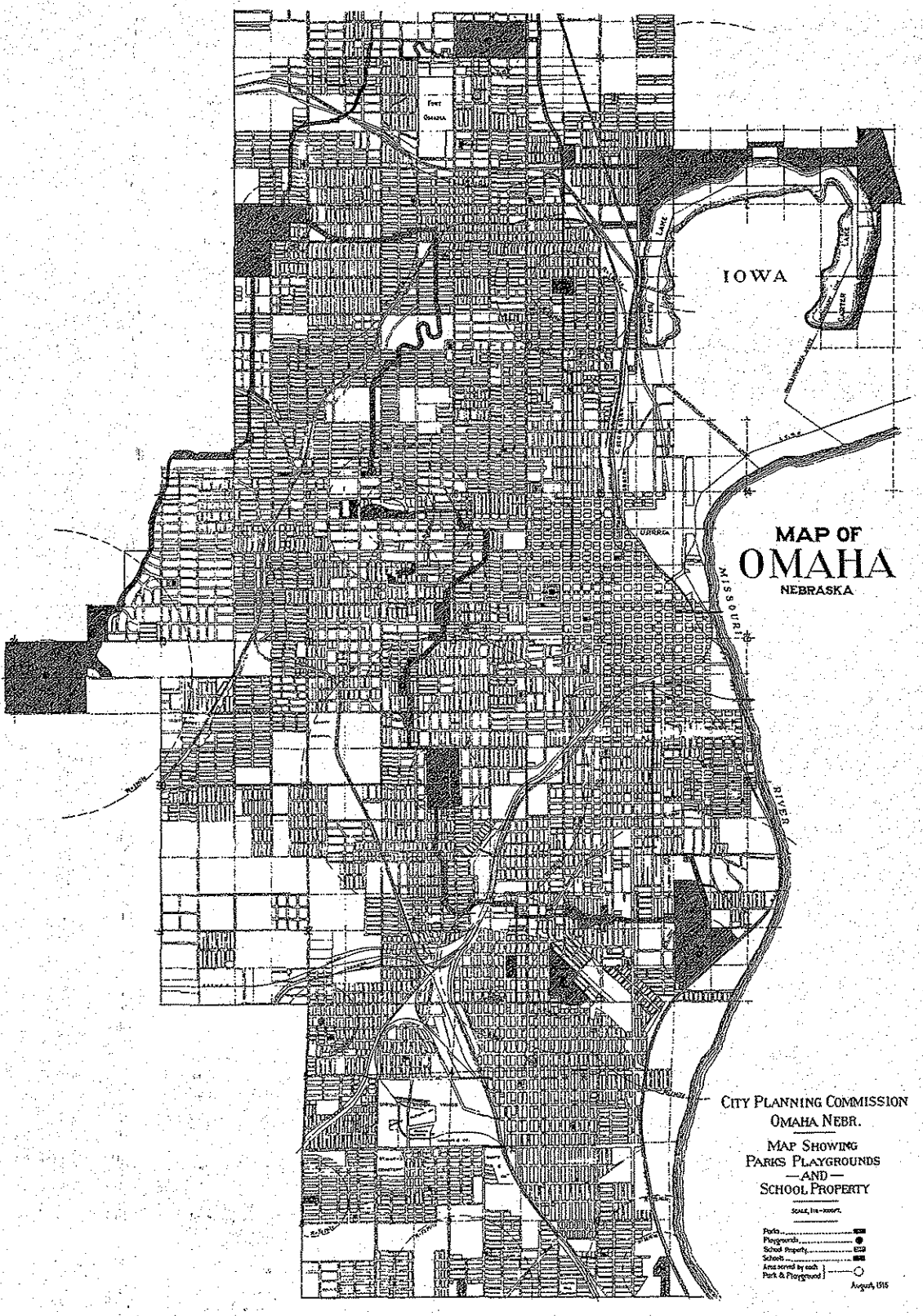
OMAHA'S HISTORIC

Park and Boulevard

SYSTEM


IOWA
MAP OF
OMAHA
NEBRASKA
MISSOURI
RIVER
CITY PLANNING COMMISSION
OMAHA NEBR.
MAP SHOWING
PARKS PLAYGROUNDS
—AND—
SCHOOL PROPERTY
August, 1915

BLAIR

Acknowledgements

Publication of this brochure has been funded in part with the assistance of a federal grant from the U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior.

Prepared by the Planning Department of the City of Omaha;
Gary Pryor, Director.
Report No. 259. March 1992.
City of Omaha; P.J. Morgan, Mayor

Omaha's Historic Park and Boulevard System, by Lynn Bjorkman. Cover illustration by Lynn Meyer. Design and layout by Kent C. Behrens. For insights and information on H. W. S. Cleveland, the author wishes to thank Professor William Tishler, University of Wisconsin, Madison. For additional comprehensive historical information, Planning Department Report No. 214, *A History of Omaha's Parks and Recreation System* may be obtained in the Planning Department office.

Photo on page 7 courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society. Photo on page 9 courtesy Professor William Tishler, University of Wisconsin, Madison. All other photographs from the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection owned by KMTV and on loan to the Western Heritage Museum.

We would also like to thank Judy Levin, proofreading; Robert Potter, W. Dale Clark Library; the Douglas County Historical Society; and Joseph Masek and La Vern W. Lenzen of the Western Heritage Museum, Photo Archives for their patience and help.

OMAHA'S HISTORIC

Park and Boulevard

SYSTEM

CITY OF OMAHA
PLANNING DEPARTMENT
MARCH 1992

Postscript

Like the clamor that first created public parks in American cities in the 1800s, today there is a corresponding call for the rehabilitation and restoration of those same parks, now a century or more old. Following in the wake of the movement to conserve old buildings, historic landscape preservation is a relatively new field — one that is just now finding ways to meet the particular challenges of restoring living landmarks.

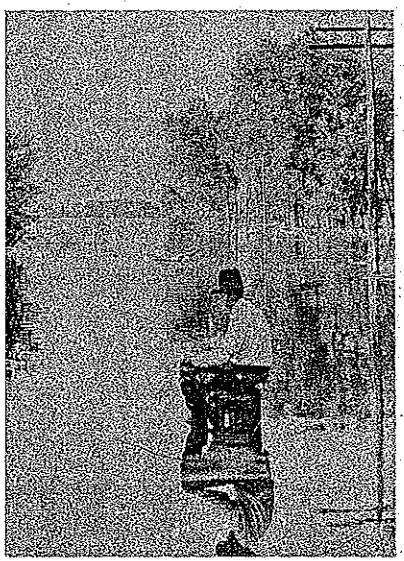
New York City's Central Park — the park that started the first wave of interest in urban park building — also inspired the preservation movement now spreading to other cities. In the early 1970s, public and private interests embarked on an innovative plan to restore portions of that public landscape to its original character. Comparable projects have now been completed in Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle, and in H.W.S. Cleveland's Roger Williams Park in Providence, Rhode Island.

We are fortunate to have in Omaha a park system with a similarly rich history. The City of Omaha's Parks and Planning Departments have long recognized the importance of this resource and have worked hard to maintain it. Neighborhood and civic groups have been especially diligent in their advocacy of our older urban parks.

Nevertheless, conserving the historic character of our parks and boulevards will be an increasingly challenging endeavor as the system enters its second century. What we do now will determine if the history in Omaha's older parks is a legacy that will be lost — or reclaimed for future generations.

16th Street. This land acquisition appears to have been part of their attempt to complete a long-held plan for a boulevard that would extend entirely around the lake. Toward this end, the Cornishes also acquired, over a number of years, approximately 140 acres on the Iowa side of Carter Lake.

In 1919 an *Omaha World-Herald* article announced the purchases of Iowa lakefront land by Edward Cornish



Carter Lake; 1920

and O.C. Redick, the developer of Sand Point Beach, a private "bathing beach." Redick collaborated with the Cornishes in their efforts to reserve the lake for recreational purposes. With the purchases, Redick and the Cornishes together held title to the entire Iowa shore line, a situation that would prompt the headline: "...Negotiations Assure Boulevard Encircling Carter Lake." As late as the 1940s, plans would describe "the newly projected Boulevard circuit around the lake," but the encircling boulevard would remain unbuilt.

Certainly, many of the Cornishes' hopes for the park have been realized. Their work of almost thirty years was noted by the naming of the boulevard that they intended as the entrance to the park in their honor.

Introduction

"I would have the city itself such a work of art as may be the fitting abode of a race of men and women... whose efforts shall be inspired and sustained by the grandeur and beauty of the scenes in which their lives are passed."— H. W. S. Cleveland

The eminent landscape architect Horace W. S. Cleveland set forth this vision of urban life in an address to the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts in 1888. One year later Cleveland would be called to Omaha by the newly formed Board of Park Commissioners to design a public greenspace system for the city booming on the bluffs of the Missouri River. Through the efforts of Cleveland, public officials and civic-minded citizens, the foundation was laid for a park and boulevard system that has "inspired and sustained" Omaha residents by its "grandeur and beauty" for more than one hundred years.

While the natural beauty and recreational benefits of Omaha's parks are widely appreciated, aspects of the system's historic importance have not been fully recognized. Because of its association with H.W. S. Cleveland — an important figure in 19th century American landscape architecture — Omaha's park and boulevard system survives as a significant landmark in landscape design and urban planning in the Midwest.

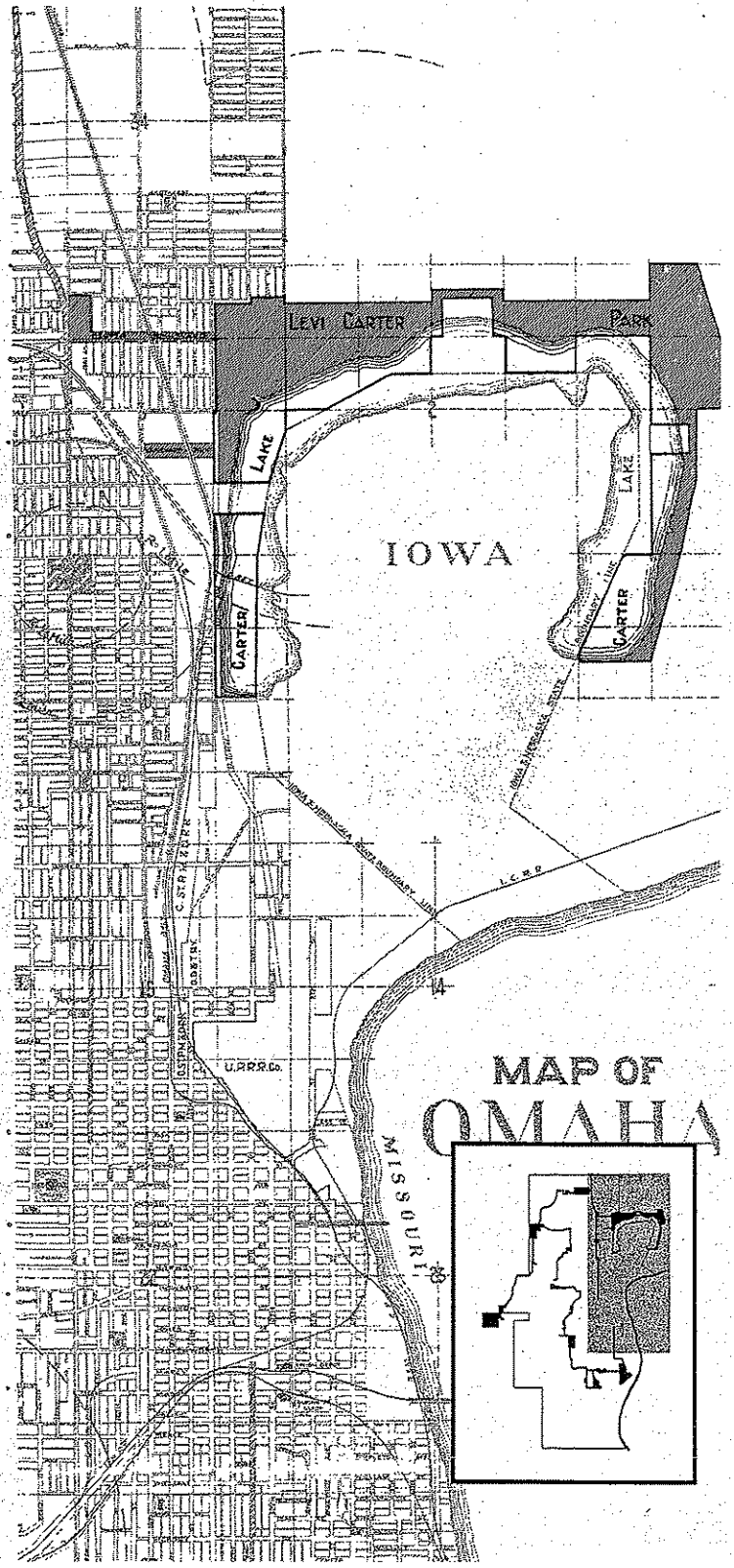
Hanscom Park; 1918

Though it might now appear that a number of Omaha's older parks such as Hanscom or Elmwood are essentially tracts that have remained in their natural state, in actuality, the case is quite different. Looking now at a stand of pines that crowns a hill in Miller Park, one would not imagine that the site was a flat, treeless cornfield when it was purchased in 1893. An immense amount of planning and expertise, money and physical labor were expended in transforming the vacant plot into wooded park land. The example of Miller Park is not unique; each of our parks and parkways was created through a lengthy and complex process that included, among other things, land surveying and grading, tree planting, stream rerouting, and road building.

These land-shaping activities were inspired and directed by H. W. S. Cleveland's ideas about urban park land design. He believed that the land's natural beauty and interesting features should be respected and retained; but with the landscape architect's idealism, Cleveland felt that nature could be improved to bring about a more pleasing aesthetic effect. By artistically arranging trees and shrubbery, laying out paths and roads that followed the natural contours of the ground, and enhancing existing features such as cliffs or ravines, Cleveland created remarkably scenic park land, often from property that was considered worthless. Aspects of Omaha's early parks and boulevards display his design signature yet today.

The concerns of Cleveland and those who launched Omaha's parks movement extended beyond a singular focus on the arrangement of trees or the grading of a hill: their vision was broader. They believed that the building of individual parks was not enough and worked toward the establishment of an integrated greenspace system — a web of parks and boulevards that stretched across the entire city.

Making parks and boulevards "integral portions of the city, instead of being merely ornamental appendages," as Cleveland put it, required a great deal of municipal coordination and planning, more than city governments of a century ago were wont to do. Land needed to be pur-



Lake Nakoma — be officially named Carter Lake.

