

THE PARK SYSTEM OF HUDSON COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

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To deal with the problem of creating a system of parks in one of the areas of densest population on the American continent, necessitating the acquisition of land for a general park system at the highest average cost heretofore made necessary in any American community, has been the task allotted to the Hudson County Park Commission, in the smallest county in area and the largest in population in the State of New Jersey. The district covered by the Hudson County park system approaches in population the highest average per acre of territory of any county in the United States. How this commission solves its park problem, therefore, becomes a matter of much interest to other crowded communities. If Hudson County handles the problem successfully, it will help to solve difficulties of a similar character in other communities.

The members of the commission did not assume the duties of the office to which they were called without an understanding of the extensive plans upon which they were expected to operate, or of the peculiarly difficult nature of the task before them. They realized that while in one sense Hudson County is a municipal unit as a county, and is also divided into other municipal units by the several cities and towns which go to make up the county, yet, in another sense, it is only a part of the metropolitan unit of which the borough of Manhattan is the center.

There are nowhere else in America such peculiar conditions as rule in the relationship of Hudson County to New York City. An overwhelming majority of those who live within the county have an income of from \$500 to \$2,000 per year. The proportion of the very poor and the very rich in the county's population is small. The park problem, therefore, is a unique one, and must be met and solved with but little light from other cities. In the solution of the

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problem it was deemed wise to approach it from the people's side, and not from the land side.

Hudson County has no open country in its suburbs in the usual acceptance of the term "country," and for that reason, as it increases in population, it cannot spread out like the ordinary city with an open country around it. On the contrary, as its population increases, its available open area will decrease, and the constant encroachment of the railroads on its territory will in time leave no space for the very important purpose of giving to a large and thickly settled community the benefit derived from parks and playgrounds.

The Hudson County Park Commission is composed of four members appointed by the Court of Common Pleas under authority of a special act of the legislature, and its funds are supplied by sales of county bonds to an amount the total of which is equal to one per cent. of the county ratables. Its object is to establish and maintain a system of county parks.

There were some who said that any commission that the court might appoint would be unable to complete the construction and maintenance of this system of county parks. They said that the political influence that would be brought to bear would be so heavy as to defeat the purposes of the commission. At the death of its first president, when it was necessary to appoint his successor, men to whom the position was offered declined to serve, fearing that the commission would be tied up by political entanglements and that they would not be free to continue the construction of a suitable park system for Hudson County in the way in which it should be conducted.

Since the organization of the commission it has been beset by many political obstacles, but it has met such difficulties and in every case overcome them. Every session of the New Jersey Legislature brings forth a number of bills the sole object of which is to hamper and annoy the commission in the prosecution of its work. Fortunately for the people of Hudson County, however, "strike bills" and bills representing private or special interests have not been permitted by the state's legislature to become laws, and thus interfere with the work of the commission. As a consequence, Hudson County is rapidly coming into possession of a modern system of public parks that has been commented upon favorably, and the work of the commission has been indorsed by almost every park com-

mission in the United States and many similar bodies of the largest cities of Europe.

It has been held by those competent to give an authoritative opinion upon the subject that the minimum area of park space for the population of any community should be at least one acre for every 200 persons. Assuming this to be a correct estimate, Hudson County should have at this time more than 2,503 acres of park space, and Jersey City, the largest municipality in the county, more than 1,268 acres, or more than thirty times its present city park area. It is an undisputed fact that available space cannot be purchased in this county for less than an average of \$3,300 per acre. This, then, in order to give an acre to every 200 persons, would require the expenditure for land alone of \$8,259,900, which, it is needless to say, the commission does not advocate.

A noted park authority says that any ratio between population and park area is a constantly varying one, for the population of a city or county is constantly increasing. A certain proportion of the ground occupied by a municipality is, of necessity, reserved for public use, a large percentage of which must, of course, be devoted to streets. A study of conditions in many cities has formed the basis of an estimate that 15 per cent. of the area of cities is used for public streets and 5 per cent. for parks. In other words, 20 per cent., or one-fifth of the total area, can be advantageously set aside for public use, and such setting aside increases and does not decrease the value of the other four-fifths which remain as private property. This ratio of 20 per cent., the authority states, should be increased in densely populated centers. It is usually larger than that. By this estimate Jersey City, with an area of 12,288 acres, according to the state geologist, should be entitled to at least 614 acres of public parks, and the other municipalities of the county in proportion. There should also be a fraction of one per cent. used for public buildings.

As a matter of fact, in a little over five years the commission has purchased or decided upon six county parks, the smallest of which contains 5.455 acres and the largest 207.823 acres, the total acreage of these six pleasure spots being 514 acres. The average price per acre of the land for these parks to date has been \$3,275.96, while some property, acquired by condemnation proceedings, has cost the county \$22,887.45 per acre.

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West Side Park, the largest of these, located in Jersey City, with its entrance at the crest of the southern boundary of the Palisades and thence running west to the Hackensack River, is the only park where extensive improvements have yet been made, all of the upland portion, comprising about a hundred acres, having been turned over to the public as a finished park some time ago. This park, on account of its size and central location, occupies the same relation to the community as do Central Park to New York and Prospect Park to Brooklyn. It, therefore, seems highly desirable that it should be made as beautiful as possible. In their planning the architects had this as an important secondary motive. It has not been permitted to interfere in the least, however, with the idea of a thoroughly useful park, where rest and recreation should have first place. The plan contemplated no "Keep off the grass" signs, but provided, on the other hand, for a great abundance and a great variety of areas where almost every healthy outdoor recreation might be enjoyed. West Side Park is to-day one of the most popular recreation spots in the state.

