

**Gardens in the Machine:  
Cultural and Environmental Change in Detroit, 1879 - 2010**

**by**

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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Wealth of a city lies,  
Not in its factories,  
Its marts and towers crowding to the sky,  
But in its people who  
Possess grace to imbue  
Their lives with beauty, wisdom, charity.

-Dudley Randall, "Detroit Renaissance" (1980)



Belle Isle Aquarium employee cleaning a lake sturgeon with a cloth, c. 1910

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For Mom and Dad; and Detroit.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation argues that parks, gardens, yards, and other landscapes created by residents and city leaders are crucially important to understanding the rise, fall, and revitalization of metropolitan Detroit, Michigan between 1879 and 2010. The project examines how residents and city leaders negotiated social boundaries such as race and class by remaking the landscape to create a more hospitable sense of place in an overwhelmingly industrial region and endowing it with environmental values, which continue to affect the city and larger region today. Each chapter focuses on different iterations of Detroit's landscape at various scales and proximity to the central city, such as Belle Isle Park and Pingree's Potato Patches, to African American yards, an outdoor camp called Green Pastures, metropolitan parks, community gardens, and photographs of the city's post-industrial decline. These case studies reveal how varied strands of environmental thought changed over time, were made tangible on the landscape, and were adapted to meet the circumstances of different generations of people in the city. Used to instill social order or contest it, reconcile the inequalities of industrial capitalism, or imagine a middle class way of life, Detroit's cultural landscape was a dynamic terrain that residents of the region utilized to change the land and themselves. By looking for the meaning of nature in the crucible of American industry and urban decline, this dissertation demonstrates that we can trace the roots of American environmentalism not only to a distant wilderness, but also to complex spaces on the peripheries of urban life. The gardens in the machine of industrial capitalism were where

residents and city leaders invented, contested, and defined ideas and ideals about urbanism, nature, and each other through outdoor spaces.

## **Introduction Landscape and Culture in Detroit**

On a rectangular piece of land that was once home to a paint manufacturer on the corner of Orleans and Wilkins Street, a garden now grows. Opened in 2012, the Detroit Market Garden was our last stop on the fifteenth annual tour of urban gardens in Detroit, sponsored by the Detroit Agriculture Network. A nearly three-acre space bordered by a brick warehouse and views of the city's downtown skyline, it is one of many gardens across the city started by residents and organizations over the past twenty years as a means of remaking places from a landscape long relegated to the status of ruins by years of disinvestment. Over a three-year period, the Greening of Detroit, an organization dedicated to revitalizing the city with natural features such as trees and parks, worked to remediate the soil, removing upwards of two feet in some areas. After its first season, the garden yielded more than 4,000 pounds of fresh produce, flowers, and herbs, which employees and volunteers sold at nearby Eastern Market, to area restaurants, and distributed to food banks.

Looking at the Detroit Market Garden is jarring and inspiring because a sense of renewal is juxtaposed with the context of Detroit's decline. Garden historian Kenneth Helphand writes, "When we see an improbable garden, we experience a shock of recognition of the garden's form and elements, but also a renewed appreciation of the garden's transformative power to beautify, comfort, and convey meaning despite the incongruity of its surroundings. Gardens are defined by their context, and perhaps the further the context from our expectations, the deeper the meaning

the garden holds for us.”<sup>1</sup> In cities such as Detroit, residents have created an urban environmentalism of the garden as a tool of community empowerment, revitalization. The garden, a place that seems to bring nature and culture together in an idealized way, is a symbol of hope amid decline.

Supporters of the Detroit Market Garden have described it as a “pioneering experiment in urban agriculture” and a “national success story.”<sup>2</sup> A reporter writing for *The Observer Magazine* in 2010 argued that “Like no other city in the world urban farming has taken root in Detroit, not just as a hobby or a sideline but as part of a model for a wholesale revitalization of a major city.”<sup>3</sup> So the narrative goes that agricultural pursuits more common to rural areas seemed to offer a way forward for a city with an abundance of open spaces. But today is far from the first time Detroiters have imagined the garden as a solution to the social and environmental challenges of living in an industrial city. Polish and German immigrants, for instance, grew food on the city’s vacant lots as early as 1894. For more than a century city leaders and residents have turned toward parks, gardens, yards, and similar outdoor areas to try and ameliorate the negative social consequences of industrial capitalism and urban life. This dissertation argues that these spaces are crucially important to understanding the history of Metropolitan Detroit between 1879 and 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Helphand, *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Chassin Goldbaum, “Detroit Market Garden Apprentice Program” Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan Newsletter, Volume 27, Fall 2013, page 7.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Harris, “Detroit Gets Growing,” *The Observer Magazine*, July 10, 2010.

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/jul/11/detroit-urban-renewal-city-farms-paul-harris>



Figure 1: Detroit Market Garden in August 2012.  
Photograph by Joseph Cialdella



Figure 2: Tomato Plants and Detroit's Skyline, August 2012.  
Photograph by Joseph Cialdella

Fast-paced industrial development in the first half of the twentieth century followed by rapid decline since the 1960s led Detroit from a population of nearly two million during the 1950s to just under 700,000 today. Discriminatory housing policies, beginning with restrictive covenants in the 1920s and continuing with redlining through the 1940s, created a situation where eighty percent of Detroit's residents are African American. Some researchers estimate that

one third of Detroit's 139 square miles is land vacant of its former uses.<sup>4</sup> The vast amount of open space present in Detroit has created a city that that appears almost rural in some areas. Historians such as Olivier Zunz, Thomas Sugrue, and others have examined the demographic shifts, politics, racial segregation, and technological transformation of Detroit and other cities like it. Historians have given less attention to how the environment has been intertwined with more familiar narratives of Detroit and urban America.

Scholarship examining the suburbanization and transformation of cities during the post war era has, for good reason, often been focused on political and economic conditions. Yet as historians Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott have argued, "our scholarship must work as hard to understand the mental and cultural frameworks of deindustrialization as it has to grasp the political, technological, and financial dimensions."<sup>5</sup> Through this research, I take a step toward this call by examining the cultural logics of urban environmentalism that have been used to understand and remake industrial and post-industrial spaces in Detroit. These cultural and mental frameworks informed how photographers responded to urban decline, as well as the ideals of community gardeners in the city. Moreover, by taking a long view of environmental thought, this dissertation also reveals the connections and continuities between past conceptions of Detroit's landscape and those that have evolved during the period of deindustrialization that Cowie and Heathcott describe. The result is a history of Detroit's cultural and social landscape – a narrative of how place and environment have been central to the city's past and present.

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<sup>4</sup> John Gallagher, "With So Much Space, so Few Options, Detroit's Vast Vacant Lots are a Burden," *Detroit Free Press*, April 1, 2012. <<http://www.freep.com/article/20120401/NEWS01/204010467/With-so-much-space-so-few-options-Detroit-s-vast-vacant-lots-are-a-burden>>. For a thorough analysis of the factors that led to Detroit's decline during the postwar period, see Thomas Sugrue's work, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996).

<sup>5</sup> "Introduction" in Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds. *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5.



By reading the landscape at different moments in Detroit's history, I examine the meanings residents, city and civic leaders, community organizations, artists, and planners gave to nature in the crucible of American industry and urban decline. In doing so, my research demonstrates that we can trace the roots of environmentalism not only to a distant wilderness, but also to complex spaces on the peripheries of urban life. The gardens in the machine of industrial capitalism were where residents and city leaders invented, contested, and defined ideas and ideals about urbanism, nature, and each other through outdoor spaces such as parks, gardens, and camps. Detroit's landscape was a dynamic terrain. Leaders and residents of the region often believed that by shaping the land they could transform their fellow human beings, an idea often described by scholars as "moral environmentalism."

Moral environmentalism is most often used to describe explain the Victorian system of beliefs that build and natural environments can influence the behavior and minds of individuals. For example, historian David Scobey describes in his work *Empire City*, that New York city's nineteenth century "city builders...viewed the natural and built environments as an index and instrument of moral progress in American society. Yet their efforts entailed more than just generic faith in the uplifting influence of planning and design. New York's urbanists infused moral environmentalism with a complex vision of what a great metropolis should look like, a vision that sought to link capitalist growth, civilizational order, and the city's rising power."<sup>6</sup> During the late nineteenth century, Detroit's civic leaders adapted an ideology of moral environmentalism to their efforts at creating a cohesive social order. The research in this dissertation also demonstrates that residents, planers, community organizations, and civic leaders continued to adapted the idea to the changing circumstances of life in metropolitan Detroit,

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<sup>6</sup> David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 10.

sometimes using it so instill social order or contest it, reconcile the inequalities of industrial capitalism, or even imagine a middle class way of life.

While much of the scholarship on moral environmentalism has looked at larger spaces such as Central Park, this dissertation builds on earlier studies by giving equal attention to smaller scale spaces like vacant lot gardens in the nineteenth century, yards in the early twentieth century, and community gardens in the twenty first century. Alongside an examination of massive parks in metro Detroit like Belle Isle or the Huron-Clinton Metroparks, an analysis of more everyday or vernacular spaces helps to bring different sets of historical actors to the foreground and demonstrates moral environmentalism was a much more malleable concept than only an instrument used by urban elites to instill a sense of order upon the landscape. Everyday residents, Polish and German immigrants, members of the Detroit Urban League, and community gardeners used, challenged, and adapted moral environmentalism to try and make a place and identity for themselves in the city. Creating a landscape, writes historian David Stradling, is often a “contentious collaboration” more than a linear process.<sup>7</sup> This idea holds true in Detroit, where the urban landscape was made and remade in response to social tensions.

Like many cities, Detroit has long been a landscape of ruin and repair. Generations of residents and city leaders used their own visions of moral environmentalism to transform *spaces* they viewed as unsightly and inhospitable into *places* – landscapes that evoked emotions and meaning.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of a verdant summer in 1908, for example, the *Detroit Free Press*

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<sup>7</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), xxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan theorizes that, “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” Throughout this dissertation, the individuals and organizations I examine use cultural practices such as gardening, designing parks and camps, and cleaning up their neighborhoods, to add value or meaning to their experiences in Detroit. Far from a simple linear or positive process, the way individuals, groups, and city leader worked to create a sense of place in the historical moments I examine involved a complex negotiation of class and racial identity, ethnicity that were wrapped up with ideas of urban environmentalism.

reported that, “weeds are thriving on many vacant lots in Detroit.” More seriously, the article warned residents and city leaders that it was “possible, too, that the luxuriant growth of burdock and various other noxious vegetation will not be interrupted.” To remove them would mean “a loss of several thousand dollars to the city,” which it could not afford. With no funds available to relieve the city of this nuisance, one of Detroit’s city commissioners hoped that “a revival wave of civic consciousness will reach the owners of weed decorated lots, and that they will come to the aid of the department.”<sup>9</sup> Changing the urban landscape involved building a consensus and creating a shared vision between city leaders and residents.

This dissertation takes a long view of landscape change and urban environmental reform – the “waves of civic consciousness” as the 1908 *Detroit Free Press* reporter describes them - that Detroiters have used in their struggles to make the city’s urban environment a more livable, just, and sustainable place between 1879 and 2010. By examining on the historical moments when these programs rose and fell as prominent ways of thinking about life in the city, each chapter focuses on one or two key cultural landscapes at various scales and proximity to the central city and constitutes a snapshot within the longer history of Detroit. This study examines spaces such as Belle Isle Park and Pingree’s Potato Patches, African American yards, an outdoor camp called green pastures, metropolitan parks, community gardens and photographs of the city’s post-industrial decline. Each landscape also involved different sets of actors, such as city leaders, urban reformers, community organizations, and everyday residents. Rather than imagining that Detroit had a stable “golden age,” a long view of how these actors transformed the environment also helps to reveal what historian Kirk Savage has described more accurately

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<sup>9</sup> “Weeds are Thriving on City’s Vacant Lots,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 11, 1908.

as a “continuous history of transformation and displacement” that has characterized the change associated with industrial development and postindustrial decline.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at these waves of civic action on the part of residents, government leaders, and community organizations also helps to demonstrate that the concept of moral environmentalism was not only a top-down instrument of social order and control used by urban elite in the nineteenth century, but a also a more fluid concept that everyday residents, community organizations, artists, and others used and adapted to meet their circumstances and needs into the twenty-first century, where it has become a familiar tool of community empowerment. Along the way, African American residents melded the idea to programs of racial uplift and technocratic planners reshaped moral environmentalism with the hope that it might unite a region of 4.5 million people. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century, decisions about the appearance of Detroit’s landscape revealed broader cultural and environmental values, which in turn have said much about the people and circumstances of life in metropolitan Detroit. Together, the environmental values present in Detroit’s landscape have shaped the contours, meaning, and experience of the industrial city.

Landscape, as scholar Anne Spirn describes it, “is loud with dialogues, with story lines that connect a place and its dwellers.”<sup>11</sup> To tell the story of how Detroiters vested the city’s landscape with cultural meaning during these periods, I turn to a variety of sources including newspapers, government reports, organizational records, correspondences, photographs, designs and plans, magazine articles, memoirs, and brochures. By digging deeper into the currents of thought and environmental action presented in these sources, the pages that follow argue that

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<sup>10</sup> Kirk Savage, “Monuments of a Lost Cause: The Postindustrial Campaign to Commemorate Steel” in Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds. *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 237.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 17.

Detroit's landscape was a dynamic terrain that everyday residents, city and civic leaders, planners, and artists used to contend with the social class, racial, and environmental challenges of industrialization and deindustrialization. While those in power often used the land as a tool of social order and control, residents on the ground also attached their own environmental ideals to the city's landscape.

### **The Cultural Work of Landscapes**

Remaking and adapting parts of Detroit's urban landscape was cultural work that Detroit's residents, city leaders, planners, and community organizations used to exert a measure of control and order over spaces in the city. Scholars important to the field of American Studies have long been concerned with understanding the importance of place and landscapes to the formation of culture.<sup>12</sup> Leo Marx's work *The Machine in the Garden*, for example, uses the idea of the "machine in the garden" – technology intruding upon an idealized landscape - to examine Americans' literary fascination with the pastoral "middles landscapes" in the context of industrial transformation brought about by technology. The way Americans imagined the land through cultural texts as an idealized "landscape of reconciliation" that balanced nature and culture in a harmonious way, Marx argues, was in stark contradiction to the way industrialization was changing the land.<sup>13</sup> The way technology and industry took over the land seemed almost natural because Americans could escape to idealized places.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Annette Kolondy's *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of American Frontiers* and Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*.

<sup>13</sup> Marx argues that "the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment" in an "intricately organized, urban, industrial" society was central to understanding American identity. The Pastoral landscapes represented by writers and artists, Marx argues, could be divided into two categories: "one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex." In Detroit, the historic and contemporary landscapes I examine often gravitated between similar ideals, but with an eye toward the way the landscape itself could help maintain a sense of social order and influence identity as connected to race and class.

As individuals and organizations in Detroit redefined their sense of place and belonging in the city amidst the challenges of industrialization and deindustrialization over the course of a century, they also did so with notions of moral environmentalism in mind. Commonly understood as the nineteenth century belief that the proper design of the environment could influence the behavior of individuals, this dissertation argues moral environmentalism also intersected with conflicts over race and class well into the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> In one view, urban parks such as Belle Isle in Detroit might be interpreted as tangible landscapes of reconciliation, planned as escapes from the industrial city.<sup>15</sup> This dissertation builds on Marx's cultural approach to look at tangible "landscapes of reconciliation" that city leader, planners, and residents used to contend with the negative environmental consequences of industrialization. At the same time, I also look beyond Marx's framework. From my research, it is clear that parks, gardens, and outdoor camps were not only products of culture designed as escapes from the reality of industrial development and post-industrial decline. When examining sources related to the development of the land itself, "reconciliation" alone does not account for the messiness of cultural interactions on the ground.<sup>16</sup> The desire for order and control, not only reconciliation, is evident in the way Detroit's city leaders, planners, and everyday residents imagined Detroit's landscape as a tool to save the city and its people over the course of the twentieth century.

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<sup>14</sup> Historian David Scobey's work *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* is among the most recent to look at how nineteenth century urban reformers used moral environmentalism to shape life in America's largest city. In this dissertation I begin with reformers in Detroit who were influenced by similar concepts of moral environmentalism, but also use the concept to look at the intellectual architecture supporting projects that extended well into the twentieth century and used the landscape and environment as a tool to save the city and its people.

<sup>15</sup> Garden historian Kenneth Helphand, for example, has explained that "Marx's analysis...emphasized the machine in the garden as metaphor. What of a more literal interpretation? What of the actual machine *in* the garden?" (Kenneth Helphand in Michel Conan, ed. *Perspectives on Garden Histories* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Like other historians of cultural landscapes, such as Richard Shein, Kenneth Helphand, and David Scobey, my interest in Detroit's landscape lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach, rather than a purely historical one. This is because much of what we can learn about the making and cultural meaning of the city's environment over time stems from insights that can be gained from visual and material sources related to the designs and plans of the city's built environment.

For residents and leaders in metropolitan Detroit, the landscape was a testing ground for their visions of social order, cultural identity, and belonging. To get at the nuanced meanings attributed to the physical landscape itself this dissertation draws on and contributes to scholarship in the field of cultural landscape studies. The cultural landscape, which scholars Paul Groth and Todd Bressi describe, “denotes the interaction of people and place: a social group and its spaces, particularly the spaces to which the group belongs and from which its members derive some part of their shared identity and meaning...Cultural landscape studies focus most on the history of how people have used everyday space – buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards – to establish their identity, articulate their social relations and drive cultural meaning.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the landscape not only creates a sense of place and environment, but also can be a critical component in the formation of cultural identity.

For early works in the field of cultural landscape studies, such as those by J.B. Jackson, Carl Sauer, Henry Glasie, and D.W. Meinig, the approach to reading culture and identity in the landscape implied a visual methodology, looking at visible evidence, such as the appearance of a house or yard, and extrapolating the meaning of these features based on how groups of people used these everyday or vernacular spaces. The landscape itself was a kind of archive. More recently, scholarship on cultural landscapes has evolved to more thoroughly question the links between the seen and unseen elements that shape the meaning of the landscape. For example, geographer Richard Schein has led an effort to more critically examine the links between race

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Groth and Todd Bressi, *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1. In large part, the origins of this field can be traced back to J.B. Jackson. His work interpreted the meaning of landscapes through practices of close looking. Instead of essays grounded in historical research or strictly theoretical works, Jackson’s analyses seemed to occupy a middle area between theory and history. Later works in the field began to delve deeper into historical sources, and others were more directly influenced by theories of the social construction of space, such as those of Henri Lefebvre.

and the landscape.<sup>18</sup> Following this path, architectural historian Dianne Harris' work *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (2013) examines how ideas about race, whiteness, and class were embedded in the architecture and design of postwar suburbs in the United States. Importantly, these works use a historical approach to reveal the often unseen cultural dimensions of the landscape, as this dissertation does.

Like earlier landscape scholars, my project started with an interest in understanding the contemporary landscape of Detroit. The visual juxtapositions of community gardens, buildings from the city's industrial past, and uneven redevelopment drew my attention. But like more recent works in cultural landscape studies, my research used an historical approach to understand the meaning of these places in the present. In the pages that follow, I focus on how racial and class identity intersect with the landscape as seen through the processes of implementing projects as large as urban parks and as small as campaigns to clean up the appearance of yards in African American neighborhoods. In each of these instances, Detroit's landscape was not merely a setting for cultural interactions, but a part of the way people gave meaning to their experiences in the city. Whether they were Polish immigrants growing food on vacant lots in the nineteenth century, African American migrants from the south during the first half of the twentieth century, or planners and civic leaders, the landscape was a tool used to shape the lines of race, class, and gender.

Reading the landscape as a part of Detroit's history provides a deeper understand of the past by revealing a process of meaning making that often remains unseen. The boundaries of race

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<sup>18</sup> For examples, see the works in his edited volume, *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Geographer Don Mitchell has also complicated earlier definitions of the landscape that seemed to ignore or not fully acknowledge social conditions. As he wrote in his work *The Lie of the Land* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): "Landscape is thus best understood as a kind of produced, lived, and represented space constructed out of the struggles, compromises, and temporarily settled relations of competing and cooperating social actors; it is both a thing (or suite of things), as Sauer would have it, and a social process, at once solidly material and ever changing" (30).



and class in the city and its suburbs, for example, are often understood as “natural” features of geography. As geographer Richard Schein describes, “The cultural landscape is especially adept at masking its complicity with processes of racialization when it is enacted as part of other, seemingly more benign narratives of American life.”<sup>19</sup> For example, throughout this dissertation, the advocates of environmental reform whom I examine frequently discuss parks and gardens around discourses of bringing nature to the city, neighborhood beautification, and recreation. But these spaces were not separate from the racial, ethnic, and class tensions of Detroit’s residents. The landscape was one part of the complex way individuals were defined by others, articulated their own racial and class identities, as well as their position as a part of Detroit’s social order.<sup>20</sup>

Landscape architect Kenrick Grandison has described the landscape “as a system of interrelated parts consisting of buildings and other human constructions within their various changing contexts...its historical significance cannot be appreciated strictly by detailed study of these parts...Instead...historical meaning resides not so much in autonomous objects or ‘things’ but rather in how spatial relationships change over time.”<sup>21</sup> The landscape, in short, is a useful concept because it helps to reveal connections between the multiple factors that contribute to historical change.<sup>22</sup> Throughout this dissertation, the “interrelated parts” that create Detroit’s

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Schein, “Race and Landscape in the United States,” in Richard Schein, ed. *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

<sup>20</sup> In an essay from 1991, Upton emphasized the need for architectural historians to address the cultural landscape as their unit of analysis, rather than individual buildings or architects. This approach lends itself to examining the history of Detroit from a cultural history/American Studies perspective because there it provides conceptual space for including areas of analysis that are not readily “seen,” but still exert influence on the meaning of places. As Upton explains, “a working definition of *cultural landscape* emphasizes the fusion of the physical with the imaginative structures that all inhabitants of the landscape use in constructing and construing it. Since there can be no normative perception, the human environment is necessarily the product of powerful yet diffuse imaginations, fractured by the fault lines of class, culture, and personality. It cannot be universalized, canonized, or even unified.” (Dell Upton, “Architectural History or Landscape History?” *Journal of Architectural Education* (August 1991, Volume 44, Issue 4, pp.195-199), 198.

<sup>21</sup> Kenrick Grandison, “Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Record of Post-bellum America,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 51 (Sep. 1999), pp. 529-597; 532-533.

<sup>22</sup> This has also been a central tenant of landscape studies for some time. As D.W. Meinig wrote in his 1979 work *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*: “the idea of landscape runs counter to recognition of any simple binary

landscape include elements that are readily seen, like the design of parks and the appearance of a place at a given moment in time and the racial geography of neighborhoods, in addition to components that are unseen that affect the landscape, such as ideas, politics, and public policies. Architectural historian Dianne Harris writes that, “landscape is among the most potent conveyors of ideological content, because its long association with ideas about nature and the natural render its appearance as seeming inherently benign, vacant of meaning, and...completely without political import.”<sup>23</sup> With a historical focus, this dissertation helps to reveal the unseen strands of environmental thought that shape the urban landscape of Detroit by explaining how they change over time. To do this in a more elaborate way, this project also builds on areas of inquiry in the fields of urban and environmental history.

## **Metropolitan Detroit and Environmental History**

As the epicenter of America’s industrial rise and decline, Detroit has attracted the attention of many historians and scholars. My dissertation relies on and builds from the insights of those in the fields of urban, environmental, and cultural history. Over the last twenty-five years, urban and suburban historians have rewritten the history of American cities more broadly, giving attention to the way federal housing policies, highway construction, and the relocation of industry have shaped metropolitan regions.<sup>24</sup> The narrative of Detroit’s past has often been told through accounts of the social, political, demographic, and technological transformations

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relationship between man and nature. Rather, it begins with a naïve acceptance of the intricate intermingling of physical, biological, and cultural features which any glance around us displays.” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 265.

<sup>24</sup> For example, works important in this area of inquiry include: Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (1987), Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996), Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (2004), Kruse and Sugrue, eds, *The New Suburban History* (2006), Howard Gillette, *Camden After the Fall* (2005), Cowie and Heathcott, eds. *Beyond the Ruins* (2003), Robert Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares* (2005).

wrought by industry and devastating policies of urban disinvestment. A large portion of the scholarship on Detroit and American cities, has, importantly, focused on urban spaces as seen through the lens of political and economic structures that led to the city's rise, fall, and dramatic social inequality, including the racial segregation perpetuated by public policies and the structural causes of racial divisions between the city and its suburban region.

In his book *The Changing Face of Inequality* (1983), for example, Olivier Zunz describes how Detroit's industrialization between 1880 and 1920 created a "total industrial landscape," in which the boundaries of ethnicity and class among Detroit's laborers defined the city's social geography. By 1920, he argues, "race and class came to replace ethnicity in dividing and reshaping the mature industrial metropolis"<sup>25</sup> Zunz's social history approach demonstrates how spatial boundaries were shaped by patterns of immigration and industrial development. In contrast, the section of this dissertation centered in the late nineteenth century takes a cultural approach to understanding the city by examining strands of urban environmental thought intended to transform the "total industrial landscape" Zunz observes into a landscapes endowed with cultural value used to negotiate ethnic, racial, and class lines while maintaining social order. It was during this same late nineteenth century period that the city hired landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to design a park in an attempt to save the city and its people from becoming totally absorbed in the moral and social implications of industrial life.

During the post-World War II period, Thomas Sugrue's pivotal work *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996) dispelled the well-worn narrative that Detroit's problems of decline and abandonment began with the riots of 1967. In it he argues policy makers planted the seeds of Detroit's decline and dramatic racial inequality at the height of the city's growth, during the post-

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<sup>25</sup> Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 11.

war era between the 1940s and 1960s. Sugrue explains how multiple factors such as housing and employment discrimination, suburbanization, economics, and politics together produced the racial segregation, social inequality, and economic decline. June Manning Thomas's *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (1997) also examines the flaws present in presumably well-intentioned urban planning projects that sought to improve social and economic conditions in the city during the same period that Sugrue examines, with particular attention to the negative effects redevelopment projects had for Detroit's African American communities. Historians' attention to the spatial dimensions of inequality in Detroit illustrate how public policies, economics, and redevelopment plans had very real consequences for the city and its residents and caused the social divisions present across metropolitan Detroit. This historical narrative, however, also has an environmental side. During this period planners, landscape architects, and leaders in Detroit and its suburbs also proposed a system of parks, known as the Huron-Clinton Metroparks, that were not separate from the social ramifications Sugrue and Thomas describe. Uneven development had profound consequences for the quality of the environment in the inner city, which the environmental justice movement and related scholarship has done much to reveal. This dissertation contributes to the critical attention given to planning and social divisions in Detroit, but with a focus toward spaces designed with the environment in mind.

In addition to historical scholarship that has focused on urban space in Detroit, this dissertation contributes to the field of environmental history, particularly the growing area of urban environmental history. Following a tradition associated with the work of historian William Cronon, my study examines the interplay between nature and culture in urban areas. In the historical narrative of these works, "culture" often meant capitalism and its markets, which

brought damage to the environment and degraded nature. In this dissertation, however, I look to the way city leaders and residents instigated and navigated environmental and cultural change within the constraints of an industrial order, with a particular focus on how race and class intersect with efforts toward environmental reform in Detroit.<sup>26</sup> By investigating sources related to a wide array of outdoor projects in Detroit, my method of inquiry links discourses of urban environmental thought and civic improvement to the tangible changes in the landscape that affected the everyday lives of Detroiters in small and profound ways.

Like historians such as Matthew Klingle, Ari Kelman, and Matthew Gandy who have written environmental histories of Seattle, New Orleans, and New York respectively, my work also investigates the effects of parks, public spaces, and environmental beautification projects on social relationships in the city. As Klingle writes of Seattle's past, "Landscape architects...carves public greenswards out of Seattle's remaining forests in hopes of guaranteeing social peace through artistic loveliness. For all of their aesthetic differences, the engineers and the landscape architects shared one critical assumption: a sense that nature altered was nature perfected and society harmonized. Both classes of experts considered themselves enlightened arbiters of capricious markets and erratic nature."<sup>27</sup> Park building projects in Detroit – such as Belle Isle Park and the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Parks - had similarly lofty social and environmental goals, but in reality the effects of different urban environmental projects on

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<sup>26</sup> The field of environmental history, once primarily concerned with physical transformations of the land and their effect on the condition of the natural world, has also become increasingly involved with examining cultural dimensions of race and class that have typically been associated with American Studies and cultural history. For example, the essays presented in Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll's edited volume, *To Love the Wind and the Rain* (2005), forward the contributions of African Americans toward shaping an American environmental ethic. This dissertation builds from this area of inquiry by giving significant attention to African Americans' relationship to the environment in Detroit. Historian Brian McCammack's dissertation, "Recovering Green in Bronzeville: An Environmental and Cultural History of the Great Migration to Chicago, 1915-1940" also brings African American history, urban history, and environmental history together in ways that have previously been underexamined in the field. Works on environmental justice have also long been concerned with the racial and socioeconomic dimensions of environmental impacts such as pollution.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Klingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 5.

Detroit's residents were far more complicated and often maintained social order and class lines in the city.

Large-scale transformations in urban areas – such as park building - have often played a central role in urban environmental histories like those of Klinge, Kelman, and Gandy. In this dissertation, they also play a role. At the same time, I also look at smaller-scale changes in the land, such as gardens and yards. In these spaces, the nuanced ways Detroiters used the landscape to shape the identity of the city and themselves along racial and class lines becomes clearer and helps to reveal the cultural work that was involved in spatial change. By reworking the land to meet their ideals of home and create a sense of belonging and place, Detroiters engaged in a process of making meaning using the landscape itself. Public policies may have helped shaped the boundaries of race in Detroit, but cultural practices such the appearance of one's yard, or the experiences in the great outdoors also shaped racial and class identity. With a focus on culture, *Landscape of Ruin and Repair* looks at the city from the perspective of historians such as David Scobey (*Empire City*) and Dell Upton (*Another City*) whose approach to urban spaces examines how the planning and design of cities influences the way they are experienced by those who live there. In this approach, Detroit is not a space shaped by public policies and social boundaries between groups of people, but a place and landscape given meaning by the way people represent it, use it, and shape it. Without losing sight of the larger social, political, and economic forces in Detroit's history, this dissertation contributes to a growing subfield of urban environmental history by examining moments when individuals, organizations, and city leaders used intersecting ideas about nature, culture, cities, and their fellow human beings to instigate changes in the urban landscape. Transforming places helped them contend with the challenges of life in an urban-industrial environment that was out of their ability to fully control.

## Chapter Outline

To organize the broad chronological breadth of this dissertation, each chapter focuses on the creation of one or two cultural landscapes that illustrate a snap shot of how Detroit's residents sought to reconcile the challenges of living in an urban-industrial environment – such as inequality, racism, and poor living conditions – by endowing parks, gardens, and nature with the possibility of providing an avenue for cultural and environmental change. In dialogue with the physical landscape and built environment of the city, Detroiters invented and tested ideas about their relationships with the natural world and one another. From Olmsted's urban pastoral and community gardens to the ideal of wilderness, Detroiters used and altered discourses of nature to make small, but tangible changes in the landscape that helped them negotiate categories such as race and class that had material implications for their quality of life in the city. The appearance and use of the landscape was a central component to Detroiters sense of place and belonging in the city.

Chapter one juxtaposes the creation of two spaces to examine the evolution of an environmental ethic in Detroit as it coincided with the city's industry development during the late nineteenth century. The first, Belle Isle Park, was a pastoral leisure environment designed by Fredrick Law Olmsted in 1881, complete with picturesque views of the surrounding landscape and city, walking paths, idyllic arched bridges over a network of canals, and even, for a short while, a pasture with sheep. The second use of space, municipally supported subsistence gardens called "Pingree's Potato Patches," marked the agrarian flip side of Olmsted's romanticized pastoral. Started by Mayor Hazen S. Pingree as an unemployment and poverty relief program following the economic panic of 1893, the potato patches were thought of as an experiment to

utilize what he described as “wasteland” on the peripheries of Detroit’s city limits. This chapter argues that city leaders employed the idea of “moral environmentalism,” the belief that the design and use of buildings and landscapes could influence the behaviors of individuals for the benefit of society, to ameliorate class and ethnic tensions in the city and create a cohesive urban citizenry during a period of economic turmoil and social unrest.