With the prior acquisition of Miller, Fontenelle and Kountze parks, the Park Commissioners were not looking to add to their holdings in the northern sector of the city. Nevertheless the Board welcomed Selina Carter's offer. A number of south-side citizens and several city councilmen, however, objected to the proposal, which required that the City provide matching funds to develop the property. The protesters felt that City money would be better spent improving existing park properties.

A 1908 Commissioners report states that "by the acquisition of this park Omaha is given a beautiful body of water with possibilities for aqua sports and recreation." In the nearly two decades since Omaha's first parks were developed, more active forms of leisure activity had become popular. The board's interest in the lake property reflects this shift in attitude about the purpose of parks — from an earlier focus on the quiet enjoyment of picturesque scenery to a new emphasis on the provision of facilities for more active activities, such as swimming, golf, tennis and baseball.

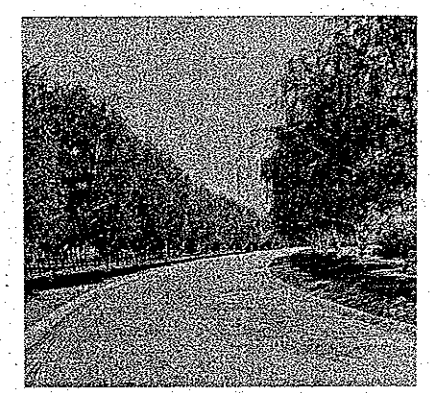
In the same year that Selina Carter donated funds for Levi Carter Park, she married Edward J. Cornish, an Omaha attorney who had served on the Park Commission since 1896. After moving from Omaha in 1911 and until their deaths in the late 1930s, the Cornishes continued to play an active role in the development of Levi Carter Park through gifts of property and funds for improvement projects.

Two years after their donation of Levi Carter Park, Edward and Selina Cornish deeded to the City for $1 a 250-foot strip of property they had acquired between Carter Park on the east and 16th Street on the west to serve as an entrance to the park. The corridor tied the new park to a major thoroughfare, but did not link it to the boulevard system. That connection was established when land for Carter Boulevard was secured by the City in 1910 through the condemnation of property along the north side of Grand Street from the park to Florence Boulevard.

Later, in 1930, the Cornishes bought two additional pieces of land on either side of the boulevard corridor to chased in advance of its development, before the price became prohibitive, and purchases needed to be made strategically, so that park sites could accommodate later population growth.

The Park Commissioners' work in developing policy and procedures aimed at shaping the future form and development of the city was an innovative practice, one that anticipated modern-day city planning. Under the leadership of the Commissioners and the guidance of H.W.S. Cleveland, Omaha was early among cities of the Midwest to institute and act upon this comprehensive program for city betterment — this vision that would have the whole city "a work of art."

The ideas, hopes and energies of H.W.S. Cleveland and civic-minded Omahans of a century ago are embodied in the designs of our historic parks and boulevards; their form and features bear the stamp of those who fashioned them and the period in which they were produced. Over the years, however, the story of the origins of our park system has been largely forgotten. The intent of this guide is to bring the foundations of this living landmark to light.



Birch Drive, Miller Park; 1917

To accomplish this purpose, the guide begins with a description of the early growth and development of the Omaha park system, placed within the historic context of the 19th century parks movement in the United States. Following is information about the system's individual parks and boulevards — also focusing on their early history — arranged in the form of a tour.

Covered in the course of this guide are a dozen parks and approximately thirty-five miles of boulevards. Space permits only a brief stop at each of these major sites, but we hope that the information presented will encourage you to further explore the rich history and scenic beauty of this important civic resource.

Historic Context

American cities experienced tremendous growth in the later decades of the 19th century. At mid-century, only one in five Americans lived in urban areas; by 1900, the proportion of city-dwellers had climbed to about 40 percent of the total U.S. population. The nation's largest city, New York, for example, grew by a factor of five — from about 700,000 to almost 3.5 million persons — in the fifty-year period between 1850 and 1900.

American Urbanization and the Growth of the Parks Movement

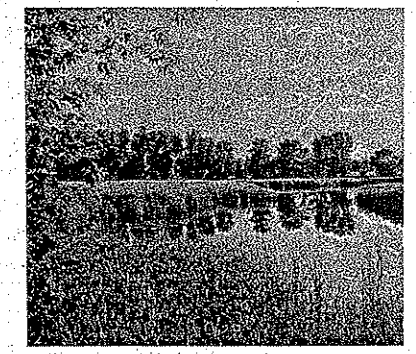
As 19th century American cities grew larger, dirtier, more crowded and crime-ridden, voices emerged through the din to lead the way to a more ideal urban vision. This new view — shaped by social reformers, engineers, physicians, architects and poets — proposed that the salvation of cities was to be found in the country. Or at least in the qualities and values inherent in rural life. According to these civic improvers, urbanization had obscured the connection between humankind and nature: break up the urban gridiron with naturalistic greenery and a more civilized city would result.

One of the primary proponents of this view was Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), who is acknowledged as the father of American landscape architecture. Olmsted was a key figure in the 19th century urban parks movement and together with his partner Calvert Vaux won the 1858 competition to design New York City's Central Park, the nation's first comprehensively planned public urban park.

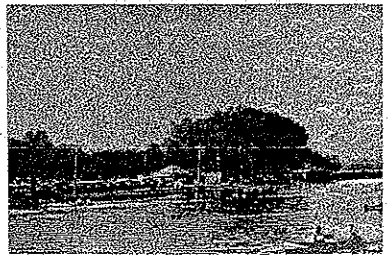
Levi Carter Park, Carter Boulevard Cornish Boulevard

The oxbow lake that formed north of the city when the Missouri River changed course in 1877 — Cut-Off Lake, as it was first known — soon became valued as a commercial and recreational resource. The South Omaha meatpackers Swift and Armour were among those who located ice cutting and warehousing operations along the lake's northern banks. Attracted by its water-related recreational advantages, a beach resort with a large boat house and two-story pavilion, a Rod and Gun Club, and a YMCA camp had all settled on the lake shores by 1906.

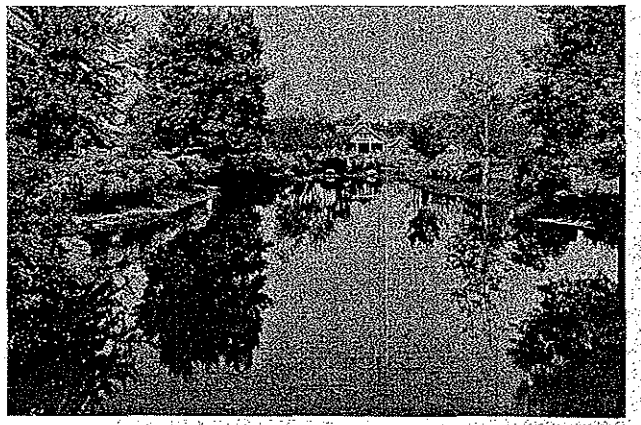
Omaha industrialist Levi Carter, owner of the Carter White Lead Works in nearby East Omaha, became interested in Cut-Off Lake for somewhat different reasons. As his wife Selina Carter noted, "He passed this land daily in going to and from his business, and was among the first to see its desirability for park and boulevard purposes." In 1908, three years after Carter's death, his widow donated $50,000 to the city to acquire lakefront land for a public park memorializing her husband. Terms of the donation stipulated that Cut-Off Lake — also at that time known as



Carter Lake; 1917



Carter Lake Municipal Beach; 1929



Kountze Park; 1913

and 21st streets, Pinkney to Pratt. The terms of the deed required that the parcels be forever used as a public park, known as Kountze Park, and that the City spend $5,000 to improve the property during 1897, the first year of a two-year period of use granted to the exposition company. The Commissioners exceeded the agreed-upon sum and spent about $35,000 improving its land and roadways leading to the property.

The park parcel constituted only a small portion of the Trans-Mississippi's total of nearly two hundred acres, yet across the Park Commissioners' ground stretched the fair's main attraction, the Mirror Lagoon. A reflecting pool lined by impressive, Renaissance-inspired buildings, the lagoon entertained exposition visitors with cruises in Venetian gondolas.

After the closing of the fair, the Board, according to its 1898 report, was left with "two iron bridges, an artesian well...a quantity of trees and shrubs, a macadamized boulevard...and the park land." One year later, the Board reported its intent to remove the bridges, fill the lagoon and grade the site in preparation for the park's future development. Evidently, building debris remaining from the demolition of the fair's temporary plaster structures was used, in part, to fill the Mirror Lagoon. In 1901, some rather large expenses for "filling and grading for lagoon and artesian wells" were paid out of the park fund; a pair of smaller ponds was apparently fashioned from this rearrangement of the site. The lagoons, stocked with fish, remained a feature of the park as late as the 1930s.

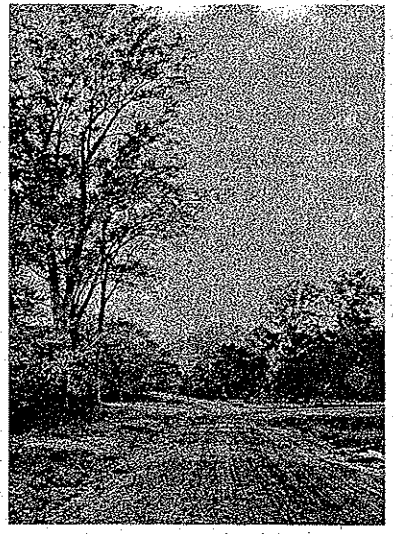
Even before Central Park was completed, a number of other cities — among them Philadelphia, Baltimore, Brooklyn and Detroit — began to develop plans for pleasure grounds based on the Central Park model, and in many cases with Olmsted's direct design help. In the decades following the Civil War, the interest in park-building spread from older, more established cities to newly developing urban areas; the movement caught hold in Omaha in the 1880s.

The Greening of Omaha

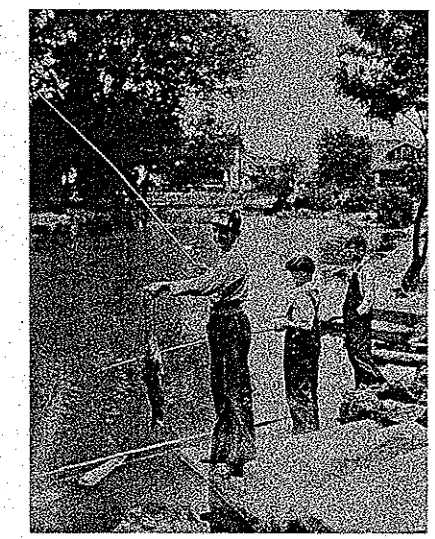
The push for parks in Omaha culminated in 1889 with the state legislature's enactment of a law that gave metropolitan class cities an effective means of acquiring, developing and maintaining a system of public parks and boulevards. Before the passage of this statute, the City of Omaha lacked the clear legal authority to establish a park commission with the power to raise funds through taxation and the issuance of bonds. Consequently, at the time of the new legislation, Jefferson Square — the only public property surviving from the original 1854 platting of the city — was in dire need of a facelift; and Hanscom Park, a fifty-acre tract donated to the city in 1872, remained virtually undeveloped and little used.

The poor state of the city's park properties had long been disturbing to a number of Omaha's leading citizens who had lobbied forcefully for the 1889 legislation. The cause was perhaps closest to the heart and pen of George L. Miller, an Omaha pioneer physician who refocused his career on newspapering in 1865 when he co-founded the *Omaha Daily Herald*. An avid arborist, Miller used his editorial power to convince the public of the need for parks — a need that was becoming increasingly pressing in the boom years of the 1880s.

In the decade of the 1880s, Omaha's population jumped from thirty thousand to over one hundred thousand persons. As the city consumed more and more of the adjoining countryside, Dr. Miller and a growing group of like-minded residents feared the increase of urban ills and saw parks providing an effective antidote. Not only concerned with bettering conditions inside the city limits,



Elmwood Park; 1914



Kountze Park lagoon; 1930

this group of influential citizens also wanted to improve Omaha's image to the rest of the country. A fine system of parks would add a civilized and progressive aspect to the city of stockyards, smelters, wholesaling and railroading. In turn, this enhanced image would attract people and capital. Parks could bring increased prosperity, so argued Dr. Miller and his supporters.

As provided in the new parks statute, in May of 1889 Omaha's first Board of Park Commissioners was named by judges of the District Court. Among the five men selected were: George W. Lininger, farm implement dealer and art gallery owner; Augustus Pratt, a real estate developer; former State Supreme Court Judge George B. Lake; banker Alfred Millard; and the aforementioned George L. Miller. At the Commissioners' first session, Dr. Miller was voted Board President.

