

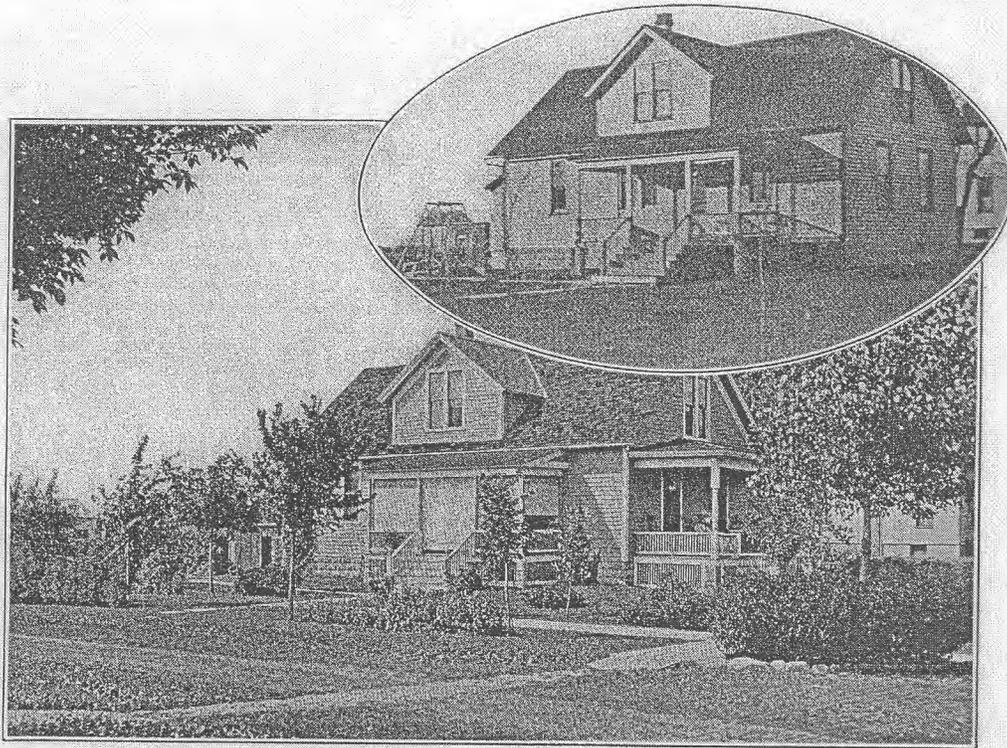
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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 44 JUNE 2006 NUMBER 2

## THE ROCKFORD PARK DISTRICT, THE CITY BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT, AND THE ROCKFORD PLAN

By Craig G. Campbell



*J. T. Miller, 2203 North Street, First Prize Winner in Fourth District for Residence Property Showing Greatest Improvement. Cut Shows "Before and After."*

One of the award winners in the first City Beautiful contest held in Rockford in 1912. This is the home of J.T. Miller at 2203 North St. The upper photo is the "before" photo. Originally published in the *Third Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners Rockford Park District 1912*.

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The America In Bloom award that the City of Rockford received last year had its roots in the City Beautiful movement a century earlier. Craig Campbell shares the story of how the City Beautiful movement got started and how it came to Rockford in 1912. He also discusses the "Rockford Plan", developed in 1918 it is a plan on how to develop future growth to make the most of the city's assets.

Craig G. Campbell is an author, and publisher in the fields of history, culture and consciousness. He has a lifelong interest in Winnebago County park, recreation and community history. He has authored two books; *History of Loves Park, Illinois* (1998) and *History of the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County, Illinois* (1980). Some of you may remember Craig when he gave a presentation on the history of Loves Park at our annual meeting a few years ago.

## NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

## UPCOMING EVENTS

The annual meeting of Rockford Historical Society is tentatively scheduled for September 17, 2006 at Midway Village. A notice will be mailed at a later date.

