

Social-justice park will convey democratic ideals

By Rutherford H. Platt

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On March 27 ground was broken near Downtown for what might be the nation's first "social-justice park." The park is a project of the First Congregational Church, U.C.C., under the leadership of its senior minister, the Rev. Tim Ahrens, in association with the city, nearby cultural institutions and the Columbus Foundation. As related in the April 14 Dispatch editorial "New park to honor Columbus social justice champion," it will be named the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park to honor the founder of the "social gospel movement" and civic leader who was pastor of that church from 1882 until 1918.

The new park will adjoin the church on the former site of my father's boyhood home at 414 E. Broad St.

The ancestral Platt home was built by my great-grandfather William Augustus Platt in 1855. His brother-in-law (and my great-great-uncle) was Rutherford B. Hayes, who visited the Platt home frequently. As a wounded Union Army officer, three-term Ohio governor and 19th president of the United States, Hayes was a staunch advocate for racial justice. During his term in the White House (1877-1881), he sought to protect civil and voting rights for African-Americans against hostile southern Democrats. Hayes became a close friend and admirer of Gladden, who delivered a resounding eulogy when Hayes died in 1893.

The idea of a public park where they once played baseball and croquet would surely have pleased my dad and his family. Their home was a short carriage ride from the 88-acre Franklin Park and Conservatory that opened to the public in 1884, a Columbus landmark inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park in Manhattan.

Introduced to "nature in the city" at an early age, my father (also named Rutherford Platt) became a widely published naturalist who lived to welcome the beginning of the environmental movement in the 1970s. (How distressed he would be that his beloved Republican Party has lately betrayed its own environmental and conservation legacies.)

The Gladden Social Justice Park will be a compact 21st-century counterpoint to the great urban parks designed by Olmsted and his associates. Olmsted conceived of Central Park as "an educative and civilizing agency . . . to furnish healthful recreation for the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the vicious and the virtuous." Central Park and its peers continue to further Olmsted's social-justice vision as observed by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker* (March 31, 1997): "When we walk in the park, what we are seeing is not a protected bit of nature but something more original: a democratic playground, a liberal common, the ideal anti-plantation."

Today, the "democratic playground" ideal takes many forms. While the size and complexity of the great Olmsted parks can't be replicated today, a new generation of much smaller but hugely successful "New-Age Central Parks" have emerged since the 1980s. These include Chicago's

Millennium Park, New York's High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park, and Atlanta's BeltLine, along with hundreds of less-famous miniparks bordering urban streams and waterfronts, straddling highways and enhancing struggling communities across the nation.

Plans for the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park suggest that it will be a national model for creative new parks or sites within older parks that honor and inspire the struggle for social justice. Its design and spirit will connect visitors, particularly schoolchildren, to the ideals of democracy and human rights — to the “better angels” of Abraham Lincoln, to the “democracy and social ethics” of Jane Addams, to Washington Gladden's “social gospel,” Eleanor Roosevelt's “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and Martin Luther King Jr.'s “arc of the moral universe.”

As the Weavers once sang to another troubled time: “We are traveling in the footsteps of those who've come before.” The footsteps of Gladden and other prophets of democracy must lead us on the long march ahead. The Washington Gladden Social Justice Park and its counterparts elsewhere will help to refresh the weary and inspire the next generation of marchers. Bravo to all concerned.

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