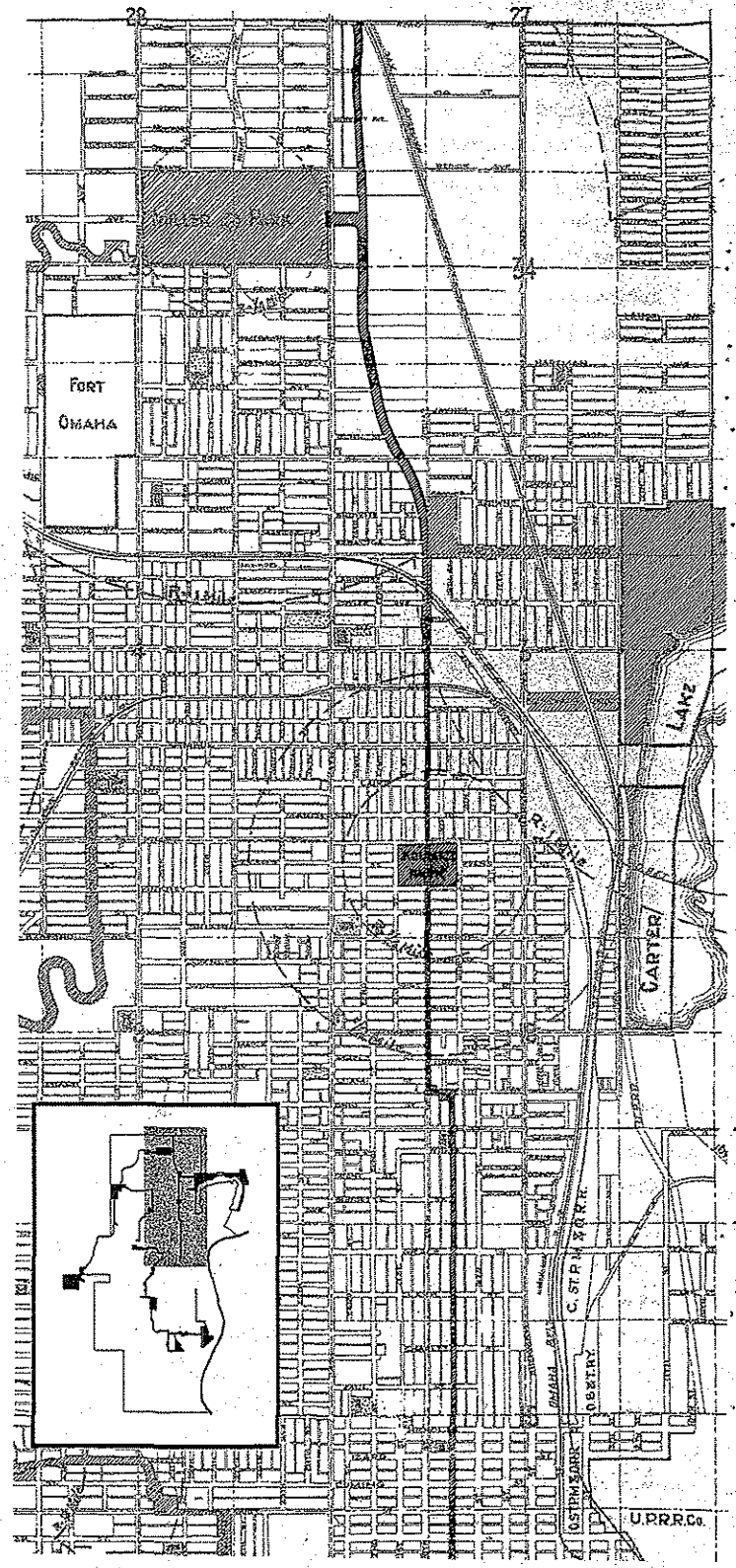
Dr. George L. Miller

At the time of his appointment to the Board of Park Commissioners, Dr. Miller had been a resident of Omaha for more than thirty years. A native of upstate New York, Miller came to Omaha at the age of twenty-four in 1854 to practice medicine in what was then a struggling village. But when the young doctor realized that he could not make a living in the small settlement, he gave up the profession and, in his own words, "floated out upon an unknown sea of politics and speculation."

Following the bluff line along the Missouri, Florence Boulevard was laid out to afford fine views of the river valley. Immediately upon its opening, the route became popular for recreational drives — first by carriage and bicycle, afterward by automobile. Because of its scenic, level course and the fact that the roadbed was not broken up by street railway trackage, the boulevard was described in 1895 as "the only suitable driveway in the city." Later, lined by tall sycamores and attractive homes, a length of Florence Boulevard near Miller Park became known as "The Prettiest Mile."

Kountze Park's eleven acres became public property as a direct result of the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha's version of a world's fair that attracted more than two million visitors. The site selected for the fair was a large tract of land north of the city owned by Omaha pioneer banker and real estate developer Herman Kountze. City officials wanted to assist the Exposition Board in developing the grounds, but state law prohibited the allocation of City funds for this purpose. If the property were dedicated park land, however, public money could be spent by the Park Commissioners to improve the property as a city park.

Taking that approach, in 1897 Herman Kountze's United Real Estate and Trust Company conveyed to the City for the consideration of $1, twin parcels of about five and one-half acres each between 19th and 20th, and 20th



Dr. Miller served three terms in the territorial legislature and then was nominated for Congress. A defeat at the polls ended his further pursuit of elected office, yet it did not dim his desire for an active career in politics and public service. Toward this end, in 1865, Miller co-founded the *Omaha Daily Herald.* As the newspaper's publisher and editor for more than twenty years, Miller acquired a strong and respected voice that affected public affairs on local, state and national levels.

One of Dr. Miller's most important contributions to the city and the entire state was the important role he played in securing the location of the Union Pacific's bridge and eastern terminus at Omaha in 1868. By successfully representing Omaha's interests in negotiations with railroad officials, Miller helped to assure the city's status as an important regional transportation center. Expanding upon that achievement, Miller involved himself with a broad spectrum of issues and activities, ranging from law enforcement to experimental agriculture —all aimed at the building up of Omaha and Nebraska.

George L. Miller

In 1887, George Miller retired from journalism, selling the newspaper that would several years later merge with the *Omaha Daily World* to become the *World-Herald.* Not inclined to remain idle, Miller took the position of general manager of the New York Life Insurance Company's Nebraska operation while he maintained a variety of civic and social involvements that in addition to the Park Commission included work for the Humane Society,

Immanuel Hospital and the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Related to Miller's interest in forestry and land development, another project that occupied a great deal of his attention over the years was "Seymour Park," his country estate located then about five miles southwest of the city. In 1867 Miller purchased the first parcel of what would eventually become a 650-acre tract envisioned by its owner for development as an elite suburb. The doctor planted the property with thousands of oak, catalpa and walnut trees and built an imposing stone mansion. The house burned in 1899, and nine years later Miller began selling off the property for development as a townsite. In 1912 the area formerly comprising Seymour Park was incorporated as the city of Ralston.

The close of George Miller's life stands in marked contrast to the productivity and public character of his earlier years: in 1909 he suffered a mental collapse and remained an invalid until his death at the age of ninety in 1920. In the care of his niece, he died a poor man, buried with funds provided by his friends.

To begin the biographical profile of Dr. Miller in their *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska,* James W. Savage and John T. Bell write: "Of all those who have been identified with the growth and progress of Omaha and have left their impression upon its history, no one has a reputation more to be coveted than George L. Miller."

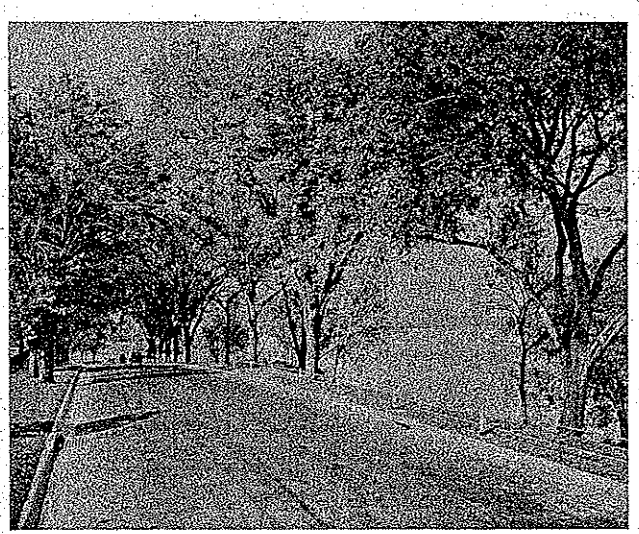
H.W.S. Cleveland

Under the leadership of President Miller, one of the Board of Commissioners' first and most farsighted actions was the commissioning of the eminent landscape architect H.W.S. Cleveland (1814-1900) to provide direction in designing a comprehensive park system for the city.

When the Omaha Board selected Horace William Shaler Cleveland, then seventy-five, to serve as its advisor, the landscape architect was living in Minneapolis where he was employed in a similar capacity by the Park Boards of Minneapolis and St. Paul. A native of Massachussetts, Cleveland early in his life worked as a farmer, land surveyor and horticulturist. He became associated

Florence Boulevard Kountze Park

After three years of planning and a number of false starts, the city engineer set the stakes for Florence Boulevard on October 10, 1892. This event marked the beginning of the city's boulevard system and, according to the *World-Herald*, the realization of a "hope... sprung perennial in the Omaha heart for the last decade."



Florence Boulevard; 1938

The initial stretch of parkway was constructed north from Ames Avenue to near the Parker tract (later Miller Park). Although the boulevard's one-hundred-foot right-of-way does not conform to H.W. S. Cleveland's two-hundred-foot standard for "ornamental avenues," a Park Commissioners report refers to payment made to the landscape architect for plans. It is not known how closely actual construction followed Cleveland's designs.

In 1897 the section of the boulevard along 19th and 20th Streets between Chicago Street and Ames was placed under the jurisdiction of the Park Commissioners. This roadway was improved by the addition of land and landscaping, but the existing linear road configuration

to the east. In 1884, a tract of land including the point was platted as the Belvedere Addition, a name derrived from an Italian word meaning "beautiful view."

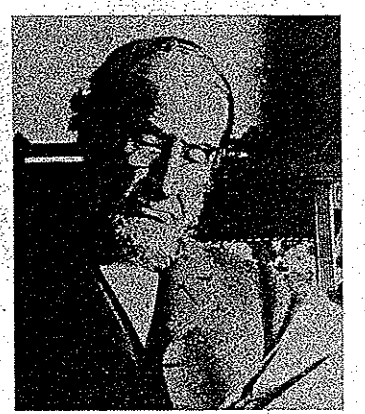
A proposal for a boulevard through the Belvedere area was discussed by the Park Commissioners as early as 1889, preceding their purchase of the tracts that would become Miller and Fontenelle parks. Certainly the Commissioners were drawn to the area because of its picturesque terrain; adding to their interest, however, was the proximity of the three-hundred-acre Forest Lawn Cemetery, established in 1885 about two miles northwest of Fort Omaha.

In the 19th century, particularly before the spread of public parks, cemeteries were widely used by urban dwellers as recreation spots. Some of the earliest boulevard planning efforts were thus focused in the Belvedere area in an attempt to link Forest Lawn with prospective park sites. Later, in the late 1920s, the City would acquire property to extend Fontenelle Boulevard from 36th Street and Martin Avenue to Forest Lawn Avenue, finally securing the boulevard connection contemplated many years earlier.

with Frederick Law Olmsted in designing Prospect Park in Brooklyn during the late 1860s, and the two remained lifelong friends and colleagues.

Cleveland lived until the age of eighty-five, and over the course of his career in what was then the newly developing field of landscape architecture, he completed a broad range of projects, including designs for parks and boulevards, resorts, cemeteries, and suburbs in such varied locales as Chicago; Providence, Rhode Island; Indianapolis; Jekell Island, Georgia and Milwaukee. The metropolitan park system of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul is considered by scholars as his greatest professional achievement.

Cleveland's chief interest, however, which he discussed in his 1873 publication *Landscape Architecture As Applied to the Wants of the West*, was "the art of arrang-



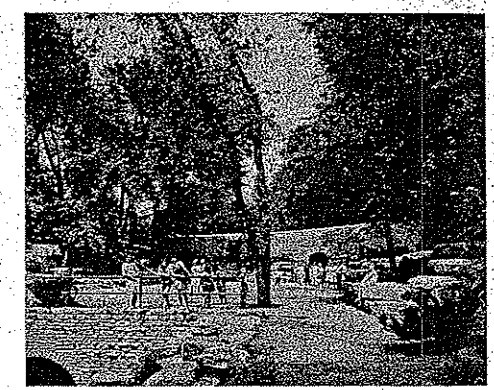
Horace William Shaler Cleveland

ing land" for efficiency and beauty in the newly developing cities of the midwestern region.

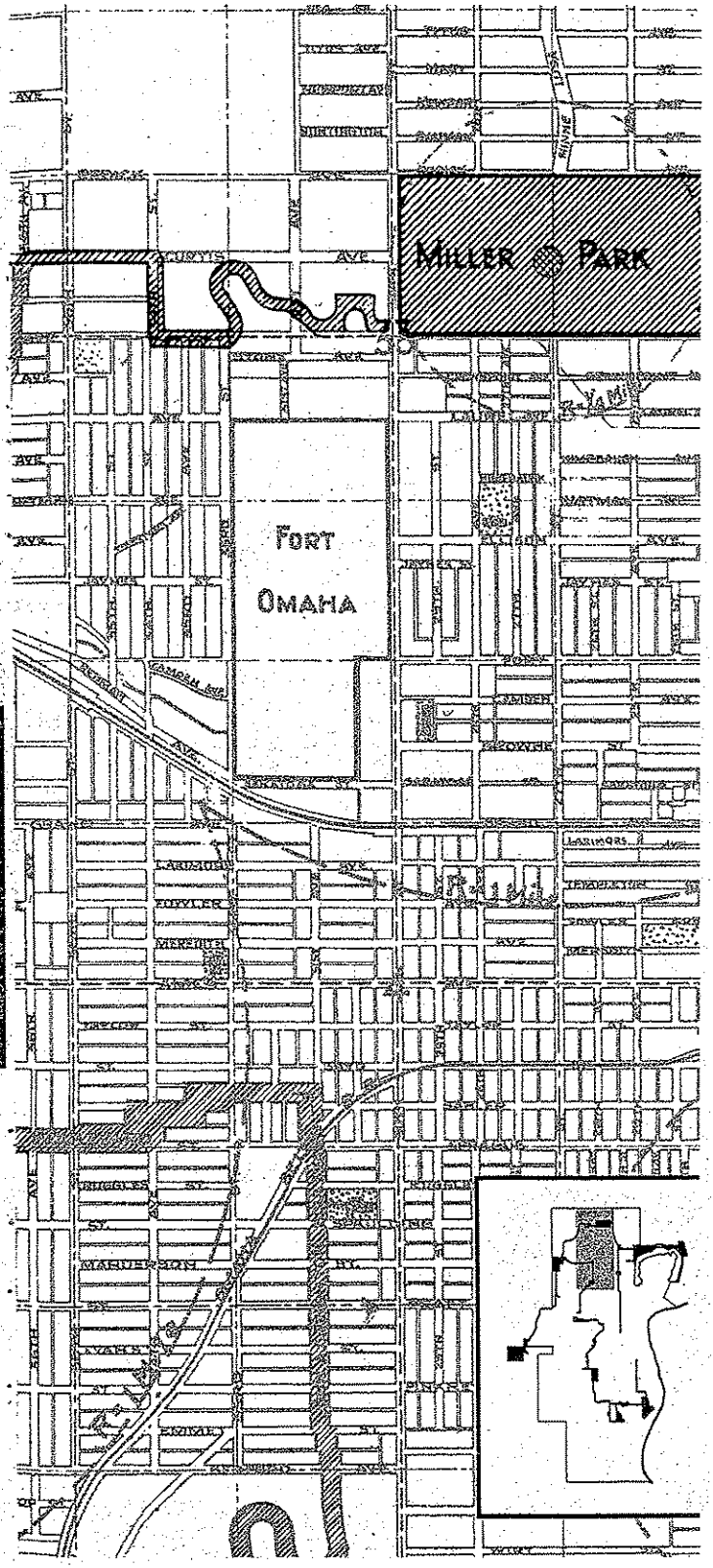
Horace Cleveland worked on Omaha projects for a five-year period from 1889 until 1894, when health concerns forced him to give up his work here. Board of Commissioners annual reports show that over this period he was paid approximately $6,000 for plans for Jefferson Square, Hanscom, Elmwood, Bemis, Miller, and Fontenelle parks, as well as survey and design work for portions of Florence Boulevard. Through his later writings, it is known that Cleveland himself considered his Omaha plans to be among his most important work.