The second chapter moves forward chronologically to examine the ways African Americans shaped and responded to Detroit’s landscape through yards, gardens, and neighborhoods as they began moving to the city in large numbers between 1916 and 1940. While Detroit offered many opportunities for migrants from the South, racism and economic inequality relegated many to second-class status that they sought to overcome through programs of environmental reform. While moral environmentalism is frequently examined in the context of a Victorian-era system of beliefs, this chapter examines how the Detroit Urban League’s black middle class leaders used programs of neighborhood clean up connected the notion of moral environmentalism with the ability to promote racial uplift. By promoting an orderly, modern landscape aesthetic most often associated with white middle class homeowners, rather than the more “rural” vegetable garden that migrants cultivated out of necessity and choice, the Detroit Urban League attempted to transform African American migrants from the South to their image of respectable citizens. Far from a straightforward process, however, migrants often chose to maintain their semi-rural ways of life.

The Detroit Urban League (DUL) also sought to instill middle-class ideals of respectability in Detroit’s lower-class African American residents through programs of outdoor recreation aimed at children. The third chapter examines one of their most prominent efforts, the creation of a camp called Green Pastures, which began in 1931. During the Great Depression,



the DUL looked for ways to reduce poverty and continue its efforts to transform African Americans in Detroit into model urban citizens. Located west of Detroit in rural Michigan, the DUL's camp used the ideal of a wilderness experience and healthy recreation to advance their mission of assimilation to white ways of living, with the hope it would increase African Americans' chances of finding equal opportunity in Detroit. At Green Pastures, leaders of the DUL designed and used the landscape of an outdoor camp to promote positive behavior and instill values of cleanliness, thrift, and fair competition by learning from nature away from the city.

By the 1940s, the belief in a moral environmentalism was beginning shift toward the suburban areas of the metropolitan region as it was combined with a technocratic and rational approach to creating parks and green spaces. Chapter four examines the transformation of moral environmentalism in the post-World War II period by tracing the development of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, an agency charged with developing a system of regional parks around Detroit that coincided with increasing suburban development. While a seemingly beneficial program, the politics and decisions made about how to fund the new park system largely left the city of Detroit out of the picture, while continuing to remove financial resources from the city's coffers with minimal benefit to residents. While many factors contributed to Detroit's decline, by the 1970s it was increasingly clear that Detroit's parks and green spaces deteriorated in part because financial resources went to outlying suburban areas.

The process of urban disinvestment – planned through highway construction, suburbanization, and the relocation of industry - left Detroit's landscape dramatically transformed. Vacant lots, abandoned structures, and the open spaces of urban prairies became common sights that Detroit's residents had to live with on a daily basis. Chapter five examines

two responses to Detroit's decline. During the 1970s, individuals once again turned to gardening as a means of improving the city. At the same time, photographers and urban explorers became enthralled with Detroit's ruins. In stark contrast to the environmental ethic promoted by urban gardeners, a subset of these photographs imagined the city as a veritable post-industrial wilderness, by focusing on the way nature seemed to be returning to the city through the weeds and plant life that grew over abandoned structures. This chapter looks at the way photographs and gardening projects created between 1970s and 2010 create competing environmental narratives from Detroit's decline. From a landscape devastated by deindustrialization, Detroiters reintroduced the garden into a landscape ruined by the machine in order to imagine an alternative to the model of industrial capitalism that left residents to contend with the fall of an American city.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the rows of crops in the Detroit Market Garden and hearing the voices of enthusiastic community gardeners on that August day, it was not difficult to imagine why, on a 2007 visit to the city, author Rebecca Solnit went so far as to describe the city as an "arcadia" for the renewed sense of an idealized rural life that has taken root in Detroit.<sup>28</sup> While it may seem backward to outsiders, adapting agriculture, one of the oldest human inventions, to an urban setting has brought a renewed sense of optimism and hope that Detroit – long relegated to the status of ruins by many – might point the way toward a new kind of city. As the research presented in this dissertation demonstrates, however, the ability to do so has been uneven and deeply vested in strands of moral environmentalism that sought to bring social order and control

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<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia," *Harper's Magazine*, July 2007. Kenneth Helphand, *Defiant Gardens: Making gardens in Wartime* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), 9.

to the city. The environmental side of Detroit's history contributes a deeper understanding to the scholarship on race, class, and urban space that have shaped our understanding of the city by closely examining how individuals and organizations used the landscape to respond to periods of social and cultural uncertainty.

The result is a history of Detroit that is greener than one might otherwise have imagined, but no less connected to the racial and class boundaries that have been central to understanding Detroit. The geographer and theorist of place Yi-Fu Tuan once wrote that the ambition of "humanistic enterprise" is "to increase the burden of awareness."<sup>29</sup> By focusing attention on parks, yards, and gardens as components of Detroit's landscape, it is my hope that the pages that follow will help us to look at Detroit and other cities like it not only as abstract social problems, abandoned places, or ruined relics of the past, but deeply human terrains, where meaning continues to be made and remade by residents, organizations, the government, and city leaders.

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<sup>29</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 203.

## **Chapter 1: Belle Isle Park, Pingree's Potato Patches and The Origins of Moral Environmentalism in Detroit, 1879-1900**

Like most American cities during the late nineteenth century, Detroit was in a perpetual state of ruin and repair. The smell and quality of the environment were less than inviting. City reports and newspapers recorded numerous complaints, from the filthy condition of Eastern Market, one of three markets in the city during this period, muddy streets, unsanitary and abandoned buildings on Michigan Avenue and Fort Street, and standing water and sinkholes on the Eastside near Bloody Run Creek.<sup>30</sup> The topography was largely flat and soggy. "The natural drainage of Detroit is not very good, and is by no means depended on for the drainage of the city," reported census worker J.C. Holmes.<sup>31</sup> For the effluents that did not remain stagnant, the Detroit River was the discharge point to the city's growing sewer system. At the same time, social tensions stemming from immigration and unemployment also festered. In 1880, the city's population rose to 116,340, with over 45,000 "foreign-born" residents.<sup>32</sup> The city's built environment was also expanding haphazardly beyond the wheel and spoke plan that Augustus Woodward officially laid out in 1807. Amidst this chaotic urban development, city leaders imagine ways they might transform Detroit into not just a manufacturing hub but also a place

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<sup>30</sup> For example of complaints regarding environmental conditions in the city, see *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Detroit*, 1894-95 (Detroit: Allied Printing, 1895), 1300. The *Detroit Evening News* was dismayed to find abandoned and neglected buildings after a recent tour of the area. "Fort Street West," *Detroit Evening News*, April 1, 1894.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Tenth Census of the United States*, 1880 (New York, NY: Norman Ross Publishing, 1991), 605-609. Soggy land and standing water was a common health concern now that Detroit's population was steadily on the rise. Sewers gradually became an important public works project, making the city more hospitable.

<sup>32</sup> Michigan Department of State, *Census of the State of Michigan 1894*, Vol. 1 (Lansing, MI: R. Smith and Company, 1896), 216-227.

with the order and prestige of a great metropolis. Could parks and gardens serve as one of the necessary tools to mend this broken landscape, achieve social cohesion, and meet their own expectations about Detroit's future?

For some civic leaders, the situation in Detroit merited revisiting plans for a large city park that, by this time, had been on the backburner for nearly a decade. Members of the Detroit Parks and Boulevard Commission advocated for the immediate construction of a park in Detroit. "This great improvement" was needed, they argued, "for the health and sanitary uses of its people, as well as for its [the city's] embellishment...It is an improvement that is now indispensable...A public park is a necessity for a large city population. Our people at large cannot seek seaside and mountain resorts. Their places of recreation and rural enjoyment must be brought near home."<sup>33</sup> In the eyes of these city leaders, the necessity of a park and its associated environmental benefits went hand in hand with the growth of a city whose population was increasingly comprised of industrial laborers. Significant conceptual and physical labor would be needed to create a place with the ability to provide "recreation and rural enjoyment" in the city. Park supporters, whose sense of environmentalism began with the visual appearance of the landscape, imagined that reshaping the visual contours of the landscape would provide residents with meaningful encounters with a more refined sense of nature amidst an urban-industrial environment that otherwise seemed to be in constant chaos. A park, Detroit's industrialists, business, and civil leaders argued, could provide a sense of permanence, value, and stability for posterity during a time when the city was in the midst of a piecemeal process of development.

Others, such as Detroit's mayor Hazen S. Pingree, who held the office between 1889-1897, were more ambivalent about the human relationship to urban-industrial life. In 1896 he

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<sup>33</sup> *Minutes of the Detroit Parks and Boulevard Commission* (1871-1880), 31. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

wrote that, “Everyone will concede that we have drifted from nature’s own way of getting a livelihood. Rushing to the cities and trying to get a livelihood by one’s wits is not nature’s way...”<sup>34</sup> Pingree’s words seem odd given that he was the mayor of a developing industrial city that grew from the dissolution of rural ways of life. Yet for some to earn a livelihood during the economic recession of the 1890s meant a step back in time to a more rural way of life. He proposed a plan for subsistence gardens to feed unemployed workers, commonly referred to as “Pingree’s Potato Patches.” Like the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards, Pingree’s words suggest some of the social anxieties about urbanism as a way of life during this era. Language about the unnaturalness and moral ambiguity of urban life, and the apparent loss of independence that comes with industrial labor coupled with fears over the “rush” to cities, likely referring to the waves of German and Polish immigrants who came to Detroit at the turn of the century, all fed into Pingree’s logic that something must be done to ameliorate these social and environmental problems.

Pingree knew nature through the labor of gardening and not a walk in the park. He describes agriculture, one of the oldest human inventions, like a healing salve, not only for maintaining connections to a seemingly more natural way of life in an urban-industrial environment, but also for providing the poor and unemployed with sustenance and work during the boom and bust economy that went hand in hand with the industrial development of the era. Pingree’s environmentalism began with the social conditions he was faced with as mayor, and developed into ideas about how to use the landscape to address the growing pains of Detroit.

The words of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards and Pingree reveal the strands of urban environmental thought that, in part, shaped a larger debate over the contours of urban life and environmentalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Although there were many

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<sup>34</sup> Hazen Pingree, “Mayor Pingree’s Potato Patch Plan” *Public Opinion*, February 13, 1896: 109.

political, economic, and social solutions that individuals, organizations, and the municipal government in Detroit used to meet the challenges of reconciling human life with urban expansion, the construction of two spaces, created between 1879 and 1900, help to illuminate how Detroiters attempted to repair these social and environmental issues. The first, Belle Isle Park, was a pastoral leisure environment designed by Fredrick Law Olmsted in 1881, complete with picturesque views of the surrounding landscape and city, walking paths, idyllic arched bridges over a network of canals, and even, for a short while, a pasture with sheep. The second use of space, municipally supported subsistence gardens called “Pingree’s Potato Patches,” mark the agrarian flip side of Olmsted’s picturesque pastoral. Started by Mayor Hazen S. Pingree as an unemployment and poverty relief program following the economic panic of 1893, they were thought of as an experiment to utilize what he described as “wasteland” on the peripheries of Detroit’s city limits. Pingree’s Potato Patches and Belle Isle Park, reconstructed through evidence such as historical planning documents, writings, designs, and photographs, shed light on this moment in America’s urban environmental history.

In the context of late nineteenth century Detroit, both landscapes represent ways of coming to terms with the meaning of urban-industrial life. As American Studies scholar Leo Marx might describe it, Detroiters made tangible “landscapes of reconciliation,” places, real and imagined, that represent a search for harmony between humans and nature in the face of technological progress and development.<sup>35</sup> In Detroit, however, creating parks and gardens did more than reconcile environmental challenges. The environmental ideas represented by these spaces, I argue, also sought to reconcile Detroit’s ethnic and class tensions in an era of economic

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<sup>35</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9, 87. While Marx primarily focused on this dynamic tension in works of literature and visual culture (representations of ideal landscapes), in this dissertation I look more closely at how and why these ideas were put into practice in actual landscapes on the ground.

uncertainty by reworking Detroit's landscape and making a new sense of place. Out of the disarray of urban-industrial life, creating parks and gardening in nineteenth century Detroit were cultural practices tinged with similar forms of "moral environmentalism" that sought to create virtuous citizens and virtuous spaces through linked social and environmental change.

Historian David Scobey uses the term "moral environmentalism" to explain the Victorian system of beliefs that built and natural environments can influence the behavior and minds of individuals. As he describes in his work *Empire City*, examining New York City during the mid-nineteenth century, "city builders (like many reformers, designers, and tastemakers) viewed the natural and built environments as an index and instrument of moral progress in American society. Yet their efforts entailed more than just generic faith in the uplifting influence of planning and design. New York's urbanists infused moral environmentalism with a complex vision of what a great metropolis should look like, a vision that sought to link capitalist growth, civilizational order, and the city's rising power... The uneven effects of growth seemed simultaneously to affirm and mock their ambitions."<sup>36</sup> In Detroit, still striving to gain the stature of New York, leaders similarly attempted to attach an ideology of moral environmentalism to the physical landscape with labor, design, and use.

Detroiters invented and tested ideas about how a human relationship with nature would continue in an urban-industrial environment by reshaping the landscape. In the foreground was the desire to create a unified urban space and civic identity from the pressure points of urban growth. The influx of people from outside the United States and growing environmental concerns associated with industrial development were just two of the challenges city leaders sought to ameliorate. As leaders in Detroit attempted to reconcile the social tensions of

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<sup>36</sup> David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 10.



unemployment, immigration, and labor unrest in Detroit during this period, these projects also became, as Scobey describes, “self-consciously *cultural* project[s] of social and moral improvement,”<sup>37</sup> linked to the “military and ideological consolidation of the nation,” which attempted to infuse “‘civilized’ values across a fractured social order” through an “extension of state power and class discipline over an unruly democratic polity.”<sup>38</sup> While the actors and debates were different in Detroit than in Scobey’s mid-nineteenth century New York, the comparative stories of Belle Isle Park and Pingree’s Potato Patches help to illuminate how the landscape became a central organizing framework, around which Detroiters made, remade, and imagined the cultural and environmental meanings of the city to debate the contours of an urban environmentalism at the turn of the twentieth century.

### **Making Nature Public on Belle Isle**

Belle Isle, an island of 700 acres located approximately two miles upriver from downtown Detroit, had long been a site of informal recreation, semi-public use and escape amongst Detroit's residents prior to becoming an official city park.<sup>39</sup> When French settlers first took control of the area that became Detroit, the island was designated as a commons, where the inhabitants grazed livestock and kept animals, most notably hogs. This earned it the name “Ile au Cochons” or Hog Island.<sup>40</sup> When France surrendered Detroit to Great Britain in 1760, a British Lieutenant named George McDougall, claimed the island. His family retained ownership of it until William Macomb purchased it in 1793. In the early nineteenth century it was sold to

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<sup>37</sup> David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9

<sup>38</sup> David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>39</sup> As it was transformed into a public park, Belle Isle grew in size from approximately 700 acres to 982, because of infill, particularly on the western end of the island, now the location of Scott Fountain.

<sup>40</sup> “Statement of Significance,” *National Register of Historic Places Nomination for Belle Isle Park*, February 25, 1974.

Barnabus Campau. The island was also home to small, but profitable, fisheries, although the scale of intensely managed commercial use was less on this marshy land than other islands in the Detroit River that were home to a growing number of industries.<sup>41</sup>

Above all else, nineteenth century Detroiters knew the island as a place to escape the daily life of the city, even though it was privately owned. The *Detroit Free Press* noted, “it is the pleasantest resort within miles of the city. The angler may enjoy great sport here, as fish are now taken with hook in great numbers near the island. We know of no pleasanter place to spend an afternoon.”<sup>42</sup> Steamships and ferries gave residents access to the island. As the *Free Press* again noted, “the little steamer Gem makes trips to Belle Isle which afford a delightful recreation for family parties and persons who desire to get a taste of woods and cool winds during the hot weather by a very short journey. Our island resort is among the blessings with which Detroit is especially endowed, and those who avail themselves of them always appreciate the privilege.”<sup>43</sup> Visitor’s leisure time use of the space changed the island’s reputation and residents gradually adopted the name “Belle Isle” to reflect its use by people rather than hogs.<sup>44</sup> With residents already using Belle Isle as an informal park and the city’s downtown riverfront a disarray of docks and smokestacks, it might have seemed like the logical location for an urban park. Amidst

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<sup>41</sup> The fisheries were apparently quite profitable, according to a communication to Detroit’s Common Council in 1879. See *Journal of the Senate Michigan* (April 11, 1879), 746. In 1891, the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards decided to discontinue leasing fisheries on the island, as they were deemed “unsightly.” In their place, the commission hoped to eventually “erect permanent buildings for the propagation, keeping and exhibition of specimens of the finny tribe, an acquisition which would undoubtedly prove one of the great attractions of the park.” *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards* (March 1, 1891), 7. In their plans for a future aquarium, the commission marked a shift in using natural resources for production to using them as a cultural resource, to be displayed and viewed as a way of entertaining and educating visitors, as objects of science, curiosity, and natural wonder, detached from their ecological context. Overtime, fisheries of production gave way to fisheries of spectacle, with the opening of the Belle Isle Aquarium in 1904, marking the transition to space that became fully devoted to a landscape of leisure and informal education.

<sup>42</sup> “Farmer’s and Mechanic’s Bank of Michigan,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 28, 1851, 3.

<sup>43</sup> “New Buildings,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 15, 1859, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Detroit mythology claims that the island was named Belle Isle after a group of young people named it for Governor Lewis Cass’ daughter. See Janet Anderson *Island in the City*, (Detroit: Heitman-Garand Co., 2001), 27.

the grittiness of industry, leaders in Detroit thought it was necessary to create a park. Yet its location was far from certain.



Figure 1.1: Ponds and fish houses on Belle Isle before it was purchased by the city. Date unknown. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

Small parks totaling approximately 13 acres dotted Detroit’s landscape prior to the city’s acquisition of Belle Isle, but nothing existed on the scale of New York’s Central Park, Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park, Baltimore’s Druid Hill Park, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Cincinnati’s Eden Park, or Forest Park in St. Louis. As early as 1868, there were calls to create a large-scale park in Detroit. A special committee on parks wrote to the Common Council that, “it has been the uniform practice in all great cities to provide such places of resort at public expense, and so far as your committee has been able to ascertain, the establishment of such parks have, in their good effect on morals and health, proved a most wise and beneficial investment.”<sup>45</sup> A similar call to action over the poor condition and limited scale of parks in Detroit compared to other major American cities also made its way into Mayor William Wheaton’s message to the

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<sup>45</sup> “Communication to the Common Council, Special Committee on Parks,” *Journal of the Common Council* (1869-1869), 300.

Common Council in 1870. As he stated, “some of the cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, are laying out, improving and enlarging parks that are equal to anything of the kind in the world, and the testimony is, without contradiction, that although the expense is very heavy it is well repaid and cheerfully borne. Other cities have been thus far content with less extensive establishments. Boston, Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati are creating parks of hundreds of acres, while Philadelphia has thousands – but all acknowledge the wisdom and necessity of providing for the public a place of resort and health.”<sup>46</sup> The message was clear: to compete with other modern cities and provide its residents relief from a commercial and industrial landscape, Detroit would need a major park.

Wheaton’s words laid the groundwork for the type of moral environmentalism, economic shrewdness, and civic virtuousness that would be used to justify the resources needed to develop a park in Detroit. As he stated in his annual message of 1870, “this subject, in its moral, sanitary, intellectual and physical advantages, has been recognized as of the first importance in most of the larger cities in the country...It will pay in our interest and more in the annual increase in value, and a few years delay will more than double the cost of obtaining it.”<sup>47</sup> Since cities in the state of Michigan were small, few, and far between during the 1870s, they were not legislatively equipped to take on the task of creating and managing large public spaces. The state legislature had to approve most policy and land acquisition decisions, which made it difficult for Detroit to purchase land for a park. A change to this legislative method came a year after Wheaton’s message, when the state legislature passed the Park Act of 1871. This act gave local authorities the ability to purchase land and established a Board of Park Commissioners for the city of

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<sup>46</sup> Wheaton, William. “Message to the Common Council,” 1870 as quoted in: Janet Anderson *Island in the City*, (Detroit: Heitman-Garand Co., 2001), 28.

<sup>47</sup> *Annual Report of the City of Detroit*, 1870, 7.

Detroit. This organization became the primary public advocate for a park in Detroit. As they described,

“public parks for large cities are not mere pleasure grounds and costly public luxuries, but public necessities. Their utility has been recognized through all the ages of civilization...the public health, moral as well as physical, requires them. Any principal of sanitary law demands them. The poor, the sick, and the children cry out for them. The prolonged existence of the thousands who are born, live, [and] die within the walls or limits of large towns depends upon these ‘public lungs.’ The millions that people our great cities cannot each have the costly private grounds, nor even the simple ‘door-yard’ and garden, but all may have, own, and enjoy in common, one still grander and better, a public ‘door-yard’ and garden, towards which the doors of the whole city open.”<sup>48</sup>

With lofty ideals in mind, the commission solicited proposals from landowners with sites suitable for a park through local newspapers and chose three finalists.<sup>49</sup>

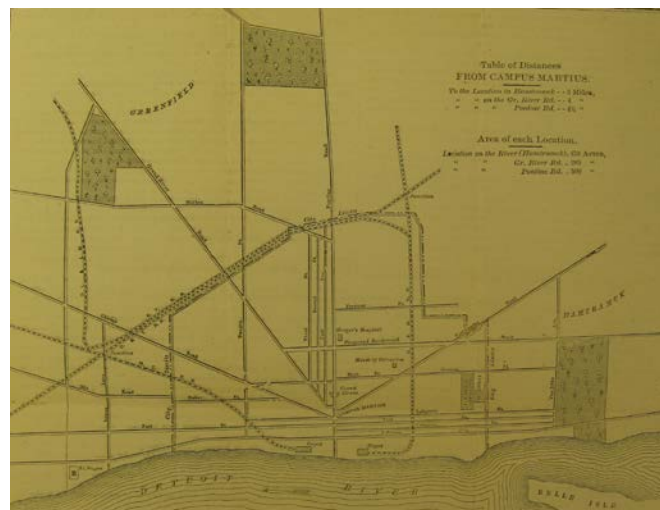


Figure 1.2: Three possible locations for Detroit’s park, 1871. Belle Isle, pictured in the bottom right, was not up for consideration, although commissioners favored the area directly across the river from the island. Image reproduced from: “Detroit Park Commission” folder, Box 5, Ferry Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

The site they chose was north of downtown along the river, where “the elevated ground above Jefferson Avenue commands a view of the city, of the Canada shore, of Belle Isle, and an

<sup>48</sup> *Minutes of the Parks and Boulevard Commission, 1871-80*, 49. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>49</sup> *Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Detroit* (November 21, 1871), “Detroit Park Commission” Folder, Box 5, Ferry Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

unsurpassed water view extending far into Lake St. Clair.”<sup>50</sup> The site was also ideal, the commissioners explained, because, “During the season of navigation, save in the bay of New York, so animated a water view is nowhere else to be seen in this country...as all this commerce passes through our river, it gives us an idea, at once vivid and accurate, of the activity of this great commercial thoroughfare.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the promising vista, not everyone was pleased with the commissioners choice of location. Disgruntled property owners adjacent to the sites not chosen formed a committee and created enough protest to defeat the commissioner’s proposal and get the Park Act overturned by the state supreme court. Detroit was again at the drawing board with regard to choosing a location for their park.<sup>52</sup>

One of the first official plans to use Belle Isle as a park came in a proposal from 1874. The plan called for using the island as the city’s water works and a railroad bridge or tunnel crossing, in conjunction with a park. Because industry had not yet encroached this far upriver, supporters ensured there was “no interference possible with the manufacturing interests of the city.” A pamphlet supporting the tripartite plan also argued that the water at Belle Isle was cleaner, and the air more salubrious.<sup>53</sup> With a desire to blend the functions of modern industry with leisurely use, the pamphlet articulated some of the first pastoral park plans for Belle Isle:

Detroit...should have a Park to serve as a healthful place of recreation for the people...a continuous and delightful drive around it of about six miles could be laid out, with the waters of the lake or river constantly in view...Bathing houses for the public could be built on the north shore, where sand or gravel bottoms lie beneath the waters. A light iron bridge could be thrown

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<sup>50</sup> *Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Detroit* (November 21, 1871), “Detroit Park Commission” Folder, Box 5, Ferry Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>51</sup> *Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Detroit* (November 21, 1871), “Detroit Park Commission” Folder, Box 5, Ferry Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>52</sup> Janet Anderson, *Island in the City: How Belle Isle Changed Detroit Forever* (Detroit: Heitman-Garand Co., 2001), 29 and Danuloff, Donald. *The Acquisition of Belle Isle and the Grand Boulevard Project*, MA Thesis, Wayne State University, 1966.

<sup>53</sup> Henry D. Farrand Henry, *The Advisability of Purchasing Belle Isle for a Park, Water Works and Basis for a Tunnel*, (Detroit: Unions of Printing Company, 1874). “Were Belle Isle purchased by the city, it could be made at comparatively small cost, the most famous park in this country, unsurpassed for the beauty of scenery, and salubrity of air” (8). See also pages 3-4 and 13 for discussions of water quality.

across from the main shore...Forrest [sic] trees of a century's growth are there to from pleasant groves, through which charming vistas could be opened, of the city, the Canadian shore, and the ships passing on the lake and river. The low portions of the island could be kept drained by the use of wind mills, which would add to the picturesqueness of the scene.<sup>54</sup>

The writers expressed an urban pastoral sensibility, where natural features worked in harmony with human design to create ways of looking that gave equal weight to century's old trees and the water as to ships and views of the city. Belle Isle could become not only a place seemingly detached from industrial life but, because of its location, a place where the urban landscape of an industrial city could be framed and marveled at from a distance.

Romanticized imagery of a park and industry side by side framed the way civic leaders discussed the value of nature in creating a sense of place within Detroit. At the same time, economic factors were another motive for remaking a place of nature and leisure on the landscape. While many wealthy Detroiters were concerned with the costs of purchasing and maintaining the park, some business and industrial leaders, such as James McMillan and Levi Barbour, considered parks a feature that would attract future economic activity to the area, not to mention provide a space of leisure that could provide laborers with a place of recreation. As early as 1871, the Board of Park Commissioners summarized that, "we know what our business advantages are...with such advantages, by judicious and tasteful public improvements, we can make Detroit the most desirable and attractive city upon the Lakes for a home."<sup>55</sup>

The chamber of commerce and the merchants' and manufacturers' exchange, along with citizens, formed the Executive Committee on a River Crossing at Detroit, which advocated

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<sup>54</sup> Henry D. Farrand Henry, *The Advisability of Purchasing Belle Isle for a Park, Water Works and Basis for a Tunnel*, (Detroit: Unions of Printing Company, 1874), 7-8. While the idea of a bridge crossing might seem at odds with that of a park, a group of prominent citizens, in a communication to the Common Council, framed the issue this way, "Should the project of crossing the Detroit River, in which the public is now taking a lively and well-timed interest, include the passage across the island, we do not conceive that it should be any possible injury to its full use as a park, and it might even add an additional attraction." *Journal of the Senate, Michigan*, (April 11, 1879), 747. The bridge and park plan might be thought of as what David Nye terms "the technological sublime."

<sup>55</sup> *Report of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Detroit* (November 21, 1871), "Detroit Park Commission" Folder, Box 5, Ferry Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

purchasing Belle Isle for a park with a rail crossing to Canada.<sup>56</sup> Through the lobbying efforts of this organization and many prominent Detroiters, the state legislature passed an act allowing the city to purchase Belle Isle from the Campau family in April of 1879 by issuing \$200,000 in bonds, pending the approval of the city's Common Council. The city would also once again be able to nominate their own park commissioners.<sup>57</sup> A period of heated debate, summarized in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* newspaper as a debate between the will of the people against a few "prominent capitalists" who did not want to see the city's funds used to these ends, followed the news that Detroit might soon purchase Belle Isle.<sup>58</sup> Might a park prove a useful means of instilling order amidst growing labor concerns, or a municipal extravagance that got in the way of creating the transportation infrastructure to facilitate continued economic prosperity?

In response to Detroiters who were concerned about the cost of the park, State Senator McElroy pleaded that, "now is the time for your heaviest taxpayers and your leading citizens to show that they have some sympathy for the poor, and some love for the beautiful, by meeting with the masses and insisting that Detroit shall avail herself of this grand opportunity."<sup>59</sup> Two examples from the *Detroit Free Press* also illustrate the heavily class-conscious shape of the debate. Judge Walker described in one editorial that,

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<sup>56</sup> Janet Anderson, *Island in the City: How Belle Isle Changed Detroit Forever* (Detroit: Heitman-Garand Co., 2001), 31.

<sup>57</sup> State of Michigan House of Representatives Bill No. 584, April 16<sup>th</sup> 1879 (Levi Lewis Barbour Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library). This collection also contains the petitions circulated to garner public support for purchasing Belle Isle. Barbour, a lawyer, played a central role in negotiating with Belle Isle's landowners and organizing the Executive Committee on River Crossing at Detroit.

<sup>58</sup> "Belle Isle, Detroit's New Park," *Frank and Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, August 16, 1879, 399. The island was not the most logical location for a park. As Olmsted would recall in a letter dated 1889, "Belle Isle was bought by Detroit not because it was a good place for a park but because it was feared that if it remained in private hands it might be used in ways that would harm the city....as a site for a park it had the disadvantage of being in a considerable part marshy, and in nearly all parts liable at times to be water-soaked if not completely submerged. It was thought by some citizens that to turn it into such a park...required something more than common sense and that the task would be one in which the ordinary machinery of the city government was not well adapted." (Untitled notes on Detroit, Reel 29, frame 378 Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress).

<sup>59</sup> "The Park Purchase," *Detroit Free Press*, June 24, 1879.



It has... become very apparent that something like an organized opposition thereto [to the purchase of Belle Isle for a public park] has sprung up amongst a few of our wealthy men. Nor is this surprising; they pay heavy taxes and feel no need of a park. They keep their carriages, and the whole country around is within their reach. In hot weather, when a park is most needed and most used, they with their families are off to Saratoga, the seaside, the mountains, or perhaps take a flying trip to Europe, and they cannot understand or appreciate the wants of the great body of the population. Now, a public park is not needed for this favored few but for the *many*, and to a great city it is a necessity.<sup>60</sup>

George Lothrop, chairman of Detroit's earlier park commission argued the park was needed,

"alike for beauty and salubrity." He continued,

It is not so much for the rich, who can seek health, beauty and pleasure elsewhere, as for the large masses of people whose recreations and rural pleasures must be brought near home; for the poor and the sick; for women and children. The wisest observers, both in Europe and this country, now agree that no large city can safely deny its people park privileges...these cities would as soon spare their magnificent warehouses as their noble parks. The rich cannot afford to overlook a great popular need like this. In no way can they so well check the spread of communism and the growing hatred of poverty to wealth as by taking a hearty interest in every rational project for the promotion of the health, comfort and enjoyment of the people.<sup>61</sup>

In short, Lothrop and Walker argued that the landscapes of urban parks might provide a safety valve, not only as the "lungs" for a city, but to promote social stability against the threat of class antagonism. On the other side of the argument, individuals such as Alderman Haller opposed the purchase of the island, arguing, "poor people can't reach this park." Rather than select a different location, however, he continued by writing, "Money is needed for railroads to Detroit to improve business conditions instead of money for parks."<sup>62</sup>

In the end, opposition to a park was not enough to convince a majority of Detroit's Common Council to vote against the measure. By the end of June they voted 18-7 to purchase Belle Isle. Although a railroad crossing was never built, Detroit now had a space for its park.

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<sup>60</sup> "A Park for the People," *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1879.

<sup>61</sup> "A Park for the People," *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1879.

<sup>62</sup> "Belle Isle," *Detroit Free Press*, April 9, 1879, 1.