# The Rockford Park District, the City Beautiful Movement, and the Rockford Plan

By Craig G. Campbell

When the City of Rockford received the America In Bloom award (AIB) on September 10, 2005, the Rockford community participated in a nationwide beautification program whose historical roots began at the turn of the 20th century with the "City Beautiful Movement." One of the strongest proponents of the 2005 America In Bloom competition was the Rockford Park District and specifically, the "City of Gardens" program, established by the Rockford Park District Foundation in 1999. In 1912 the Rockford Park District cosponsored the first "City Beautiful" contest as a means to instill civic pride through city beautification. In 1918 the Rockford Park District played a key role in the first city-wide public-private planning initiative known as "The Rockford Plan." When the Rockford Park District celebrates its Centennial in 2009, it will honor the one hundred year legacy of its founding members and their pivotal role in the beautification and progress of the Rockford community.

## **City Beautiful Movement**

*City beautification of public and private landscapes began at the turn of the nineteenth century with the "City Beautiful" movement. An offshoot of Progressivism, the City Beautiful movement focused on beautification as a means for economic and social reform.*

## **Introduction**

City beautification in America coincided with the vast economic and cultural transformations brought out by the American Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century. The transition of America from an agrarian to urban culture brought into play profound demographic changes, economic inequalities and deep-seated ethnic differences. The passing of the American frontier and the rise of the United States as a world power created a transitional crisis for American society. The nostalgia for the agrarian ideal and the utopian landscape, so prevalent in the national consciousness during its westward expansion, was no longer feasible. The largesse of the American West was being replaced with the congested realities of urban city centers. Overcrowding, crime, poverty, disease and social disparities came to the forefront in the collective consciousness of the early 20th century American city.

Between 1860 and 1910 the US population had grown from 31.4 million to 91.9 million; the largest population shift occurring in the number of city dwellers. By 1910, 46 percent of all Americans lived in cities with populations over 2,500.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the nation centered on the role of the

city. Adherents of the City Beautiful movement believed in the city as a crucible for the "good life," a conviction that resonated with the founding father's belief in the egalitarian ideals of the Enlightenment. Many advocates of the City Beautiful movement believed in the ameliorative effects of beauty in urban centers to instill civic pride and improve economic and social outcomes. The importance of city beautification, for civic life, was brought to the national consciousness at the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. Its first application for city planning began in Washington, D.C. with the McMillan Plan of 1901-02.

### **World's Columbian Exposition of 1893**

In 1893, Chicago sponsored the World's Columbian Exposition. Designed to portray the architectural and aesthetic potential of city centers, the marvelous "city of white" introduced American planners and social reformers to the European inspired beaux-arts architectural movement. Based on the aesthetic principles of the famous Ecoles des Beaux Arts school in Paris (which emphasized order and harmony in architectural elements), the Exposition portrayed "classically" inspired public building with wide avenues, spacious malls and the aesthetic use of gardens, waterways and open space.<sup>2</sup> The 27 million visitors to the Columbian Exposition saw a clean, well-ordered city with no poverty or crime and state-of-the-art sanitation and transportation systems.<sup>3</sup> The fair itself set the pattern for urban architecture in the US at the turn of the century, and heavily influenced city planning into the early 1920s. Daniel H. Burnham, construction director for the Columbian Exposition, played a key role in advocating city planning and beautification as a means for social reform.

### **Pierre L'Enfant**

In 1900, Congress designated that the city-core of Washington would be redesigned on the original plans created by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791. L'Enfant, a French artist and engineer, who formed a friendship with George Washington during the Revolutionary War, was granted the commission to create the new American capital. L'Enfant's drawings for Washington envisioned a Baroque design that featured ceremonial public spaces with grand radial avenues. The focuses for the intersecting public avenues were the two magnificent building sites occupied by the Capitol and the White House. In his drawings, L'Enfant specified that the city's avenues were to be wide, tree lined and visually integrated with the topographical and governmental architecture found throughout Washington. L'Enfant's intent was to create a city emblematical of governmental power for individuals and nations to see. Unfortunately, L'Enfant's plan was never implemented during his lifetime, and remained unrealized until 1900.