Regrettably, Board of Commissioners reports provide little specific information about the landscape architect's actual designs. More unfortunate is the fact that neither Cleveland's drawings nor plans, and few other materials directly related to his Omaha projects, appear to have survived. This lack of a comprehensive body of original material documenting the landscape architect's work is not a circumstance unique to Omaha. The Chicago fire of 1871 ravaged Cleveland's office, destroying records related to nearly twenty years of his early career.

Certainly this lack of information has contributed to the fact that the landscape designer has not been fully recognized for his accomplishments. Due to recent scholarship, however, the extent of Cleveland's importance as a leading figure in the history of American landscape architecture and city planning is now being realized.



Public spring at Elmwood Park; 1942



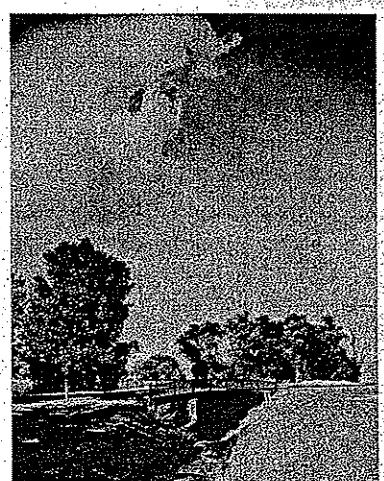
"A System of Public Parks, Parkways and Boulevards"

One important written record that has survived to the present is H.W.S. Cleveland's first report to the Omaha Commissioners. Written in the form of a letter in the landscape architect's ornate hand, this twenty-eight-page document, received by the Board in June of 1889, outlines the ideas that set the direction for parks development in Omaha for years to come.

The major portion of Cleveland's report contains a discussion of the landscape architect's general principles

tree-planting and construction of a lake were begun; between 1897 and 1898 it is reported that more than thirty-five thousand trees were planted in the park. Although Cleveland's plans have been lost, it is thought that areas of the park have retained aspects of his original designs: the stands of pine, lagoon with an island, and curving drives are features typical of his design vocabulary.

In 1893 the Board named the park in honor of Dr. George L. Miller, the principal force behind the establishment of the Board of Park Commissioners and its first President. For many years the park was known for its Birch Drive, a roadway lined by paper birches that were reportedly planted by Dr. Miller himself.



Miller Park; 1914

Belvedere Boulevard — which meets Fontenelle Boulevard at Kansas Avenue and winds east to Miller Park — was part of the right-of-way obtained through condemnation procedings initiated in 1916. At this time, the City secured the complete length of boulevard connecting its two park properties in Omaha's northwest sector. Initially the entire boulevard was named Belvedere, then later Fontenelle, and finally each of the earlier names was reassigned to separate sections of the parkway.

A notable aspect of this boulevard is its twisting climb up to the summit of a bluff said to be the highest in the city. From an elevation of almost twelve hundred feet, the boulevard provides a vista extending more than ten miles

of park system design based on studies of European and American cities. Applying these principles specifically to Omaha, Cleveland proposes a series of small parks — "pleasant and easily accessible resorts for pedestrians"— in the northern and southern sections of the city and "a large park on the West at the most central point that is available." He also urges the integration of open spaces through the construction of "broad ornamental avenues, known as boulevards or parkways" designed "with a tasteful arrangement of trees and shrubbery at (their) sides and in the center."

The language of the 1889 law establishing Omaha's Board of Park Commissioners had specifically charged the Board with developing "a system of parks, parkways and boulevards," as Cleveland describes. However, it appears that in the beginning only Dr. Miller supported the system concept — an idea that Cleveland had earlier pioneered in his designs for other cities. In an 1891 letter to Frederick Law Olmsted, Cleveland writes "Dr. George L. Miller...for a time stood alone in his wish to secure for the city a connected system of parks of sufficient area to meet its probable future wants, but he has convinced them all of its necessity and they are now very earnest advocates of the measure."

Since few significant maps from the early days of the Commission survive, information about what has become known as the "Cleveland Plan" of connected parks and boulevards was gained from historians' accounts, Board of Commissioners reports, H.W.S. Cleveland's own letters and newspaper articles of the period.

From these sources, it is difficult to determine the full extent of the landscape architect's role in designing and planning Omaha's park system. However, historic documents do reveal that in addition to providing a conceptual plan for a network of open spaces and specific designs for six parks, Cleveland also advised the Board on the selection of park sites and the routing of boulevards. Together, this work imposed a pattern on the landscape that would guide future park-building efforts for many years.

Foundations of the System

Between 1889 and 1894, five major tracts of land that would become Bemis, Elmwood, Fontenelle, Miller and Riverview parks were acquired by the Commissioners, expanding public land holdings from about sixty to almost five hundred acres. Apart from property received by the Board through private donations, a majority of this total acreage was purchased by funds provided through a $400,000 bond issue passed by Omaha voters in 1891.

Also during this five-year period, Florence Boulevard was opened and progress on acquiring real estate for portions of other boulevards was under way. Major improvement projects directed by H.W. S. Cleveland were completed in Jefferson Square and Hanscom Park, and substantial work was begun in Bemis, Elmwood, and Miller parks following the landscape architect's plans.

At this time a major improvement program was also begun in Riverview Park, directed by designs inspired by Cleveland but completed by William R. Adams, another important figure in the development of Omaha's parks. Born in Ireland and trained as a landscape gardener by his father, Adams was hired to serve as the first Superintendent of Parks in 1889 and held that position for more than twenty years.

In 1894, Dr. Miller completed his five-year term on the Board of Park Commissioners, and H. W. S. Cleveland, in poor health, also ended his affiliation with the Omaha Commissioners. Although their official involvement with the Board was relatively short, Miller and Cleveland left as their legacy the foundation of a park system that would serve Omaha well through years of growth and change.

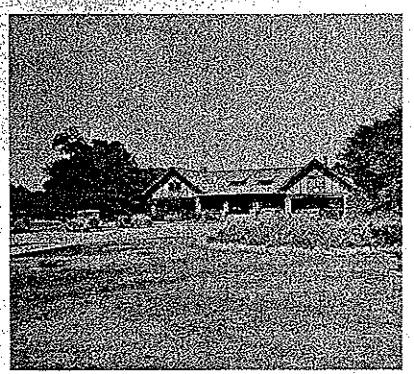
Growth of the System

The historic map which forms the basis of the park and boulevard system tour that follows was produced in 1916 for Omaha's newly established City Planning Commission. This map was selected because it best presents the system in its most finished state relative to the plans conceived by H.W.S. Cleveland and the Board of Park Commissioners in the early 1890s.

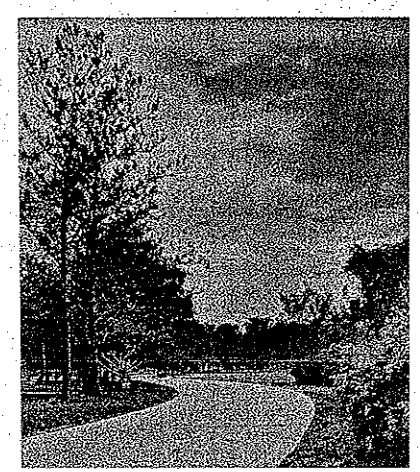
Miller Park
Belvedere Boulevard

Along with Fontenelle, Riverview, and a portion of Elmwood, Miller Park was added to the system with funds from the 1891 bond issue. Unlike the other park sites, which were sought for their scenic advantages, this seventy-eight-acre tract consisted of a level corn field cut by several ravines. Because the site offered no commanding views nor other interesting natural attributes, some city officials objected to the purchase. However, the property's location near to the route of Florence Boulevard, and the prospect of low improvement costs convinced the City Council to approve the purchase of the tract for $75,000 in 1893.

In the same year, plans were prepared for the park's design by H.W. S. Cleveland and soon afterward, grading,



Miller Park; 1931

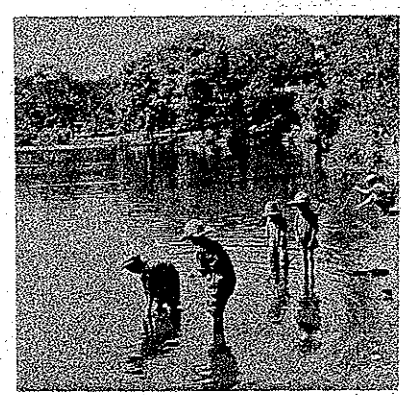


Miller Park; 1926

The map shows how the system's foundations would be expanded over the years to more fully realize its original designers' intentions. While a number of major parks were already in place by the mid-1890s, only a portion of Florence Boulevard was open for public use. Therefore, as the map illustrates, much attention would be focused over the next twenty years on the construction of links between existing park properties.

To summarize this activity, around the turn of the century, work would be started on boulevards linking Riverview, Hanscom and Bemis parks. By 1910, land was acquired to begin the connection between Fontenelle and Elmwood parks. Finally, during the teens, the City would complete the connector from Elmwood to Fontenelle and initiate construction on links between Bemis, Fontenelle and Miller parks.

In addition to boulevards, the 1916 map also shows new parks that were brought into the system after the



Hanscom Park; 1924

early '90s. Kountze and Deer parks — small parks sited on boulevard routes — were added just before the turn of the century, with Curtiss Turner Park entering the system in 1902. Six years later, in 1908, the Commissioners would accept a monetary donation to purchase the lake shore property that would become Levi Carter Park. A major park at this location was not anticipated by the Commissioners in their early plans; however, the property's location allowed for its integration into the system through parkway links to Florence Boulevard.

In the decade of the teens, the City would first add Mercer Park along the Bemis-Fontenelle corridor. In 1915, Omaha's annexation of South Omaha would lead to the aquisition of Spring Lake and five other smaller park properties. Although it appears that there were early attempts to link several of these properties to the existing system, such connections were never realized.

Ironically, other boulevard links never completed were those first contemplated by Cleveland and the Commissioners. Certainly the link that received the most attention over the years was the proposed connection between Hanscom and Elmwood. In their 1893 report, the Commissioners stated the expectation that this boulevard would be ready for use within a year. However, as late as 1917, Park and Recreation Department Superintendent J. B. Hummel in his yearly report would still speak confidently about a proposal to bridge this gap in the system.

Another boulevard proposed in the late teens was the River Drive project outlined in the 1919 City Planning Commission Report, City Planning Needs of Omaha. Envisioned as a parkway along the Missouri River, from Fontenelle Forest to north of the City Waterworks, the project elaborated on the original Cleveland plan by incorporating portions of Florence Boulevard and Riverview Park. Only a part of the River Drive was realized: the construction of Pershing Drive north from Fontenelle Boulevard, and Gifford Drive between Riverview, Spring Lake, and Mandan Parks are the results of the 1919 plan.

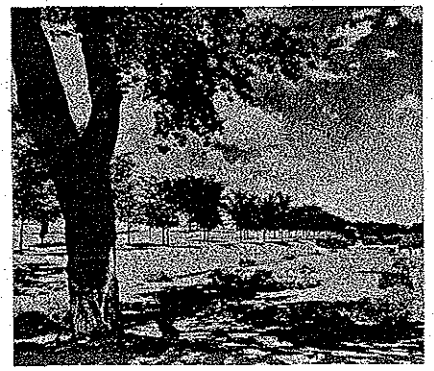
In the early 1950s, the building of the Northwest Radial Highway would cause a rift in the parkway network between Fontenelle and Happy Hollow Boulevards. The building of the Northwest Radial foreshadowed the massive Interstate Highway projects of the early 1960s — projects that would fracture the boulevard connections and reverse the system's history of continuous growth.

Happy Hollow Boulevard

With the south branch of Fontenelle Boulevard secured in 1908, the next stage in closing the gap between Elmwood and Fontenelle Parks occurred four years later with a donation of land by real estate developers C.C. and J.E. George. In a 1912 agreement, the George brothers deeded sixteen acres to the City between Elmwood Park and Western Avenue in the Village of Dundee. By accepting the gift, the City and Park Commissioners consented to spend $10,000 to construct the boulevard, with the donors providing landscaping and other improvements.

The George donation left a gap between the southern terminus of Fontenelle Boulevard and Western Avenue. Through condemnation proceedings, the City obtained right-of-way at a cost of $32,000 and in 1918 the connector between Fontenelle and Elmwood parks was complete.

Also at this time, the George brothers contributed an additional strip of property to widen the boulevard between Cuming and Underwood, providing ground for a divided roadway and sunken gardens. Nearly thirty years had passed since H.W.S. Cleveland first outlined his ideas for Omaha's parkways. Many miles of boulevards had been constructed; however, in only a few places were the landscape architect's design concepts fully realized. A portion of Florence Boulevard near Miller Park and this stretch on Happy Hollow remain the most completely developed examples of Cleveland's vision of "the broad parkway with a tasteful arrangement of trees and shrubbery at its sides and in the center."



Sunken Gardens; 1924

lake (which the Board wanted enlarged to twenty); a carriage concourse that traveled to the park's highest point; and additional drives and walks that threaded through wooded slopes. Although Elmwood has seen extensive change over the past one hundred years, it is thought that remnants of the park's original design can yet be seen in the hilltop stands of pine and spruce and in the configuration of certain roadways.

Elmwood Park; 1921

A Tour of the Park and Boulevard System

To provide a clearer picture of the early character of the system, the 1916 Planning Commission map is presented in its original form: no attempt has been made to reflect the changes in the system that have occurred since its publication. Most importantly, while the map does not show the principal gaps left in the boulevards by the building of the Interstate, when traveling the system, the breaks in Lincoln and Deer Park Boulevards can be bridged by following 30th Street and Vinton Street, respectively. It should also be noted that in some instances the map anticipates boulevard routes that later, when built, would follow somewhat different paths. A reproduction of the complete 1916 map can be found inside the back cover. *Note: All maps are oriented with North at the top of the page.*

In addition to the map, photographs have been included that show the parks and boulevards over a span of years, dating from 1909 to about 1942. Although the text focuses on the early history of each park and boulevard, corresponding photographs were not in most cases readily available; when possible, an effort was made to select images that capture some facet of the history discussed in the text.