**Olmsted in Detroit**  
**“What Detroit most wants in a park, as I am often advised, is economy”<sup>63</sup>**  
**- F.L. Olmsted**

While supporters may have envisioned Belle Isle Park as a saving space for masses of laborers, it was elite Detroiters’ ideals that informed the planning of the park. After the purchase of Belle Isle was finalized, city leaders and Detroit’s elite began to discuss how their ideals of nature and leisure would translate into the physical design of Belle Isle Park. To accomplish their goals, James McMillan was selected as the inaugural president of the Board of Belle Isle Park Commissioners, the precursor to Detroit’s Park Commission. McMillan had been a central figure in Detroit’s manufacturing and industrial scene.<sup>64</sup> One editorialist in the *Detroit Free Press* wrote that, “From one end of the city to the other, monuments, in the form of factory chimneys, are recording his [McMillan’s] epitaph in clouds of smoke”<sup>65</sup> McMillan was also well known for his 1901 plan that transformed the National Mall in Washington, DC into the rectilinear space it is today. It was in Detroit, however, that he first began his foray into city planning.

As president of the park commission, McMillan’s first responsibility was to select someone to remake Belle Isle into a public park. For him, the choice of a landscape architect was clear. Frederick Law Olmsted’s reputation as the designer of New York’s Central Park, as well as countless others across the United States, made him the most prominent national figure McMillan considered for Detroit’s Belle Isle project. Late in 1881, he commissioned Olmsted to

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<sup>63</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882),11.

<sup>64</sup> McMillan invested particularly heavily in railroad development, helping to make Detroit a commercial and industrial center with transportation, “knitting together the Upper and Lower Peninsulas with ‘bands of steel.’” See: Geoffrey Drutchas, “A Capital Design,” *Michigan History*, March/April 2002, 32. McMillan also had a financial stake in developing much of Detroit’s infrastructure, such as through the Detroit City Railway Company, Michigan Bell Telephone company and Ferry Seed Company, demonstrating the extent to which urban planning and the development of park systems in American cities was connected to a civic ideal intimately dependent upon business, even as public projects such as parks, libraries, and museums are often framed today as public spaces opposed to private business interests in the city.

<sup>65</sup> “James McMillan,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 11, 1902, 4. McMillan died on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1902.

“furnish a general comprehensive plan for the improvement of the Park.”<sup>1</sup> In doing so, McMillan and the commission expressed Detroit’s national ambitions through civic and city planning, just as McMillan had done in the preceding years through his investments toward making Detroit an industrial powerhouse. As McMillan described his decision to Detroit’s Common Council in 1882, Olmsted’s “skill and experience...placed him at the head of his profession as a Landscape Architect. With his assistance the Board confidently hope in due time to make the park a means of the highest enjoyment to all classes of the people, and an ornament to credit to the city.”<sup>66</sup> Industry encroached on all areas of the city. The time seemed ripe to create a space that could promote a better quality of life for Detroit’s residents and raise the city’s national profile.

From the beginning of his employment by the city of Detroit, Olmsted urged careful planning of the park. In his 1882 pamphlet and plan for Belle Isle, he advised that discussions of the park “should obviously range beyond the ordinary field of local city politics. It should have a distant future in view.” He continued, “I believe it unlikely that for many years to come there will be any matter of local public business brought before the people of Detroit, haphazard views of which will be more costly.”<sup>67</sup> In his plan for Belle Isle Park, Olmsted attempted to demonstrate the great value of planning and nature to the future of Detroit.

His vision of urban environmentalism began with his interest in landscape design and the environment as a means of influencing the behaviors of individuals. Like his clients, he thought of the environment as a space that could shape moral authority, when properly designed. In the first half of his plan for Belle Isle Park, he wrapped the social, economic, and educational value of the park together, proclaiming:

Now, one of the more important elements of value in a park, never to be lost sight of in a study of its economics, lies in its power to divert men from unwholesome, vicious, and

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<sup>66</sup> *Journal of the Common Council*, 1882/1883, 145.

<sup>67</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 5, 10.

destructive methods and habits of seeking recreation, and inducing them to educate themselves in such as are, at the worst, less costly to the general interests of the community. It is known, for example, that a large resort of young men to a park on Sunday means a falling-off in the back-door business of dram-shops, and resorts for petty gambling. Of what value this shall be, depends much on the pleasure such young men shall find in the park, consistently with a rigid exclusion of provocations to indulge in dishonest, destructive, blackguard, or law-outwitting smartness.”<sup>68</sup>

For Olmsted, the benefits of a park would come by providing residents with alternative to the types of urban recreation he described. Olmsted’s language, like that of McMillian and Lothrop, explained the area where social and environmental realms overlapped. Like others during the nineteenth century, Olmsted believed in the ability of parks and other civic institutions, such as museums, to enlighten the masses and reconcile the negative effects of uncontrolled urban development by creating a more orderly environment where residents could escape the city.

While Olmsted claimed “the essential element of a park is the enjoyment it offers of the beauty of natural sylvan scenery,” the suitability of Belle Isle as a place to meet these goals was less than ideal.<sup>69</sup> It was marshy and nearly all of the areas were prone to becoming water-soaked or even completely submerged.<sup>70</sup> As Olmsted wrote after one of his visits to the island, “conditions could not be more favorable to the breeding and nursing of mosquitoes...the pools, in September, I found discolored, and covered by bubbles and a green scum; and there was putrescent organic matter on their borders. They are thus available to the propagation of typhoid, malarial, and other zymotic poisons; and it may be questioned whether the city is justified in allowing, not to say inviting, ignorant people and children to stray near them.”<sup>71</sup> With conditions such as this, creating the park would require significant thought and labor to give nature an urban sensibility.

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<sup>68</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 18.

<sup>69</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 47.

<sup>70</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 18.

<sup>71</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 22-23.

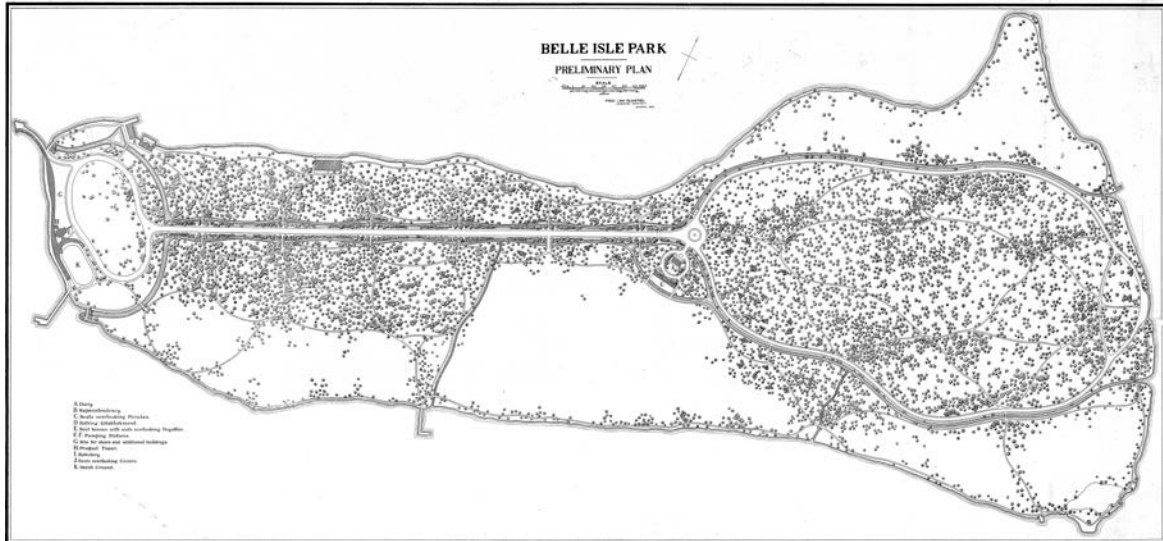


Figure 1.3: Preliminary plan for Belle Isle Park, c. 1882. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Fredrick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

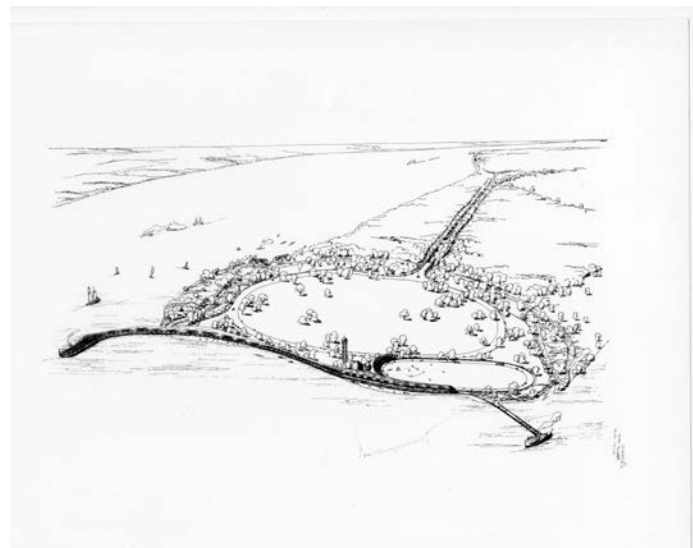


Figure 1.4: Olmsted’s 1882 rendering of the western end of Belle Isle. Before a bridge was built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, ferries carried visitors to Belle Isle. The docs are visible in the left and right foreground. From the moment they stepped off the boat, visitors entered into a choreographed experience, beginning at the most developed end of the island, and moving toward the east where Olmsted left the island in a more natural, wild state, including preserving the old-growth forest. The park also would offer scenic opportunities for walking, carriage rides, canoeing, and various sports, as well as beaches.

Image courtesy of the National Park Service, Fredrick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

To transform Belle Isle into a public space that would meet the expectations of Detroit’s leaders, Olmsted created a design that was meant to give visitors a distinct visual experience. As he wrote, “a park will have value mainly as the minds of those using it are acted upon by the different objects that come before their eyes; and the degree and method of this action will be

more determined by the order, sequence, and relation one to another, of different objects, than by their intrinsic qualities.”<sup>72</sup> To create these “objects before their eyes” Olmsted’s plan had several key features.

A defining element was a grand promenade that extended down the middle of the island from the ferry docks. Until a bridge was built in 1889, park goers could only access the island by ferry boats. From the moment park goers stepped off the boat, they entered into a choreographed experience of the landscape, as envisioned by Olmsted. Visitors disembarked at the most developed end of the island and moved toward the east where Olmsted preserved an old-growth forest that remains largely intact today. The woods, however, would not go unaltered. “With a view to driving off the mosquitoes; to the enjoyment on all parts of the island of the breeze from off the water, and to efficiency of police supervision - all thickets should be removed, and all dense, low woods should be opened,” wrote Olmsted. The natural appearance of the landscape was unsuitable as an aesthetic, and in allowing the public access and use of this space. Furthermore, to please the city, thinning the woods, Olmsted claimed, would allow for greater supervision. With the bill for the park quickly adding up, timber from this process was sold by the city for firewood to recuperate some of the cost.<sup>73</sup>

Another prominent feature of Olmsted’s design was a series of interior waterways, called “rigolettes,” or “highways of pleasure,” as Olmsted called them.<sup>74</sup> These winding canals became a popular recreational feature, although they also served a practical purpose in helping to control the drainage of the island, even as they had to be dredged from time to time. When they were

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<sup>72</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 28.

<sup>73</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 42. Olmsted described that thinning out the woods would “give light and air to the ground with a view to more rapid drying of the surface...to remove dead, decaying, and badly –grown trunks, so as to allow of the development of a finer class of trees..[and] to gain a certain beauty of grouping and landscape composition throughout the woods, - all to be attained by a suitable thinning, and by grubbing and cleaning of the surface” (41).

<sup>74</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Park for Detroit* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1882), 40-41.

dug, the excavated earth was used to raise the grade of areas prone to flooding on the island. The canals and erosion control measure were the most costly element of the design, but they were necessary to make the marshy island hospitable to everyday visitors while also giving visitors recreational opportunities.



Figure 1.5: Canal on Belle Isle Park, designed to create a pastoral sense of place apart from the city. Image courtesy of the Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.



Figures 1.6 and 1.7: Canals on Belle Isle Park, ca. 1900 – 1906. Detroit Publishing Company. Images courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Olmsted's plans also called for boat landings, fair grounds, areas for sports, roads for touring and viewing the park by carriage or foot, a parade ground, and even a pasture area, to be trimmed by sheep and other livestock.<sup>75</sup> Even with all of these elements, Olmsted's plan for Belle Isle Park was relatively minimal from an aesthetic standpoint, particularly compared to others such as Central Park in New York. The "economy" or seeming sparseness Olmsted used in his plan for Belle Isle Park was not merely a response to the demands of city leaders for an economical solution to providing a park, but also likely an aesthetic goal Olmsted developed late in his career.<sup>76</sup>

Regardless of cost saving measures, finances were a constant point of tension between Olmsted and the City of Detroit. Throughout his tenure on the project, Olmsted continually pleaded with the city to take the planning and politics of managing Belle Isle more seriously, even publishing and distributing a pamphlet on the subject in 1884.<sup>77</sup> In it, he argued that city leaders should take the park more seriously, treating it as a cultural resource on par with educational institutions. Most city leaders likely agreed with Olmsted. Yet the politics of local government greatly extended the timeline for completion and made accomplishing these goals an increasingly convoluted and uncertain process, which Olmsted detested.<sup>78</sup> Issues related to his payment, and difficulty in persuading the park commissioners and the city of Detroit to see

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<sup>75</sup> While not immediately taken up, the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards did eventually purchase a flock of 30 sheep for Belle Isle in the summer of 1899. The commissioners also considered keeping bees on the island, although it is not known what became of this idea. See: "Sheep on Belle Isle," *Detroit Free Press* April 18, 1899. Various other kinds of animals did come to call Belle Isle "home" over the years – such as fish, buffalo, bears, and eagles associated with the aquarium and zoo.

<sup>76</sup> As Rybczynski describes, "This minimalism [of Belle Isle Park] was not simply a question of economy. The simplicity that had emerged in Mount Royal had become an esthetic goal." Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Fredrick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 350.

<sup>77</sup> See Frederick Law Olmsted, *Belle Isle After One Year*, (Boston: Franklin Press, 1884). These issues are also the subject of much of Olmsted's correspondences relating to Belle Isle Park, archived in with the rest of his papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>78</sup> Historian Thomas Bender discusses in terms of Olmsted and similar figures, they "were concerned to establish their opinion in public; they were not interested in a public or political sphere that served as an arena for competing ideas and interests." (Bender in Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 102.



things his way, created a stalemate, and in 1885, Olmsted resigned from the Belle Isle Park project, although it was far from “complete” in his eyes. After his resignation, a frustrated Olmsted wrote, “you may reflect that common sense would never have given the world a good many things that the world vailes, and that if my plan for Belle Isle had been carried out the Detroit of the future might possibly have had a more valuable park than it is now likely to.”<sup>79</sup> While leaders opened the park to the public in 1884, much of the park would be planned and constructed in an ad hoc manner over the span of many years, at the instruction of many different individuals. The central avenue, canals, and wooded area were the most prominent features built from Olmsted’s design.



Figure 1.8: Central Avenue, Belle Isle Park. The avenue, designed by Olmsted, was the central axis of the park. It allowed visitors to stroll alongside the forested areas, while providing a central vista. Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

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<sup>79</sup>Frederick Law Olmsted, “Letter to C.A. Roberts,” 1889. Olmsted Papers, Reel 129, Frame 381, Library of Congress, Prints and Manuscripts Division.

Among the most substantial alterations made after Olmsted's departure was the elimination of the largest pasture areas. Beginning in the late 1880s, these areas were "reclaimed" into their marshy state and transformed into small lakes. With Olmsted's misgivings about the project now a mute point, in 1888 the Board of Park Commissioners urged the speedy completion of Belle Isle Park, so that the landscape design plan would be "stamped upon the island, beyond the power of possible future ignorance and charlatanism to change them."<sup>80</sup> Nine years after purchasing the island and still under construction, the commissioners had good reason to want a quick completion to the park.



Figures 1.9 and 1.10: Reclaiming the marshes on Belle Isle, 1888. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

### **The City Takes Control**

Although the park's official opening in 1884 took place without the grand displays usually associated with such civic events, Detroit's residents began to learn of the park and visit in droves. In 1894 alone, some 61,253 persons patronized the bathhouses for the three months they were open.<sup>81</sup> That same year, 38,248 people rode the phaeton service, which drove

<sup>80</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, (Detroit: Free Press Printing Company, 1888), 10-11.

<sup>81</sup> *Sixth Annual Report of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards*, (Detroit: Free Press Printing Company, 1895), 4.

customers from the mainland around the island for 20 cents.<sup>82</sup> Just nine years later, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that the number of people who rode wagon tours rose nearly eightfold to 294,963 people.<sup>83</sup> The commissioners also leased privileges for individuals to set up stereograph wagons and the occasional traveling museum, further adding to the educational and entertainment value of leisure that increasingly became a part of the culture of experiencing nature at Belle Isle Park.<sup>84</sup>

As crowds began to gather constantly on the island park, the effectiveness of police oversight and protection became recurrent themes in the park commission's reports, particularly because Belle Isle was distanced from the city's mainland. An 1888 report noted that, "police protection of the island has heretofore been inadequate. There have been at times over twenty-five percent of the population of the city on the island, with less than 5% of the police force to protect them, and to protect the property of the public against the vicious element among them."<sup>85</sup> In 1893, a new police station was built on the island, and commissioners were pleased to report, "The pleasing and picturesque effect of the building, together with its surroundings, dissipate almost entirely all conception of the nature and character of its purpose. Its rough and attractive exterior of field-stone combined with its gabled roof, presents rather the suggestion of a cosy, retired suburban residence, and renders it both an object of admiration and utility."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> According to Silas Farmer's *Belle Isle Illustrated: A Descriptive Map and Guide* (Detroit: Silas Farmer and Co., 1895), the cost for a wagon ride around the island was 20 cents for adults, 10 cents for children.

<sup>83</sup> "Park Wagons are Popular," *Detroit Free Press* September 20, 1903, 5.

<sup>84</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," 1886-89, 175. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>85</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners* (Detroit Free Press Printing Company, 1888), 12.

<sup>86</sup> *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards* (Detroit: Free Press Printing Company, 1893), 8.



Figure 1.11: The Police Station at Belle Isle Park, 1893. While it has a massive symmetrical façade that implies power, importance, and authority, park commissioners emphasized how the naturalistic stonework “cottage” like form surrounded by trees and plantings blended into the pastoral environment of Belle Isle Park. Fifth Annual Report of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards

Built with an impressive stone façade, the police station and structures like it aimed to bring a visible and permanent sense of order and surveillance to the island, while still blending with the park’s pastoral appearance. Even with the added police visibility, in June of 1899, R.J. Coryell, the superintendent of Detroit Parks, noted at the American Park and Outdoor Art Association Annual Meeting being held in Detroit that controlling people visiting Belle Isle Park was “the greatest problem which perplexes those who are vested with park management.”<sup>87</sup> As he described, “There is one feature in all the parks that is the same, and that is the people, and to the landscape gardener they are the most desirable yet the most refractory plants that he uses in making up his effects. The adjustment of their rights, the extent of their privileges, the provision for their enjoyment, and the curtailment of their shortcomings is the greatest problem which

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<sup>87</sup> R.J. Coryell, “The Parks and the People,” remarks from the American Park and Outdoor Art Association Meeting, Detroit, MI June 27-29, 1899 printed in: Vol. 3, Part 3, *American Park and Outdoor Art Association* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill Press, 1900), 3.

perplexes those who are vested with park management.”<sup>88</sup> Far from an idealized democratic space as they are often imagined today, nineteenth century parks such as Belle Isle were intensely controlled and created new problems for those in charge about how to manage the public who used them.<sup>89</sup> Whether their fears of congregating masses on the urban periphery of Belle Isle were real or justified, Olmsted and the Commissioners tried to use landscape design to the best of their abilities to naturalize a sense of order and endow Detroit with a sense of moral environmentalism amidst the ravaging effects of industrial development.

By 1895, Silas Farmer, a Detroit area mapmaker, described Belle Isle Park as “the priceless jewel in the crown of Detroit; woods of green and waters of blue – art and nature – moving waves and waving grass – stillness and activity – vistas and broad views – beautiful flowers and lofty trees...at almost every turn there are views and visions that would tempt and test the brain and brush of the greatest artist. The electric lights of the evening bring fancies of a fairy land...there is water everywhere; you are surrounded by a sea of silver bordered with blue...all free, pure, clean, rippling and beautiful.”<sup>90</sup> Although his words may have been exaggerated, Farmer’s description is a far cry from the malarial scum Olmsted found a decade earlier. From a marshy island once used to quarantine hogs, the city created a landscape apart where residents could imagine themselves far apart from the grittiness of industry. Through the

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<sup>88</sup> R.J. Coryell, “The Parks and the People,” remarks from the American Park and Outdoor Art Association Meeting, Detroit, MI June 27-29, 1899 printed in: Vol. 3, Part 3, *American Park and Outdoor Art Association* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill Press, 1900), 3.

<sup>89</sup> Because of the involvement of business interests and political leaders with multiple motives for creating public spaces, the arguments regarding the so-called “end of public space” in the 1980s and 90s put forward by Michael Sorkin and Mike Davis, particularly in the volume *Variations on a Theme Park* (1992), seem overstated. Rather than a seemingly golden era of parks and public spaces, nineteenth century parks and gardens were complicated components of public life in the city, invested with values of class, social order and oversight, not only the democratic values of open public space. More recently, historians such as Alison Isenberg (2005) and Bryant Simon (2006) have also critiqued the arguments of Sorkin and Davis by looking at private investment in public spaces through an historical framework that calls into question the degree to which public space was truly “public” in the past.

<sup>90</sup> Silas Farmer, *Belle Isle Illustrated: A Descriptive Map and Guide* (1895), Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

cultural process of defining what “urban nature” should look like and how it should, ideally, be experienced, city officials worked with Olmsted to reconcile, in their eyes, the less-than-appealing social and environmental landscapes of industrial production and labor and create a place for the “mental, moral, and material welfare of a great city.”<sup>91</sup> From this point forward, leisurely and idealized experiences with nature in the city limits defined the quality of life Detroiters expected in an industrial city. Just as one potential solution seemed to be in place, however, the effects of the economic panic of 1893 caused Mayor Hazen S. Pingree to turn his attention to Detroit’s mainland.

### **If you seek a Pleasant Potato Patch, Look Around You**

Hazen S. Pingree first arrived in Detroit after serving in the American Civil War. He quickly became ensconced in the city’s commercial and economic life after building a successful shoe manufacturing company. With his reputation as a business leader, Pingree ran for mayor in 1889, and was elected on a platform of ending corruption in city government. Shortly after, he developed stronger political convictions around progressive ideas of social reform because of his experiences in office during the national economic panic beginning in 1893.<sup>92</sup> Unlike Olmsted,

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<sup>91</sup> *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards* (Detroit: Free Press Printing Company, 1902), 6.

<sup>92</sup> In his autobiography, Pingree wrote that corporations are responsible for, “nearly all the thieving and boodling with which cities are made to suffer from their servants” (33). Throughout this work, Pingree is concerned with ways to quell social unrest and distribute city services (water, public lighting, streetcars) to residents of the city. As Melvin G. Holli argues in his work, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), Pingree “moved from a ‘structural reformer’ to a ‘social reformer.’”...the former dealt largely with the rearrangement of governmental organization and the elimination of graft, corruption, and nepotism in city affairs; the later sought a fundamental change in economic, social, and political institutions with a larger share of the power going to the dispossessed of the new metropolitan society” (Richard C. Wad in Holli, xi). In this way, Pingree politically positioned himself on the side of the masses as a progressive. This only occurred after his first term in office, when he came to these political convictions after being confronted with them, and realizing structural reform alone would not be enough. Gardens fit into his vision of social reform by providing poor unemployed residents of the city (primarily Polish and German immigrants) with employment and food. In favor of arbitration See: Hazen S. Pingree, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that Beset Us* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson Company, 1895), 49-50. Pingree’s

who arrived at his brand of urban environmentalism beginning with an interest in landscape design, Pingree came to advocate for changes in the urban environment beginning with the social problems he faced as mayor of Detroit.

Pingree witnessed the local effects of economic crisis on Detroit, coupled with ongoing concerns over labor, immigration, and unemployment that were also widespread across the United States. In 1894, those born outside the United States comprised 24,000 of the 28,000 people on Detroit's poor commission rolls. Polish and German immigrants received more than fifty percent of charity relief funds.<sup>93</sup> The *Detroit Journal* reported in 1894 that, "long periods of idleness have almost driven [the unemployed] to a point of desperation...and when they hear of a job in any part of the city there are usually 10 times as many Poles on the spot as can be furnished with work."<sup>94</sup> Pingree's idea for "potato patches" grew from a backdrop of social and economic turmoil. Throughout his tenure in office, Pingree and city officials attempted to ameliorate these ever-present elements of industrial capitalism that affected the city through progressive reform efforts. As Pingree described, "...this agricultural plan will be, I believe, a step in the right direction."<sup>95</sup> While more fleeting and less permanent spaces than Belle Isle Park, in the context of the economic uncertainty following the panic of 1893, vacant-lot gardens became another iteration of moral environmentalism, used to reconcile the inequalities of industrial capitalism. Pingree's "potato patch scheme" used space to negotiate the class and ethnic tensions during this period, and also shaped the way residents experienced urban life in Detroit.

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"potato patch scheme" can be thought of as a form of quelling social unrest in the city through progressive ideals of self-help and civic improvement.

<sup>93</sup> *Census of the State of Michigan 1894* (Lansing, 1896) I, 216-27 and *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Poor Commissioners 1893-94* (Detroit, 1894), 5, 49. In 1890, the total population of Detroit was approximately 205,000.

<sup>94</sup> *Detroit Journal*, December 12, 1894.

<sup>95</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, "Mayor Pingree's Potato Patch Plan" *Public Opinion*, February 13, 1896: 109.

Like other cities across the United States, tensions were high and riots were an ever-present possibility. A particularly violent incident occurred at a city worksite site near Connor's Creek, where 500 Polish workers, angered by a new system of payment that reduced wages, which was instituted by the board of public works, were fired upon by police officers, who were standing by the worksite in case of trouble. The officers were overwhelmed by the mass of people, and a fight with shovels ensued. Dozens were severely wounded and three men died.<sup>96</sup> Two months later, Pingree announced his plan for cultivating vacant land in Detroit. Arising out of Pingree's reform agenda, the proposal may also have been a political strategy to win the votes of Polish and German immigrants in the city, who were the worst hit by the economic conditions.

As Pingree describes in his political treatise and autobiography, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that Beset Us*, his idea for cultivating vacant lots in Detroit came to him while driving through the empty land around the sparsely finished boulevard project in Detroit. Surrounded by vacant space, it occurred to him, "that could but the poor and unemployed get a chance to cultivate some of the vacant and idle lands there, it would give them something to do, and what they would raise would be that much saved to tax-payers."<sup>97</sup> Evidence also suggests that his wife was influential in his thinking.<sup>98</sup> With cries for "bread or blood" heard outside the Board of Public Works building, it is difficult not to imagine the economic unrest and social strife of the 1890s playing a key role in Pingree's thinking. Devising a way to provide food and jobs had to be a priority.<sup>99</sup> In Pingree's eyes, growing food seemed the perfect way to both busy idle hands and use vacant lands.

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<sup>96</sup> Detroit Journal: April 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 1894; Detroit Evening News: April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1894. For more analysis see *Reform in Detroit*, pg. 67.

<sup>97</sup> Gardener in Hazen S. Pingree, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that Beset Us* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson Company, 1895), 161; excerpt from speech delivered before the Pan American Congress, Toronto, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1895.

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.historicdetroit.org/building/hazen-s-pingree-monument/>

<sup>99</sup> *Twentieth Annual Report of the Board of Public Works, 1893-94* (Detroit, 1894), 42.



Early in 1894, Pingree created Detroit's first Agricultural Committee, and gave them the challenge of creating what he described as an "experiment" for using undeveloped or "wasteland" as vegetable gardens for aiding the city's poor and unemployed residents.<sup>100</sup> The committee was composed of businessmen, city officials, and at least one avowed socialist, and headed by former US Army Captain Cornelius Gardener, who was previously in charge growing food for Fort Wayne, five miles downriver.<sup>101</sup> Gardener was one of the first people with whom Pingree "conversed in relation to cultivating the waste land in the suburbs of the city" and oversaw the implementation of the "Detroit Plan" during its first two seasons.<sup>102</sup> Pingree called on the Agricultural Committee to implement his idea, "in view of the fact that there were lying idle and unoccupied, thousands of acres of land within the city limits and adjacent thereto, and thousands of unemployed and poor persons dependent more or less upon charity, who, if given opportunity, would gladly cultivate some of these lands..."<sup>103</sup> Pingree and the committee thought Detroit's elite could be influenced to support the plan because, in line with ideas about poverty during this period, it was thought to be a way the poor could help themselves and save Detroiters the cost of aiding the poor through direct taxation. Yet Pingree, who did not make many allies

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<sup>100</sup> Since its creators thought of it as a new idea, they often spoke of it as a social "experiment." For example, see language in *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894, 7. While Pingree takes credit for originating this novel idea for municipal gardening, allotment gardens have existed in England for many years prior to this. The *Detroit Journal* recognized as much in an article connecting Pingree's plan to the long established allotment garden system in England. See "Hundred Years Old" *Detroit Journal*, May 20, 1895. There is also evidence of a program in Berlin, dating to at least 1894, if not earlier. As an article described, the plan appeared to be stricter than Detroit's: "The planting must be done according to the inspector's directions and the planting of earlier varieties of potatoes or of anything but potatoes is forbidden." Careful instructions are given as to weeding, hoeing and so forth. In case of inability to do the work at the right time the inspector can have it done at the charge of the lot holder. When the potatoes begin to ripen a field watchman is put on duty, and persons are admitted to lots only on presentation of a paper and during day-light hours. The holders are notified when to harvest and must do so within a fortnight." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 8 (September 1896), 206-217. Detroit's potato patches were managed with a similar level of organization, although the detailed level of oversight appears to be greater in the Berlin plan.

<sup>101</sup> Judson Grennell was the socialist who was a friend of Joseph Labadie. See: <http://lib.umich.edu/jo-labadie-his-gift-michigan/12.html>. Accessed January 18, 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that Beset Us* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson Company, 1895), 159. Subsequent leaders of the Agricultural Commission, such as Captain John Conline, were also from the United States Army, suggesting the order, structure, and power dynamics required for implementing this plan.

<sup>103</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 3.

among Detroit's elite through his urban reform efforts, still had to convince many the plan was worth while.

Almost from the moment he publicly mentioned the idea, Pingree's "potato patch plan" drew intense skepticism, particularly from newspapers, boosters, and commercial interests who deemed it contrary to the perceived progress of urban-industrial modernity. The skepticism was not necessarily unwarranted. A series of issues faced the Agricultural Committee: Who would be willing to donate land? Would people be willing to grow food on it? After all, many Detroit's Polish and German immigrants, the target demographic for the plan, had left rural ways of life in their home countries in order to earn better livings as industrial laborers.

The plan drew critical and often satirical commentary.<sup>104</sup> As the editors of *Garden and Forest* magazine recalled in 1896, "the experiment was looked upon as visionary, if not ridiculous."<sup>105</sup> There were charges that potato bugs would invade the city and more practical concerns about the willingness of the city's poor to grow food for themselves. Others saw it as a "free land scheme." In 1894, the *Detroit Evening News* reported, "Detroit citizens who reside in the suburbs do not believe it will be possible for the raisers of the crops to gather them. One said that from his experience it would take an army of deputy sheriffs if not the militia to protect them from thieves." A resident who lived on the eastern edge of the city remarked that, "Mr. Tredway

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<sup>104</sup> For example, see: "75 Pingree Potatoes Dug From One Hill," *Detroit Free Press*, March 17, 1896. This odd letter lists 75 alliterative words beginning with the letter "p" to call the plan "political", "Preferential" "Pandering" "petty" and "Paltry," among other choice words.

<sup>105</sup> "Farming on Vacant City Lots," *Garden and Forest*, March 4 (1896): 91. As historian environmental historian Shen Hou argues, this magazine, edited by Harvard botanist Charles S. Sargent and New York journalist William A. Stiles, is foundational in locating the urban roots of American environmentalism. As the articles and editors emphasized emotional bonds to nature, they defined what Hou terms a "city natural" ideal as a precursor to the later City Beautiful movement. As Hou describes, "the city natural ideal was focused on bringing nature into the city and city people into nature. Even though the ideal also endorsed scientific and artistic intervention and required some control over natural processes, it expressed a deep love and respect for nature and its laws." (Shen Hou, "Garden and Forest: A Forgotten Magazine and the Urban Roots of American Environmentalism." *Environmental History* 17 (October 2012), 821. Although Pingree's environmentalism was also driven by a strong social and political imperative, his emotional appeals fit within this brand of "city natural" environmentalism, which he also helped to define through his Potato Patch Plan in Detroit in which the editors of *Garden and Forest* took an interest.

had a whole field of potatoes stolen last fall...scores of fine trees have been cut down for firewood and carried off. 'Who is going to secure the crops to the people who raise them? Much of the land offered has not had a plow in it for a dozen years. It will take a pretty good plowman to rip it...how many of these people will know how, or be willing, to break it up? Half a day at it would probably satisfy most of them.'"<sup>106</sup> Concerns over the quality of the land and fears of disorder were likely sparked because the gardeners would primarily be immigrants and lower class residents who would now have access to areas outside of the central city ghetto where most resided.