## **McMillan Plan of 1901-02**

In 1901 the Senate Park Commission was created to implement L'Enfant's original city plan. The Commission was headed by Senator James McMillan of Michigan. Known as the McMillan Plan of 1901-02, the commission included Daniel Burnham, construction director for the Columbian Exposition; architect Charles McKim of New York; famed landscape architect Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr.; and the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Influenced by the Beaux Arts school, the commission sought to create legitimacy for the government and the new professional classes (architects, planners and engineers) who were spearheading city planning. As Thomas Hines said of the plan: "It was the first large effort to retrieve and restore the historic capital of the Founders, one of the earliest major attempts in the history of the republic to reestablish for any city a sense of continuity with its origins and with the national heritage, as expressed in architectural forms."<sup>4</sup> The symbolic relationships of the North-South and East-West axes of Washington today, of which the Capitol, the White House and the Washington Monument are its focus, are a direct outcome of the McMillan Plan and its emphasis on the themes and forms of the early American Republic. Critical to the success of the McMillan Plan was the rise of the City Beautiful Movement, and its deep-rooted belief in the importance of city planning and beautification for social and economic improvements. This vibrant debate, which began at the beginning of the 20th century, is still at the center of city planning and economic development one hundred years later.

## **The Rockford Park District and the 1912 City Beautiful Contest**

Three years after the establishment of the Rockford Park District in 1909, the first cooperative public/private program to beautify Rockford began in 1912 with the "City Beautiful Contest." Cosponsored by the Rockford Chamber of Commerce, the Rockford Club and the Rockford Park District, the spirit of the 1912 initiative has persisted to the 21st century with the Rockford Park District and its support for the "City of Gardens" and the America In Bloom competition.

On January 1, 1913, the third annual report of the Rockford Park District was presented to the Winnebago County Board of Supervisors. Levin Faust, president of the Park Board, said in his introduction:

*Four years have passed since Rockford decided to have large parks and commissioners to take care of the same. Many people thought the commissioners extravagant when they bought Sinnissippi and Black Hawk Parks, but in looking over the appraisal by three of our most competent and conservative men we find that the people of Rockford never made a better investment than when these parks were purchased.<sup>5</sup>*

Besides Faust's vigorous endorsement of the economic importance of the four-year old park district to Rockford, he also stressed the social and physiological benefits of recreation for the city's working classes:

*A city the size of Rockford has a great number of people employed at trades and occupations that do not give them enough exercise for their health and development, so it is necessary to provide playgrounds, ball diamonds, and golf links. A large number of people take advantage of these places of recreation and are highly pleased with the results. One well-known man told the writer that he never felt better in his life since he started to play golf. "It's better than medicine," another one remarked."*

Though Faust championed the importance of parks and recreation to the Rockford area, his statements clearly link local consciousness with national trends in park and city planning. The very creation of the Rockford Park District at the start of the 20th century clearly shows that local events are not isolated from national trends: reciprocity is the basis of all local and national thinking and behavior.

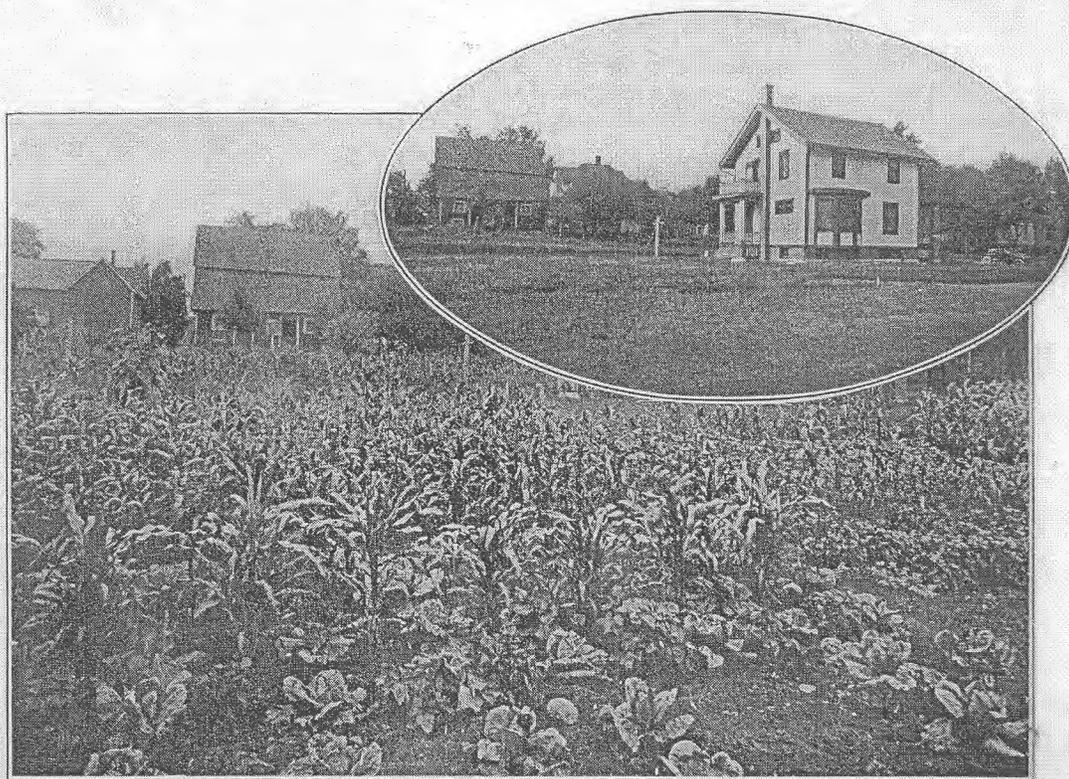
Congruent with the importance of public recreation to Faust, was the need to beautify Rockford. To accomplish this, the Rockford Park District cooperatively sponsored the first "City Beautiful Contest" in 1912. Paul B. Riis, first superintendent of the Rockford Park District, stated the cooperative sponsorship of the City Beautiful Contest in his 1912 report:

*This contest was conducted by the Rockford Chamber of Commerce and the Rockford Club co-operating with the commissioners of Rockford Park District, who furnished the time and services of its superintendent, Mr. Paul Riis, without charge...Without the cooperation of all of these bodies the contest would not have been possible. The Commissioners of Rockford Park District are deeply interested in beautifying the city generally and while it is not for them to assume charge of this undertaking, yet it is their desire to assist as far as practical and the Commissioners have decided to make the report of the City Beautiful Contest a portion of their annual report...*

As Riis continued, the first city-wide beautification campaign "demonstrated very plainly what can be done to improve home surroundings with a little application and encouragement." As he pointed out:

*The primary purpose of the Contest was to interest the class of people who work in the shops and have little time to work about their homes; the class who can ill afford to hire their work done; a class which is scattered over a large area of the city. Rockford is considered a city of homes, and therefore it can easily be seen how the appearance can be improved by interesting the classes who own their own homes. It so happened that the entrants were clearly wage-earners and not a single entry was made by a person of means.*

The implicit bias, voiced in Riis' report, was not unusual for the time period. Most supporters of the City Beautiful Movement were white male, middle to upper-middle class businessmen and professionals who sought to remedy the social inequities and congestion of America's inner cities. The means they choose to express their progressivism was to create beautiful cities that would inspire the disadvantaged to moral and civic virtue. Business, civic and reform leaders in America's largest cities understood that their own economic viability hinged on the city center. Out of genuine concern and self-interest, these reformers acted to improve the inner city by using beautification as an effective social control.<sup>6</sup> Rockford certainly was not the New York, Philadelphia or Chicago of 1912, but the composition and tenor of the local "City Beautiful" advocates reflected the national constituency.<sup>7</sup> Most were industrial, business and community leaders keenly aware that Rockford's growth and development were dependent upon sound infrastructure and aesthetic planning to insure its progress.



*A. H. Carter, 123 Pearl St., First Prize Vegetable Garden. This Shows Improvement to be made even by Vegetable Gardens.*

Another of the award winners in the first City Beautiful contest held in Rockford in 1912. Even vegetable gardens could win awards for beauty. The upper photo is the "before" photo. Originally published in the *Third Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners Rockford Park District 1912*.

To implement Rockford's City Beautiful contest, Riis divided the city into four districts using the Rock River as the east-west division, and State Street as the north-south divide. Six categories were assigned for the City Beautiful competition: Class A for "residential property in each district, showing the greatest improvement;" Class B "for most attractive window box in each district;" Class C for best "flower garden grown by any school boy or girl;" Class D for "Factory property and City Fire Stations showing greatest improvement;" Class E "For school yard showing greatest improvement;" and Class F for "Best vegetable garden raised by school boy or girl in vacant lot." First prize recipients for the City Beautiful contest were given ten dollars; second prize winners received five dollars. A total of 325 entries were received with Highland School winning first prize for Class E and A. "H. Carter," 123 Pearl Street, took first prize in Class F for his vegetable garden. Class B, window boxes, was not represented, as was the case for vacant lot improvements. Class D, factories and fire stations, was highly competitive with the Rockford Furniture Industry taking first prize.<sup>8</sup>

The 1912 Rockford City Beautiful contest was the first community-wide, interagency program to advocate beautification as a means for civic improvement. Its impetus and development were a direct result of the national City Beautiful movement that began with Washington D.C., in 1901. Civic beautification continues to play a crucial role in Rockford city planning and economic development one hundred years later.