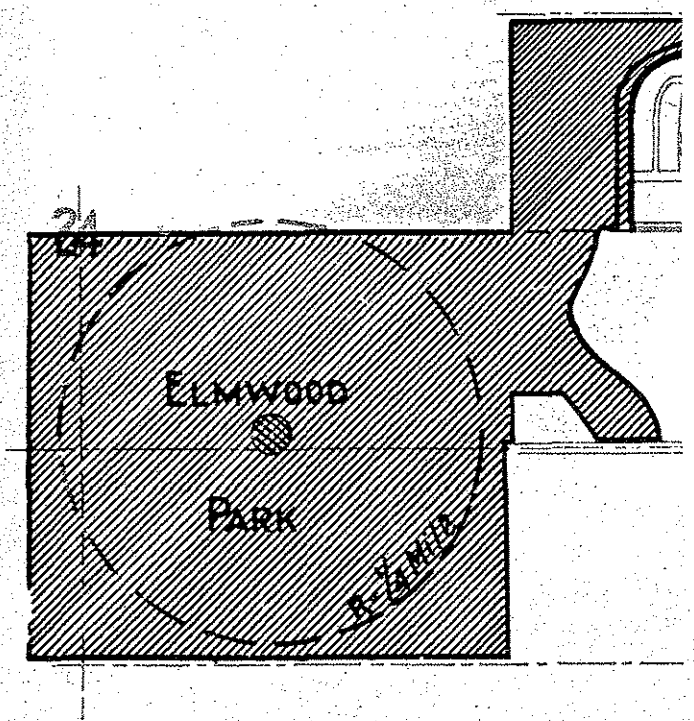
The descriptions and photographs that follow present only limited glimpses of the ever-changing shape of Omaha's early public landscape. Through this tour, you will find that the winding cinder paths that were the first boulevards have been covered over by straight concrete streets, clipped grass has replaced clumps of shrubbery, and swimming pools now substitute for wild lagoons. Yet, much evidence of the foundations of our early parks and boulevards still remains. We hope that this guide will help make this layer of history more clearly visible.

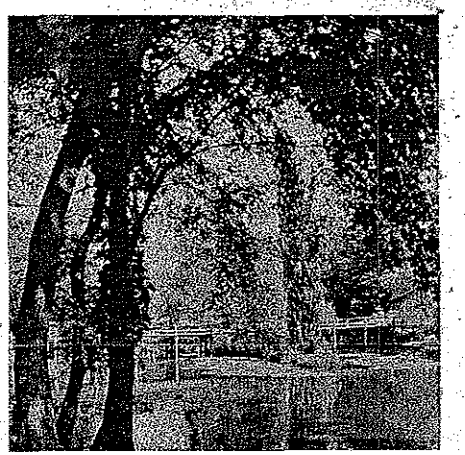
Riverview Park
Riverview Boulevard

Consistant with H. W. S. Cleveland's premise that parks should be located in areas before they were built up, the Commissioners allocated funds from the 1891 bond issue to purchase park land in the city's southern reaches. For its south-side park, the Board selected a piece of property on the Missouri River shore in an undeveloped region between Omaha and South Omaha. Local residents were not at first happy with the Commissioners' choice, finding it too far from their homes and so hilly that "the land could not support a table on four legs." Difficulties also arose with property owners over the terms of purchase, and the city had to use its power of eminent domain to acquire the initial parcel of park land in 1894. Additional tracts were subsequently added to increase the park to over one hundred acres by 1899.

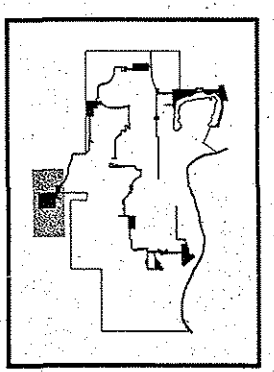
Although Cleveland himself approved of the site on the river, he wasn't sure how to design a park that gave the effect of "rural tranquility and graceful beauty " in sight of the Missouri, "that turbid and untamable stream." In the end, the landscape architect did not have to contend with the problem; his health failed and he could no longer continue his work in Omaha. Long-time Park Superintendent W. R. Adams prepared the park's designs that featured a lagoon and winding drives.

Virtually from its beginnings as a park, the Riverview





Riverview Park
Lagoon; 1939



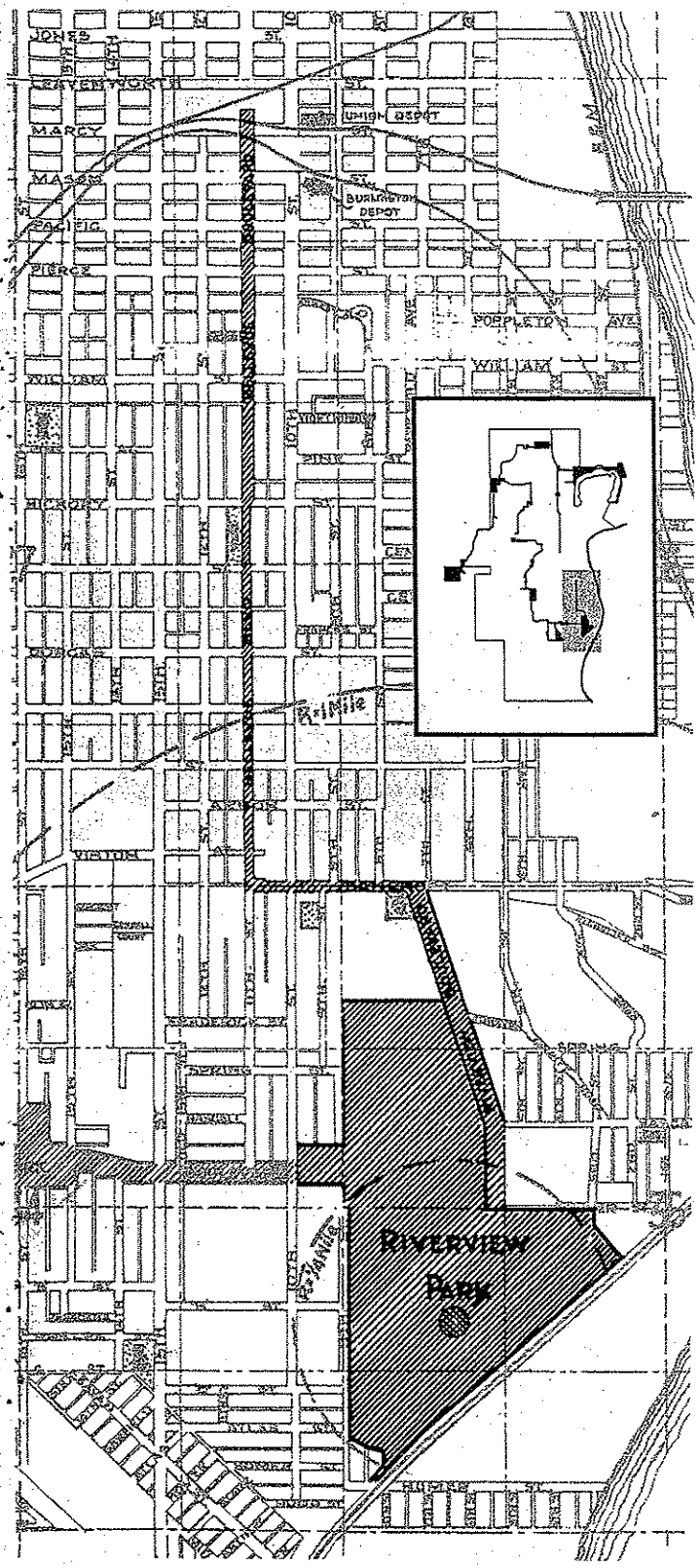
Elmwood Park Auto-camp; 1920

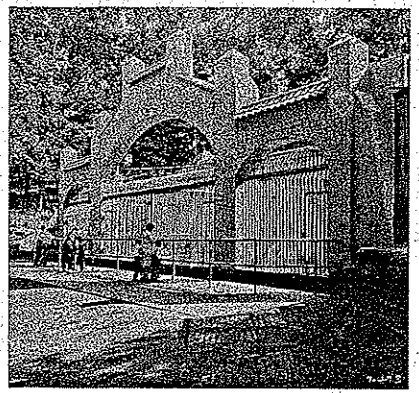
siting of the large central park. Three and one-half miles from the business district, the parcel was described in the *Omaha Bee* as a "wild and romantic place," containing a wooded ravine that followed the course of a small stream. "There are all manner of shady nooks in this dell," the description continued, "and some of the largest forest trees in this section of the country are to be seen in it." Most impressive among the trees were the huge elms that prompted the Commissioners to give the park the name Elmwood.

Especially in its early years, the Park Board received numerous offers of property for sale or by donation: land developers knew that proximity to park land was advantageous in speeding the sale of lots and raising their value. The Board refused many offers, but accepted the Elmwood tract because of its location, scenic advantages and opportunities for expansion.

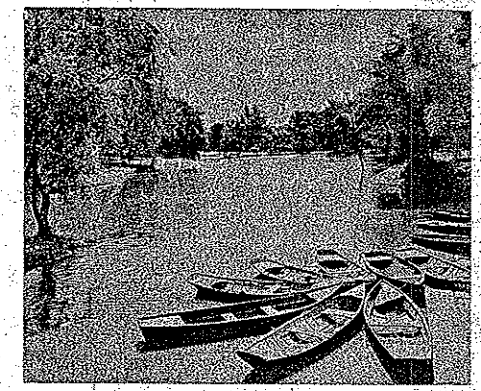
From the beginning, the Board envisioned that the donated parcel would serve as the nucleus for a larger park; thus several years later when the group of landowners who donated the first tract offered additional, adjacent acres for sale, 156 were purchased for $135,000. In seeking City Council approval for the purchase proposal, President Miller said it was the Board's intent to make Elmwood serve as the "grand park" for several years. Dr. Miller — optimistically planning ahead for a city of five hundred thousand inhabitants — hoped to later obtain a tract of one thousand acres further west.

As with the other parks acquired during the Park Board's first years, Horace Cleveland was commissioned to draw up a set of plans for the improvement of the Elmwood tract. According to newspaper accounts, in 1892 he outlined plans to the Board that featured a seven-acre





Bear Pit; Riverview Park; 1928



Riverview Park; 1917

tract has had an association with zoo activities. The 1896 Park Commissioners report notes the first addition of a collection of animals to the park, including the purchase of a moose ($150), a bear ($25) and an odd expense incurred for "Moving fish" ($1). Over subsequent years more of the property was turned over to the zoo's use; in 1964 the tract was leased to the Omaha Zoological Society as the site for the Henry Doorly Zoo. After work began on Omaha's first parkway, Florence Boulevard, the next branch in the system sprouted from the city's southernmost park property, the Riverview tract. In 1895 the land for the boulevard was acquired through condemnation and was turned over to the Park Commissioners for improvement as the Southeast Boulevard.

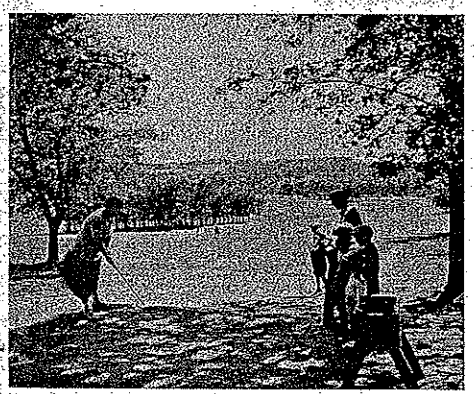
In the early 1890s, this boulevard may have been contemplated as the link between Hanscom and Riverview parks, but later in the decade that connection was established further south.

Elmwood Park

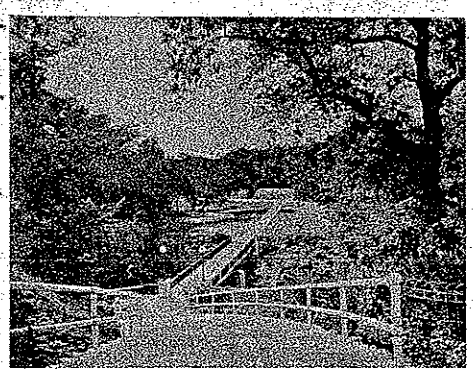
In an initial report to the Park Commissioners in 1889, Horace Cleveland explained his general principles of urban park planning, including his conviction that a "great central park" was a necessary component of a comprehensive park system. Such a park, Cleveland said, needed to be of considerable size to shut out city sights and provide "the refreshment of rural scenes."

For Omaha, Cleveland advised that a tract of no less than five hundred acres be secured to meet the needs of the city's rapidly increasing populace. With an eye toward future land values and patterns of city growth, the landscape architect further specified that the tract be located at a central point far to the west of already densely populated areas.

Soon after receiving Cleveland's report, the Commissioners accepted a donation of fifty-five acres along Leavenworth Street that fit the report's description for the



Elmwood Park golf course; 1921

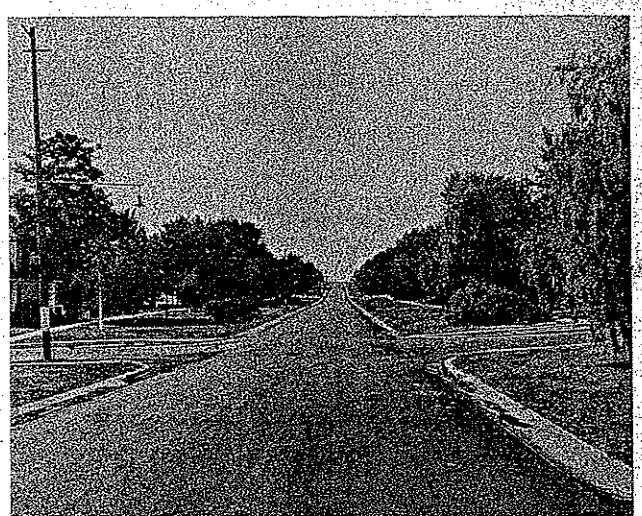


South entrance near Leavenworth Street; 1924

tion of Grant Street, Military Avenue and 45th Street, ran parallel with Military for about 700 feet, then headed due north straight to Fontenelle Park. Secured through eminent domain at a cost of $16,000, the parkway was laid out on land adjacent to the city limits that, for the most part, had not yet been divided by lots, blocks and streets. Officially named Fontenelle Boulevard in 1913, this parkway would later join with Happy Hollow Boulevard to complete the route to Elmwood Park.

The section of boulevard leading north from Fontenelle Park to join Miller Park was not acquired by the City until the mid-teens. The entire length was initially known as Belvedere Boulevard, but a 1917 city ordinance changed the name of the segment of parkway from Ames to Curtis Avenue (at 36th Street) to Fontenelle Boulevard.