There were also those who saw Pingree's plan as an overreach of mayoral powers, as suggested in a politically charged cartoon of the Mayor as a ruler named "Tuber I" with a carrot and potato in hand. When Pingree asked for assistance from churches, one pastor sarcastically told his congregation, "to give liberally and pray that potatoes might grow as had the...[mayors] head and then there would not be a single hungry child left in Detroit."<sup>107</sup> One editorial cartoon, printed in the *Detroit Evening News*, scoffed at the scheme, suggesting that the state of Michigan change its motto, coined in 1835, from "if you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you" to "if you seek a beautiful potato patch, look around you."<sup>108</sup> In the cartoon, the stooped over gardeners, represented like farmers, are portrayed as backward and anti-modern. With the precedence given to commercial and industrial development during the period, a focus on large-

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<sup>106</sup> "He Got \$13.80." *Detroit Evening News*, June 11, 1894.

<sup>107</sup> Melvin Holli, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 71.

<sup>108</sup> "This Page Belongs to Pingree." *Detroit Evening News*, June 13, 1894. Three days later, on June 16, 1894, the *Evening News* gave a more glowing review to the laying of the cornerstone for the new Detroit Chamber of Commerce, writing, "this bright June day marks an epoch in the history of Detroit, for it witnessed the laying of the corner-stone of the Detroit Chamber of Commerce, in which the builders erect a monument to the commercial achievements of the past and pledge their faith and support to the city's future prosperity...the building itself is to be a colossal structure, in the highest type of modern architecture..." Ironically, at the same time many in the city were celebrating the forward push of a modern city, others were returning to the land to grow the food they could not afford to buy.

scale vegetable gardens as a part of an urban landscape seemed odd to many. Even so, Pingree and his allies were able to garner enough support to put their ideas into action. Although it was already late in the spring, the Agricultural Committee could now begin implementing Pingree's plan.

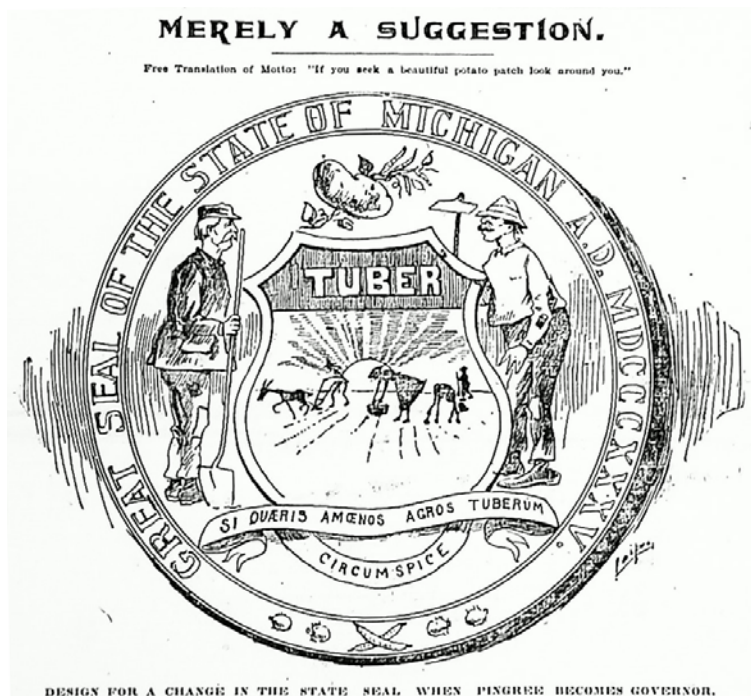


Figure 1.12: This cartoon, printed in the *Detroit Evening News* on June 13, 1894 reveals some of the skepticism Pingree faced from the local media as he sought to implement a plan for the poor and unemployed to cultivate vacant lots in the city during the economic crisis of the 1890s.

## Implementation and Organization of the “Detroit Plan.”

“It is no impracticable dream”

- Rev. Donald D. McLaurin, discussing Pingree’s plan in *Public Opinion*, January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1895

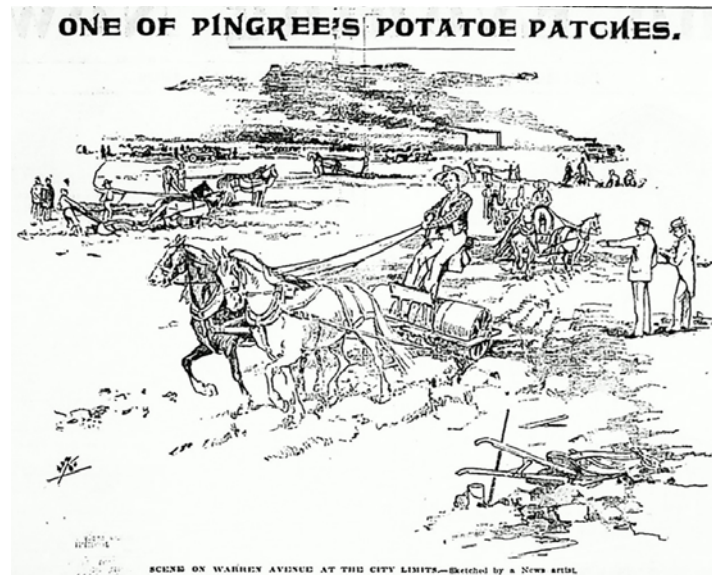


Figure 1.13: The smokestacks of the city fade into the background as work progresses on one of Pingree’s Potato Patches in Detroit, From the *Detroit Evening News*, 1894.

The Agricultural Committee “started out with the determination of attaining the greatest possible results with the least expenditure of public money.”<sup>109</sup> Acquiring land was one of the most pertinent questions they faced. Without the authority, let alone the funds, to purchase space for garden plots, the Agricultural Committee, with Pingree’s assistance, solicited donations of land from individuals to temporarily use for cultivation. Through advertisements in newspapers and personally persuading landowners, Pingree and the committee were able to acquire 430 acres for use during the first season, enough to provide plots of land for 945 families.<sup>110</sup> “Most of the land,” Gardener, remarked, “was withdrawn from [previous] cultivation and plotted for

<sup>109</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1896), 3.

<sup>110</sup> Pingree also sold his prized horse to raise funds and demonstrate his commitment to the plan. Pingree Scrapbook, Volume I, page 22. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

subdivisions.”<sup>111</sup> Much of it was located in areas of the city that were subdivided by speculators and waiting to be sold, but could not be due to the recession. These sections were closer to the outskirts of the city limits or just beyond them, on the west and east sides of the city, on either side of the central business district. Geographically, this meant the gardens were not particularly close to the participants’ homes. Some had to travel up to four miles to reach their assigned plots of land.<sup>112</sup>

Once the vacant land for garden plots was selected, the board of public works plowed and harrowed it for cultivation. Then it was staked off and numbered into parcels that ranged from one quarter to a half acre. On at least one occasion, an overzealous Agricultural Committee caused a dispute over property boundaries. In 1897, for example, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that the potato commission illegally plowed up 76 acres of a land without permission from the owners, tearing up the subdivision stakes and absconding with signs reading: “these lots for sale.”<sup>113</sup> Despite this confusion, yearly calls for donations of land, with accompanying tax relief for the owners were printed in the city’s newspapers and received favorable responses, which allowed for the creation of these semi-public spaces. With a combination of city-sponsored funds totaling \$3,000 to \$5,000 a year, as well as donations of land and money by individuals, the Agricultural Committee was able to support a network of potato patches in Detroit.<sup>114</sup> Next, the Agricultural Committee needed gardeners willing and able to participate.

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<sup>111</sup> Cornelius Gardener, “An Experiment in Relief Work” *Charities Review*, 4.5 (1895): 225.

<sup>112</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 4.

<sup>113</sup> “Potato Patch Commission is in Trouble.” *Detroit Free Press*, May 28, 1897.

<sup>114</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 4, 12-14.

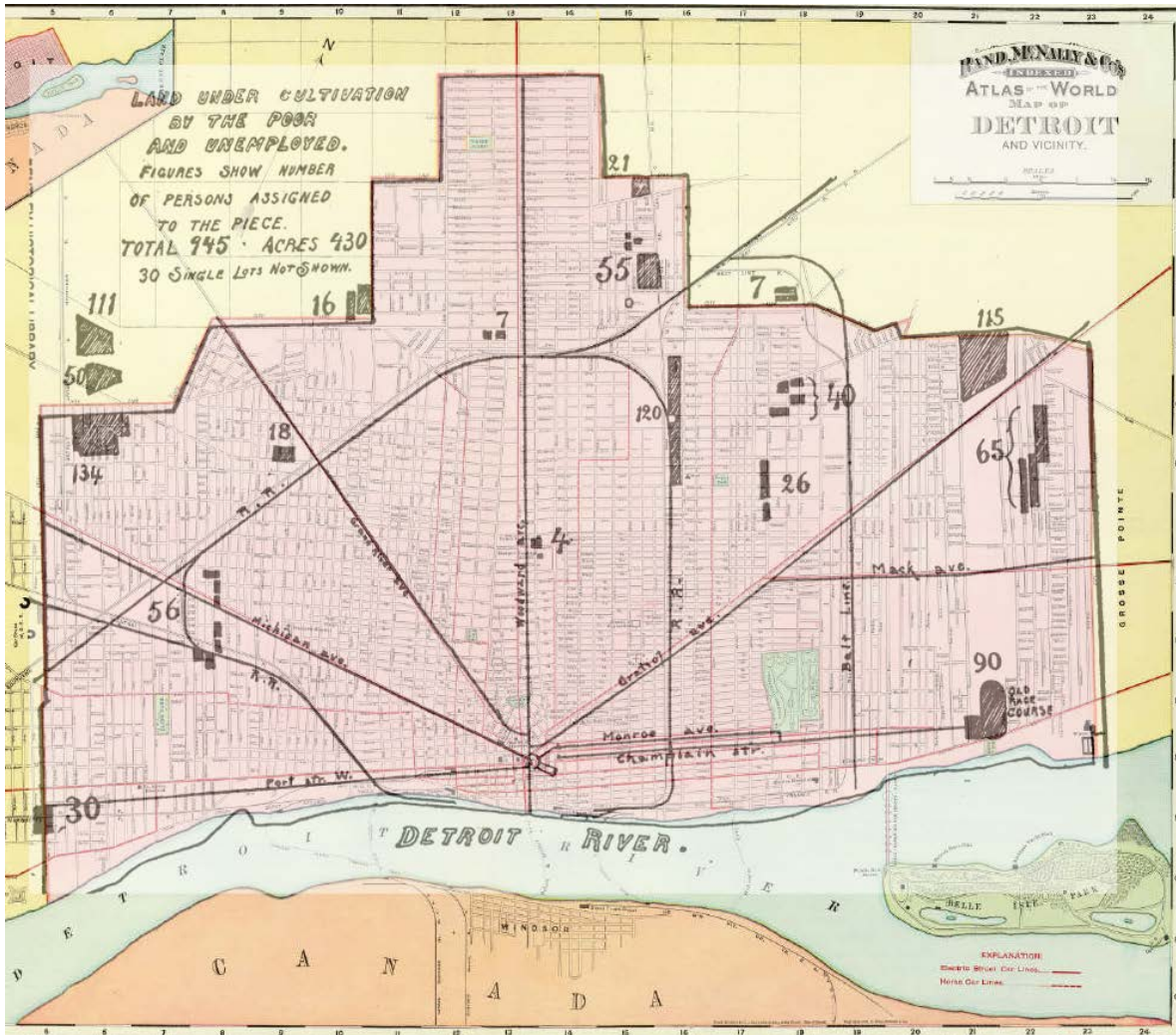


Figure 1.14: Potato Patch plots, 1894 (from the Agricultural Committee Report), overlaid onto detailed map of the city from 1897 (Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection). Although they were “urban gardens” because of city residents use them, much of the land for Pingree’s Potato Patches was located on the fringes of the city, in areas that were described as more suburban or rural than urban like today’s community gardens in the city.

Detroit’s poverty-stricken immigrants were not the most likely nineteenth century agriculturalists. Although Polish residents came largely from rural areas and agricultural economies, most left for Detroit in larger numbers beginning in 1880 for opportunities as laborers in the city’s expanding industries.<sup>115</sup> Many may have despised the thought of returning to agriculture. To ensure participation the Potato Patch Plan, the Agricultural Committee gave

<sup>115</sup> M. Remigia, “The Polish Immigrant in Detroit to 1914,” *Polish American Studies*, 2 (January-June 1945): 5.

residents ample incentive to participate, not only in the form of seeds, but also through administrative intimidation. Anyone receiving aid from the city's Poor Commission who did not apply for a garden lot would have their name stricken from the books.<sup>116</sup> Under this method, the Agricultural committee received 3,000 forced applications for 945 available plots during the first season. While the opportunity to grow food was useful, it was also the only option for most participants. Far from the idealized city-saving plan that nineteenth century reformers and journalists often memorialized, the Detroit Plan was arguably a more ambiguous blessing for those doing the labor.

After participants signed up, they were given a ticket with their plot number, location, and a specific time that a foreman would take them to their lot. A stake was labeled with their name and address to indicate their ownership of the lot for the season.<sup>117</sup> In order to take account of the crop yields, the Committee also provided participants with note cards, on which they were instructed to record their information.<sup>118</sup> In addition, a pamphlet, printed in three languages, gave the gardeners directions for how to plant and care for each seed that the committee provided.<sup>119</sup> While two-thirds of the lots were generally planted with potatoes, the gardeners also raised "nearly all kinds of garden truck," including beans, squash, pumpkins, string beans, cabbage, cucumbers, corn, and beets.<sup>120</sup>

Of course, simply having land did not mean vegetables would grow. While concerns over the willingness of the poor to grow their own food were quelled by the large number of applications, some continued to express doubt over the abilities of a class of industrial labors, and not agriculturalists or horticulturalists, to cultivate crops. Moreover, the land used for these

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<sup>116</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1895), 3.

<sup>117</sup> Cornelius Gardener, "An Experiment in Relief Work" *Charities Review*, 4.5 (1895): 226.

<sup>118</sup> None remain from Detroit that I can find. However, it most likely was similar to the one from Philadelphia.

<sup>119</sup> Cornelius Gardener, "An Experiment in Relief Work" *Charities Review*, 4.5 (1895): 226.

<sup>120</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 5.



gardens was often of poor quality, located on abandoned truck farms vacant for quite some time. The State Agricultural Commission did not believe that city folk could farm, suggesting that because they lived in Detroit, they would have little success. As the state commission wrote, “now, as these amateur plowmen found, the soil, unstirred by cultivation for years, some of it filled in with clay from cellars, sewers, etc., is hard and baked solid as a rock. The fertilizers depended upon are the old tin cans and boots and shoes dumped on the vacant lots, and the prospects are there will be plenty of work for the unemployed – if that’s what they are after – to grow a mighty small crop.”<sup>121</sup> While there is perhaps more than a touch of sarcasm in their comments, and a bias against urban residents, their concerns about the quality of the soil were quite real. To make the supposedly modern commercial and industrial city of Detroit function during the economic depression of the 1890s required not only knowledge of urbanism and public works, but also the seemingly “rural” knowledge of growing food, fertilizer, and plowing the earth.

Even with these obstacles, participants grew what the Agricultural Committee described as a bountiful crop during the first year of the “Detroit Experiment,” particularly given the late start they had in sowing seeds.<sup>122</sup> Yet soil quality and garden pests continued to be of concern. As the committee wrote in 1895, “much of the land used heretofore has been almost exhausted of fertilizing qualities.”<sup>123</sup> To remedy this situation, Mayor Pingree and the Agricultural Committee devised a plan to use the city’s street sweepings as fertilizer. They were hauled to the garden plots for use as a top dressing by the city’s public works department, sometimes using the assistance of streetcars. In the fall, sweepings were also left on lots over the winter for use

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<sup>121</sup> State Agriculture Report, as quoted by Pingree in: *Sixth Annual Message to the Common Council of the City of Detroit, January 8, 1895* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1895), 47. Pingree Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>122</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 4, 12-14.

<sup>123</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1895), 7.

during the next season.<sup>124</sup> Efforts to clean up the central city were combined with the cultivation of vacant lots.<sup>125</sup> To combat harmful insects, barrels of Potato Bug Poison were shared between several tracts, and applied to the vines of plants by each occupant as bugs appeared.<sup>126</sup> The committee was particularly pleased to report that it was nearly impossible to give awards for the best tended lots in 1895, since there were reportedly “no weeds to be seen anywhere.”<sup>127</sup>

Like Belle Isle Park, the Potato Patches also required security, due in no small part the committee’s beliefs about ethnicity of the gardeners, as well as the fact that the land was donated and not owned by the city outright, thus greater care was required to return it to the owners in good condition. To ensure participants took care of their unfenced lots, the Police Commission had between one and two mounted policemen report to the Agricultural Committee. The first year there was one officer, in subsequent years there were two. According to reports, they patrolled the potato patches on a daily basis. Committee members were also assigned to patches on the East and West sides of the city. “Throughout the summer, they made a daily round of all the ground being cultivated, making it their business to spur up such as were neglected their pieces and settling trivial disputes.”<sup>128</sup> According to the committee’s reports, crime and

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<sup>124</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1895), 7. Hazen Pingree, “Mayor Pingree’s Potato Patch Plan” *Public Opinion*, February 13, 1896: 109; and “Street Droppings for Potato Patch Lots” *Detroit Free Press*, March 17, 1897.

<sup>125</sup> As can be imagined, the smell and quality of the environment must have been less than inviting. Indeed, urban environmental nuisances were prevalent during this period. The Journal of the Common Council for 1894/95 records numerous complaints, from the filthy condition of Eastern Market, unsanitary buildings on Michigan Avenue, and standing water and sinkholes near the site of Bloody Run Creek on the Eastside (where many of the unemployed gardeners lived). These experiential qualities of turn of the century urban life were targets of Pingree’s plans to make Detroit a more attractive place to live (and do business), as he called for improvement of the waterfront, and a more strict smoke ordinance to keep buildings clean so that the “beauty of these fine buildings may not be impaired.” (Hazen Pingree, *Report to the Common Council*, January 14, 1896). A year later, the Free Press reported that the buildings on Michigan Avenue improved. March 17, 1897.

<sup>126</sup> Hazen Pingree, “Mayor Pingree’s Potato Patch Plan” *Public Opinion*, February 13, 1896: 109; and *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 10.

<sup>127</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1895), 4. However, as the Detroit Free Press reported, the committee did give cash prizes for the lot with the largest quantities of potatoes for the season, with Pingree donating his own money. “Prizes Will Be Offered” *Detroit Free Press* May 15, 1895.

<sup>128</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 5.

trespassing were low. “There was but little trespassing or stealing...and what trespassing there was, was not done by the cultivators themselves, but by outside parties...and the pieces were watched over and protected to a great extent by uninterested people living in the vicinity.” During harvest time, in September and October, more inspectors and overseers were put in place.<sup>129</sup> According to Gardener’s account of the “Experiment in Relief Work” published in *Charities Review* in 1895, some arrests were made for trespassing, and a few cattle were impounded for roaming free across the lots, but there were no major incidents.<sup>130</sup> The *Detroit Evening News*, however, reported that some participants, labeled “unscrupulous poles,” were taking more than one lot. As they reported, a man signed up for a lot and his name is recorded on the plot marker. “After it has been assigned to him, his wife drifts in. She tacks on five more z’s on the family name, throws in a few j’s for good measure, and gets a parcel of land all her own.”<sup>131</sup> While the commission did not find these instances enough to contribute to their reports, accounts like the one above shed light on the tensions that remained over the use of “free land” for immigrants, even as there seemed to be no apparent shortage of space for participants.

By 1899 Gardener reported to the annual meeting of the American Park and Outdoor Association that, “of late years, however, there has been but little trouble from marauders in the cultivated tracts.”<sup>132</sup> While the committee might have downplayed trespassing and stealing in their reports to promote the plan, there was a fear of disorder and crime that allowed the committee to justify a system of strict oversight. Whether a precaution or a response to actual

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<sup>129</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1894), 5-6.

<sup>130</sup> This was also a problem for the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards, who often complained about cattle tearing up the newly finished boulevard around the city. In this way, the city was not as pleasantly static and pastoral as city leaders imagined through visual and material culture. Nature and people not behaving as planned thwarted their ideals. See Anton Ekstrom, *Report of the Superintendent of Small Parks and Boulevards* (Detroit: Free Press Printing Company, 1891), 9.

<sup>131</sup> “Unscrupulous Poles” *Detroit Evening News*. June 4, 1895.

<sup>132</sup> Cornelius Gardener, remarks from the American Park and Outdoor Art Association Meeting, Detroit, MI June 27-29, 1899 printed in: Vol. 3, Part 3, *American Park and Outdoor Art Association* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill Press, 1900), 46.

incidents, surveillance of the lots demonstrates the extent to which it was considered an “experiment” and means of keeping a watchful eye on the urban underclass. The power of observation and record keeping no doubt made the plan unique, distinct from merely raising food for the unemployed, or encouraging them to grow food closer to their homes.

Potato Patches were intensely managed spaces, not unlike Belle Isle Park. As such, they also became laboratories for moral environmentalism, with similar conceptions of order and oversight as Victorian era parks. Their function was intended to promote the transformation of the individuals who used them for growing food. Like the promise of public space open to all at Belle Isle Park, the civic mission of the Potato Patches wrapped issues of inequality and access to food in the language of moral environmentalism. Vacant lot gardening, like building a park, became a virtuous civic action that produced a form of environmentalism connected to the experiences of life in an industrial city and supported an educational mission in addition to a practical one.

### **An Environmentalism of the Well-Tended Garden**

Although Pingree’s Potato Patches were supported by a similar intellectual architecture as that of Belle Isle Park, as semi-public spaces only used by one segment of Detroit’s population, these landscapes structured class and ethnic difference in ways that Belle Isle did not. To city leaders, participants were learning values of “self-help,” and took part in the civic life of Detroit by growing their own food. Those who did not need to garden or who donated land could be assured they were doing “the right thing” since gardening had the potential to teach participants the supposed ideals that might allow them to become a part of the civic elite. As historian David Scobey writes of New York City, “in both the management of park labor and the

regulation of park use, then, the politics of stewardship identified state power with class authority. It made Central Park the stage for a great transaction between genteel provisioners of civilization and the masses who required its discipline.”<sup>133</sup> In Detroit, the management of Potato Patches by local government served similar ends. By studying and attempting to ameliorate the negative effects of poverty in industrial cities through the “experiment” of vacant lot cultivation, city leaders attributed loftier goals of social and moral uplift to landscapes that were not only livable, but virtuous. Gardening advocate promoted them not only as a savings to taxpayers, or a measure in fiscal prudence, but as part of a wider process intended to build a class of citizens who could be deemed worthy in the eyes of city leaders to uphold the ideals of the city and nation. Residents and city leaders reworked so-called “wastelands” into spaces of subsistence, allowing elite Detroiters to bestow their values of self-help and hard work to groups of people acutely affected by economic hardship. Productive land and productive people seemed to reconcile potentially explosive class tensions, as well as the unsightly environments of an underdeveloped city.

For Pingree and other reformers, the turn of the century practice of cultivating vacant lots was enmeshed with ideals about the moral possibilities of contact with these spaces. Gardens were idealized representations of space. As theorist Henri Lefebvre defines it, “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols...space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.”<sup>134</sup> With the social power to entice unemployed Detroiters to garden, leaders of Detroit’s vacant lot cultivation movement made *symbolic use* of vegetables and soil amidst spaces left abandoned by land speculation. As a cultural practice steeped in the mythology of agrarian life and of living

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<sup>133</sup> David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 213.

<sup>134</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 39.

close to the land, gardening amidst the failures of industrial life, such as uneven development, and economic inequality, became a virtuous act of social uplift.

Like Pingree, who boasted his plan was a “step in the right direction” because it brought people in contact with nature, Cornelius Gardener, first chairman of the Agricultural Committee, justified the logic of the Potato Patch Project he was in charge of by explaining, “As all means of subsistence must, in the first instance, come from the soil of the earth by the exertion of man’s labor, it would seem just and according to natural laws that no man who is in need, and willing to labor, should be denied the opportunity of raising food from land not in use for this purpose.”<sup>135</sup> He continued this line of thinking in an article for *Charities Review*, published in 1895, writing, “it seems unnatural and unjust that here or within many of our Western cities there should be so much land lying idle and serving no good purpose to anyone, and at the same time thousands of people in want, who, if permitted, would gladly raise something on these lands for their subsistence.”<sup>136</sup> On a national level, the editors of *Garden and Forest* described that the nascent movement, “offers a natural plan for giving the people who dwell in stifling tenement houses opportunity to work for themselves in the open air and under healthful conditions.”<sup>137</sup> Framing gardening as educational and “natural” thus allowed particular classes and ethnicities of people to be targeted. As “self-help,” rather than direct charity, Pingree was able to boast savings to taxpayers and assuage fears amongst those of his own entrepreneurial industrialist class that he was favoring the lower classes.

Aside from their value to the city budget and in meeting the subsistence needs of unemployed Detroiters and those in other cities, while potentially transforming the social and

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<sup>135</sup> Cornelius Gardner in Hazen S. Pingree, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that beset Us* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson Company, 1895), 173.

<sup>136</sup> Cornelius Gardener, “An Experiment in Relief Work,” *Charities Review* 4.5 (1895): 225

<sup>137</sup> “Farming on Vacant City Lots,” *Garden and Forest*, March 4 (1896): 91.

cultural values of an urban underclass, these gardens were also understood as a means of ameliorating unsightly spaces within a developing urban-industrial landscape. They were a social improvement that could reconcile the negative environmental “wasteland” of vacant space with a more pleasing garden aesthetic. While not as highly designed and idealized as Belle Isle Park, the Potato Patches and other vacant lot plans preserved a mythology of American agrarianism in the city, rather than leaving the callous void left by the empty spaces of land speculation.

What is more, the burden for realizing this aesthetic did not have to be carried out by those who owned the land. When they donated land, the owners became members of a philanthropic civic culture, rather than exploitative land speculators and industrialists. As one individual commented after the inaugural year of Pingree’s plan, “it will be to the benefit of the owners, as well as the needy users, to have the once beautiful, but now barren and untidy fields which have been blighted by the mildew of ‘speculation,’ so used as to warm the hearts (too often in need of it) of those who hold titles to these lands, while filling the mouths of the hungry. Brooklyn, Buffalo, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco and all the great cities of the country have wastes within and around them, now neither useful nor pleasant to look upon, which may be made to gladden the hearts of the suffering poor and the eyes of all beholders.”<sup>138</sup> As part of a larger dialogue on land-use in turn of the century American cities, the cultural aesthetic of a well tended garden was a part of the way individuals created meaning out of landscapes that were not fully developed, but transitional spaces on the urban periphery. The aesthetics of abandonment, an ever-present reminder of the negative effects of land speculation, were unacceptable, even as they were an ever-present part of economic boom and bust.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> “Good Use for Idle Acres,” *American Magazine of Civics*, Vol 6, January-June (1895): 550-551.

<sup>139</sup> Commenting on a recent tour of the western edge of the city along Fort Street, the *Detroit Evening News* was dismayed to find abandoned and neglected buildings. “Fort Street West” *Detroit Evening News*, April 1, 1894.

Cleaning up the urban environment was also a part of Pingree's thinking. As he commented, in a conversation later described by Agricultural Committee member George H. Barbour to the *Detroit Free Press*, "Some of that land hasn't had a spade in it for 15 years, and will be a d—n sight better for a little plowing."<sup>140</sup> Yet, while this way of imagining and recreating the urban environment created a sense of place for members of one social class, those doing the labor of gardening might not have understood their experience in quite the same way. For them, gardening was not a matter of aesthetics, but a means of fulfilling their most basic need for health and subsistence.

The Agricultural Committee also described what was likely a particularly romanticized image of everyday life on the potato patches. As their 1896 report described, this vision was supposedly an unexpected consequence of the plan. They wrote, "other objects are unconsciously attained. It creates a desire on the part of those receiving assistance, to have land of their own if possible; it is also an object lesson in industry and thrift that will not be lost on the children who go out with their parents to assist in planting and harvesting the crops; from the pretty babies in their buggies who incidentally get an outing, to the interesting children of seven or more years of age, who act as interpreters for their parents who cannot speak the language of the country, - in this most beautiful picture, all seem happy, contented and grateful for the kindness of Providence, and their fellow beings."<sup>141</sup> While many of these women, as Gardener noted, "would bring their babies and their lunch to spend the day upon the place," it was more likely because the gardens were located so far away that there was little else to do but spend an entire day in the field.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> "Potato Patch, 1894 Reminder" *Detroit Free Press*, February 25, 1917.

<sup>141</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1896), 8.

<sup>142</sup> Cornelius Gardener in Hazen S. Pingree, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that beset Us* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson Company, 1895), 165.



The Detroit News Tribune also recreated the scene of being in a potato patch for readers. As one author wrote, “leaving the car at Thirty-Second Street the visitor has before him a wide, open country, apparently miles in area, with here and there herds of cows browsing, guarded by old men and dogs. Wagon tracks and footpaths wind through the fields.”<sup>143</sup> Here, whole families worked with hoes, spades, and forks, although, as the author noted, most of it was “the work of sturdy Polish women.” The author was also pleased to observe that, “although these people are brought up in a big city, they have adapted themselves with celerity to agricultural pursuits... Upon the faces of the Polish potato gatherers, at the day’s end, is a look of contentment. Their simple lives, their separation from the turbulence of existence, suggest that they are not unhappy. Their contentment is far greater than that of many men and women in this town who consider themselves socially higher.”<sup>144</sup>

Publicity photographs of Pingree’s Potato Patches, such as those published in *The Arena* magazine, also illustrate how an environmentalism rooted in the garden represented ideals of respectability intended to reconcile fears of civic unrest and environmental destruction wrought by industrial life. Several images represent neat, orderly, and apparently grateful gardeners at rest. Most depicted women, arranged in tidy rows with their tools at their side, rather than laboring in the garden. Others included Mayor Pingree and Agricultural Committee members overlooking the garden plots or posing with thankful participants. In one photograph from Pingree’s Memoir, a Polish family had apparently written on a sign, “the name of the man who originated this system will be handed [sic] down to posterity.” While it is difficult to determine if this family in fact wrote the sign, let alone their motives for doing so, not everyone might have felt the same

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<sup>143</sup> “The Harvest” *Detroit News-Tribune*, October 4, 1896.

<sup>144</sup> “The Harvest” *Detroit News-Tribune*, October 4, 1896.

way about their life in the garden.<sup>145</sup> The image, however, suggests the sentiment for which city leaders hoped: to have Pingree's Potato Patches build empathetic, rather than rebellious, connections between the city's lower-class population and its civic leaders.



Figure 1.15: Some of the gardeners, with signs written in Polish and English.

Left: "Kto daje biednym pozycze Bogu" (He who gives to the poor lends to God).

Right: "The Name of the man who originated this system will be handed down to posterity." Images such as this, as well as the material culture of signs and language they depict, suggest that gardeners were grateful for the opportunity to have food, and were not unhappy with the program. This image also suggests the unequal power relations between city leaders and the city's poor. Locked in a system with few alternate options, participating in Pingree's Potato Patches and conveying good behavior was a means of survival.