It is on the meadow portion of this park that there will be constructed the largest playground in the world, where it is planned to provide such facilities for outdoor sports as have been found popular in the newer park systems throughout the country. Ample areas are arranged for baseball, tennis and general sports, and a field house with locker facilities will be located about midway of the field.

This playfield on what is now covered by the Hackensack meadows will comprise about sixty-nine acres, exclusive of another smaller tract. It will be about six times the size of the gigantic stadium at Athens, which is famous as the athletic field of the Greeks, and three times the size of the beautiful green lawn of Central Park, where thousands of Manhattan's children congregate daily. Nowhere in New York, which has scores of playgrounds greater in size than those of any other city in America, is there a field that can be rated in the same class, while it greatly exceeds in size any playground in Europe.

Of the athletic fields of New York City, the largest, which is now the largest in the world as well, is the forty-acre parade ground adjoining Prospect Park, Brooklyn, which has twenty baseball diamonds, eleven cricket fields, and space for lawn tennis and other

games. The West Side Park playfield will be half as large again as this one, surpassing anything of its kind and size in the world.

The athletic field at Pelham Bay Park contains about twenty acres, or less than one-third the area of the Jersey City playground, while Thomas Jefferson Park, in Manhattan, and Maccomb's Dam Park, in the Bronx, which are pointed to with pride by New York City as the ideal of a city's interest in its young, are scarcely one-seventh the size of the Jersey City field.

Paris and Berlin have splendid parks, but no great space set aside for young men and boys to play. London's suburbs are dotted with large greens, or commons, where cricket is played on holidays, but even the largest, that at Blackheath, is less than one-third as large as will be the Jersey City playfield. Several times the size of any baseball field in the country, it will be in the summer months the meeting-place through the week of hundreds of boys and men; on Saturdays and holidays the hundreds will be thousands. At present the tract is a vast stretch of marsh meadows.

The old St. George cricket grounds in Hoboken, the most densely populated city in the United States, has been bought by the commission, and a portion of it already made into a public playground, while plans have been accepted for its improvement during the present year as one of the most complete modern playfields in the United States. The other sites thus far selected include 160 acres in the township of North Bergen, at the northerly extremity of the county, atop the Palisades, overlooking the majestic Hudson, 200 feet below; 48 acres in Harrison, in the westerly portion of the county, between the Passaic and Hackensack rivers, and two parks in Bayonne, in the southern part of the county, one of 84 acres and one of 5 acres.

Hudson County is at present possessed of no large public parks, with the exception of the sites already selected by the commission. Fifteen public squares, nine in Jersey City, two in Bayonne, three in Hoboken and one in West Hoboken, are the only other public pleasure spots in Hudson County to-day. They offer no rural effects whatever, and are merely city squares, with asphalt paths, grass and trees, yet they are thronged on warm evenings with men, women and children, affording additional evidence of the need of park lands in the county.

West Hudson County, comprising in land area more than one-

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third of the entire county and extending from the Hackensack to the Passaic River, has no public park or playground. The density of population in Harrison, Kearny and East Newark, and the fact that its vacant lands are rapidly being built upon, caused the commission to give immediate attention to this section of the county.

The project of a county system of parks is comparatively new, and is being watched with great interest. While it is an excellent one, it has necessitated a campaign of education, and this campaign is still at its height. Hudson County is made up of a number of distinct local communities, each regarding its public affairs from an independent and isolated point of view, and generally in a spirit of competition and jealousy. The marked topographical divisions of the county have aggravated sectional feeling to an unusual degree. As a consequence there has been a disposition to look upon the county parks as of little value, except to the people of the district adjoining each park. This feeling, entertained by intelligent and generally well-informed citizens, presented a difficulty to be contended with; for, unquestionably, if it were maintained, it would nullify a large share of the value to the county of the properties proposed to be acquired for a park system.

A park standing by itself and little used, except by those living near it, would be very different from a park which is to stand as one of a system. In the latter case the fitness of a site will be found in its adaptation to supply some peculiar form of park refreshment that others of the system are ill-adapted to supply, or are naturally excluded from supplying. In a word, the design, under the policy which the commission is trying to establish, is to develop features in every locality which will give distinctive interest because of the development of altogether different attractions elsewhere.

If due advantage is taken of the particular capabilities of each section the result will be incomparably better than can possibly be gained under a policy, such as seems to be commonly entertained, of regarding each proposed park as an independent affair, deriving no interest from its relation to others, and imparting nothing of value to the interest of others.

In a word, the commission is endeavoring to present the result of a scientific plan to establish water and landscape views in situations either neglected, destroyed or condemned for such purposes by public opinion at least two generations previously. The park system

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of Hudson County to-day presents to the people a clear indication of the ultimately beautiful and useful parks they will own. The foundation has been laid, so that the parks can be seen and enjoyed while their development into the complete and perfect system designed is being carried forward.