### **The Rockford Park District and The Rockford Plan**

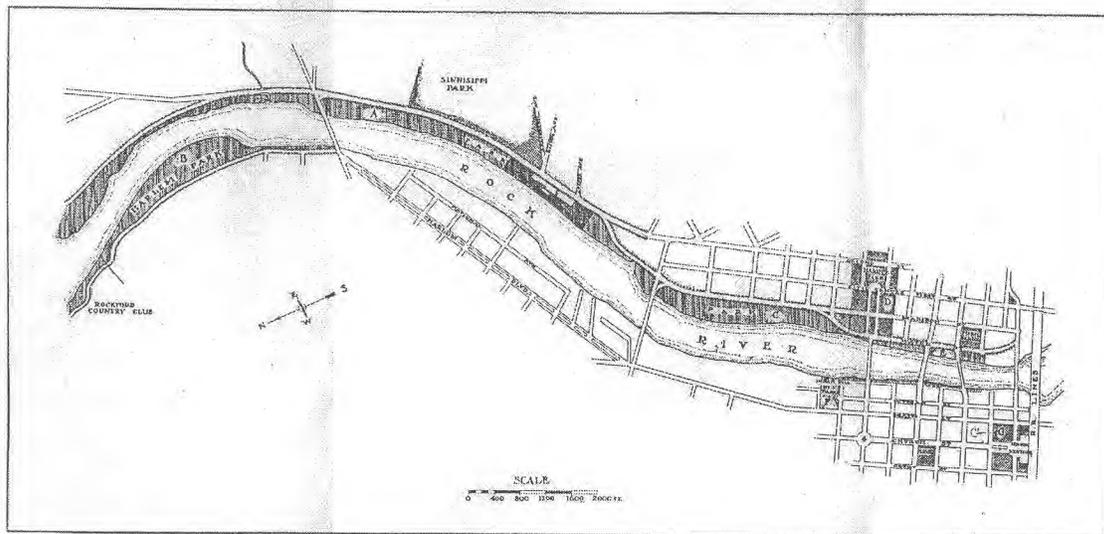
*The first comprehensive public/private planning initiative for the city of Rockford was "The Rockford Plan" published by the American Park Builders in 1918. Known locally as the "Roper Plan," for George D. Roper president of the Roper stove company, it was a direct outgrowth of the American beaux-arts planning movement at the beginning of the 20th century. The Rockford Plan was the blueprint for all subsequent city and park planning, especially along the Rock River corridor.*

In March 1915 Adam Gschwindt, President of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce, appointed a 25 member committee of five women and twenty men "...for the purpose of investigating the feasibility of establishing and adopting a modern city plan commensurate with the needs of the municipality and its environs." The "Rockford City Plan Commission" consisted of the leading civic, business and philanthropic leaders of the Rockford community including Levin Faust, president of the Rockford Park Board. The chairman for the planning commission was George D. Roper. After "months of earnest study," Roper invited Myron H. West, President of the American Park Builders (APB) of Chicago, to outline the "possible features of a plan for a greater Rockford." West met with the commission on April 8, 1915, and so impressed the panel that the executive committee authorized a contract with APB on February 6, 1917, for \$5,000.<sup>9</sup> The Rockford Plan was submitted to the planning commission on February 28, 1918, and was

adopted unanimously on March 2.