Image courtesy of Detroit Historical Society, Detroit Views Collection

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<sup>145</sup>Another gardener, who did not speak English, also thanked Pingree via a contact at the Polish American Publishing Company, who wrote to Pingree on their behalf. See letter dated March 1895 to H.S. Pingree from Chas Laskowski, Pingree Scrapbooks, Volume I, page 68, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. Another Pingree supporter also wrote the mayor in October of 1895, with a saying they created: "He who makes a potato vine flourish where formerly was only burdock and thistle is a greater man than he who may be elected four, or four times four, times mayor of a city." Letter to H.S. Pingree, dated October 15, 1895. Pingree Scrapbooks, Volume II, page 63. A letter from Frank Kuhn, a resident of Detroit for 35 years, was more dire. He wrote Pingree for help in October of 1895 asking for assistance because his patch was a failure, not providing them with enough food for the winter. This was likely due to drought conditions the Committee described during the summer of 1895. Letter to Mayor Pingree, Pingree Scrapbooks, Volume II, page 67.



Figure 1.16: Polish women walk to their assigned potato patches, c. 1893. Detroit News Archives.



**THE DETROIT PLAN — SOME OF THOSE WHO WERE AIDED BY MAYOR  
PINGREE'S MEASURE.**

Figure 1.17: Gardeners in Detroit. Originally published in *The Arena*, 1896.



**THE DETROIT PLAN — MAYOR PINGREE, CAPTAIN GARDENER, AND OTHERS,  
IN THE MIDST OF THE POTATO PATCHES.**

Figure 1.18: Members of the Detroit Agriculture Committee. Mayor Pingree, fourth from left. Originally Published in *The Arena*, 1896.



**THE DETROIT PLAN — A SCENE IN THE VEGETABLE PATCHES.**

Figure 1.19: Committee members and gardeners at one of the potato patches. Originally published in *The Arena*, 1896.



**THE DETROIT PLAN — THE AGRICULTURAL COMMITTEE AND  
SOME OF THE WORKERS.**

Figure 1.20: Agricultural Committee Members and Mayor Pingree visit a Potato Patch with some of the gardeners. Originally published in *The Arena*, 1896.



Figure 1.21: Mayor Pingree (left) and Cornelius Gardener tour the Potato Patches. Detroit News archives.

With the success of his plan, Pingree imagined that “From the results of this plan...cities will do well to set apart certain sections of land for permanent use in this direction. This will become more and more apparent as large cities become more and more populous and no man can do a more philanthropic act than to donate land for such use.”<sup>146</sup> He even went as far to advocate

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<sup>146</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, “Pingree’s Potato Patches” *Public Opinion*, January 23, 1895: 205. Pingree also suggested the city find land along a street car lines that extended to farmland on the outskirts of the city, so that gardeners could

direct municipal ownership of land for growing food in the form of agricultural parks. “These agriculturally cultivated parks will, I believe, be found as beneficial in results as the purely pleasure parks, and will be as useful for the prosperity of the city’s inhabitants; and by this I do not mean to advocate at all the giving up or lessening of the number of our breathing spots, the parks devoted to pleasure and recreation.”<sup>147</sup> In a landscape seemingly devoid of hope and meaning for many, Pingree imagined a way that both Belle Isle Park and “agricultural parks” could coexist. He combined a seemingly rural way of life with the challenges of an industrial city in the midst of recession to envision a different way of life in urban America. For Pingree, agricultural food gardens were not nostalgic relics from a previous era, but instead could be integral components of an urban-industrial modernity. The Agricultural Committee even recommended purchasing 200 acres on either side of Woodward Avenue as a start toward making agriculture a permanent part of Detroit’s civic life.<sup>148</sup> While this proposal was never put in place, Pingree’s Potato Patches set in motion a national momentum toward vacant lot cultivation that continued to grow from Detroit to cities across the country.

### **Beyond Detroit**

In 1896, Pingree stated to the *Detroit Free Press* that “the Potato Patch Plan has been a material success, and has advertised this city as nothing ever did before.”<sup>149</sup> Countless publications described the Detroit origins of vacant lot cultivation. Delegations from Buffalo

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travel back and forth by rail, while providing a way to permanently grow “plenty of potatoes for the poor.” “A Potato Tour.” *Detroit Tribune* August 1, 1895.

<sup>147</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, “Pingree’s Potato Patches” *Public Opinion*, January 23, 1895: 205. Pingree also suggested the city find land along a street car lines that extended to farmland on the outskirts of the city, so that gardeners could travel back and forth by rail, while providing a way to permanently grow “plenty of potatoes for the poor.” “A Potato Tour,” *Detroit Tribune* August 1, 1895.

<sup>148</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1896), 9. On the same page, members of the committee also reasoned that if need be, “these farms can, as the city becomes larger, be converted into parks.”

<sup>149</sup> “Potato Patch Plan” *Detroit Free Press*, March 31, 1896.

and Boston visited Detroit as early as 1895. With ample criticism at the beginning, even the *Free Press* later came to admit that, while “many derided the scheme as chimerical and as born of politics rather than philanthropy,” Pingree’s “idea is vindicated” through the widespread national interest garnered by the “social experiment” of vacant lot cultivation.<sup>150</sup>

Between 1894 and 1920, vacant lot cultivation became a social and intellectual movement grounded in the pragmatic use of urban space; it was one way people negotiated their sense of place within environments that, like Detroit, needed to reconcile the social inequality and environmental chaos of urban-industrial life that seemed to leave cities in a perpetual state of ruin and repair. They could do this by elevating the status of gardening from a seemingly mundane, rural act of subsistence, to a virtuous program of social and moral uplift for residents detached from their “natural” environments and placed within the confines of urban civilization.

Inquiries regarding “Pingree’s Potato Patches” came to Detroit from cities and organizations across the United States. From the Salvation Army, a professor at Beloit College, and the growing New York, Philadelphia, and Boston vacant lot cultivation associations, a range of socially minded individuals were interested.<sup>151</sup> Pingree himself received letters and telegrams inquiring about the “Detroit Plan” from cities large and small, from San Francisco to Worcester, Massachusetts. Some had read his book, *Facts and Opinions*. Others had read about it in newspapers. Some wanted information about the plan to implement it, while others were preparing reports and presentations on the topic, such as a professor at Beloit College.<sup>152</sup>

Regardless of motive, the letters suggest an exchange of ideas and materials (Agricultural Committee reports, statistics, etc.) took place, facilitating discussions as to the merits of vacant

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<sup>150</sup> “Meeting one of Detroit’s Greatest Needs.” *Detroit Free Press*, October 20, 1909.

<sup>151</sup> The Pingree Papers at the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library have hundreds of letters written to Pingree and the Agricultural Committee inquiring about the Detroit Plan. See especially boxes one and two, and Pingree Scrapbooks.

<sup>152</sup> Pingree Papers. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Box 1.

lot cultivation. In Kansas, the *Atchinson Daily Globe* advertised it as an “odd scheme for relieving distress.”<sup>153</sup> Odd it may have been, that industrialists, businessmen, and reformers latched on to gardening in cities. Nonetheless, similar plans were adapted to various local contexts across the nation, and the meaning of gardening became part of the way leaders discussed class identity in the city.

Plans in New York and Philadelphia were the most well documented, but according to an 1897 survey, Boston, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, Dayton, Denver, Detroit, Duluth, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Omaha, Providence, Reading, Seattle, and Springfield (MA) all had plans in place for the cultivation of vacant lots. Unlike the plan in Detroit, where the municipal government was the primary organizer, these plans were typically run by private organizations with the blessing of the local government. In Buffalo, for example, the Buffalo Industrial Association managed the cultivation of some 700 acres by 10,590 people.<sup>154</sup> Continually discussed by advocates as an “experiment,” when examining these programs at a national level, they emphasized similar hypotheses about gardening’s educational, economic, and moral benefits. As one author summarized, “it has had a wholesome educational effect in providing to those who had often been the drudges of machine industry in the past that the individual artistic spirit, even when applied to potato culture, has its ample reward for the worker, both in self-satisfaction and for his pocket-book.”<sup>155</sup> Contact with the “proper” type of environment and cultural practice within it, could, it was believed, cultivated not only sustenance, but also a particular kind of “artistic spirit” rooted in growing food. Of course, with little other means of acquiring food without living wages, the gardeners themselves (many who came to cities for the

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<sup>153</sup> “Pingree’s Potato Patches,” *The Atchinson Daily Globe*, July 17, 1894.

<sup>154</sup> “Vacant Lot Cultivation” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 11 (May 1898): 140.

<sup>155</sup> “Vacant Lot Cultivation” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 11 (May 1898): 146.



promise of a better life through industrial labor) may have felt differently about the benefits this “educational effect” and the role of moral environmentalism on their lives within the urban-industrial environment.

Taken to the next extreme, some imagined that the poor might even be so transformed by the experience of growing their own food that they might leave the city altogether. As one commissioner, involved with New York City’s Association for the Cultivation of Vacant Lots by the Unemployed, told the *New York Times* in 1897, “a great benefaction will be done if the poor can be induced to go out into the country, where they can lead healthy and profitable lives.”<sup>156</sup> Cornelius Gardener, of Detroit, also appeared pleased to report that 25 families moved to a small village outside of Detroit “directly as a result of your potato patch scheme.”<sup>157</sup> Of course, no mass exodus of the poor from American cities occurred as a result of these programs. Yet, as these attitudes demonstrate, creating the allure of a rural lifestyle was at least a part of the sentiment underlying the creation of these spaces.

Rather than attempting to realize structural urban and environmental reform, gardens continued to be understood as a way of ameliorating the negative social consequences of poverty, rather than transforming the underlying causes of poverty. As Frederic W. Speirs, of the editorial committee of the Philadelphia Vacant Lot Cultivation Association wrote, in 1898,

We are beginning to realize that in our modern civilization we have to deal with an ever-changing yet never-absent class of unemployed men and women, who for various reasons can find no place in the industrial system. At quite regularly recurring intervals, general industrial depressions settle down upon us, and hundreds of thousands of workers are deprived of regular employment for months. Forces beyond their control close the factory

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<sup>156</sup> “Helping New York’s Poor,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1897.

<sup>157</sup> Cornelius Gardner in Hazen S. Pingree, *Facts and Opinions or Dangers that beset Us* (Detroit: F.B. Dickerson Company, 1895), 169. F.B. Dickerson, superintendent of the poor in Detroit also reported, “at least one hundred families, out of approximately one thousand, moved to homes in the country as a direct result of their vacant-lot-cultivation experience.” See: Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 30. From AICP “Cultivation,” pg. 29 Also see footnotes pg. 305.

doors against them, drive them from workroom and store, and turn them into the streets to beg in vain for a chance to earn a living.<sup>158</sup>

Gardening was understood as a site of social and cultural “experimentation,” which grew in tandem with urban industrial life. Even while viewing the programs as “more or less sporadic,”<sup>159</sup> and “palliative”<sup>160</sup> in regards to transforming social inequality in urban America, supporters continued to believe that, “all thoughtful, far-seeing humanitarian and patriotic citizens will readily see that in infusing hope and self-respect into individuals and transforming objects of charity into independent, self-sustaining persons, the community and nation must necessarily realize far more in substantial gain than can be computed in dollars and cents.”<sup>161</sup> By engaging with a set of ideas about urban space, while others transformed the land to realize the material form of these ideas, particular types of landscapes structured the social relations and class identity amongst urban residents. Therefore, while gardening unquestionably aided the nutritional needs of many during this period, it was also more than a subsistence practice. “It not only preserves self-respect, but it *restores* the self-respect of those who have lost it” (emphasis added).<sup>162</sup> Gardens were one piece used in forwarding a larger social and cultural vision about how the developing landscape could and should be used to create a sense of place in cities where natural resources were not only the inputs of industry, but also integral to the creation of a cultural and social landscape of American citizens.

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<sup>158</sup> Frederic W. Speirs and Samuel McCune Lindsay and Franklin B. Kirkbride, “Vacant-Lot Cultivation,” *Charities Review* 8:2 (1898): 74.

<sup>159</sup> Frederic W. Speirs and Samuel McCune Lindsay and Franklin B. Kirkbride, “Vacant-Lot Cultivation,” *Charities Review* 8:2 (1898): 76.

<sup>160</sup> B. O. Flower, B.O. “A Successful Experiment for the Maintenance of Self-Respecting Manhood.” *The Arena*, 1896: 546.

<sup>161</sup> B. O. Flower, B.O. “A Successful Experiment for the Maintenance of Self-Respecting Manhood.” *The Arena*, 1896: 550.

<sup>162</sup> Frederic W. Speirs and Samuel McCune Lindsay and Franklin B. Kirkbride, “Vacant-Lot Cultivation,” *Charities Review* 8:2 (1898): 76.

One particularly well-known example is Fannie Griscom Parsons' School Farm in New York City's DeWitt Clinton Park.<sup>163</sup> Parsons, a pioneer of school gardens in the United States, created her garden on an "unimproved site on Fifty-third Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues...overlooking the river, and used for many years as a dumping-ground and storage place for trucks." Her plan was to use this vacant lot and dumping ground as a place where children (many of them second-generation Americans) could become "proper" urban citizens who understood the importance of gardening, environmental beautification, and contact with the natural world. With the help of children and the parks department, this small piece of landscape was transformed into orderly garden plots, designed to teach responsibility, concentration, and "private care of public property."<sup>164</sup>

By 1903, Parsons was noting with some satisfaction that "[i]n a neighborhood where before only vandalism reigned this miniature farm, lying in one of New York's most congested districts, awakened an almost forgotten feeling in the hearts of the people of the neighborhood, at the same time satisfying the active restlessness of the children."<sup>165</sup> For Parsons, as with Pingree and reformers, gardening transformed not only the landscape, but also the people who lived in this environment.

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<sup>163</sup> For more on Parsons and the school garden movement in New York, see Warsh, Marie, "Cultivating Citizens: The Children's School Farm in New York City, 1902-1931, *Buildings and Landscapes* 18, no. 1, Spring 2011 and <http://tclf.org/news/features/frances-griscom-parsons-and-new-yorks-childrens-garden-movement>; Lawson, Laura *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 62-67. Ceremonies such as raising the American flag daily, as well as elections amongst the children to choose civic roles and responsibilities to oversee this miniature "garden city" added to the patriotic (and Americanizing) sensibilities of Parsons' school garden. When coupled with Cecilia O'Leary's arguments about cultural practices being a defining characteristic of instilling a sense of patriotism amongst American youth, gardening can be thought of as another practice within this framework. See chapter nine, "I Pledge Allegiance...": Mobilizing the Nation's Youth" in *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (1999).

<sup>164</sup> Fannie G. Parsons, "The First Children's Farm" *Outlook*, May 2, 1903.

<sup>165</sup> Fannie G. Parsons, "The First Children's Farm" *Outlook*, May 2, 1903.



Figure 1.22: Garden Plots at DeWitt Clinton Park in New York City, October 1909. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Thomas Warren Sears Collection.



FARM GARDEN, DEWITT CLINTON PARK.

Figure 1.23: Parsons' Farm Garden, DeWitt Clinton Park, New York City, 1906. Courtesy NY Department of Parks.

## Conclusion

Back in Detroit, most accounts of the time deemed Pingree's Potato Patches a success. In 1896, "a total of 7,523 persons of both sexes [including children] are beneficiaries upon the 'Detroit Plan,' or about 1-35<sup>th</sup> of the entire population of the city, and representing twelve nationalities, including the United States." Newspapers frequently documented, however, that a majority of the participants were Polish, and more often than not, women.<sup>166</sup> In 1896, the Agricultural Committee boasted, "the land cultivated is more than 4-7ths the area of Belle Isle, scattered over a surface 5 by 8 ½ miles, and to visit all the different sections in succession requires a journey of over 30 miles."<sup>167</sup> City leaders created a landscape of self-help through gardening. As can be seen in the results of the plan in the table below, positive economic returns on an experiment billed as a charitable endeavor allowed city leaders to further promote the benefits of linking environmental and social transformation in urban space.

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<sup>166</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1896), 4-5.

<sup>167</sup> *Report of the Agricultural Committee* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1896), 9.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Families</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Cost per lot</b>	<b>Estimated value of crops</b>
<b>1894</b>	<b>975</b>	<b>430</b>	<b>\$3618</b>	<b>\$3.71</b>	<b>\$14,000</b>
<b>1895</b>	<b>1546</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>\$4875</b>	<b>\$3.17</b>	<b>\$27,792</b>
<b>1896</b>	<b>1701</b>	<b>421</b>	<b>\$2400</b>	<b>\$1.46</b>	<b>\$30,998</b>
<b>1897</b>	<b>1563</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>\$1993</b>	<b>\$1.27</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>
<b>1898</b>	<b>994</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>\$892</b>	<b>\$1.11</b>	<b>\$12,000</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>n/a</b>
<b>1901</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>71 5-3</b>	<b>\$595</b>		<b>\$3,707</b>

Figure 1.24: Number of participants and costs associated with the Detroit Plan, 1894-1901<sup>168</sup>

Even if only a small percent were aided, the powerful social and cultural ideas behind the gardens, coupled with the visual transformations they produced within the urban landscape, made the practice appealing to other cities across the nation. However, despite the apparent success of the plan, by 1900, only six years after the plan began, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that public potato patch interest was falling off.<sup>169</sup> By 1901, the Agricultural Committee reported that only 330 families participated in the plan.<sup>170</sup> Even as Detroit trumpeted the plans success, as a social experiment in relieving poverty, the benefits were relatively small in terms of

<sup>168</sup> Information gleaned from Agricultural Committee reports and the *Detroit Free Press*, “330 Families Raised 4945 Bu. Potatoes,” November 24, 1901.

<sup>169</sup> “Public Potato Patch Interests Falling Off,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 16, 1900, 4.

<sup>170</sup> “330 Families,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 24, 1901, 5.

the number of people the plans ultimately aided. As an historical survey of philanthropic programs by the Russel Sage Foundation in 1936 noted, “they were too small and scattered to make much impression upon total relief costs, but their value was apparent from the attention and support which they achieved.”<sup>171</sup> The number of people who benefited may have been larger than the committees reported, however, since those gardening also likely helped support others with food through social networks, informal exchanges, and selling on street corners.



Figure 1.25: Labeled, “Female Street Vendor Selling Potatoes c.1890s,” it is uncertain whether these came from a Pingree Potato Patch. Nevertheless, it is likely that informal commercial spaces such as street corners facilitated financial exchanges between vacant lot producers and their consumers. From the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

As the Sage report noted, the attention and support gardening projects received created a sense of value disproportionate to the impact the spaces actually had. Whether because their benefits could be readily seen on the landscape or because the seeming oddity of the plan in an urban area gave it as sense of momentum, vacant lot cultivation became one way of discussing the social problems of urban life at the turn of the century. Following the first Potato Patch in 1894, Pingree capitalized on the achievements of his plan, amplifying its success by incorporating it into ideas he held about the causes of poverty in the city. As he described in his 1895 message to the Common Council, pauperism, which he defined as the perpetual aiding of

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<sup>171</sup> Leah Hannah Feder, *Unemployment Relief in Periods of Depression: A Study of Measures Adopted in Certain American Cities, 1857-1922* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936), 161.

the poor through direct charity, could be reduced, “if not almost obliterated, by three radical methods...Educating the people to till the soil, and giving them opportunity to do so...The rigid enforcement of the laws against pauper immigration” and “reduction of the hours of labor.”<sup>172</sup> By providing subsistence through an activity thought to promote moral uplift using idealistic notions of agrarian labor, government-initiated gardening projects maintain social order amidst the failures of industrial urbanism to adequately meet the basic human needs of all people in the city.<sup>173</sup>

Only during a time of economic crisis and scarcity, when city leaders were reminded of the tenuous and fragile composition of their urban industrial society to the environment, when many residents could literally not find a means of sustenance, were city leaders able to consider other ways of life. Because they needed a solution to unemployment, the language of moral environmentalism also allowed supporters of gardening in Detroit to make the desire for industrial work in a time of scarcity unnatural. Consequently, it became “natural” for those on the low-income margins of industrial urbanism to garden.<sup>174</sup> As landscape architect and garden historian Laura Lawson argues, gardens during this period, “provided a participatory outlet for reformers who were interested in making cities more livable, helping immigrants and urban children, occupying unemployed laborers until the economy picked up...these varied goals were to be accomplished by reintroducing urban dwellers to ‘nature’ and, through this contact, filling a

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<sup>172</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, *Sixth Annual Message to the Common Council of the City of Detroit, January 8, 1895* (Detroit: The Thos. Smith Press, 1895), 49.

<sup>173</sup> As geographer Thomas Bassett argues, gardening during periods of economic instability quells social unrest. See Thomas J. Bassett, “Reaping on the Margins: A Century of Community Gardening in America” *Landscape* 25 (2): 2-3.

<sup>174</sup> As historian Jennifer Price describes, “in any society, visions of the connections between what’s human and what’s not human are basic and powerful guides with which people navigate the social and ecological world around them.” See Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xx. Therefore, however much a human invention agriculture and gardening may be, immediate contact with plants and land was understood as more “natural” than urban life. Moreover, describing it as natural enabled those in power to ascribe this meaning to people in lower social classes, designating them the cultivators of the earth. Philanthropic gardening was understood as one way to ameliorate the “sins and costs of modernity,” even as many sought to “enjoy all of modern life’s social and economic benefits fully” (xix).



perceived moral vacuum in the urban living experience.”<sup>175</sup> Gardening was a practice that not only provided subsistence, but also a civic and educational experience.

While other cities continued to adopt plans similar to Detroit’s Potato Patches, by the time Pingree gave his last annual message as mayor of Detroit in 1897, the city of Detroit had spent over \$1.3 million for maintaining and improving Belle Isle Park compared to approximately \$15,000 on the Potato Patch Plan. In financial terms, the choice between these two ways of urban life was clear. While both plans sought to bring order to a chaotic landscape, Belle Isle Park, influenced by Olmsted’s more pastoral sense of environmentalism, became a permanent part of Detroit’s landscape into the future, while Pingree’s Potato Patches remained fleeting and temporary.<sup>176</sup> Even as Pingree called for permanent agricultural parks – a path that might have reconciled the two strands of urban environmental place-making – once he left office in 1898 to become governor of Michigan, the plan was left without its most vocal advocate and political supporter.<sup>177</sup> What is more, since the Detroit Plan for cultivating vacant lots was more intimately connected to municipal government than its counterparts in other cities, particularly New York and Philadelphia, there was no grass-roots and non-governmental organization set up to continue the gardening program, let alone acquire the necessary land. Moreover, as the economy improved spaces for leisure prevailed over those of labor. As the *Detroit Tribune* bluntly stated, the plan “is chiefly valuable as an emergency measure and finds no great usefulness in ordinary times.”<sup>178</sup> Gardens of this genre did not seem to have staying power within the urban landscape.

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<sup>175</sup> Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>176</sup> It is difficult to determine exactly when the official Potato Patches ended. Although statistics from the city’s agricultural commission are not reported after 1898, the *Detroit Free Press* included statistics on yields up to 1901, when the plan apparently tapered off as an official, city-sponsored program.

<sup>177</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, “Pingree’s Potato Patches” *Public Opinion*, January 23, 1895: 205.

<sup>178</sup> “The Pingree Potato.” *Detroit Tribune*, June 5, 1895.

Geographer and historian Matthew Gandy describes, "the overwhelming priority of nineteenth-century philanthropists was one of order: a social and spatial order within which the interrelated problems of 'pauperism, congestion, environmental chaos, and aesthetic disarray' could be handled by a combination of professional expertise and advances in scientific knowledge. The promotion of urban parks can be conceived as simply one element of 'the larger social-improvement crusade' that developed in nineteenth century America." Similarly, the landscape in Detroit, increasingly defined by factories, pollution, and rising population, was a system of interrelated parts city leaders attempted to live with by remaking it into a more hospitable landscape with elements such as parks and potato patches.<sup>179</sup> Both visions were, without a doubt, sharp contrasts to the smoke, fires, and noise of transforming the raw materials of nature through industrial production.<sup>180</sup> The nature of Belle Isle Park and Pingree's Potato Patches opened up new ways for Detroiters to imagine and experience nature in an urban-industrial environment. But these landscapes of reconciliation were also central to the way city leaders justified Detroit's continued industrial and commercial growth, as well as the social inequality, that went hand in hand with capitalist expansion. Parks and gardens, as central

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<sup>179</sup> As landscape scholar Kenrick Grandison theorizes in his article, "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America" (*American Quarterly*, Vol. 51 No. 3 (September 1999)), many intertwined components – cultural, social, and economic contexts, buildings and the natural environment - work together to create the meaning of place. He writes, "understanding these contexts as encoded not merely by buildings but more profoundly by "landscape," engaged as a system of interrelated parts, we can begin to gain a fuller understanding of the historical significance of the HBCU campus than we do currently" (532). Likewise, the same approach can yield insights into Detroit's urban landscape during this period. Grandison continues, "Understood in its broadest sense as connoting the built environment, landscape is conceptualized not so much as 'the grounds' or even as 'a collection of artifacts' but more in the sense of ecology, as a system of interrelated parts consisting of buildings and other human constructions within their various changing contexts" (532).

<sup>180</sup> Henri Lefebvre theorizes that space is created relationally; social actions, ideas and material spaces therefore are mutually constitutive of one another. Social actions have spatial repercussions and vice versa. Therefore, unrest within the (lived) spaces of Detroit led Pingree and bourgeois city leaders to conceive of new space, which in turn transformed social relations in the city. To explain how people inhabit and create a concept of social space, Lefebvre outlines three key mutually reinforcing and interwoven types of space to formulate his theory of social space. They are: spatial practice (perceived), representations of space (conceived), and representational spaces (lived). In this way, social actions have spatial repercussions. Each of these is mutually re-enforcing, and at a theoretical level, helps to explain how Pingree, and those backing Belle Isle Park, moved from the realm of idea to material reality as they negotiated ethnic and class tensions to recreate the landscape of Detroit. See: Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 38-39.

features coexisting within Detroit's landscape for nearly a decade, were sites where the cultural and environmental politics of place were debated.

Yet there was little support for subsistence gardening once the economy gained steam and land once again proved more valuable for other uses. The elasticity of philanthropic gardening projects only stretched as far as the bad economy. Once conditions improved, there was little need for a moral solution, let alone one that seemed as backward-looking as using labor to cultivating valuable land in industrial cities. Moreover, in Detroit community-based subsistence gardening of this type came to have distinct class and ethnic connotations, making its more widespread use an undesirable prospect for upper class Detroiters, who would not tolerate using municipal funds for a public project that would seemingly benefit a narrow group of the public. Belle Isle Park, in their eyes, was a better landscape to make Detroit competitive with other urban centers such as New York and Chicago, which were leaders in the evolving City Beautiful Movement reshaping the appearance of American cities with beaux-arts architecture and urban plans. Despite the advantages espoused about the benefits of vacant lot cultivation, this use of space was relegated to a rather humble status, despite its practical use in creating a usable food system for some of Detroit's lower income, and largely immigrant residents.

Although there was a brief rekindling of the Potato Patch Plan in 1908, after Pingree's tenure as mayor, city-wide gardening efforts became sporadic projects during times of economic crisis and uncertainty rather than permanent features of the landscape. School gardening for children run by the Department of Recreation, liberty gardens during World War I, well-organized thrift garden during the Great Depression, and the victory gardens of World War II all made appearances in Detroit.<sup>181</sup> More often than not, however, civic organizations and

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<sup>181</sup> While not discussed in this dissertation, Detroit resident Mary Grosvenor led a long lasting children's gardening movement for the Department of Recreation in the city from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century into the 1930s. Little has been

individuals, not local government, drove subsequent interest in urban food gardens. Pingree's vision for potato patches and agricultural parks as a possible long-term plan to create a different way of urban life in Detroit never took hold.

In comparison, Belle Isle Park came to define the way most Detroiters experienced nature in the city. As the economy improved, spaces of leisure prevailed over those of labor. Industrial society, it seemed, was again on a path that could provide increasing prosperity for all. Since "the clamors once heard against the 'rich man's park' disappeared years ago," it became clear to residents and city leaders alike that "no public resort offers equal inducements and facilities for its occupation and use by all classes."<sup>182</sup> Grand public spaces, ostensibly open to all classes, rather than those that more overtly defined class and ethnic difference, were, in the eyes of city leaders, a superior spatial form to reconcile the social and environment dilemmas of industrial urbanism into the twentieth century. Belle Isle Park seemed to offer the city's laborers and elites alike a sense of belonging through shared participation in the public life of the city from common experiences in the park's environment.

As it was in the 1880s, Detroit was still a place of "heat, the din, and the nerve-racking life in a great city, where the walled streets seem as prisons and the atmosphere on a hot summer day is that of an inferno" by the twentieth century.<sup>183</sup> But now, with Belle Isle Park complete, the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards could encourage residents to step "from this into the

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written about this movement in Detroit, overshadowed by Fannie G. Parsons' work in New York, although Grosvenor's papers at the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library extensively document her work. In a larger sense, since Grosvenor was associated with the Garden Club of Michigan/Garden Club of America, her work is also part of a larger progressive-era movement where women played a central role in creating civic identity by using space in cities like Detroit. Of course, private gardens and garden clubs continued to be popular forms of community building and identity in urban and suburban areas, particularly amongst upper class women, with the Garden Club American founded in 1913 (the Garden Club of Michigan was one of the founding members). Grosse Point and other Detroit suburbs were home to numerous grand private gardens by noted designers, which were spaces used to create cultural identity and meaning for their owners.

<sup>182</sup> *Fourth Annual Report of the Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards* (Detroit: Free Press Printing Company, 1893), 5.

<sup>183</sup> *Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards Annual Report 1901*, 7.

cool and restful quiet of our Island Park – the envy of the world – is an emancipation and an inspiration. It brings to all the soothing touch of Nature in her happiest mood and most delightful adornment.” They could boast that, “We have within our own city limits as our own rest, a spot so fascinating to every sense of beauty that thousands travel annually half across the continent to see what is ours for daily enjoyment. Set apart time to be idle and enjoy the beauties of Nature.”<sup>184</sup> Years after Belle Isle had been unofficially used as a getaway spot amongst local residents, by the twentieth century, it was Detroit’s official landscape of reconciliation.

Belle Isle continued to be a prime location for articulating Detroit’s sense of identity and civic values. In 1904 an aquarium and horticultural conservatory building were constructed, to compliment the zoo.<sup>185</sup> The island became home to numerous monuments, festivals and family gatherings. Because of its popularity, the park seemed to capture an urban sensibility of nature that was distanced from the grit and grime of industry, but not so far removed from an urban life as to involve too much digging and weeding by visitors themselves. Visits to the island park were a defining experience of being a “Detroiter” and expressing the virtues of civic life and American citizenship. This was so much the case that, when an increasing number of African Americans moved to the city from the South during the first half of the twentieth century, it was among the first places they visited on structured excursions sponsored by the Detroit Urban League. For African American migrants and their advocates, the landscape of the city’s public spaces and neighborhood would be fertile ground for attempts and shaping identity as they

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<sup>184</sup> Commissioners of Parks and Boulevards *Annual Report* 1901, 7.

<sup>185</sup> As Silas Farmer describes in his 1895 *Illustrated Map and Guide to Belle Isle Park* wildlife was one of the main sights on the island. “Among the attractive features are the deer, elk and fox enclosures, and the menagerie. There are a number of elk, several scores of deer, and quite a variety of birds and animals. Squirrels are numerous all over the island, they peer at you from almost every tree, run here and there before you, and in the summer time are almost as plentiful as the picnickers, and get many a meal from their supplies.”

transformed the contours of moral environmentalism in their quest for racial equality and equal opportunity.

**Chapter 2:**  
**“You cannot grow lilies in ash-barrels:” The Cultural Politics of Landscape, Race, and Place during the Great Migration, 1916-1930.**

Detroit was on the cusp of dramatic change when John and Elizabeth Crews arrived by train at the city’s eighteen story beaux-arts Michigan Central Station in 1918. While manufacturers were building icons of industry that made lasting impressions on the urban landscape, such as Henry Ford’s River Rouge Plant and the Packard Motors factory, African Americans like the Crews moved in large numbers from rural areas in the South to urban-industrial centers like Detroit in the North during the Great Migration between 1916-1930. In 1910, there were just over 5,000 African Americans living in Detroit, slightly over one percent of the total population. By 1930, the city had 120,000 African American residents. Like most of Detroit’s black migrants, the Crews made their first home in the city’s congested East Side neighborhood, where they were packed into rapidly deteriorating nineteenth century housing.

