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The Principal Pleasure Grounds in the City of Albany

PARKS

The principal pleasure ground in the City is Washington Park from the time of the Dongan Charter, 1686, this land has been public property. It has never been privately owned since the day Indians roamed therein on the arrival of Henry Hudson, in 1609.

It was set apart in 1802, before any residences, other than a farm or two, had been started in that section, for the purpose of a powder-house. The people's minds were still thinking of wars, —and still more wars, so they were preparing.

It is a curious circumstance that the old-time lock of this powder-house may still be seen as one of the permanent exhibits belonging to The Albany Institute on Washington avenue and that it possesses a history of much greater length and interest than is commonly known. It was given to this institution by the heirs of the Hon. Verplanck Colvin, who died aged and respected on May 28, 1920.

It is not unreasonable to believe the account which places the lock in this city 250 years ago, because the narrative leads pretty close and reaches print to day through reliable sources. It is well to have it on record.

Fort Frederick was built in 1676, in the center of State street, immediately west of Lodge Street, by order of Sir Edmond Andros, the Colonial Governor. It was considered that a fort placed upon a hill could render wider service than one in a valley, —such as Fort Orange, upon the river -bank.

Fort Frederick was removed in 1784, and about this time the powder house was constructed. Two large locks of elaborate mechanism were taken from the old fort, and applied to the newer military enterprise. The wooden one sealed the inner door leading to the powder magazine to keep away intruders. The metal one locked the outside door of the powder house.

We know this to be a fact because the Hon. Andrew J. Colvin, the father of Verplanck Colvin, bought the material of the old powder-house when it was declared out of commission and condemned, to employ the material upon his farm on Western Avenue. Hon. Andrew J. Colvin was District Attorney in 1850, and State Senator in 1860, residing at No. 173 Western Avenue.

On October 6, 1806, the land between Madison Avenue and State Street, from Willett to Knox street, was dedicated as the Middle Public Square, and in 1809, it was rechristened Washington Square. Later on, it was known as the Washington Parade Ground.

Adjoining this tract on the west, in the year 1800, was a large public cemetery known as the City Burial Ground. Many a citizen of prominence found his or her last resting-place out under the great trees, whereon the resident of State Street gazes daily, between 1800 and 1842, before the Albany Rural Cemetery was established.

In 1869, prominent citizens who were promoters of the park plan which had been agitated for years, but had met many rebuffs from the Common Council, secured the passage of a State law which established Washington Park, May 5, 1869.

This law provided a Board of Park Commissioners, and when it organized on May 8, 1869, it held these names: John H. Van Antwerp, President (who was the president of the National Savings Bank); Dudley Olcott, Treasurer (who was the president of the Mechanics & Farmers' Bank); William D. Morange (who composed the Bi-Centennial Ode); Arthur Bott, John Bridgeford, William Cassidy (Editor of The Argus), George Dawson (proprietor of The Albany Evening Journal), John Fair, Hon. Rufus Wheeler Peckham, Jr. (Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court) and Samuel H. Ransom, manufacturer.

The Board accepted the plans of Messrs. Bogart & Cuyler, and the construction was under the supervision of Robert H. Bingham, City Engineer, with William S. Egerton as Assistant. Mr. Egerton continued as Superintendent of City Parks from then on, until succeeded by Philip Bender, January 21, 1908; followed by Wellington B. Clarke, the present one in office, January 1~ 1922.

Work was begun in July 1870. The leases of a few tenants expired and tombstones were removed to the Albany Rural Cemetery in 1871.

By 1873 it was completed westward as far as Robin Street and in 1874 to Lake avenue. It was then that the Park Lake was excavated.

In 1880 several blocks of the property at Madison avenue and Knox street were purchased, so as to square up the grounds, and in 1882 the extensive Taylor homestead and land property, at the northeast corner of Madison and Lake avenues, were added in order to establish the tennis court section.

In 1883 the Superintendent's residence and the series of propagation houses were built. Michael Fink, formerly the head caretaker of the grounds at the Van Rensselaer Manor House, located at the north end of Broadway, was chief gardener then.

He was familiar with many families who visited there, whose prominence was undisputed in this city, Boston, New York and Philadelphia. They all knew Fink, and they never failed to ask for him and bestow praise, because he had decorated the table of the Patroon when guests came to his board, and thereby brought them into the "social realm." It was then commonly considered that any person who had not dined in the Van Rensselaer Manor House could not possibly be of importance.

Western Avenue, formerly called the Great Western Turnpike, for a distance of 8,200 feet, from Washington Park to the tollgate, was placed under the Board's control, planted with maples, and the paving improvement to a width of 40 feet was inaugurated November 16, 1876. The admirable bronze statue of Scotland's poet, Robert Burns, the bequest of Miss Mary MacPherson and the work of Charles Calverly, native Albany sculptor, costing \$25,000, was dedicated on August 30, 1888.

The King Fountain, depicting Moses smiting the rock, a bequest from Henry Laverty King, in memory of his father, Rufus H. King, J. Massey Rhind, sculptor, was dedicated September 29, 1893.

Area of Washington Park is 90 acres.

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