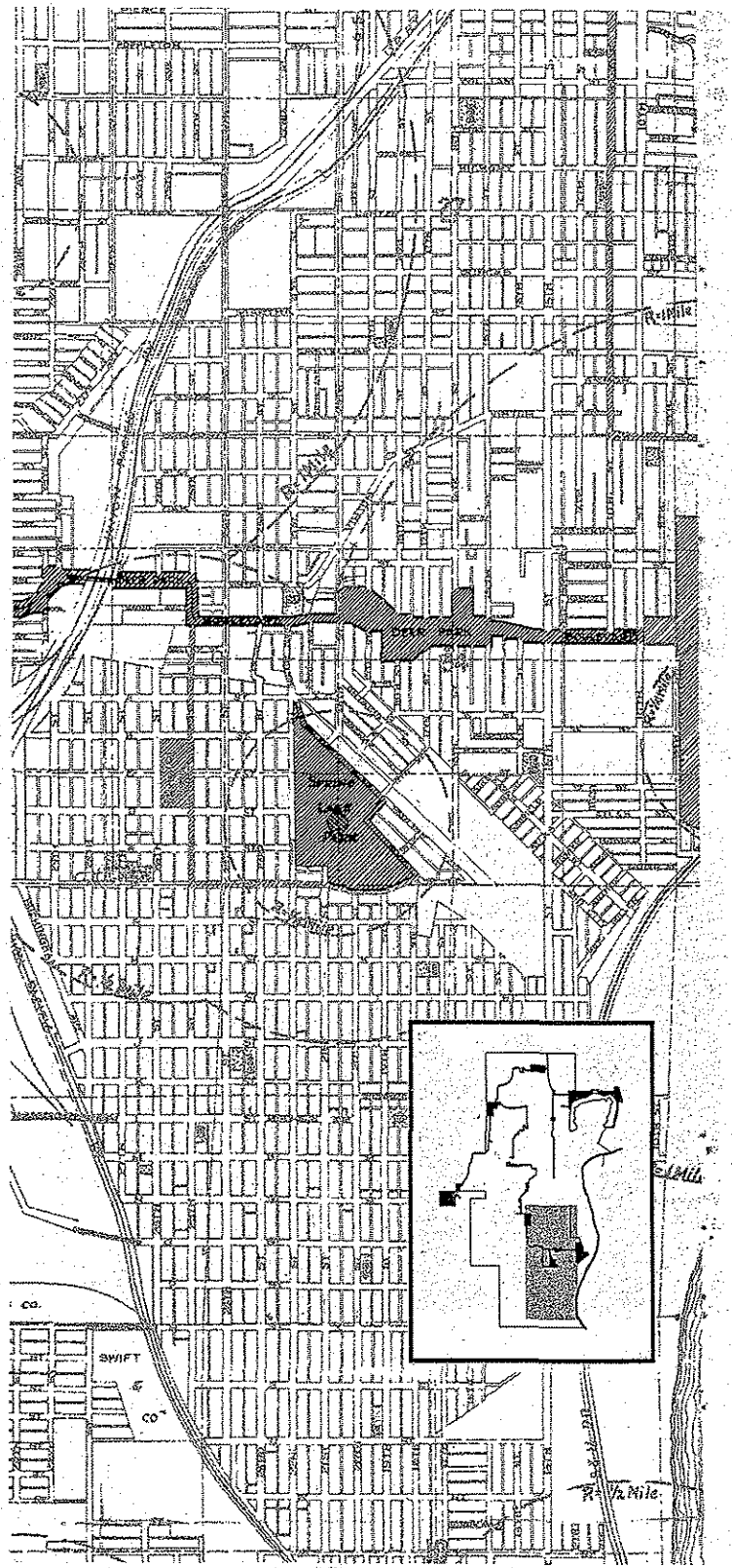
"Broad parkings and pleasant homes set back among the trees" — this description of Fontenelle Boulevard in 1926 still captures the character of the boulevard today.



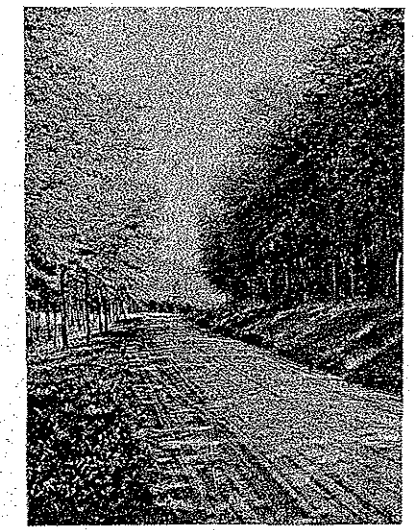
Fontenelle Boulevard at Bedford Street; 1930

Renamed "Riverview Boulevard" in 1913, the winding road was originally built to connect the park's north entrance with Bancroft Street, forming the first leg of the Southeast Boulevard, which later was extended along Bancroft to 11th Street, and along 11th to about Mason. These additional stretches became known as Bancroft Boulevard and Bellevue Boulevard, although it appears that they received little improvement and remained "boulevards" primarily in name only.

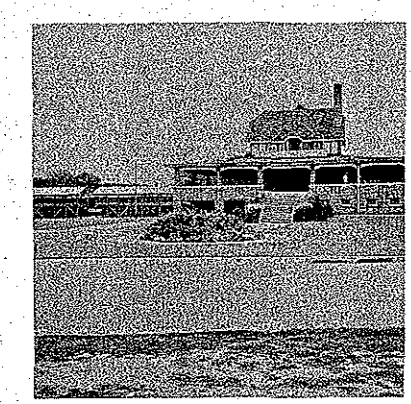
Riverview Park; 1917



Fontenelle Park; 1918

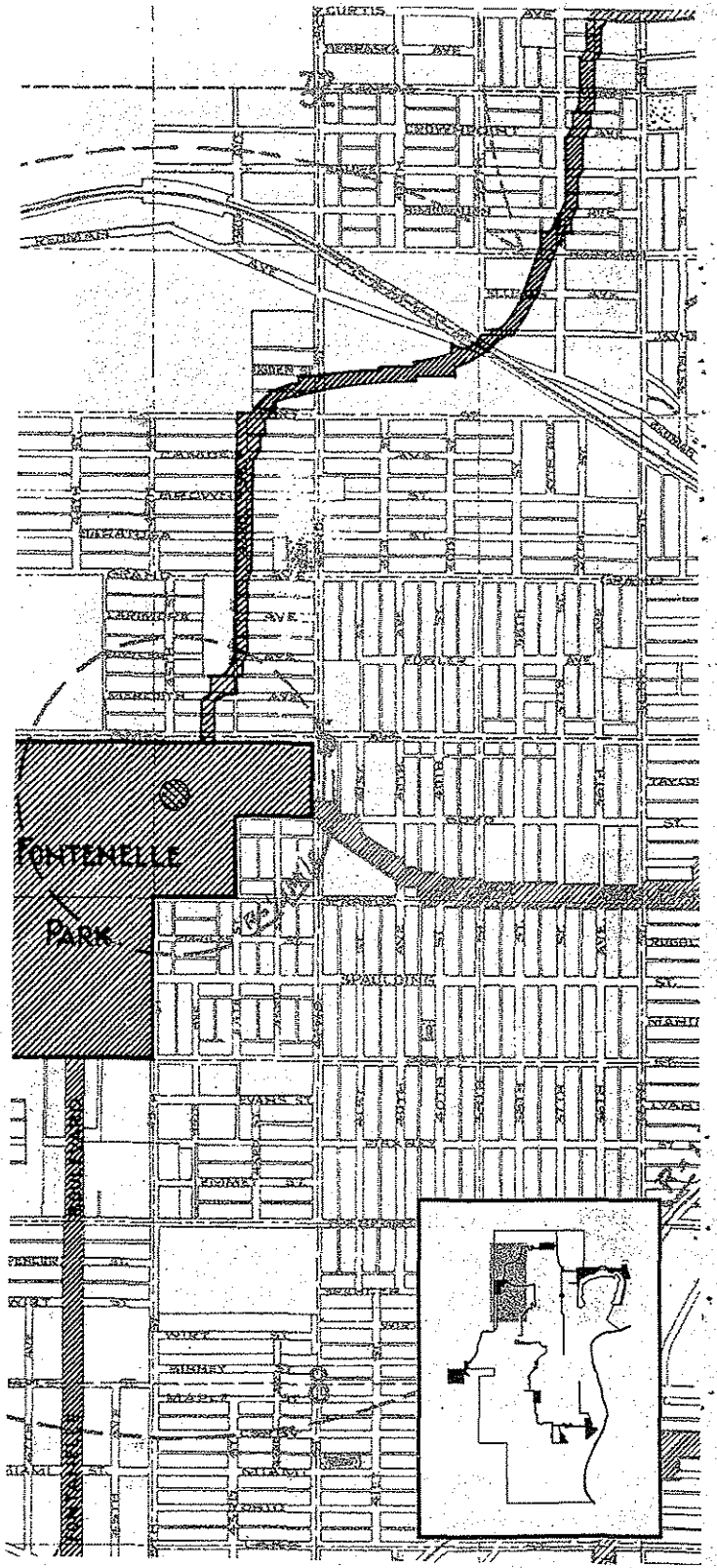


Pavilion at Fontenelle Park; 1942



In 1911 the Commissioners refocused their attention on the Fontenelle property, initiating a program of park-building activities that included grading, road construction and the laying out of a golf course. As a result of this work, by 1916 Fontenelle could be described by Park and Recreation Department Supertendent J. B. Hummel as "one of the most popular and best patronized parks in the system." Apart from the golf course, it is not known whether park improvements followed aspects of the designs that Horace Cleveland had produced for the property nearly twenty-five years earlier.

To begin to bridge the long expanse between the city's westernmost parks — Fontenelle and Elmwood — the Park Commissioners in 1908 acquired land for what they termed the "outer" or Northwest Boulevard. This 150-foot strip of public property commenced at the junc-



Deer Park, Deer Park Boulevard Spring Lake Park

In 1898 the City Council passed Ordinance No. 4372 which declared "the necessity of appropriating certain private property and lands for the use of the city of Omaha, for the purpose of making an addition to the public parks, parkways and boulevards." What follows is a four-page listing of legal descriptions of parcels of land, lots, and pieces of lots that together cut a swath between Riverview and Hanscom Parks. This document represents an early chapter in the official history of the Central Boulevard, the connector that was intended to link the system's "inside" parks, including Hanscom, Riverview and Bemis.

The southernmost portion of the Central Boulevard, referred to as the South Central Boulevard, was described in an 1898 Park Commissioners report: "It will be 150 feet wide, excepting between Seventeenth and Twentieth streets, where it widens into a small park of twelve acres, enclosing a deep ravine, covered with a dense growth of forest trees."

This widened area of the boulevard — later enlarged further — was named Deer Park, presumably due to the fact that it was carved from land in the Deer Park Addition, an area of steep terrain and thick vegetation that was likely a popular home for deer.

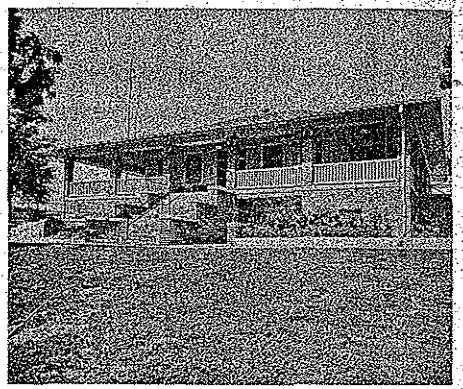
The South Central boulevard was dedicated and opened for travel in 1901; that section of parkway between Riverview Park and the Union Pacific and Burlington tracks at Vinton and 27th was renamed Deer Park Boulevard in 1913.

In the late 1960s the State of Nebraska's Department

Deer Park Boulevard; 1912

Spring Lake Park; 1924

Pavilion at Spring Lake Park; 1931



of Roads received title to a portion of the boulevard through condemnation for Interstate Highway use. I-480 severs the boulevard at 28th Street; this is one of two major breaks in the parkway system caused by the building of the federal highway project.

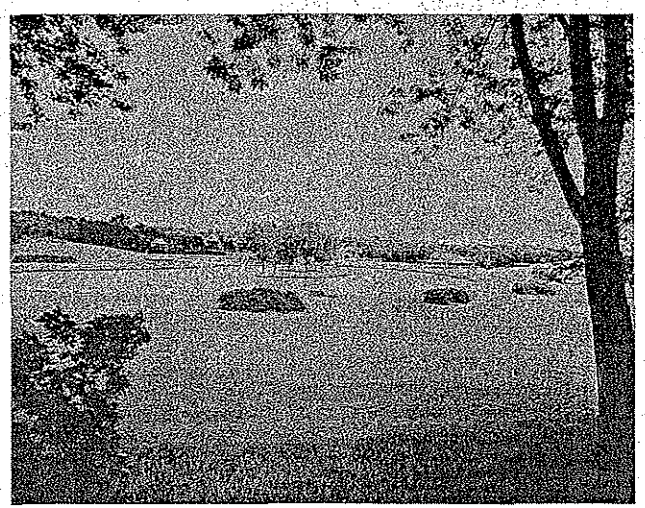
Spring Lake Park was added to the Omaha system in 1915, but its beginnings as a park date from thirty years earlier — specifically, to 1884 when a group of businessmen affiliated with the Union Stockyards Company platted the suburb of South Omaha. City founders hoped to make South Omaha more attractive to prospective residents by reserving more than one hundred acres of scenic land in the northwest corner of the townsite. Spring-fed lakes on the property were used as South Omaha's water source, and at one time the tract was sought by the state for a fishery.

After the group of original owners (or "syndicate," as they were first incorporated) organized into the South Omaha Land Company in 1887, the land was "developed

Fontenelle Park
Fontenelle Boulevard

This 108-acre tract of high rolling hills northwest of the city's original center serves as an example of the early Park Commissioners' foresight in planning ahead for future generations. Land for the park was purchased in 1893 with $90,000 in funds from the Board's first bond issue, despite protests from citizens who felt that the tract was located too far from the city. H.W. S. Cleveland advised the Board on the selection of the site and in 1892 was paid $1650 for plans for the tract's redesign. In the same year, the park was named to commemorate the Chief of the Omaha Indians, Logan Fontenelle.

Soon after the property's acquisition, a number of trees were planted, but few survived the drought of the mid-1890s. Further efforts to improve the tract were deterred, according to the 1898 Board of Commissioners report, "on account of lack of funds and adverse criticsm of expenditures upon distant and undeveloped parks."