By 1921 however, the Crews managed to save enough money to move to “a small tar paper-covered house” in a neighborhood on the far northwest side of Detroit known as Eight-Mile Wyoming.<sup>1</sup> It was a place that a small but growing number of African Americans were calling home. Compared to the central city, the area was sparse and almost rural in appearance. As the Crews’ daughter Burniece Avery later recalled, to walk through the neighborhood, “one pushed aside giant ferns to travel the paths that wound diagonally through the neighborhood. Here and there, small spaces were cleared for gardens, otherwise, the undergrowth was broken

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<sup>1</sup> Burniece Avery, *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 126.

only by towering trees, until one reached the house and lot of a distant neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> Although they lived in a city at the forefront of urban industrial development, the Crews neighborhood was more like the rural places from which they moved. With limited financial means and racial divisions preventing African Americans from moving to other neighborhoods, the Eight-Mile Wyoming area was a better option for the Crews because it offered space for vegetable gardens and their own small home, rather than paying high rents for crowded and derelict housing on the East Side. Even though living conditions were still far from perfect, for the Crews and other migrants with limited finances, the Eight-Mile Wyoming neighborhood offered space for subsistence gardens in an environment away from the crowded tenement district. In the eyes of Detroit’s middle class residents, however, the appearance of these places and their residents seemed to lack the sophistication and respectability necessary for urban and suburban life. How would civic leaders in Detroit work to reimagine and remake the city’s cultural landscape and prepare the people that lived there for a future at forefront of industrial modernity?

Founded in 1916, the Detroit Urban League was an African American led social service organization dedicated to improving the lives of black Detroiters, particularly around issues of housing, health, and employment. Under the leadership of its inaugural director, Forrester B. Washington, the organization took a leading role in promoting the transformation of Detroit’s African American neighborhoods during the first decades of the twentieth century. Washington moved to Detroit after receiving degrees from Tufts College in Boston and Columbia University in New York. As part of a small but growing cohort of African American social workers and social scientists, he played a leading role in shaping how the organization would help migrants find employment, housing, and community as they sought to make a place for themselves in the

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<sup>2</sup> Burniece Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952.” Burniece Avery Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.



city. For example in 1916, Washington described that the DUL, “is interested primarily in the physical and material side of the Negro’s life. It believes you cannot do much for a man spiritually until you have given him a healthy and wholesome physical environment. In other words, ‘you cannot grow lilies in ash barrels.’”<sup>3</sup> Washington believed, as much as Olmsted and Pingree before him, in the important role the environment and recreation played in shaping the behaviors, virtues, and morals of individuals. His words set the framework for much of the DUL’s place-based program of action that focused on improving the environmental conditions in which Detroit’s African Americans lived. Through neighborhood clean-up campaigns rooted in a larger program of Americanization activities, the League sought to use the appearance of yards, neighborhoods, and the urban landscape to shape migrants identities and opportunities for success within Detroit’s social hierarchy.

Washington’s language also expressed a deeper layer of meaning than merely finding decent houses, neighborhoods, and employment to support a better way of life. He implied that migrants’ cultural identities, their inner sense of self and outward representation, needed to be transformed in order to gain a sense of place and belonging in Detroit. Moreover, through the jarring visual imagery of lilies in an ash barrel, Washington suggested the environment plays a formative, even determinative role in producing ideal citizens. Far from a static background or setting, in Washington’s mind the environment was a constitutive component of character formation that could be adapted, along with personal traits and habits, to put African Americans on equal footing with Detroit’s white residents. Migrants, like plants, his language implies, could be cultivated into something of great natural beauty and desirability when allowed to blossom in a garden, rather than the veritable ash barrel that awaited migrants in the city’s dirtiest and most

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<sup>3</sup> Washington, Forrester B. “Report of the Director to Monthly Meeting of Joint Committee” 16 October 1916. Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

crowded neighborhoods when they arrived in Detroit. Washington's choice of flower – the lily – also denotes being “lily white” as an idealized racial complexion, which revealed his preference for integration, Americanization, and assimilation to the cultural standards of Detroit's Anglo-American community. Racial uplift and economic opportunity, he believed, could be achieved through strategic cultural uses of space. The transformation of people, like the arrangements of plants in a garden, went hand in hand.

For Washington and the DUL, the landscape where African Americans lived was not just a static setting for culture, but a dynamic element in the creation of meaning. The landscape had material and symbolic potential. As geographer Richard Schein explains, “the cultural landscape is an important, even constitutive, part of social and cultural processes (no longer simply inert or just detritus or spoor, but something central to the reproduction of human activity). Through its symbolic qualities, the cultural landscape serves to naturalize or concretize – to normalize – social relations...the landscape's normalizing, normative capabilities simultaneously make the landscape central to the ongoing production and reproduction of place and identity.”<sup>4</sup>

Washington and the black middle-class leaders of the DUL understood the material and symbolic potential of the landscape Schein describes. They used it to design clean-up campaigns and garden contests that advocated the aesthetic of ornamental gardening over the more seemingly “rural” vegetable gardening many brought from the South. These programs were one part of the DUL's larger Americanization campaign, which was rooted in bringing a middle class identity and culture to all black Detroiters with the hope it might give them access to the full economic and social benefits of the citizenship they were granted legally.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Schein, “Normative Dimensions of Landscape,” in Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, eds, *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 202-203.

While the DUL had varied programs for achieving these ends, the way African Americans and the DUL created meaning through neighborhoods, yards, gardens, and public spaces in Detroit shaped their sense of belonging in the city. To better understand these changes to Detroit's urban environment, this chapter traces the way African Americans used their surroundings.<sup>5</sup> Faced with the challenge of continually adapting their identities in relation to changing social, cultural, and racial expectations of life in a new place, landscapes of African American life in Detroit, particularly around the aesthetics of gardens and neighborhood appearance, became a cultural terrain for negotiating racial, class, and also gender identity. Through cultural and environmental change, black Detroiters sought to make a place for themselves in a social, political, and economic climate steeped in racism that challenged them in every corner of the city.<sup>6</sup>

Parsing out the history of spaces that were often small, fleeting, and such a seemingly mundane part of everyday life that they were left largely undocumented, can be challenging. Nonetheless, reports, memoirs, newspapers, and photographs from the first half of the twentieth century point to the gardens that were a part of Detroit's past. They are important sites for understanding the history of landscape and race across the wider city.

This chapter tells the story of how these residents used the landscape to change, resist, and adapt to life in Detroit. I examine the actions of individuals and programs that shaped the built environment in these neighborhoods to describe how the Victorian concept of moral

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<sup>5</sup> My work builds on that of environmental historians who focus on African American experiences, such as Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll. They describe an African American strand of environmental history that "explores the relationship of African Americans to their surroundings" (Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll. *To Love the Wind and the Rain*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 8).

<sup>6</sup> In this way, my historical methodology derives in part from the field of cultural landscape studies. As architectural historian Paul Groth describes, "Cultural landscape studies focuses most on the history of how people have used everyday space – buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards – to establish their identity, articulate their social relations, and drive cultural meaning." (Todd Bressi and Paul Groth, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997), 1).

environmentalism – the notion that the environment can influence the thoughts and behavior of human beings - was adapted into a tool of racial uplift by people from various ethnic and racial backgrounds who had to contend with the way a dramatically increasing African American population changed Detroit’s landscape during the first half of the twentieth century. As African Americans sought to shape their place in Detroit, they also defined the contours of an urban environmentalism practiced with an ever-present awareness of how race influenced the way they used space in their everyday lives. The landscape was a cultural terrain where the DUL, migrants, and Anglo-American Detroiters shaped and contested attempts at “Americanization” and assimilation in Detroit. Urban spaces played a symbolic role as part of a class and race-based contestation over the city’s built environment. The chapter begins by placing these transformations in the context of early twentieth century City Beautiful and progressive era ideas that influenced programs of reform in cities across the United States, and also changed Detroit’s landscape. Then, it focuses on the experiences of migrants, reformers, and members of the DUL, as well as the spaces they inhabited, shaped, and observed, including the East Side, West Side, and Eight Mile/Wyoming neighborhoods.

### **The City Beautiful Movement and Moral Environmentalism in the Twentieth Century**

Forrester B. Washington was not alone when he spoke of his anxiety over the veritable “ash barrel” of city life and its effects on the individuals who inhabited this space. He was, however, one of the few who linked racial identity to these conditions. His ideas fit within the discourse of the City Beautiful Movement between the 1890s and 1920s, which intended to bring order to American cities through monumental design and Beaux-arts aesthetics. Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett’s plan of Chicago is the most noted example of the grandiose

city plans created during this era. In addition to new buildings and public spaces, however, the movement was also characterized by municipal clean up campaigns led largely by white middle class women and businessmen. With the infrastructure of a new built environment, city and civic leaders intended for an orderly and “beautiful” central city to inspire a generation of urbanites toward a greater sense of civic mindedness and citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

Like Olmsted and his followers before them, progressive era City Beautiful reformers conceived of urban landscape design as a practical and symbolic method of governance that could create a civic identity and influence the behaviors and morals of individuals.<sup>8</sup> As historian Martin Melosi describes, urban reformers during the progressive era had, “a desire to bring order out of the chaos induced by the economic revolution of the Nineteenth Century. They shared faith in humankind and an environmental determinism, which led them to expect that the good in people would prevail if the evils produced by imperfect social, political, and physical circumstances were eliminated. They also placed their faith in an expert elite and in the scientific method to solve society’s problems.”<sup>9</sup> Civic spaces such as libraries, museums, and public parks that used the material culture of architecture and objects to inspire a sense of authority, knowledge and order were particularly prominent features used to transform the built environment in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In Detroit, Belle Isle Park continued to be a prominent location for expressing these ideals. In 1904 an aquarium and conservatory designed by architect Albert Kahn, who was better known for his icons of industrial design such as Ford’s Rive Rouge factory, were added to the

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the nuanced dynamics of the City Beautiful Movement, see “City Beautiful or Beautiful Mess?” in Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> The “tap root” to the Progressive Era City Beautiful Movement, as historian William Wilson, describes can be found with the earlier environmental reform efforts of Olmsted and his followers.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 107.

park. These elements facilitated the educational mission of the park, providing urban folk with a way to view nature up close. By 1925, Olmsted's original design was juxtaposed with an angular, beaux-arts addition to the Western end of the island, complete with a Gilbert Cass designed fountain, bequeathed to the city by a wealthy, although morally dubious-business man, James Scott. Gilbert's design replaced Olmsted's more naturalistic and organic design with one of rigid symmetry and geometric forms. While some called it a crime "to cover the lower end of Belle Isle with cold formality, a man's handiwork" gave the park an increased sense of geometric order, formality, and monumentality that Olmsted's plan seemed to be lacking by Twentieth Century.<sup>10</sup> The fountain area also increased the park's size to an even more substantial 925 acres.

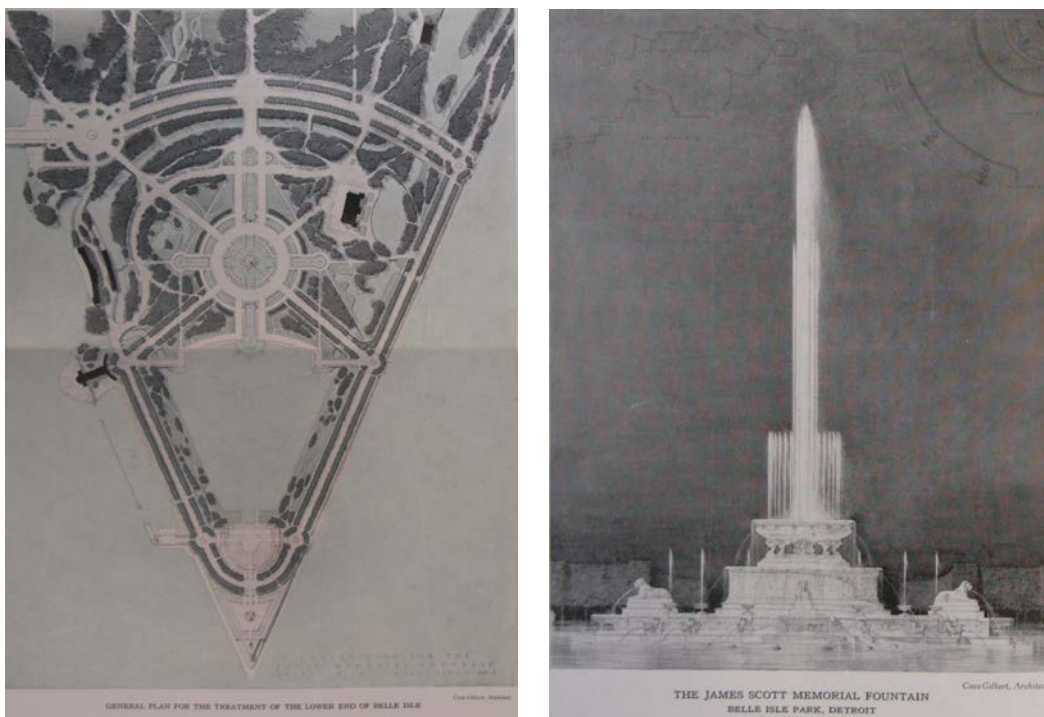


Figure 2.1 and 2.2: Plans for the East end of Belle Isle Park (left), including the James Scott Memorial Fountain (right). From the City Plan and Improvement Commission, "James Scott Memorial Fountain: Statement of Progress" November 1914. William C. Weber Papers, Box 19, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

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<sup>10</sup> Weber, William C. "A Taxpayer," draft of a letter to the editor. Cultural Center- Belle Isle Development folder, Box 19, William C. Weber Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



Figure 2.3: Construction of the James Scott Memorial Fountain, Belle Isle Park, April 1922. Image Courtesy of Cass Gilbert Collection, National Museum of American History Archives Center, Smithsonian Institution.

In addition to the improvements on Belle Isle, Detroit’s City Plan and Improvement Commission also advocated a massive tree planting program to beautify the city as early as 1913, and the Garden Club of Michigan, based in Detroit, assisted by sponsoring and participating in a roadside tree-planting campaign.<sup>11</sup> William C. Weber, a wealthy industrialist, called for the creation of a Cultural Center district in 1913. By 1927, the area along Woodward Avenue was home to a new building for the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Detroit Public Library. In 1915, the planning commission hired Edward Bennett, who worked with Daniel Burnham on his famous *Plan of Chicago* and the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, to develop a master plan for the city.

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<sup>11</sup> Phillips, Glen T. “City Tree Planting” Report No. 1, (Detroit: Detroit City Plan Commission, Revised December 1914). Garden Club of America Bulletin, No. XVIII, January 1917, Botany and Horticulture Library Collection, Smithsonian Institution.

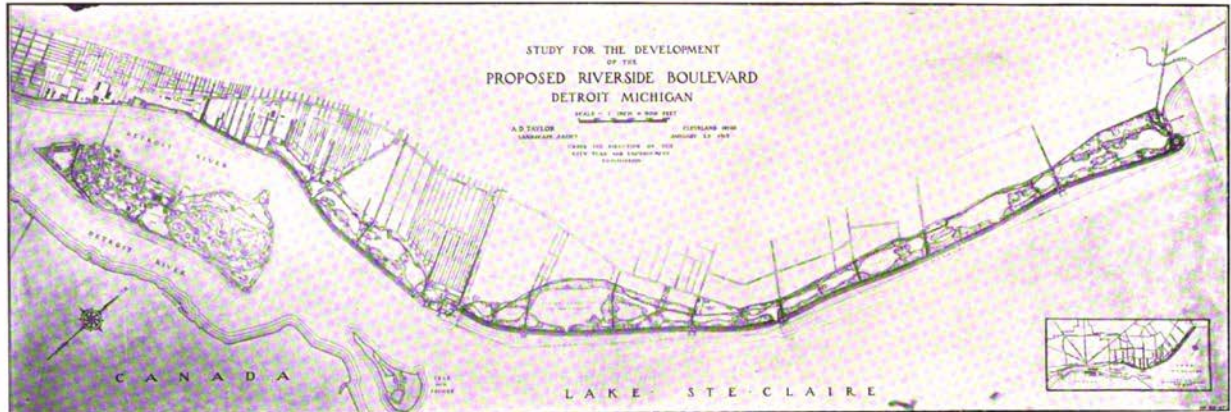


Plate XXII.

Study for the Development of a Riverside Drive.

A. D. Taylor, Landscape Architect.

Figure 2.4: “Study for the Development of a Riverside Drive, Edward Bennett, *Preliminary Plan for Detroit*, 1915. Image reproduced from the Edward Bennett Collection, Art Institute of Chicago. Belle Isle Park is to the left of the drawing, which emphasizes beautifying the riverfront and transforming it into a more civic park space, rather than private land. Bennett’s plans were never realized. Today large portions of the Detroit Riverfront are privately owned.



Figure 2.5: The stark reality of industrial development stretching across the flat landscape of metropolitan Detroit, as seen in this photograph of the Ford Motor Company River Rouge Plant, c. 1927. Image courtesy of the Detroit Publishing Company Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-D414-K3461.





Figure 2.6: In contrast, those who reproduced images of factories for postcards often softened the reality of industrial life by portraying a pastoralized image of the factory, such as this image of the Packard Motor Factory from 1911. Image courtesy of the Detroit Public Library. Both factories were designed by Albert Kahn, the “architect of Detroit.” Historian Alison Isenberg argues that post cards of downtown areas during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were cleaned up and altered to convey an image of beauty and “commercial dignity.”<sup>12</sup> In Detroit, post card makers used similar techniques to represent factories as clean, harmonious parts of the landscape.

With a cost of \$15,000,000 the Michigan Central Station, completed in 1913, was the most iconic and extravagant building associated with the City Beautiful Movement in Detroit. Designed by Warren & Wetmore and Reed & Stem, the same architectural firms who designed New York City’s Grand Central Station, the 18-story station was the grandest gateway to Detroit. It was here that most African American migrants from the South arrived.

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<sup>12</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 42-77.



Figures 2.7 and 2.8: Postcards of the Michigan Central Railroad Station, c. 1915 Images courtesy of the Detroit Historical Society

Once migrants departed the towering façade of the station, however, they soon discovered the ideals of City Beautiful were only skin deep. A cacophony of horses, horns, and street cars created a scene of confusion. One newcomer recalled that it was a “mad rush of people, bags, and bundles.”<sup>13</sup> At the height of the Great Migration representatives of the DUL waited for trains from the South to greet migrants as they arrived.<sup>14</sup> The process of beginning life anew as an African American migrant in Detroit was far from the ideal civic experience city leaders and architects of the City Beautiful Movement imagined. With resources for civic improvement largely focused on projects in the central city, neighborhoods where African Americans first decided to live were largely left in the shadow of larger city-improvement projects.

This led Washington and leaders of the DUL to create their own campaign to improve the living conditions and appearance of these areas of the city. Although they held similar ideas about the influence of the built environment on individuals as City Beautiful reformers did, they

<sup>13</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 84.

<sup>14</sup> Washington, Forrester B. “A Program of Work for the Assimilation of Negro Migrants into Northern Cities,” speech given at the National Urban League Conference in Pittsburgh, 1917, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Also see John Dancy’s recollection of meeting migrants at the station in his memoir, *Sand Against the Wind*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 55.

sought to use this environmental potential to overcome the discrimination they witnessed as African Americans. They understood that both race and space together shaped white Detroiters' perception of African Americans. As Washington wrote, the physical or material side of African Americans' life in Detroit was "not alone the body itself but the material environment such as: housing, health, employment, probation."<sup>15</sup> By articulating the environment's role in shaping African Americans' ability to succeed in an industrial city, Washington and the DUL argued that given the right environmental conditions and human touch, Detroit's rapidly growing African American population could become successful, equal American citizens.

### **Finding a Place on Detroit's East Side**

As the Detroit Urban League sought to help migrants create a place in Detroit, landscape became intertwined with racial identity. Architectural historian Paul Groth writes that "*landscape* denotes the interaction of people and place: a social group and its spaces, particularly the spaces to which the group derive some part of their shared identity and meaning."<sup>16</sup> In Detroit, the Great Migration caused an interaction between people and place that dramatically transformed how Detroiters understood the city's landscape. For city leaders and reformers, black Americans began to replace the "foreign born" Detroiters of Pingree's era as the primary social challenge facing the city. Immigrants and their progeny gradually became white, and their divisions with an increasing number of black migrants subsequently became the most apparent racial division in the city. 1910, African Americans made up just over one percent of Detroit's total population, with 5,741 residents recorded. In 1920 this number was 40,838, and by 1930

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<sup>15</sup> Washington, Forrester. "Program of Work for the Assimilation of Negro Migrants into Northern Cities." Speech delivered at in Columbus, Ohio December 17, 1917. Folder 8, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>16</sup> Groth, Paul. "Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Study," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, 1997, 1.

the city had 120,066 African American residents, making up just over seven percent of Detroit's total population.<sup>17</sup> Many of these migrants made their first place of residence on the city's East Side neighborhood.

This area had long been “a port of entry and stopping off place for much of the city's foreign born.”<sup>18</sup> The section along St. Antoine Street was home to Detroit's small African American population during the nineteenth century, although as a whole it was also shared by eastern European immigrants. Gradually black migration to the city increased. Most lived in a tightly confined space, moving as far east and south, toward the river, as possible. Within this three-square mile portion of the city, known as Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, some 313,600 people were “huddled together as closely as it is possible for humans to exist.”<sup>19</sup> As John Dancy, second director of the DUL recalled, “in those very early days...it was a matter of making a place for all the people who came.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population, 1910-1930* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, various years) as cited in Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 23.

<sup>18</sup> David Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 156.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration, 1916-1929* (Ann Arbor: Bentley Historical Library Printing Services, 1993), 25 and *Detroit City Directory, 1924-1925*, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 44.

<sup>20</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 151.

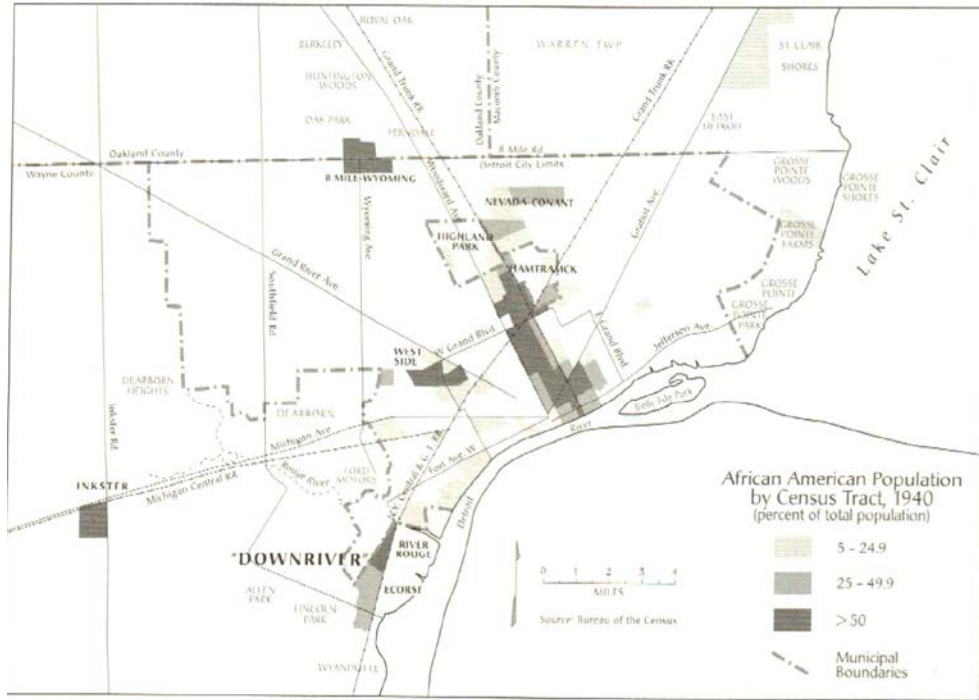


Figure 2.9: African American Population by Census Tract, 1940. From Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (2004), pg. 45 (Map by Harry D. Johnson).

As part of the Great Migration, John and Elizabeth Crews, along with their daughter Burniece, “journeyed through six states seeking a home” and found their way to Detroit in 1918.<sup>21</sup> Their story is similar to many of the African Americans who moved to Detroit from the South where the city’s many industries promised a better way to make a living. The Crews’ began by leaving their lives as sharecroppers and farmhands in Alabama for a white landowner, whose bookkeeping tactics left the family with little money and no means to acquire their own land, or as Avery would later describe it, “a real home.”<sup>22</sup> John Crews attempted to find work in the mining towns of Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. Working conditions were different, but not much improved. Still seeking a place that could provide a better quality of life,

<sup>21</sup> “Never All (Chronological Index),” n.d. Burniece Avery Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>22</sup> Burniece, Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly*, (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 9.

an advertisement for farmland in Mason County, Michigan along with a mining disaster in Logan, West Virginia, prompted John Crews to continue the family's migration northward.<sup>23</sup> The family never made it as far north as Mason County. Instead, they chose to settle in Detroit.<sup>24</sup>

For the first three years of their lives in Detroit, the Crews rented apartments, and for a brief period owned a home, in the East Side with other migrants, amidst a city that seemed "hustling, impatient, and impersonal."<sup>25</sup> As the *Detroit Free Press* reported in 1917, many of Detroit's new migrants "live amid sanitary conditions that are unspeakably vile. Tumbledown shacks whose outward evidences of dilapidation are only a suggestion of the decay to be found within, fairly bulge with their human population, herded into stuffy quarters without proper light or ventilation, eating, living and sleeping in a single room perhaps, because they have no other place to go."<sup>26</sup> Images in newspapers demonstrate that Detroit was characterized by densely packed low-density frame houses and other small buildings, unlike the towering taller buildings found in the tenement districts of New York or Chicago.

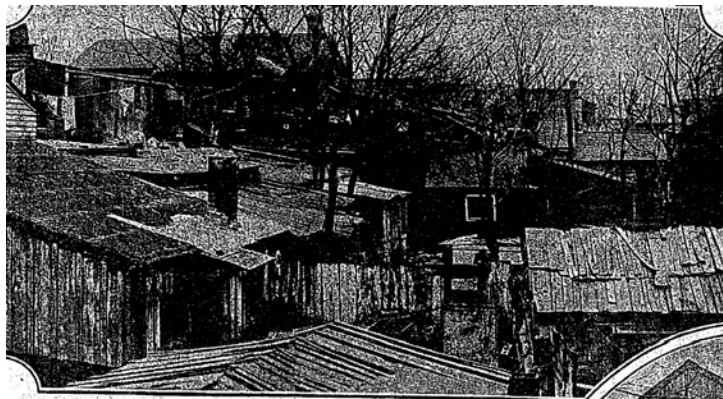


Figure 2.10: Housing conditions on Detroit's East Side where many African American migrants took up residence. From the *Detroit Free Press*, June 3, 1917.

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<sup>23</sup> Burniece Avery, "Coal mine disaster sparked move to Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, November 30, 1987.

<sup>24</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), vii.

<sup>25</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly*, (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 83.

<sup>26</sup> Len Shaw, "Detroit's New Housing Problem," *Detroit Free Press*, June 3, 1917, E1.

The Detroit Board of Commerce, ever-concerned with the image and reputation of Detroit and its potential to attract business and economic activity, also expressed concern over the condition of the landscape. One editorial in their magazine, *The Detrouter*, described that on the East Side, “We see whole blocks, yes, streets, filled with mean, ramshackle, rickety, wheezy shacks, down at the heel in every sense of the word. The dirtiest, dilapidated shacks, fronting an alley, will bring in to the landlord at least \$60 a month, and some yield as high as \$100 a month...The Negro problem presents one different in every respect from that of any other racial group, for in Detroit it is impossible for a Negro man or woman to secure decent quarters for self or family. His presence as a resident is not tolerated in many sections of the city. He is compelled to live in the slum districts.”<sup>27</sup> The built environment in these lines is personified as “mean,” “ramshackle,” “Rickety,” and even “wheezy,” perhaps suggesting the character of the inhabitants. The author, however, unlike many during the period, acknowledged that black migrants were all but forced to live in these conditions because discrimination and racial conflict with white residents of Detroit prevented them from moving elsewhere. Living on the East Side was not a choice for the vast majority of African-American migrants to Detroit. Other onlookers took a less sympathetic view as they continued to conflate the condition of the landscape with the character of the people who lived there. Jerome Gale Thomas, writing a study on Detroit’s urban geography in 1921, commented that on the East Side, “the congestion and carefreeness of the population is evidenced by the ramshackle character of their buildings, by the multiplicity of their store types, by the picturesque gaudiness of their decorations and street attire, the teeming colorfulness of their street life, the lounging and lolling groups of all ages, sexes, and colors who bring to Detroit a landscape type far different from that which existed in the same region, on the

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<sup>27</sup> Editorial, *The Detrouter Magazine*, December 15, 1919, 1-2.

same streets, and veritably in the same buildings only a few short years ago.”<sup>28</sup> Many, he even reasoned, preferred “this type of existence to the more enlightened residential possibilities of the suburbs.”<sup>29</sup>

Thomas was struck by the dramatic transformation of this neighborhood. In his eyes, a “carefree” population had created “ramshackle” buildings, even though, as he noted, white European immigrants occupied the same buildings with in the living memory of many in Detroit. Despite his apparent distaste for the neighborhood and its population, Thomas was drawn to the area because it was both a “picturesque” and “gaudy” landscape. African American inhabitants, according to Thomas, brought with them a place that was exotic, other, and different, making it an alluring, if frightening, sight for white observers. As cultural geographer Richard Schein theorizes, “through our ability to read landscapes...norms, values, and fears are perpetuated, reproduced, or challenged. This power of landscape makes it inescapably normative.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the Board of Commerce and DUL, who believed the environment could be reshaped to have a positive influence on individuals, Thomas used his reading of the “landscape type” of black Detroit to argue that African Americans were inherently inferior and thus negatively transformed the condition of the city with their mere presence. Thomas dramatized lines of racial difference that were already inscribed across the city’s built environment. With a lens tinted with

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<sup>28</sup> Jerome Gale Thomas, “The City of Detroit: A Study in Urban Geography” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1928), 101-102. He also reasoned that “Those people who would be attracted to a conveniently located central area, of temporary use, miserable sanitary and moral conditions, and unbelievable congestion, are the types who have never known anything better, who thrive upon squalor, and desire to live only where life is moving and earnest. As a result, we find the East Side cottage district now the Negro center...” 101.

<sup>29</sup> Jerome Gale Thomas, “The City of Detroit: A Study in Urban Geography” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1928), 105.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Schein, “Normative Dimensions of Landscape,” in *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson*, ed., Chris Wilson and Paul Groth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 203.



early twentieth century “race science,” Thomas’ understanding of the landscape normalized the stereotype that African Americans themselves were inherently inferior.<sup>31</sup>

Ever cognizant that the condition of African American neighborhoods was problematic for African Americans’ success in Detroit, Forrester Washington had a different reading of these same landscapes. A dramatically increasing population and lack of space due to restrictive covenants, behind the scenes real-estate codes, and other forms of racial discrimination in the housing market, fueled housing segregation. Options for migrants were limited. As Washington reported, “Our housing situation as everyone in Detroit knows is growing more and more acute. Our problem is far more serious than is the problem of the white people. This is due primarily to the fact that we live in a limited area and find it difficult to expand our borders.”<sup>32</sup> He continued to argue that “in the largest district in which Negroes live, that of the East Side, most of the houses into which Negroes move are in the old resident district...whose white residents are in that intermediate stage where they lack or no longer take civic pride in their dwellings.”<sup>33</sup> In short, the residential district where many newcomers made their home was a dense area of quickly deteriorating housing.

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<sup>31</sup> As historian and American Studies scholar Philip Deloria describes, “The idea of stereotype has been an important tool for understanding the relation between representations – that is, images, texts, music, and performances – and the concrete exercise of power...A stereotype, we might say, is a simplified and generalized expectation...that comes to rest in an image, text or utterance.” (Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 8-9). In the case of African Americans and the landscape in Detroit, the stereotypes of inherent disorder and dirtiness came to be associated with the city’s African American neighborhoods and residents, in part through the writings of individuals such as Thomas and others who inscribed this meaning onto the landscape by exercising his cultural authority and power to represent African Americans and the places they lived. The DUL then sought to combat this image by establishing its own set of expectations about how the city’s African Americans and their landscapes should be seen in the city.

<sup>32</sup> Detroit Urban League “Report,” September 18, 1919 to October 9, 1919. Folder 1, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>33</sup> Forrester Washington, “The Housing of the Negro in Detroit,” *The Negro in Detroit* (Detroit: Research Bureau: Associated Charities of Detroit, 1920).