In the foreword to the Rockford Plan, William H. Fulton, secretary for the Rockford City Plan Commission, described Rockford as: "There are big towns and there are little cities. The big town is an overgrown thing which must presently settle down to its appointed lot. The little city is a living community which must move on to realize its manifest destiny. Rockford is a little city. It is moving on and must still move on." Citing Rockford's rapid growth, Fulton reiterated what many early 20th century progressive reformers confronted in America's cities: "Observing this rapid growth of the city, our most fore-sighted people long since became apprehensive as to the results of unguided expansion." He then lists a series of planning concerns voiced by local civic leaders:

*They saw addition after addition platted and new streets laid out with little or no reference to existing streets; they saw land fitted by nature for parks and recreation ground pre-empted by factories which might easily have found more advantageous sites elsewhere; they saw ever increasing congestion of traffic in downtown districts, and owing to that congestion transportation systems becoming less and less adequate; they were, in common with the whole community, shocked at the news of tragic accidents at grade crossings; they saw housing conditions for factory employees becoming more and more unsatisfactory while near the factory districts were lands ideal for numberless homes.*



Park Development Proposed for River Front North From Civic Center.

This is the proposed development of the river front as outlined in the Rockford Plan of 1918. Source: Plan for the Improvement and Extension of Rockford, Illinois. By Myron Howard West. American Park Builders; Chicago, IL; 1918.

As Fulton explained, concerns over Rockford's unplanned growth led "our most progressive citizens" to begin "...a quiet agitation for a City Plan which would provide for the city's development, at the same time conserving its industrial advantages, preserving its great natural beauty, and insuring the welfare and comfort of the rapidly increasing population." Fulton then discussed the role of the Rockford Park District in the Rockford Plan: "Substantial aid was given by the Park Board, which assumed the cost of that part of the Plan relating to the survey and establishment of boulevards and driveways connecting the parks of the Rockford Park District." Fulton then went on to portray the role of the Rockford Plan in city development as: "...a living thing in which, as in a tree, vital expansion forces will continually develop new forms to embody the unfolding corporate life." He added that the final realization of the Plan, though an ideal is "...we believe, in harmony with the city's ideal evolution." In his conclusion, Fulton raises the issue of consciousness as the prime mover in collective thinking and behavior stating: "In the meantime, our hope is that the Plan may be so wrought into the consciousness of all our people and the growing generations especially, as to become an ideal which none will venture to transgress and all will seek to approach." He continued: "It [the Rockford Plan] offers a curriculum in community effort. Can we achieve it? Yes, if we will work together, if as members of one body we unselfishly seek the good of the whole, emphasizing not the things that divide but the things that unite us."

These sentiments were echoed almost 90 years later by Ruth Miller, program director of the Rockford Park District Foundation City of Gardens, when Rockford received the America In Bloom award in 2005:

*As a community, we should be very proud. We have made major strides and have proven what we can do when we work together. We have raised the bar on our community standards and shown what we can do when we expect the very best for and of ourselves. We have a big job to live up to, and we're ready to move forward.<sup>10</sup>*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hines, Thomas S. "The Imperial Mall: The City Beautiful Movement and the Washington Plan of 1901-02."

<sup>2</sup> Most of the social and economic reformers who advocated city planning at the turn of the 19th century were upper-class wealthy businessmen and newly-developed professional architects, lawyers and planners. The wealthy wanted to enjoy the amenities of the city, but were alarmed about the growing social unrest and discord of the working-class poor in America's inner cities.

<sup>3</sup> Chicago's overcrowded and disease-ridden working-class and immigrant tenements were glossed over and hidden from the visitors who attended the fair. This was the intention of the fair's architects and planners when the Exposition was built.

<sup>4</sup> Hines, "The Imperial Mall."

<sup>5</sup> Rockford Park District Board of Commissioners. Third Annual Report. January 1, 1913; p. 33-35.

<sup>6</sup> Boyer, Paul S. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978; p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> Levin Faust owned several furniture companies in Rockford, Illinois, and was keenly aware of the limited recreational opportunities for his employees in the community.

<sup>8</sup> No where in Riis' report does he detail what baseline was used to qualify or measure aesthetic improvements for the City Beautiful contest.

<sup>9</sup> West, Myron Howard. *Plan for the Improvement and Extension of Rockford, Illinois*. Chicago: American Park Builders, 1918; p. 12. All references in this section on the Rockford Plan are from this source.

<sup>10</sup> [www.rockfordparkdistrict.org/news/city\\_of\\_gardens.html](http://www.rockfordparkdistrict.org/news/city_of_gardens.html).

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