Fontenelle Park golf course; 1931

The Fontenelle tract remained essentially pasture land for another decade, until city growth expanding to the northwest created a demand for the property's improvment.

declaring the need to take land to complete the east-west portion of the route, from Sahler Street to Fontenelle Park. By August of 1912, property was secured and the route was declared ready for improvement.

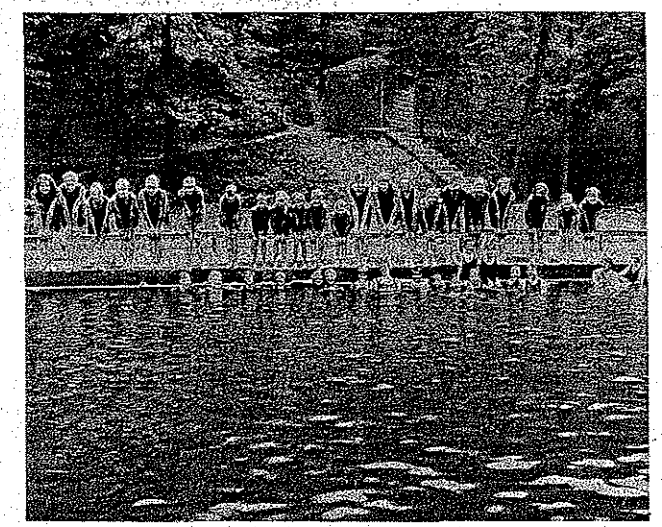
When the system of boulevard nomenclature was changed in 1913, this stretch was named Paxton, for pioneer businessman William Paxton. Settling in Omaha in the 1860s, Paxton had extensive business and real estate interests in Omaha—primary among them was his involvement in the development of the Union Stockyards. Together with John A. Creighton Boulevard, Paxton Boulevard forms a link between Bemis and Fontenelle Parks that serves as a memorial to two of the city's most influential 19th century citizens.

In addition to Paxton and Creighton, in 1912 the city acquired through its powers of eminent domain land needed for three other major links in the parkway system. Major work on extending and improving the boulevards would continue throughout the teens, fueled by the proliferation of automobiles and their popularity for recreational use.

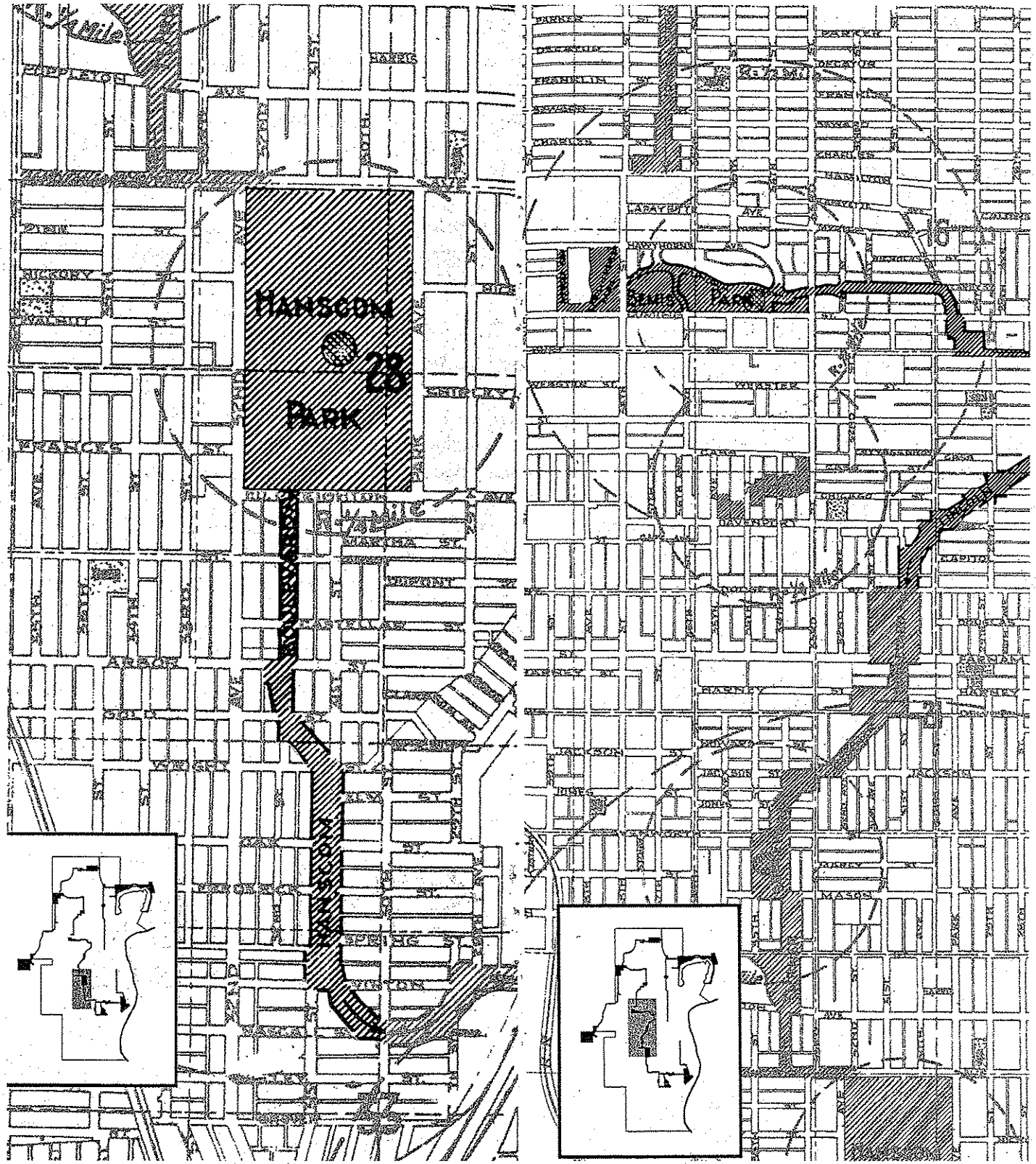
to some extent by landscape architects" with the expenditure of about $30,000 for improvements. In 1892 South Omahans were angered by the land company's building of a seven-foot fence around the property, closing the park off to public use. After battles with residents, the company sold part of the land for building lots, but agreed to keep a portion open for the public.

For a period, Omaha Park Commissioners eyed "Syndicate Park"— as Spring Lake was commonly known— for the site of a south-side park. Because the land was within the corporate limits of South Omaha, acquisition became a complicated matter, and the Board settled instead on the Riverview tract. When South Omaha was annexed in 1915, the city purchased the park land and Spring Lake came into the Omaha system.

Omaha also assumed ownership of five other parks through the annexation of South Omaha: Highland, Clearview, McKinley, Mandan and Morton. With their acquisition, some attempts were made to build boulevard connections between several of these properties — from Spring Lake to Riverview, for example. The links, however, were never realized.



Swimming Pool at Spring Lake; 1921


HANSCOM
28
PARK

Creighton Boulevard
Paxton Boulevard

From information contained in the 1907 Park Commissioners Annual Report, early plans for extending the boulevard system north from Bemis Park called for the construction of a boulevard along 33rd Street to Miller Park, with a second segment branching from Bemis northwest to Fontenelle. Clearly, this proposal was never realized, but a modified version of the plan began to take shape around 1910 with the development of John A. Creighton Boulevard.

Extending from Hamilton Street on the edge of the old Walnut Hill Reservoir north to Lake along the former 37th Street, John A. Creighton Boulevard winds east to Bedford where it follows 32nd north to Sahler. Land needed for the two-mile parkway was acquired through condemnation proceedings initiated in 1910 and generally completed in 1912. While Omaha's earlier boulevards moved through areas ahead of building development, in the case of this boulevard, a number of houses were taken to make room for the roadway.

Known for a brief time as Highland Boulevard, John A. Creighton Boulevard was given the name of the pioneer Omaha businessman and philanthropist in 1913 — six years after his death — in part, perhaps, to recognize the contributions of his land company in furthering the development of the parkway system. The John A. Creighton Real Estate & Trust Company donated tracts for Hanscom and Lincoln Boulevards; it appears that the company also may have been involved in advancing the system north of Bemis Park.

Of particular interest on this boulevard, is the route of the roadway as it travels through what is now Adams Park. As a concession to modern, higher speed travel, the hairpin curves of the original switchback have been straightened, but the roadway path is still discernible, though now covered by sod.

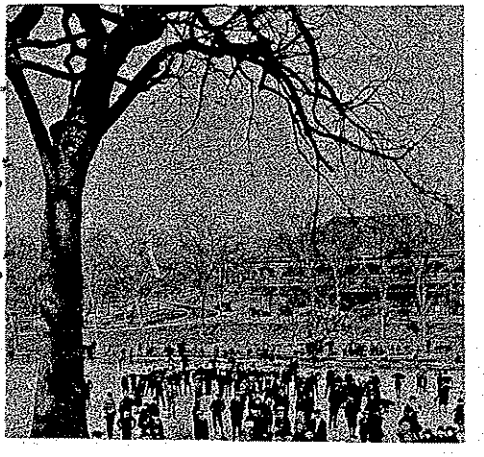
About a year after the City Council took action to set in motion the building of the north-south section of the North Central Boulevard, the Council passed an ordinance

Hanscom Boulevard
Hanscom Park

City officials may have been overly optimistic when they passed an ordinance declaring Central Boulevard between Riverview and Hanscom parks "open for public travel" in 1898. Property acquisition for the route was not completed for at least another decade, when the gap between Arbor Street and Hanscom Park was closed by donations of land along 32nd Street.

The area to the south of Hanscom Park was slower to develop as a residential district relative to land on the other three sides of the park; however, the completion of the boulevard from Arbor Street spurred home-building south of the park. The Commissioners report for 1909 observes that "the opening of the boulevard into the park... has made an ideal residence section for people whose work takes them to South Omaha."

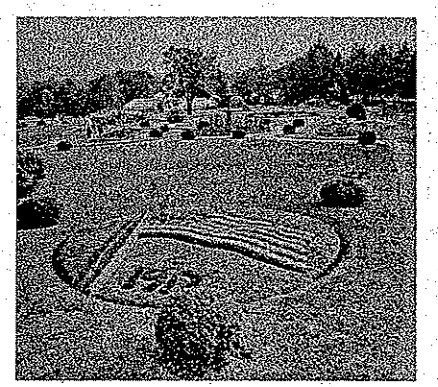
As the report implies, in addition to their recreational function, boulevards were valued as expedient transit routes. According to H.W. S. Cleveland, the diagonal path of a boulevard could save the traveler time as well as the monotony of passage down a straight city street. In their 1897 report, the Commissioners looked ahead to a parkway that would tie together scattered neighborhoods in the city's southeast district with South Omaha and "all the territory lying to the north and west of Hanscom park," noting that the boulevard would be "the only possible



Ice Skating in Hanscom Park; 1915

roadway with a traversable grade connecting these parts of the city."

Later, when the City Council passed an ordinance clarifying the boulevard system's confusing nomenclature (South East, West Central and North West, for example), that portion of the South Central boulevard between Arbor Street and Ed Creighton Avenue was designated "Hanscom Boulevard."



Flower beds and conservatory in Hanscom Park; 1917

In his book *Omaha Memories,* Ed Morearty recalled Hanscom Park prior to its occupation by the Park Commissioners: "the only ornaments worthy of note in the park up to 1890 were two cadaverous bald eagles." Over the park's east entrance, the author reports, was an arched sign that read, "Nature Designs and Art Improves." Morearty further observes that "if nature in its crude form ever needed the touch of art, that park certainly did."

The Park Commissioners evidently concurred with Morearty's assessment: the improvement of the Hanscom tract was one of the first projects taken on by the newly formed Board.

In the summer of 1889 they assigned the design work to H.W.S. Cleveland, and according to one Commission publication, Hanscom Park was "radically changed in plan and very greatly improved...under his trained hands." The 1898 Commissioners report describes the results of his work: "Two lakes, a cascade, extensive flower beds, two and one-half miles of macadamized roadway, fountains and a magnificent growth of forest trees make this the only finished park in the city."

Mercer, prominent Omaha physician, street railway enterpriser and real estate developer. Dr. Mercer built an imposing family home at 40th and Cuming Streets in the early 1880s; he was also an officer in the Bemis Park Land Development Company, developer of the Bemis Park subdivision lying immediately to the east of Caroline Mercer Park.

Connecting with Lincoln Boulevard on the east, Mercer Park Road sweeps through the park to join Mercer Boulevard. The boulevard terminates at 38th Street. To connect with the next link in the system, John Creigh-ton Boulevard, one travels through land now owned by the Metropolitan Utilities District, originally the site of the city's Walnut Hill waterworks and reservoir built in 1881.

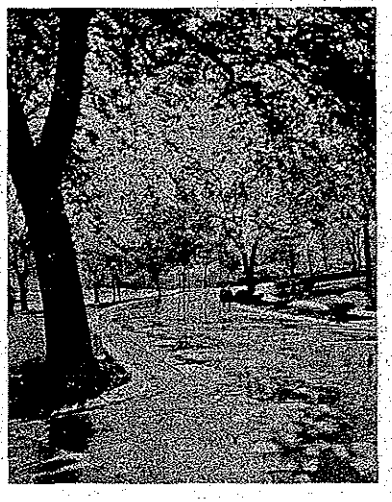
not allow my name to be used in connection with the improvement of the park."

A compromise was struck, and in the end, the park was developed according to the landscape architect's plans. Today, key elements of the original designs have been lost: the lagoon has been removed and extensive shrubbery has been replaced with sod. Nevertheless, Cleveland's decision to retain the site's steep topography has benefitted the park by distancing it from nearby Cuming Street.

The property now occupied by Caroline Mercer Park and Mercer Park Boulevard was donated to the City in 1912 by the S.D. Mercer Company. The four acres of park land were conveyed to the City under the condition that 39th Street between Cuming and Nicholas would be completed as part of the boulevard system within nine months. Conditions of the deed specified the route of the portion of the boulevard that extended through the park, and even spelled out the paving materials for the boulevard.

The deed also designated that the park portion of the donation be known officially as Caroline Mercer Park. Nelson Mercer, president of the S.D. Mercer Company at the time of the donation, intended the park as a memorial to his sister Caroline Mercer who died during a 1911 trans-Atlantic steamship voyage.