Figures 2.11 and 2.12: Images of Detroit's East Side neighborhood, c. 1922, by Jerome Gale Thomas.

Washington described just how derelict many of the structures were in a report from 1916. He noted that, “There are places in the walls that are open to the air. There are holes in the front rooms that show the lathes. The 4 rooms on the ground floor have been cut up by cheap partitions, not extending all the way to the ceiling, into two tenements...without toilet or bath...there is a toilet attached to the outside of the rear apartment, which serves both tenants. The toilet leaks onto the floor of the rear apartment and into the kitchen...Unquestionably building laws have been violated...”<sup>34</sup> Conditions were slow to improve. The problem of housing, “like the poor,” reported the DUL, “is always with us.”<sup>35</sup> Occasionally, the DUL was successful and got the attention of the board of health or other city agency to assist in cleaning up the area. In 1921, for example, after repeatedly calling attention to the filthy alleys of the East Side, they reported the alleys were in “very good shape.” compared to previous years.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Forrester Washington, “Report of the Director,” pp. 6, November 9, 1916, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>35</sup> Detroit Urban League, “Board Report,” October 1922. Folder 4, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>36</sup> Detroit Urban League, “Meeting Minutes,” December 8, 1921. Folder 3, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

One year later, Clarence E. Brewer, Commissioner of Recreation for the City of Detroit also offered some suggestions for improving the racial climate in the city. Sharing Washington's and the DUL's mission of improving the living condition of African Americans through Americanization and assimilation, Brewer wrote that, "to break down race prejudice...is the first step towards assimilation." He continued, "To develop a community spirit and civic pride by bringing the neighbors of a community together...this is a very vital and important function if the future success of the city is to be established. The department [of recreation] must develop and promote a spirit of friendliness, or progressive ideals and of clear right thinking upon the part of the community...they must know each other meet each other, if they are going to understand; and it is on the playgrounds, in the community centers, at the community entertainments, watching an athletic contest, or listening to a band concert, that people are going to meet each other and become acquainted."<sup>37</sup> A common City Beautiful era beautification project, playgrounds, according to Brewer had the potential to fulfill a need within the neighborhoods of Detroit. In June 1922, the Department of Recreation began construction of a playground on Detroit's East Side.

Brewer's well-meaning intentions were misplaced. An influx of migrants in May of 1922 added pressure to the housing situation.<sup>38</sup> The DUL reported that, "Our housing problem is becoming more and more acute. Rents are climbing and old dilapidated houses which are not fit for habitation are being put back into use. To add to this sore the city authorities have condemned several blocks of property on the East Side, where most of the colored people live,

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<sup>37</sup> Clarence Brewer, "Recreation a Necessity." *Detroit Educational Bulletin*, Vol 5 No. 9, May 1922.

<sup>38</sup> In May 1922, another influx of migrants stressed an already acute housing situation. The DUL reported, "Because of the condemning and tearing down of lots of houses in this east side section where most of the colored people have been living, if the migration grows to any greater proportion we are likely to have the same critical housing condition which we had during 1920. Negroes have only a limited area in which to live, that is providing they rent, and the bulk of our population are renters." (Detroit Urban League Report for May, 1922, pp. 2-3. Folder 4, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan).

that playground space may be provided. One whole block on Clinton and Chene Street is being torn down and another at Division and Rivard Streets all for the purpose of playgrounds.”<sup>39</sup> In this instance, the intentions of urban reformers made the housing situation worse for Detroit’s newcomers. Because the area was written off as dirty, dilapidated, and downright vile, recreation planners typically viewed it as a blank slate from which to begin anew. Ignoring the more pressing needs of East Side residents in their plans for reshaping the seemingly “blighted” neighborhoods, reformers exacerbated already difficult circumstances.

Even with these perpetual challenges, Washington noted that “compared to the slums of many cities, there is much more room [around individual houses]...Out of 928 cases, the lot was practically filled in 316; in other instances there was sufficient yard area.”<sup>40</sup> Because of this geography, some of Detroit’s African American residents were able to use this space for structures such as coal sheds, garages and chicken coops. Detroit’s low-density pattern of residential housing also allowed space for gardens, animals, and “fowl.”<sup>41</sup> Residents living in Detroit’s East Side district retrofitted this patchy landscape of deterioration to suit their needs as they looked for work and made a place in the city. In the process, seemingly rural features like sheds and chickens created a landscape that many observers, both black and white, found distasteful, backwards, and lacking in an urban sophistication that they thought should be characteristic of a city at the forefront of industrial modernity.

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<sup>39</sup> Detroit Urban League, “Director’s Report,” June 8, 1922, pp. 2-3. Folder 4, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>40</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit* (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 11 (From the Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan). While surveying black neighborhoods in Detroit during the 1920s, a team of sociologists led by Forrester B. Washington took note of these housing conditions, making observations that help to piece together components of the landscapes where black Detroiters resided.

<sup>41</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit* (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 12 (From the Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).



Figures 2.13 and 2.14: Although photographed in 1949, these images of Black Bottom suggest some of the ways Detroit's African American Migrants of the early twentieth century made use of their yards and this housing stock for gardens. On the left, sunflowers and other plants grow in a fenced area in front of a Victorian-era cottage. On the right, sunflowers and beans grow in the rear of a home. These images, and hundreds more, were taken by photographers for the Detroit Corporation Counsel, the agency vested with documenting and appraising the value of the neighborhood before it was razed to make way for Interstate 75. Corporation Counsel – Real Estate Division Records, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

Environmental historian Dianne Glave describes that many African Americans in the South had agricultural training and experiences that became an asset to their livelihoods.<sup>42</sup> In the North, the same skills supported their livelihood in Detroit, but were not always admirable. Many of Detroit's long-time residents, both black and white, found the East Side landscape, and lifestyle, less than appealing. Although Detroit reportedly had "a number of successful colored gardeners" in the 1890s,<sup>43</sup> "one of the older Detroit Negro leaders" stated in an interview with the DUL that "the 'riff-raff' of the rural southern Negro type has been responsible for changing the Negroes' position in Detroit."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Dianne Glave, "A Garden So Brilliant" in *Environmental History*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Jul. 2003), 395-411.

<sup>43</sup> Forrester Washington, "The Historical Background of the Negro in Detroit from 1800 to 1920" in *The Negro in Detroit* (Detroit: Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1920). Washington noted that J.W. Clark and William Ellis were particularly well known gardeners in Detroit.

<sup>44</sup> Forrester Washington, "History of the Negro in Detroit," Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Forrester B. Washington sympathized with this argument. He wrote that “a large percentage of the Negroes follow agricultural pursuits which call for no regularity, speed, or intelligence because there is comparatively little scientific farming in the South. One solution for this vicious heritage is education in northern industrial ideas and habits.”<sup>45</sup> Washington understood that the built environment and landscape was a formative part of black migrants’ identity in the city. Transforming black migrants from second-class citizens to equal members of American society would require remaking the landscapes in which they lived. Because Washington understood that these racial stereotypes were partly rooted in the landscape, their interest in improving the cultural and environmental well-being of African American migrants in Detroit was, unlike other City Beautiful era reformers, grounded in the hope of gaining some measure of improvement in social status for migrants. Under Washington’s leadership, the DUL worked to change how white audiences perceived black Detroiters. The DUL began to look for ways to reimagine and remake the meaning of Detroit’s cultural landscape, and in turn the identities of migrants themselves, in an effort to reconcile racial differences and inequality.

### **Public Space and the “Detroitization” of Migrants**

While East Side neighborhoods were the first place of residence for many African American migrants who settled in Detroit, the city as a whole was also their new home. For this reason, the Detroit Urban League attempted to assimilate new black residents into the civic life of Detroit as a whole. John Dancy, picking up as the DUL’s second director after Washington was drafted to fight in World War I, continued the work of shaping the Urban League and its program of assimilation. He wrote that one of the primary objectives of the DUL was to “offer

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<sup>45</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro In Detroit*, (Detroit: Research Bureau, Associated Research Charities of Detroit, 1926), 71.

assistance in the way of raising the standards which would show in the Detroitization of these people as soon as possible.”<sup>46</sup> Programs to assist new residents with finding work, housing, social services were one way to raise the standard of living for African Americans in Detroit, 85 percent of whom lived on the near East Side, according to one DUL report.<sup>47</sup> Dancy’s language, emphasizing “Detroitization” implies a new way of life that migrants had to learn in order to become productive members of society. A malleable concept, the DUL shaped the notion of “Detroitization” with their own vision of culture and place in an attempt to create a cohesive African American community around middle-class ideals of home, work, and leisure.

The situation in Detroit was not unlike issues of migration and immigration in other areas of the United States, such as Los Angeles. As historian George Sanchez argues, “By stressing conformity to the American industrial order, they [Anglo-American reformers] could try to impose stability on a society in rapid flux. They supported and sometimes developed Americanization programs established by progressive reformers to transform the values of the Mexican immigrant. Ironically because of the peculiar burgeoning character of migration into Los Angeles, these efforts often amounted to one newcomer trying to change another while neither was particularly familiar with local conditions or customs.”<sup>48</sup> In Detroit, the DUL sought to change southern African American migrants to similar ends, although they were aware that rather than immigrants from another country, African Americans were, in fact, American citizens who had migrated to Detroit from within United States.

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<sup>46</sup> John Dancy, “Annual Urban League Report.” January 10, 1924. Folder 6, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>47</sup> “Negro Population of Detroit” undated manuscript, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>48</sup> George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87-88.

Still, on a national scale, the work of the DUL was not unlike that of other groups, primarily led by whites, that were interested in the Amerization of immigrants. Like the DUL, these organizations understood culture as malleable, and thus individuals, in theory, could be changed through intense education programs designed to instill “American” values of home, work, and domestic life. As historian George Sanchez describes, “Mexican culture was seen as malleable, but required intense education in ‘American values’ to fit into a modern, industrialized society. These efforts also made clear, however, that Mexicans were intended only to assimilate into the bottom segment of the American work force as low-paid, yet loyal workers.”<sup>49</sup> Even though African Americans migrated from within the United States, in the eyes of the middle-class leaders of the DUL, black migrants culture was still in need of transformation so they could assimilate to modern life. The DUL’s response was to aid in the “Detroitization” of African American migrants from the south. While most migrants, like the Crews, did not come to Detroit straight from the farm, the DUL still believed that in order to become a part of the urban-industrial order in Detroit, migrants needed to change their way of life to match the racial imagination of the DUL. The DUL, however, did have higher hopes than the white-run organizations Sanchez discusses. The DUL had a vision of middle-class life that they hoped to bring to the African American community in Detroit. And although they were not treated as such, African American migrants to Detroit had legal status as American citizens. The willingness of immigrants and migrants to change, however, was not always absolute.

Neither men nor women conformed to the idealized vision of gender roles the DUL imagined. For the DUL, migrants of particular concern were those from the “back-woods,” areas

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<sup>49</sup> George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 106-107.



so rural they “had never seen a Southern city much less a Northern city.”<sup>50</sup> Although most migrants, like the Crews, did not come to Detroit straight from the “back woods,” but instead came from farms and made stops in cities along the way, migrants’ appearances drew attention to the racial stereotypes leaders of the DUL wanted to quash through personal and environmental reform. Specifically, they were disturbed by those who did not conform to clean and respectable visions of gender, such as “women who had been used to hunting and fishing and going bare-foot all their lives...By their very uncouth appearance at present (which can probably be toned up after a year or so in a Northern environment), and by their real ignorance of the machinery of a modern city home, these women cannot be used in the only occupation (namely day’s work) in which their appearance would not be against them.”<sup>51</sup> As historian Victoria Wolcott argues, creating an image of respectability was central to the class politics of upwardly-mobile African American women in Detroit, and the middle class leaders of the DUL worked to uphold this ideal.<sup>52</sup> Men’s appearance and use of public space also troubled leaders of the DUL, who were concerned with the way men stood “around the public thoroughfares in overalls and undershirts,” which they believed also contributed to an unpopular image of African Americans and an “inappropriate” use of public space.<sup>53</sup> If they were to fit into the city, migrants, at least in the eyes of the DUL, would have to conform in order to build a cohesive sense of community in Detroit.

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<sup>50</sup> “Annual Report,” 1917 pp. 3. Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>51</sup> Folder 0, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>52</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> Forrester Washington. “Report of the Director,” October 16, 1916, Associated Charities of Detroit Collection, Box 12, Folder 41, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University). See also, Forrester B. Washington in Richard Thomas. *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 56.

Gendered language demonstrates that Detroit's established black community worried as much as whites about the "uncivilized" migrants now living in the city.<sup>54</sup> Washington candidly observed, however, that the truth of the matter was, "one hundred of this class are more conspicuous than ten thousand of the better class... There are, of course, untidy and uncouth whites, but white people are the judges and colored people are being judged."<sup>55</sup> The influx of Southern African Americans, they feared, might lead whites to see all blacks as "uncivilized" and undeserving of equal rights and access to housing and other economic opportunities.

The representation of African American bodies in public and semi-public spaces of Detroit was an important part of the DUL's work to remake the identity of newly arrived African Americans in Detroit. While leaders focused on both men and women, it was women who were typically front and center in the League's assimilation efforts. For example, in 1918 the DUL printed a brochure of "helpful hints" for new residents, which they passed out at the train station. At the center of the brochure is a before and after image of a woman posing on what are presumably the front steps of a home. The first is labeled "general disorderly appearance" and the second, "neatly clothed and orderly appearance."

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration, 1916-1929* (Ann Arbor: Bentley Historical Library Printing Services, 1993), 5.

<sup>55</sup> Forrester Washington, "Report of the Director," October 16, 1916, Associated Charities of Detroit Collection, Box 12, Folder 41, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. See also Forrester B. Washington in Richard Thomas. *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 56.

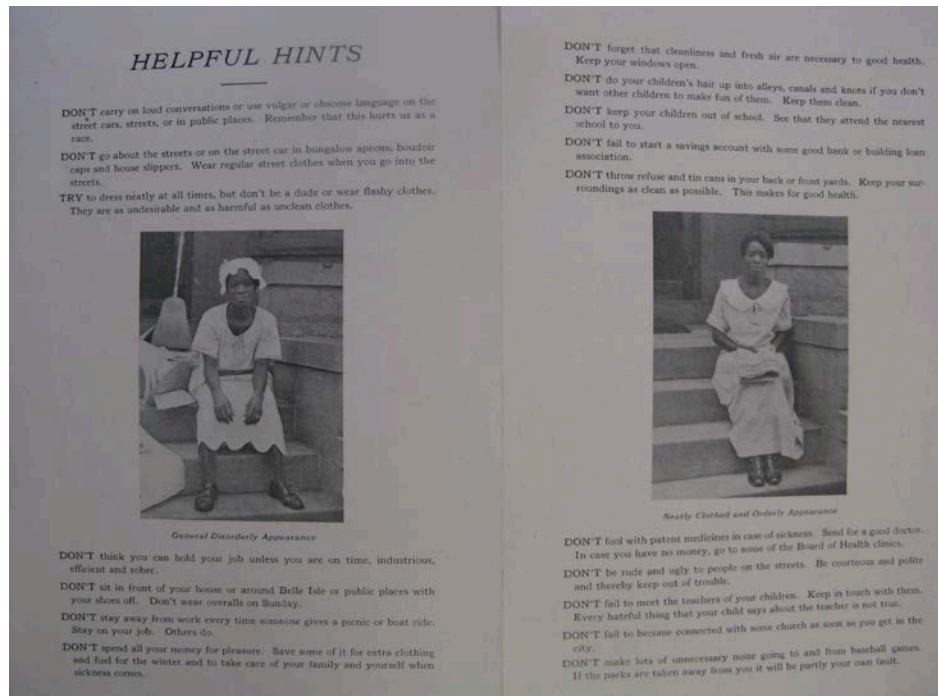


Figure 2.15: “Helpful Hints” pamphlet, Detroit Urban League Records, Folder 9, Box 1, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

The leaflet goes on to outline a code of conduct for how African Americans should use Detroit’s public spaces and tend to their surroundings. Some of the “hints” instructed migrants not to “carry on loud conversations or use vulgar or obscene language on the street cars, streets, or in public places,” not to, “go about the streets or on the street car in bungalow aprons, boudoir caps and house slippers. Wear regular street clothes when you go into the streets,” and “don’t sit in front of your house or around Belle Isle or public places with your shoes off.” Furthermore, they were instructed to not “throw refuse and tin cans in your back or front yards. Keep your surroundings as clean as possible. This makes for good health.” Residents were reminded not to “forget that cleanliness and fresh air are necessary to good health. Keep your windows open.”<sup>56</sup> While aimed at all African American migrants to Detroit, the central image of African American

<sup>56</sup> “Helpful Hints” leaflet, Folder 9, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

women emphasized a particular concern with women's role as housekeepers who, according to the DUL, had the primary responsibility to keep up the appearance of the semi-public realm of the home as a respectable part of the larger landscape of the city. Men, as instructed on the brochure, were imagined as the guardians of public spaces, being warned that if they made "lots of unnecessary noise going to and from baseball games," it would be their own fault if access to parks were taken away from them.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to adults' use of public and semi-public spaces, the DUL was also concerned with youth delinquency, particularly because both parents of many migrant families had to work in order to make a living. To assist with this issue, the DUL established programs that revolved around recreation activities. As Washington wrote, "in a program for adjusting the Negro to a community there must be provision for the development of wholesome recreation. Recreation becomes a hundred fold more important in the Negroes life in the North than it does in the South. There isn't the restraining influence of his family or his friends, and ones that know him."<sup>58</sup> Chaperoned DUL outings to navigate the spaces of the city open to African Americans aimed to model what they considered the proper behavior for using the city's public spaces, such as Belle Isle Park. As early as August of 1919, 400 children were taken on an "Urban League Outing" to Belle Isle Park, "in large motor trucks, which were donated to them for the day by the Columbia Motor Company."<sup>59</sup> In 1926, they took 1,400 children, and in the summer of 1927 alone, they took 1,045.<sup>60</sup> During this period, African Americans, Washington reported, used the park more

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<sup>57</sup> "Helpful Hints" leaflet, Folder 9, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>58</sup> "Program of Work for the Assimilation of Negro Migrants into Northern Cities." Speech delivered December 17, 1917, Columbus, Ohio. Folder 8, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>59</sup> Untitled report, c.1919. Folder 10, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>60</sup> Annual Report, March 1, 1926. Folder 8, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

than any other group, and did so, “without any friction with whites. They bathe on the beach, use the canoes and other facilities without any appreciable unpleasantness.”<sup>61</sup> The scale of the island park, large enough to provide ample space to both groups, likely aided in this amiable use, as did its proximity to the East Side that provided easy access – without traversing white neighborhoods.

Public spaces were important because, as architectural historian Paul Groth describes, “design professionals usually see urban parks as official places: special areas reserved for finding aesthetic and spiritual refreshment, and for learning the ruling interpretations of nature and society.”<sup>62</sup> Olmsted used a similar logic when he designed Belle Isle Park. Thirty years later, the DUL grasped it as a means use public space to assist in the “Detroitization,” or assimilation of migrants to the ways of life the DUL deemed acceptable in Detroit. As the DUL described in a report, “in an industrial city like Detroit where there is more emphasis placed on brawn than there is on brain, the general culture level is low. This city has by no means reached the high level that has been attained in some of the eastern cities like Washington, Baltimore, Boston, and some others. Detroit does not possess in such large numbers people who would count themselves on the culture level.”<sup>63</sup> Belle Isle’s design and meaning, steeped in Victorian ideas about the possibility of moral improvement that might come through contact with the environment, was an

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<sup>61</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit* (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 11 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan). Washington’s research also reported that African Americans were, “unwelcome at such amusement centers as Tashmoo Flats and Bob-Lo at all times and can secure suitable accommodations at Put-in-Bay and Sugar Island only on special days,” 10. Since recreation areas such as these appear to be largely dominated by whites, it could explain why little friction was reported at Belle Isle Park during this period. As historian Norman Miles also describes, “the most common form of recreation among black Detroiters during the 20’s were picnics. In the warmer months there were picnics almost every day, especially Saturday and Sunday. Belle Isle soon emerged as the favorite picnic spot for black Detroiters...Churches, fraternal organizations, and families found Belle Isle a pleasant place to spend a sunny day.” (Norman Miles, “Home At Last: Urbanization of Black Migrants in Detroit, 1916-1929” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1978), 217.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Groth, “Vernacular Parks” in Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams, ed., *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 135.

<sup>63</sup> “The Cultural Side of Detroit” February 9, 1927. Folder 19, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

ideal civic space for migrants, as guided by the DUL, to experience a more refined sense of culture characteristic of urban life. However, in their mission to uplift African American migrants, public spaces were not the only cultural terrain used by the DUL. The level of the neighborhood, yard, and garden were also important sites for making meaning and crafting racial identity.<sup>64</sup>

### **Neighborhood Clean Up Campaigns**

Since recreational outings to Belle Isle Park did little to change the environmental circumstances in the places where African Americans actually lived, the DUL also sponsored civic-minded clean-up efforts in more ordinary spaces that also intertwined identity and landscape. While everyday spaces do not represent the same civic mindedness as highly designed public parks like Belle Isle, vernacular landscapes, as architectural historian Paul Groth argues, also “suggest clear rules of behavior.”<sup>65</sup> In Detroit, a place that historian Thomas Sugrue describes as, “above all, a city of homes,” the yards and gardens of houses became important cultural symbols for the DUL.<sup>66</sup> How African American residents chose to manipulate and organize around these types of spaces was a part of the way they negotiated the racial and aesthetic expectations of life in the urban north.<sup>67</sup> The yard became particularly important as some African Americans began acquiring the means to move out of the East Side and into more

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<sup>64</sup> As landscape studies scholar Kenrick Grandison describes, the cultural, as well as ecological, landscape can be understood as a “a system of interrelated parts consisting of buildings and other human constructions within their various changing contexts” (Kenrick Grandison, “The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America.” *American Quarterly* 51.3 (1999): 529-79; 532. In this sense, the DUL conceptualized Detroit’s African American neighborhoods as a landscape that could only be complete (and culturally function as a tool for shaping identity and the representation of African Americans) if everyone participated in constructing a coherent image and agreed upon sense of place.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Groth, “Vernacular Parks” in Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams, ed., *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 135

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 23.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 23.

affluent areas of the city. As the DUL's first director, Forrester B. Washington believed, "the character of the house into which the Negro immigrants go has a direct effect on their health, their morals, and their efficiency."<sup>68</sup> The home environment, according to Washington, was a moral and aesthetic imperative, in addition to an economic and public health one. Targeting domestic spaces, such as yards, for clean up and beautification was one of the most readily available means of transforming the outward appearance of black landscapes in Detroit. As one announcement from the DUL described, "as a means of preserving health and beautifying their premises...folks are being asked to remove all rubbish and trash that surround their homes and to take care of the lawn, and to do other necessary things that would make for the beauty of the community."<sup>69</sup> Through clean up campaigns, the DUL shaped their own vision of an environmental ethic by linking the appearance of African American homes to public health and the quality of community life.<sup>70</sup>

The Detroit Urban League's efforts to target and transform the everyday spaces of black life in Detroit began in 1919, shortly after John Dancy took over as director. He attempted to build a coalition with other organizations in the city that had been working to clean up the city since at least 1913. At Dancy's urging, the Detroit Board of Commerce made the East Side, where approximately 50 percent of Detroit's black population lived, part of their annual "Clean Up and Paint Up" campaign.<sup>71</sup> The event was reportedly held because of the "many old houses

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<sup>68</sup> Forrester Washington, "A Program of Work for the Assimilation of Negro Migrants into Northern Cities," December 17, 1917. Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>69</sup> "Health Week Linked with Clean up-paint up week," Detroit Urban League report, April 19, 1927. Folder 20, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>70</sup> As historian Elizabeth D. Blum argues, "clean up days became the most common form of environmental activism among African American women during the Progressive Era" (Elizabeth Blum, "Women, Environmental Rationale, and Activism," in Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and The Rain* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 89.

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Mrs. Jackson, president of the Associated Charities of Detroit, April 9, 1918. Folder 10 Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. The Board of Commerce organized the clean up campaigns were semi-regular events, which began as early as 1913. See "D. P. W. To Go Limit in Cleanup

here which have been neglected.”<sup>72</sup> Frank Cody, chairman of the Board of Commerce’s Americanization Committee, met with Dancy to discuss a preliminary survey of the “congested district,” bounded by Beaubien and Hastings and Lafayette and Winder. The survey, Cody wrote, “brought to light many startling facts regarding over-crowding, lack of sanitation, exorbitant rents, etc.” The Board decided to support efforts to improve conditions in this area, which they hoped would, “relieve this blot in the city’s boundaries. Action was taken,” Cody wrote, “because the Negroes are all native-born, full American citizens, whose entire culture is derived in America, and it was not deemed proper to imply in any degree that the Negroes were not all Americans.”<sup>73</sup> Likely influenced by discussions with Dancy, Cody and the Board of Commerce made the argument that the derelict condition of the East Side was not an African American problem, but one that reflected poorly on the city as a whole. More importantly, Cody’s words explicitly acknowledged that African Americans were American citizens, migrants from within the United States and not immigrants from a different country, which, in their eyes, made the conditions all the more appalling and in need of a solution.

To rectify the situation, they advocated wide participation amongst all Detroiters, with the hope it would improve the overall image of the city. For a week in April or May, residents in all parts of the city were encouraged to paint their houses, beautify lawns and burn any rubbish. “Paint,” one article directed, “gives new life to the old houses. You can take one which

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Campaign” *Detroit Free Press* May 4, 1913, 14. As with other City Beautiful efforts at cleaning up the city, middle class women were often the primary advocates on the street. As one *Detroit Free Press* article described, “Many of the women’s clubs in the city are evincing a keen interest in the ‘clean-up and paint-up’ campaign being fostered by the Detroit Board of Commerce in cooperation with Mayor Couzens...” (“Clubs Keen,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 13, 1919, B13). Clean Up campaigns were also encouraged by the State of Michigan for suburban villages (“Suburban Clean Up Day.” *Detroit Free Press*, April 30, 1912, 3). As early as 1916, Mayor Oscar B. Marx also created a temporary “Sanitary Squad” to help with a “city-wide clean-up of garbage, filth, and unsanitary conditions generally...” (“Sanitary Squad to Clean Up City,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 29, 1916, 8). The existence of clean up campaigns in the years before a significant African American population moved to Detroit makes it clear that the living conditions many white onlookers deplored and connected to African American spaces were, in fact, prevalent in white areas of the city.

<sup>72</sup> “Clean Up Now, Season Here, So Get Busy,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 7, 1914.

<sup>73</sup> Frank Cody, “Americanization Committee,” *The Detroit*, May 8, 1920, 19.



is showing the ravages of time and paint and trim it, put out a few little gardens, seed the lawn and otherwise brush up and at once you have a home that passers-by will see with favor.”<sup>74</sup>

Houses, “bright and of rational colors,” imagined the author, were “not only more durable than one which is neglected and weather beaten, but it is more apt to attract those who are looking to buy.”<sup>75</sup>

Aside from the commercial and economic aspects emphasized by the Board of Commerce, the DUL imagined environmental clean up campaigns as a way to combat racial stereotypes and promote public health. The public health component was of particular interest to the DUL, which reported, “it has been found in a great many homes in Detroit that rats enjoy as much care and comfort in the house as do some of the members of the family.”<sup>76</sup> In order to make health-related connections, Urban League affiliates across the United States connected clean-up campaigns to the National Negro Health Week program, which had primarily focused on personal health, such as disease prevention, and clinics for babies and mothers. The DUL believed, “half of serious illnesses that over takes colored people could be avoided if they would only pay some attention to general cleanliness around their homes. Small pox, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis are always found lurking about in filthy homes where unsanitary conditions prevail.”<sup>77</sup> Local Urban League officials urged Detroit’s African American population to “fix up their lawns, to plant grass seed, and to do everything they can to exterminate rats, to generally

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<sup>74</sup> “Clean Up Now, Season Here, So Get Busy,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 7, 1914.

<sup>75</sup> “Clean Up Now, Season Here, So Get Busy,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 7, 1914.

<sup>76</sup> Untitled document about Health Week, 1925. Folder 14, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>77</sup> “Health Week and Clean Up and Paint Up Campaign Started,” 1925. Folder 14, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

improve their surroundings so that Detroit will be a better and cleaner place to live in.”<sup>78</sup> The League’ program of action linked health to an orderly environment.

To spread the word, the DUL distributed literature and organized physicians to speak at each of the churches the Sunday before the campaign to stress “upon the congregation the ways and means for preserving life and making for better health.”<sup>79</sup> In 1925, DUL officials organized 23 physicians speaking at 23 different churches, “urging people to take care of their health and to look after their general surroundings.”<sup>80</sup> Women’s clubs also made house to house visits, “in an effort to stress the importance of this work.”<sup>81</sup> A strong network of organized citizens helped the DUL promote their plan of action.

In their instructional pamphlets and posters to local Urban League affiliates, the National Urban League emphasized similar themes. As one program from Health Week in 1922 informed participants, “You cannot bring up healthy people in unhealthy homes. Move out and burn up all unnecessary rubbish, clothing, and waste. Move, dust, and clean well all household goods and, as far as possible, take all the furnishings out of the house into the open air and sun them all day. Brush down the walls and ceilings of all rooms; scrub and clean thoroughly all the floors and woodwork of the house. Paint or whitewash the walls, ceilings, and woodwork...”<sup>82</sup> The pamphlet continued to note that residents should, “give careful attention to the front and back yards, as these menace the health and comfort of your family as long as they remain dirty. Clean

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<sup>78</sup> “Health Week and Clean Up and Paint Up Campaign Started,” 1925. Folder 14, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>79</sup> “Clean Up and Paint Up Week,” 1921. Folder 1, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. In 1925, 7,000 pieces of literature “were distributed at the churches and other places of assembly” (Minutes of the Urban League Board meeting, April 9, 1925. Folder 7 Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan).

<sup>80</sup> Minutes of the Detroit Urban League Board. April 9, 1925. Folder 7, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>81</sup> Minutes of the Detroit Urban League Board. April 9, 1925. Folder 7, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>82</sup> “Program for National Negro Health Week, April 2-8, 1922.” Folder 26, Box 22, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

up yards and paint or whitewash the fences and house. Repair the stable, the barn, and henhouse. Whitewash them if you can and see that no filth remains in which flies can breed...overcrowding makes for bad air, bad morals, discomfort and disease. If your house is crowded, enlarge it.”<sup>83</sup> Instructions like those above build on Forrester Washington’s logic that “you cannot grow lilies in ash barrels” by linking residents’ health to the quality of the environment in which they lived and to the appearance of their neighborhoods.

In this particular pamphlet, which may have been intended for African Americans living outside the city as well, the Urban League recognized features, like henhouses, stables, and barns, but emphasized that they too should still appear well maintained and fixed up, and whitewashed if possible. Presumably their well-kept appearance would distinguish them as sophisticated places. In addition, the language of the pamphlet suggests that a clean house and yard also reflected the owner’s good health and morals. The Urban League’s focus on ordinary spaces within the larger landscape helped to create an urban environmentalism where civic value and a sense of belonging to a larger community were achieved by cleaning up private spaces in public view.<sup>84</sup> Public health was bound together with the aesthetic sensibilities of order and neatness.

The urban environmental sensibility of cleanup campaigns also evolved from context of race and class. By the time the DUL began organizing Detroit’s African American population to participate in 1918, their motivations were not only rooted in the virtues of creating a better

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<sup>83</sup> “Program for National Negro Health Week, April 2-8, 1922.” Folder 26, Box 22, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>84</sup> As historians Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll argue, a comprehensive understanding of African American environmental history should examine “the relationship of African Americans to their surroundings” (Glave and Stoll, “Introduction” in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 8. With this approach in mind, the work of the Detroit Urban League and experience of African Americans in early twentieth century Detroit provides a compelling opportunity to describe these relationships in an urban environment where interconnected crises of racial tensions, industrial development, and limited housing influenced how African Americans thought about their relationship to the surrounding landscape and environment.

environment for commerce through civic action, but also in trying to achieve recognition of African American's citizenship by combating racial stereotypes of African American migrants as slovenly, careless, and backwards. As the Mayor's Race Committee, composed of both white and black Detroiters recommended, "a general campaign of education" should be conducted, "to urge upon colored people the special desirability of keeping their houses painted and their yards in attractive condition so that they will compare favorably to the white sections of town. A similar emphasis upon the personal appearance and demeanor of colored people and their children is equally desirable."<sup>85</sup> They attempted to transform landscapes of everyday life by linking people and place to demonstrate their contributions to the social and economic value of the city.