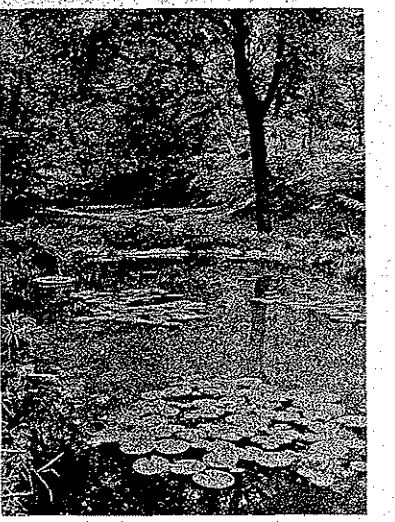
Land included in the donation was part of a much larger tract acquired and developed earlier by Dr. Samuel



Mercer Park Road; 1926

About twenty-five years earlier, property for the park had been donated to the City by early Omaha settlers, Andrew J. Hanscom and James Megeath. "At the time of the donation," Omaha historians James W. Savage and John T. Bell report,"it was extremely rough, covered by hazel brush and natural forest trees, situated in an inaccessible and uninviting portion of the city, then but sparsely settled."

In 1889 and 1890 Cleveland was paid $913.30 for plans to improve the rough tract of land. Although the landscape architect's drawings have been lost, design elements that were evidently part of his original plans have survived. The 1892 Commissioners report remarks that "a belt of pine trees was planted on the northwest side of the park which when grown will have a charming effect. This northwest portion of the park since being decorated with flowers is becoming more attractive." This belt of pines and flower gardens yet contribute to the handsomeness of the park today.



Lily pond in Hanscom Park; 1909

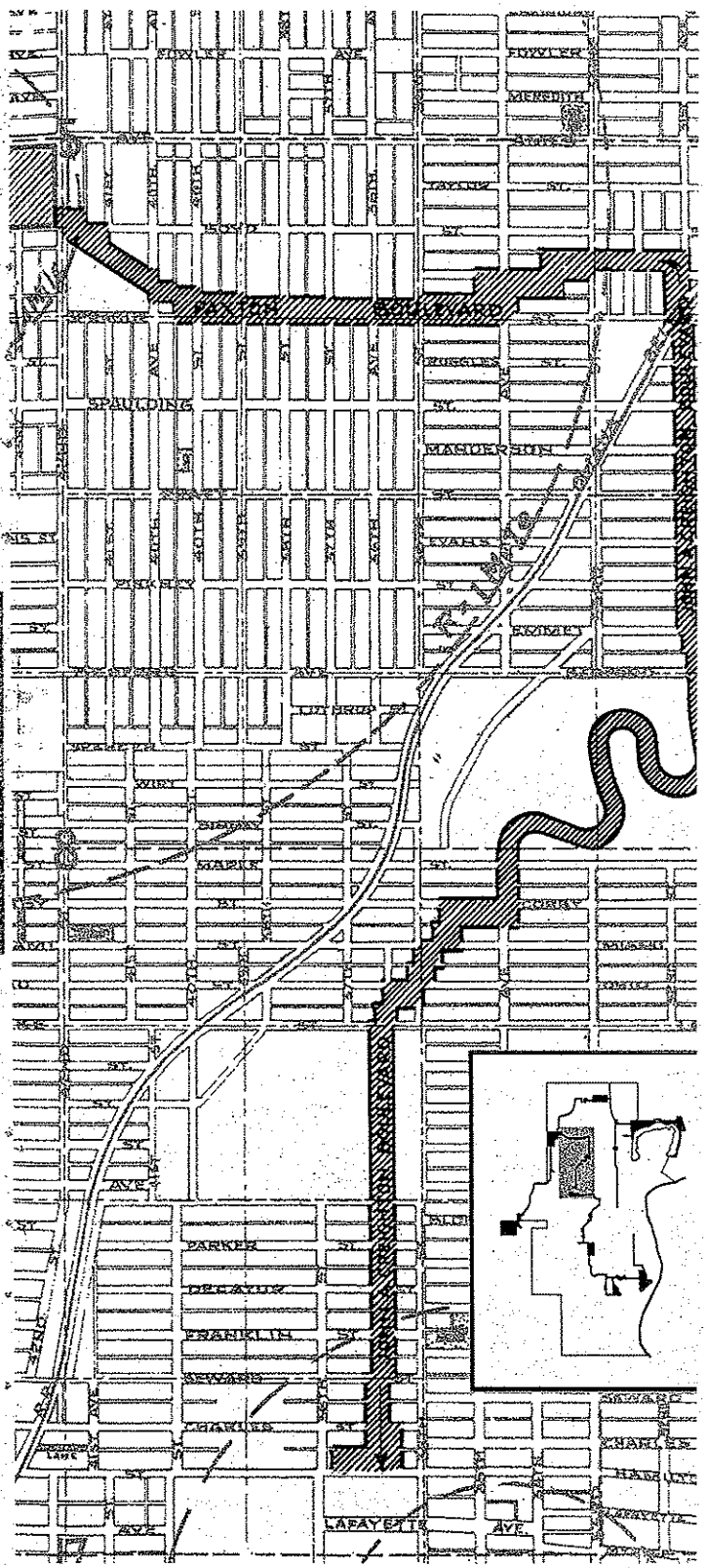
Turner Boulevard
Turner Park

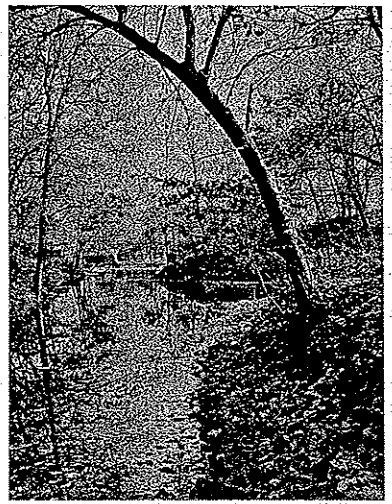
The report of the Board of Park Commissioners for 1897 comments that a notable feature of the year was donations of lands by "public spirited citizens...indicating a growing interest in our parks." Mentioned among them was the "generous donation of Mrs. Charlotte M. Turner of thiry-two lots in blocks No 1. and 2. Summit Place, for parks and boulevard purposes." This donation greatly increased the prospects for the system's Central Boulevard, later called the West Central Boulevard — the connecting link between Hanscom and Bemis parks.

Turner Park; 1915

After the turn of the century, the land donated by Mrs. Turner was developed as Curtiss Turner Park with the boulevard running along its eastern edge. The son of Charlotte and her husband Charles, a real estate developer, Curtiss Turner was a civil engineer who died in an 1898 avalanche in Alaska. It appears that after his death, the Turners requested that their land donation be used as a park to memorialize their son.

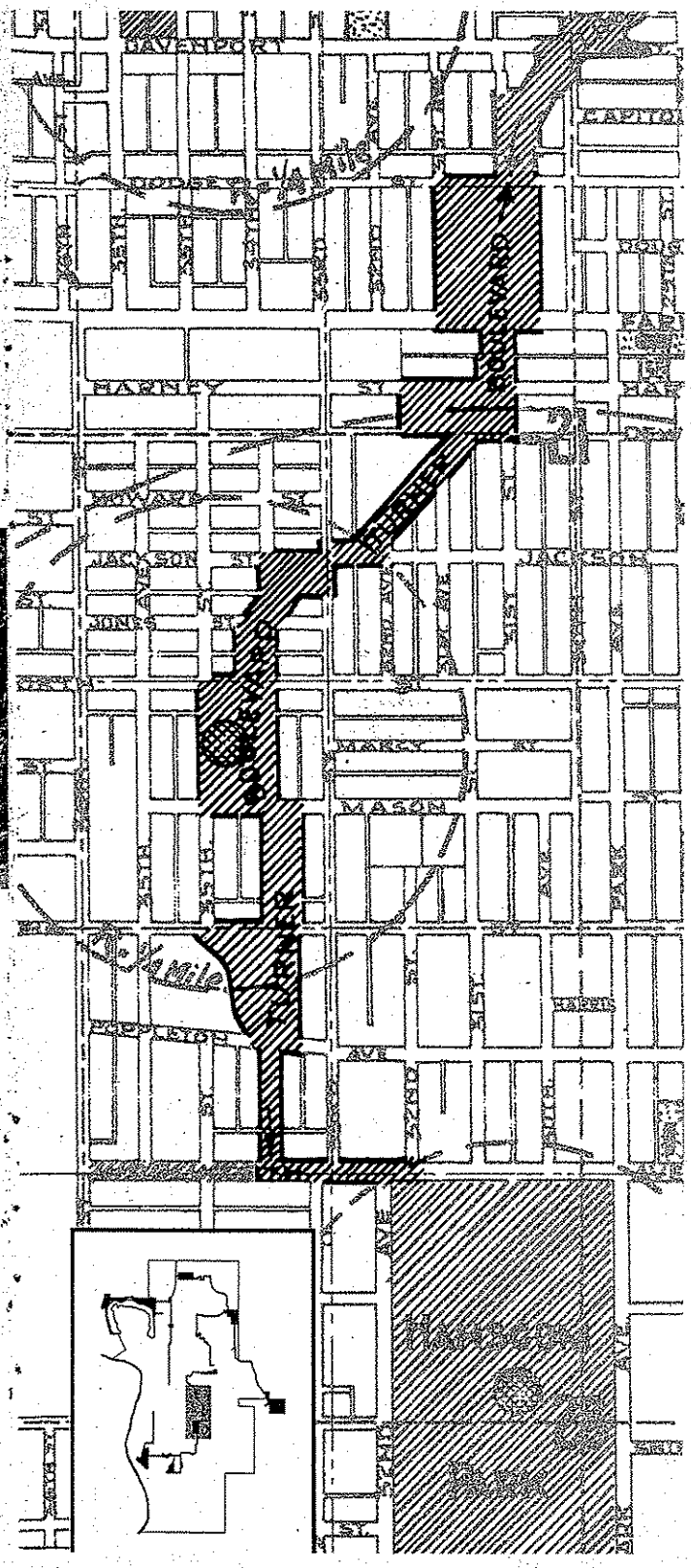
Through condemnation proceedings, additional land for the boulevard was assembled and the West Central connector between Hanscom and Bemis was officially opened for use in 1902. The portion of the West Central parkway extending from Woolworth Avenue to Dodge Street was named Turner boulevard in 1913, honoring the first land donor.





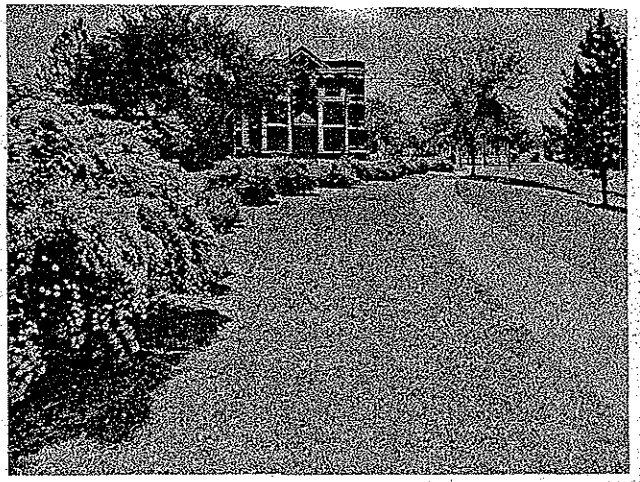
Fall in Bemis Park, before drainage; early 1900s

Bemis Park;1916



containing a steep ravine and creek, was covered with native trees and brush. The Commission purchased about three additional acres from the Bemis Company, and in 1893 H.W.S. Cleveland was paid $200 to complete park designs. Cleveland determined that the ravine could be filled in to create a larger area of usable ground, but instead recommended to preserve the natural, picturesque features of the tract, including a great number of existing elm, linden and hackberry trees.

As work began on the development of the park, a conflict arose between then-Mayor Bemis, owner of the Bemis Land Company, and the Park Commissioners concerning the park boundaries. Bemis felt that the construction of Lincoln Boulevard encroached upon his land; he also wanted the ravine filled in. A battle was waged in the press with Bemis bemoaning his gift of land, and Cleveland countering that if his plans were altered, "I should



View of the Clarinda Apartments from Turner Park; 1915

This idea of small parks located at points along the boulevard system was consistent with what we know of the Cleveland plan. In fact, in his first report to the Omaha Commission in 1889, the landscape architect stressed the need for small parks, recommending "the appropriation at occasional intervals of one or more blocks to be reserved as small parks easily accessible to those that need them." "Ideally," Cleveland continued, "these parks would be linked to the boulevards."

The block-long open area along Turner Boulevard at Leavenworth Street (now called Leavenworth Park) was another example of a small park of this type. Called the "Sunken Gardens," this rectangular parcel was acquired around 1910 and later received its name from below-street-grade ornamental flower beds.

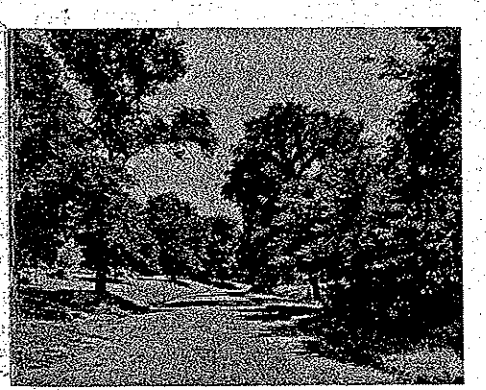
Similarly, building upon the idea of boulevards as linear parks, the land that is now Dewey Park — on Turner Boulevard between Farnam and Leavenworth Streets — was also acquired around 1910. Like Leavenworth Park with its ball diamonds and play equipment, Dewey Park has been appropriated for more structured types of recreational activities that H.W.S. Cleveland could not have envisioned.

Lincoln Boulevard, Bemis Park Mercer Park and Mercer Park Boulevard

The 1889 Bemis Park subdivision plat shows Lincoln Boulevard winding through the southern portion of the residential suburb between 32nd Street and Pleasant Street, now 38th Street. The road borders an area designated "Public Park" on the map; this is the ravine that was soon to be developed by the Park Commissioners as Bemis Park.

The Bemis Park addition was the city's first subdivision to be laid out with a curving street pattern that conformed to the lay of the land, as opposed to the rule of the rectangular block, or gridiron plan.

The landscape architect Alfred Edgerton of New York was responsible for the subdivision's design. His work appealed to H.W.S. Cleveland and the first Park Commissioners: they incorporated the road into their plan for the Central Boulevard, the link between Bemis and Hanscom Park. Later the significance of Lincoln Boulevard was acknowledged by extending the name to the stretch of boulevard between Dodge and 32nd Street. A large portion of this boulevard was obliterated in the building of I-480 — only the portion between 30th Street and Mercer Park road remains intact.



Portion of West Central Boulevard, later to become Lincoln Boulevard; 1913

In 1889 the Bemis Land Company donated to the Board of Park Commissioners a six-acre tract of unbuildable ground within the Bemis Park subdivision. The tract,