### **Middle Class African Americans and Detroit's West Side**

Nowhere in Detroit did the cultural values and aesthetics of clean up resonate with neighborhood leaders more than on the city's West Side. Here, in an area bounded by Grand River, Tireman and Warren Avenue, those African Americans of a more affluent black middle class purchased their first homes, and were particularly active in beautification and clean up efforts. As John Dancy reported to board members of the Detroit Urban League,

Recently we have been fortunate in organizing on the west side of the city a group of women, home owners, with a view to the better care of their homes and surroundings. These women plan to get out some folders and visit the homes of others in the neighborhood urging them to the necessity of keeping up their lawns and houses. Personal visits are to be made to every home in this district with this plan in view. This is a large community and the people in it have some very nice homes. Most of them keep their homes in splendid shape but in order to get to those who do not is the reason for this move.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Mayor's Interracial Committee, *The Negro in Detroit* (Detroit: Bureau of Government Research, 1926), 5-6.

<sup>86</sup> Report, January 15, 1925. Folder 7, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Home ownership made the imperative for clean up and beautification even more important. “Homeownership,” stated DUL director John Dancy in 1924, “is recognized to be a great community asset, a stabilizer, an incentive to good citizenship.”<sup>87</sup> Good citizens owned homes, but the house alone did not represent citizenship. The home also had to be well kept, and meet the ideals of a suburban garden aesthetic. This required a concerted effort on the part of the DUL, working with leaders in the neighborhood, to create a cohesive set of shared values around the experience of homeownership and the potential of a black middle class, represented by bricks, mortar, and the front lawn.

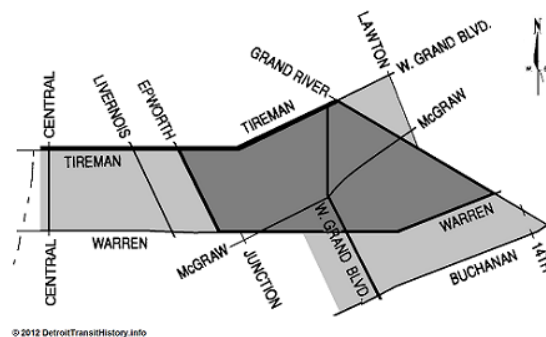


Figure 2.16: Detroit’s African American West Side Neighborhood.

West Side resident Suesetta McCree recalled that in this neighborhood, “the homes were well appointed. They were one and two story houses with a few that were brick or stone. There were two and four family flats along with eight and twelve family brick apartment buildings. Most of the yards were landscaped with flowers and trees. Backyards often held fruit trees as well as rock gardens and flowers.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Esther Gordy Edwards described how “Roosevelt

<sup>87</sup> John Dancy, “Negro Housing.” Speech delivered in Dayton, OH, April 26, 1924. Folder 13, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>88</sup> Sueseta McCree, “Our Neighborhoods,” in *Remembering Detroit’s Old Westside: 1920-1950* (Detroit: WestSiders, 1997), 85.

was a serene and beautiful street with trees, green grass, butterflies, beautiful rock gardens in back yards...”<sup>89</sup>

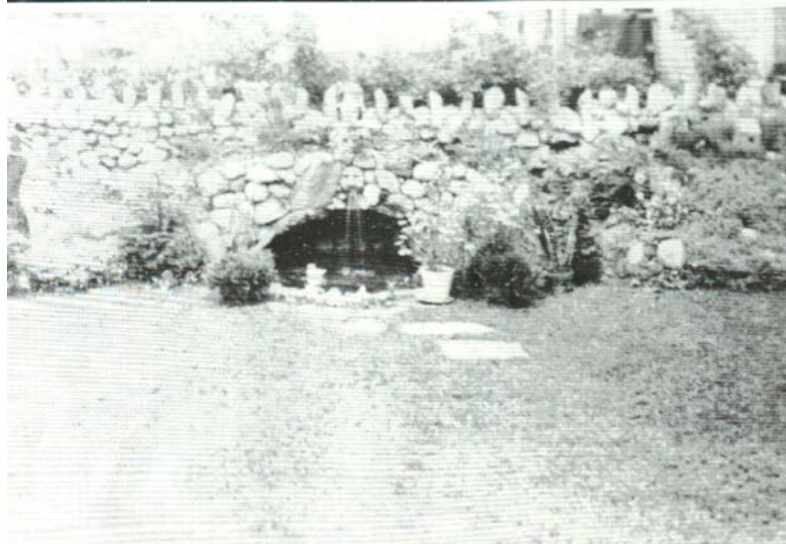


Figure 2.17: A rock garden in the back yard at 5427 Roosevelt. “The fence, pool and gardens were fashioned from rocks that the Talberts collected on their many travels throughout the United States.” Date unknown. From *Remembering Detroit’s Old Westside: 1920-1950*, pp. 102.

Horace Jefferson, who also lived on the West Side, described that after his father bought a home there in 1922, “they wanted to keep their homes up, paint them, have lawns, all of that sort of thing...so it was like a village.” To beautify their house, his mother planted so many flowers along the fence each year that she was known as “The Flower Girl.”<sup>90</sup> Not everyone had the same standards, however. To help ensure this “village” atmosphere of upkeep continued, by 1925 the DUL helped with the logistics of forming “lawn and improvement associations with a view to keeping this section one of the really worth while resident sections for colored people.”<sup>91</sup> Gardening and beautification projects were connected to the stability and economic future of the

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<sup>89</sup> Estehr Gordy Edwards, “Memories” in *Remembering Detroit’s Old Westside: 1920-1950* (Detroit: WestSiders, 1997), 222.

<sup>90</sup> Horace Jefferson, interview with Louis Jones May 20, 2005. Detroit West Sider Oral History Project, Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes of the Detroit Urban League Board, April 9, 1925. Folder 7, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

neighborhood. Neat and orderly yards reflected the potential of Detroit's middle class black residents to uphold the same standards and vision as white residents.

Jefferson's memories also recall the fact that the work of organizing and maintaining the neighborhood was largely done by women, such as his mother, who also had the institutional support of the DUL. Nellie Singleton, for example, was a board member of the DUL and the leader of the committee spearheading this campaign on the West Side. She used her membership in the Entre-Nous Club, a social group for African American women on the West Side, as a starting point, and encouraged her neighbors to organize around home and yard improvement.<sup>92</sup> The DUL was pleased to note that "the well kept homes and lawns had been an inspiration to those visiting the section."<sup>93</sup> More importantly, according to the DUL, "The West Side has been often pointed to with pride because it has consistently contradicted the statement frequently made that Negroes run down property."<sup>94</sup> Because the neighborhood represented the ideal lifestyle members of the DUL hoped every African American in the city might one day be able to achieve, they were particularly vigilant about changes in the area's appearance. For example, by 1926, Singleton and Dancy were concerned by, "careless ones coming into this section that do nothing to keep their premises in order. We are going to get to them," they described in one letter.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Singleton used her connections as a member of the "Entre Nous Club," a social group for African American women on the West Side, as a starting point for organizing around home improvement (see Folder 9, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, as well as "Detroit Physicians Back up 'Health and Clean Up' Drive" *Detroit Free Press* (c. 1923, Folder 2, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records). See also, John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 58-59.

<sup>93</sup> "West Siders Move to Improve Home Surroundings." Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>94</sup> "West Side Citizens to Make Homes Beautiful." Folder 16 Box 1 Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>95</sup> Dancy, John C. and Nellie Singleton. Untitled letter. June 1926. Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

To combat the threat of derelict lawns and gardens, Singleton arranged a meeting at Grace A.M.E. Church “to launch a movement designed to make the West Side one of the most beautiful large sections occupied by Negroes in any of the large cities” by “having every owner and tenant take a personal interest in his or her surroundings by cleaning their yards, by trimming their hedges, by mowing their lawns, by painting their houses and throwing away useless things, keeping their premises clean and neat.”<sup>96</sup> Prizes were to be awarded for the best lawns, the best kept window boxes, and for the cleanest overall premises.<sup>97</sup> The organizers also arranged for a “floral parade,” intended to “demonstrate what the committee wants done.”<sup>98</sup>

The committee adopted the slogan “The West Side is the Best Side,” which was to be used in all literature and pamphlets distributed in the neighborhood.<sup>99</sup> They urged “all the folks to beautify their premises so as to make the ‘West Side’ a show place for those of other races who argue that colored people run down property.”<sup>100</sup> Singleton and her supporters organized captains for each block who were in charge of awarding prizes and encouraged to “make complaints when others fail to keep their premises in order.”<sup>101</sup> As West Side resident Julius

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<sup>96</sup> “West Side Citizens to Make Houses Beautiful,” 1926. Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>97</sup> “West Side Citizens to Make Houses Beautiful,” 1926. Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; “West Side Make Homes Beautiful.” *Detroit Independent*, July 2, 1926.

<sup>98</sup> “West Siders Move to Improve Home Surroundings” undated report. Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. The Detroit Urban League’s own headquarters/community center also served as an example. As early as 1927, the DUL put a fence up and grew a lawn to “improve the general appearance of the Center.” The chairman felt that, “if we wanted the Center to be the beauty spot of the section that grass should be planted...Mrs. Sibley suggested sodding the front, planting flowers, putting in window boxes” (Folder 9, Box 11, DUL Records). In 1932, their “own Chestnut Street Community Center was not behind in beautifying our own premises as much as could be done with the money supply we had at hand, with window boxes, flowers, and a pretty lawn” (Report of the Detroit Urban League, September 14, 1932. Folder 12, box 11, Detroit Urban League Records). By 1950, the DUL remained explicit in its use of community centers as examples for residents to follow: “this building and grounds be maintained in such a manner as to give inspiration for proper home and community maintenance and development in the whole area.” (Minutes of the Detroit Urban League, February 1950. Folder 16, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records).

<sup>99</sup> “West Side Citizens to Make Homes Beautiful.” *Detroit Independent*. July 2, 1926.

<sup>100</sup> John Dancy and Nellie Singleton, untitled letter, June 1926. Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>101</sup> “Things to Be Presented at the Community Meeting.” Undated document, c. 1926. Folder 16, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



Combs recalled, it was in the “quality of community where the entire neighborhood was involved in seeing that all the values, the morays, the ethics, were being followed...you could not step out of line because anybody had the right and duty to make sure you stayed in line...I would say it was more or less controlled.”<sup>102</sup> By 1927, the League reported they carried the message of the clean-up campaign “all over the city and the results can be seen in many sections. This was not a spasmodic attempt but a real effort to get results and it shows...”<sup>103</sup> With the help of the DUL, residents enforced these middle class standards.

Other community organizations in Detroit also hoped to spur an interest in gardening as a recreational activity. For example, the Federation of Settlements in Detroit developed a rotating system of gardening classes between the settlement houses in the city, “in the hope of interesting the people in the neighborhoods in vegetable and flower gardening.”<sup>104</sup> Organizers solicited the Garden Club of America, as well as other local garden clubs, for prizes to be awarded to participants with the best flower boxes.<sup>105</sup> Largely ornamental and aesthetic projects such as these suggest that gardening remained an admirable activity for African Americans to engage in from the perspective of middle class city leaders, when done as part of an effort to transform their self-image, not for subsistence needs. “Gardening projects,” wrote Dancy, “have been set forth by various sorts of community service organizations with a definite plan of building up the

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<sup>102</sup> Julius Combs, Interview with Louis Jones, 2 June 2005. Detroit West Sider Oral History Project, Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>103</sup> Minutes of the DUL, April 21, 1927. Folder 9, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>104</sup> Annual Report of the Detroit Urban League, March 1, 1926. Folder 8, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Mrs. Gillis, of the Detroit Federation of Settlements, arranged for the course on “landscape gardening.” (Folder 17a, Box 8, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>105</sup> DUL Minutes, May 1926. Box 8, Folder 17a, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

weaker side of our racial group.”<sup>106</sup> For the DUL, gardening was one component of program of assimilation that could bring a more refined sense of “culture” to Detroit. “Culture,” wrote Dancy, “is after all essentially an understanding and an appreciation of values.”<sup>107</sup> Detroit’s African American residents could demonstrate their understanding and appreciation of values through well-kept yards, decorative flowers, and neatly trimmed hedges, which symbolized the respectability and refined tastes of Detroit’s black middle class culture.<sup>108</sup>

As architectural historian Paul Groth argues, “the activity and plants of most yards focus on the lot lines; they ensure that a mere lot becomes a truly enclosed yard. In that yard, the work going on may not be as directly visible as in a brickyard or lumberyard, but it *is* work. The adorned middle class yard visually toils like a hired musical group, to help celebrate a territory hard won with years of mortgage payment and the social position that comes with that territory.”<sup>109</sup> For African Americans in Detroit, the labor of neighborhood and yard improvement was the cultural work of making a place and refashioning a new identity, typically with no reference to past tradition, which demonstrated their entrance into the middle class. For African Americans in cities across the United States, the outward appearance of the house, yard, and garden became important areas for attempting reconcile environments of intense racism with ones that seemed to offer hope for a better future. With the help and influence of the DUL, the owners of these spaces aimed to blend into a middle class ideal of suburban yard and garden

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<sup>106</sup> “The Cultural Side of Detroit,” February 9, 1927. Folder 19, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>107</sup> “The Cultural Side of Detroit,” February 9, 1927. Folder 19, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>108</sup> Many of the DUL cleanup efforts took the form of “adorned yards” rather than gardens per se. As architectural historian Paul Groth describes, “an adorned yard that competes for attention with the street and lot requires a real chunk of space. Added to the basic scheme of our open-lot houses, the adornments of grass and shrubs add places to act out a personal role within the urban order of land ownership, a way of attending to the order of the lot and the place in society that it bestows upon the gardeners” (Paul Groth, “Lot, Yard, and Garden: American Distinctions,” in *Landscape*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1990): 29-35.

<sup>109</sup> Paul Groth, “Lot, Yard, and Garden: American Distinctions,” in *Landscape*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1990): 29-35.

without the markers of race or rural life, such as growing food. However, they also reinforced boundaries of class between the West Side and other African American areas of Detroit.

### **“A Lot in a Veritable Wilderness:” Detroit’s Eight-Mile/Wyoming Neighborhood**

On the West Side, lines of plum, apple, cherry, and peach trees lined the blocks of well-manicured lawns and ornamental gardens.<sup>110</sup> Compared to this, the African American settlement on the far Northwest edge of Detroit’s city limits, approximately 8 miles from the central city, seemed to be, as white sociologist Marvel Daines described, a “veritable wilderness.”<sup>111</sup>

Individuals such as Daines, who was completing a study of the area as an employee for the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, deemed it nothing more than a “suburban slum” for the lack of services and appearance of the buildings. She condemned the “ugliness and dilapidation” of the “run-down, dilapidated hovels, not crowded together on the property, but possessing all the physical deterioration of...the other...types of slums.”<sup>112</sup> Any “thinking citizen” who drives through the area, Daines remarked, “is filled with a hopeless feeling of repulsion and despair.” Compared to the vertical, “picturesque type of slums” in New York City, this area puzzled Daines because it seemed to defy her expectations about where and how urban poverty existed.<sup>113</sup> To white onlookers, such as Daines, the general “tumble-down condition” of the houses made it seem, to outsiders, a less than ideal version of suburban life.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Julius Combs, interview with Louis Jones, June 2, 2005. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>111</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940). Some residents had to cross the walk down the street to get access to running water, for example (22).

<sup>112</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 1.

<sup>113</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 1.

<sup>114</sup> Alex Linn Trout, “Foreword” in Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940).

For those living in the area, however, it was far from a wilderness, although it looked sparse compared to the denser central city. As longtime resident Burniece Avery recalled, to walk through the neighborhood, “one pushed aside giant ferns to travel the paths that wound diagonally through the neighborhood. Here and there, small spaces were cleared for gardens, otherwise, the undergrowth was broken only by towering trees, until one reached the house and lot of a distant neighbor.”<sup>115</sup> It certainly appeared more rural than the East Side neighborhood from which Avery and her family moved in 1921.

African Americans began moving to the area in large numbers during the 1920s. By the 1930s, the population was 2,000 residents, ninety-two percent of whom were black.<sup>116</sup> DUL Board member Nellie Singleton reported that she “felt that the west side colony was permanent.” Therefore, it was necessary for the DUL to focus some of their resources there.<sup>117</sup> From their perspective this was particularly true since many in this neighborhood were migrants who had recently moved to the Detroit area, such as Burniece Avery’s parents, John and Elizabeth Crews.

The Crews moved to the neighborhood after they were unable to make the payments on their home on the East Side. For African American migrants such as the Crews, the landscape was not one of hopelessness and despair, as Daines interpreted, although it was far from ideal. Buying and managing land away from the city and without many services, such as adequate transportation and for some time, running water, presented challenges. Yet “Somehow,” Avery explained, her mother “was going to have to pull her dreams from the sky and plant them on the ground. She sincerely hoped it would be fertile ground.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Burniece Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952.” Burniece Avery Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>116</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 9.

<sup>117</sup> Monthly Report of the DUL, January 26, 1926. Folder 8, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>118</sup> Burniece Avery, *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 100.

For some time, these dreams took the form of a small house “with an unfinished porch in the shadow of a pear tree.” Here, “a walk divided a garden which stopped at the side walk.”<sup>119</sup> On this land, the Crews grew a garden, with particularly memorable “Kentucky Wonder” green beans that they canned to use throughout the winter.<sup>120</sup> As historian Andrew Wiese argues, African American migrants, such as the Crews, who sought out and created these types of environments, were among the first black suburbanites. Like other suburban residents, they, “also expressed preferences for a bucolic landscape, but their ideal included unrefined open space, elaborate gardens, small livestock, and the familiar food and routine that these implied...early suburbanites shared a common displeasure with the quality of life in many city neighborhoods. They sought environments reminiscent of the southern small towns and countryside where they had grown up. Low incomes and white racism routinely thwarted these designs, but where they could, black suburbanites shaped domestic space to suit their preferences, as well as their needs, creating suburbs that combined country pleasures with proximity to urban jobs and the cultural and social opportunities of the city.”<sup>121</sup> In Detroit, the preferences Weise describes in his work were often a contested cultural terrain, not only different from white suburbs, but also from the ideals of other middle class African Americans in the city. The larger discourse in Detroit about what constituted a “suburban ideal,” and its positive or negative benefits were not agreed upon.

For example, when Forrester B. Washington completed a social survey of the area, one African American real estate agent expressed fear that subdivisions away from the central city encouraged migrants to retain their rural lifestyles. “Many colored people from the South, used

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<sup>119</sup> Burniece Avery, *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 126.

<sup>120</sup> Burniece Avery, *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 124-124.

<sup>121</sup> Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization During the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 93.

to a rural environment, settle here,” he described to Washington’s survey team. He continued, “They tend to remain in a static condition, raising vegetables. There is no opportunity for a type of development, which would enable them to adjust themselves to an urban environment...most subdivisions are neglected and unhealthy because there are no provisions for an adequate water supply or sewage disposal.”<sup>122</sup>

Similarly, an African American welfare worker believed, “Living in subdivisions aggravates the health problem and people who adopt it slip into the old southern rural ways of doing things. If they lived in better communities suggestion and public opinion would force them to keep their property and maintain a higher standard of conduct...when there is a large isolated Negro group in any area there is apt to be neglect both on the part of the inhabitants and on the part of the municipal authorities.”<sup>123</sup> While pointing to some of the very real challenges residents in the area faced, such as lack of adequate water supply and sewage disposal, the Eight-Mile/Wyoming neighborhood posed a cultural problem for middle class African Americans and the DUL since it allowed migrants to continue “rural” ways of life that they viewed as antithetical to an urban way of life. Efforts at community building and neighborhood improvement would need to continue since residents in this neighborhood seemed to lag behind the DUL’s vision for African Americans in the city.

Even so, others, such as real estate agents, who could profit from the quick sale of land, argued subdivisions outside of the “congested district” of the East Side “are a great hope for the Negro.” “If the Negro can be encouraged to save towards a lot and home, he will be morally and

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<sup>122</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 59 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

<sup>123</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 59 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

economically saved.”<sup>124</sup> Yet in the eyes of long-time DUL director John Dancy, decentralization was, “as it turned out, far from an ideal solution. Few Negroes had been in Detroit long enough to accumulate enough money to build desirable homes. Many did the next best thing – they built a floor and then erected tents and lived in them until they could afford to proceed with construction of a house. There was no water or sewage in the Eight Mile Road area and it was necessary for the settlers to obtain water. While the development of this area left much to be desired, it was a breakthrough of sorts, for it was the first large colony of Negroes established outside the downtown area.”<sup>125</sup>

Like other Americans, historian Andrew Wiese argues, these early African American suburbanites, “internalized images of ideal places to live, drawing inspiration not only from elite-oriented visions of suburban arcadia but from southern history and cultural inclinations they shared with other black migrants.”<sup>126</sup> As Burniece Avery’s writings suggest, for her family these inclinations toward open yards and gardens may have evolved from the landscapes they remembered and idealized from their past. While Avery was only a child when her family moved to Detroit, and her recollections were written well after her time in the neighborhood, her story provides at least one example of how African Americans sought to create a sense of place around the aesthetics of gardening.<sup>127</sup> For example, in describing the family’s residence in Alabama, she remembered how the “stubborn, ageless hut squatted on a little hill,” was surrounded by a “clearing that looked like a loosely planned garden, halting at the edge of a pine thicket.” The porch, she describes, was covered with “tangled shrubs with ill-concealed briars

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<sup>124</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 58 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

<sup>125</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 57-58.

<sup>126</sup> Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization During the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 69.

<sup>127</sup> As cultural theorist Michel de Certeau writes, “stories...carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places.” In Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 118.

that added to the look of desolation.” But, in the summer “large red, pink, and yellow roses” grew “to greet the buzzing bees as the honeysuckle arbor came alive with hovering humming birds.”<sup>128</sup> Nearby, the family also grew vegetables and raised chickens, although she considered it to be far from “a real home.”<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, while in the limiting environment of Appalachia mining towns, where “the stones, broken glass, and rusty tin cans kept their feet full of sores,” Avery looks back to the days when she ran barefoot all through the garden and yard in Alabama.<sup>130</sup> The constrictions the mining town, symbolized by tasteless food and limited space to cultivate anything better. She writes that, “it was during these periods of trying to force herself to swallow the food that her mind took her back to the garden.” Here, cucumbers, tomatoes and beans had grown. Butterbeans had climbed the palings (boards) that had enclosed the garden to keep the chickens out.”<sup>131</sup> Still seeking a place that could provide a better quality of life when they first moved to the East Side of Detroit, the Eight-Mile/Wyoming area just outside of Detroit might have seemed to offer the possibility of becoming a place they could call home because of the prospects for creating the type of environment they desired.

Daines also reported “one of the main purposes in moving into the area was to have a space for a garden. They love to grow things. Wherever there is a vacant lot (and 72% of the land is unimproved) the inhabitants of the area may use it for gardening. Almost every house has a cornfield at the side or in back of it.”<sup>132</sup> Daines’ observation points to the fact that, in addition to the ornamental gardens, residents also grew subsistence gardens, because there was space

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<sup>128</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 1.

<sup>129</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 9.

<sup>130</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 32.

<sup>131</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 32.

<sup>132</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 39.



available to do so. Houses in the Eight-Mile/Wyoming area often had subsistence gardens and a “chicken yard,” rather than neatly kept lawn.<sup>133</sup> Mrs. Thomas, who moved to the area with her husband from Georgia in 1924, commented, “we love it. There isn’t no place like this place... We have a garden – flowers – trees – sunshine – nice neighbors... we have enough to eat with what we can in the summer.”<sup>134</sup> Similarly, the James’ had chickens and a garden that provided them with plenty to eat during the summer months.<sup>135</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Star reported, “We got a nice garden in the summer. There’s plenty a space and air and sunshine.”<sup>136</sup> The environment and ability to transform the landscape to meet their needs with a garden provided subsistence and beauty that helped create a sense of place amidst adverse circumstances.

Nonetheless, racism, economic and political conditions severely limited how these visions played out on the ground.<sup>137</sup> No doubt most would rather have had a better house to go with their garden. Still, the landscape in this area of Detroit provides insights into the role of the garden in African American life in the north.<sup>138</sup> As one woman reported to Daines, “it does

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<sup>133</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 23. Buerniece Avery’s semi-autobiographical novel/memoir, tracing her family’s journey from Alabama to Detroit also describes how her Aunt, Ada, who lived with her in the area, “was anxious to show off her garden and chickens” (Buerniece Avery, *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamap Publishing, 1977), 100). Avery was born on the family’s sharecropping farm in 1908. In her work, she traces the family’s history from Alabama to Detroit, although the early portions are reconstructed from second-hand memories from her parents, as she would have been quite young at the time.

<sup>134</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 28. Throughout her interviews, Daines transcribed her interviewee’s words in dialect, a common practice for the time period. Offensive and frequently used to misrepresent African Americans as intellectually inferior to white audiences, for the purpose this dissertation, I edited Daines’ transcriptions so they would read more clearly.

<sup>135</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 39.

<sup>136</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 32.

<sup>137</sup> As historian Thomas Sugrue writes, “economic and racial inequality constrain individual and family choices. They set the limits of human agency. Within the bounds of the possible, individuals and families resist, adapt, or succumb” (5). While Sugrue’s analysis of post-WWII Detroit focuses on decisions related to public policy, economics, and other structural issues that worked to define race spatially, I am interested in how Detroiters shaped their everyday lives within “the bounds of the possible.”

<sup>138</sup> For example, one of the people Daines interviewed stated, “Yeah – I’d like a better house, but I’d rather have something to eat” (22).

something to a man's spirit and courage to have his own little spot in the sun. There is a privacy – a decency about these little houses out here, even if they are shacks. You should come out some Sunday in the summer and see the flowers blooming and the people going to church – all dressed up in their meeting clothes. You should see how neighborly they are.”<sup>139</sup>



Figure 2.18: “House in Negro Section, Detroit, Michigan” John Vachon, 1941.<sup>140</sup>

This house, in the Eight-Mile Wyoming neighborhood, is indicative of many of the self-built houses in the area. A cornfield and wall separating the area from the white subdivision behind are visible in the background.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF 34-063747-D.

An informal system of community gardening also appeared to exist. When Daines inquired about “trouble” with stealing as a result of growing food crops on vacant lots, one woman replied, “trouble? – no, we don’t call it that. You mean, if a man goes by a nice cornfield and he sees nice ripe ears with yellow tassels blowing in the wind – does he just take a few?”

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<sup>139</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 49.

<sup>140</sup> Vachon worked for the Farm Security Administration’s photography project. He was influenced by photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. While a seemingly ordinary photograph, the children hiding behind the rock, juxtaposed with the house, garden, and wall reveal much about the way the area existed as a seeming anomaly to outside viewers. As Vachon stated, if the experience of seeing a picture “hits you emotionally or any other way, it...tells you something you didn’t know was” (Oral History Interview with John Vachon, April 28, 1964. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Vachon’s main subject, based on other photographs of Detroit, was likely race relations as represented by the condition of various neighborhoods. In the background, he captures the wall that was built to separate the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood from the white subdivision behind it.

Why, sure he does!”<sup>141</sup> But, she continued, “why, we just plant a little more than we need each year to take care of that. We never have no trouble at all. If we run low, we just get a few off somebody else’s. We all know that. We don’t care. We’re friends out here!”<sup>142</sup> Since many likely mistrusted Daines’ motives inquiring about their lifestyle and neighborhood, the response may have attempted to paint a rosier picture of life in the neighborhood than existed. Nonetheless, residents also suggests that subsistence gardens, whether out of need, desire, or a combination of both, were a prominent part of life amongst individuals in this community.

Shortly after African Americans began moving to Eight Mile/Wyoming, the Detroit Urban League and Forrester B. Washington also took an interest in the homes and yards of the area. He returned to Detroit to complete a social-survey of housing conditions of African Americans in Detroit for the mayor’s inter-racial committee. His team of survey workers took particular note of places that seemed to err in their appearance, noting yards that were “very poorly kept,” and those where “weeds were allowed to grow around.”<sup>143</sup> In the Eight-Mile/Wyoming neighborhood, they found the uniform appearance more affluent areas strived for lacking. For example, in one block, there was a house with a well-maintained “large yard” and “small garden,” but next door the lawns were unkept and in bad condition.<sup>144</sup> Survey workers were more enthusiastic about admirable features on some houses, such as, “flower boxes on the porch” (flower boxes on porches) and well-kept lawns, “attractively arranged with flowers and

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<sup>141</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 39.

<sup>142</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 40. Throughout her interviews, Daines transcribed her interviewee’s words in dialect, a common practice for the time period. Offensive and frequently used to misrepresent African Americans as intellectually inferior to white audiences, for the purpose this dissertation, I edited Daines’ transcriptions so they would read more clearly.

<sup>143</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 22 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

<sup>144</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 23 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

shrubbery.”<sup>145</sup> Also notable for its aesthetics of cleanliness was a home that had an “attractive back lawn,” with “flowers arranged on both sides of the wall and around to the garage, making a view from the sun parlor.”<sup>146</sup> Places such as these gave Washington hope. He noted “the rather popular opinion that Negroes are not careful with the cleanliness of their premises may not be entirely warranted. Several of the survey workers commented upon the cleanliness of the homes despite adverse circumstances.”<sup>147</sup>

Even so, the condition of the neighborhood was uneven. In the eyes of the DUL, the area was a cause for concern and leaders continued their efforts of neighborhood clean-up and Americanization, as they did on the more affluent West Side with the DUL’s Home and Garden Club movement.<sup>148</sup> The DUL sponsored garden contests across the city’s African American neighborhoods as early as 1925 and into the 1930s.<sup>149</sup> According to one newspaper, “several organizations out at the 8-Mile Road district are busying themselves with a real clean up campaign – lawn and yards are to be cleaned up and gardens set with the purpose in mind of

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<sup>145</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 23 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan). See also page 24 where “flowers and shrubbery” were again praised.

<sup>146</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 24 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

<sup>147</sup> Forrester Washington, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section V (Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit, 1926), 15 (Labadie Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

<sup>148</sup> The national Urban League also engaged with the topic of cities versus suburbs on the pages of their magazine, *Opportunity*. For example, in 1932, in line with New Deal ideas, advocated “a garden city for workers,” writing, “It is not only necessary to get the Negro out of the alley, we must get the alley out of the Negro. Mere change in residence is not sufficient to regenerate a people who have absorbed the “slum” virus into the very fiber of their being. Something more is needed, something which will develop lost pride and awaken latent and forgotten ambitions. Just outside these cities within easy transportation distance is land – land which might be purchased and which could be the foundation for a social revolution of the Negro.” (*Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Volume 10 (December 1932), 369).

<sup>149</sup> Records for the exact years and locations of the contest are incomplete. From the Detroit Urban League Records, Boxes 1 and 11, and Marvel Daines 1938 study of the area, Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 40, and secondary sources such as Victoria Wolcott’s *Remaking Respectability* (2001), 155, it appears that the contest ran on and off from the beginnings of National Negro Health week in Detroit during the early 1920s and the late 1930s.

beautifying the surroundings.”<sup>150</sup> Sometimes partnering with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club of Detroit, the prize for the wining garden varied each year, from bouquets of flowers for the 20 best gardens to \$25 in cash.<sup>151</sup> Director John Dancy recalled that the DUL was inspired by the example of the clean up efforts on the West Side, and “adopted the idea and used it to advantage in other neighborhoods. League workers in such sections as the Eight Mile-Livernois area started a contest in which prizes were offered to those who improved their homes the most, and had the prettiest lawns and gardens.”<sup>152</sup> Members of this group began casting a wider net to other areas of the city that they thought poorly represented the black community.<sup>153</sup> “With a view to correcting many of the ills that it is claimed are characteristic of neighborhoods in which Negroes live,” the Home and Garden Club conducted house to house canvases in other sections of the city.<sup>154</sup> “The family heads were asked to keep their premises in order and to beautify their surroundings that they might not be regarded as eye sores by the outsider.”<sup>155</sup>

In 1926, the neighborhood caught the attention of the National Urban League magazine, *Opportunity*. Eugene Kinckle Jones wrote in an article that, “only photographs of the section

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<sup>150</sup> “Detroit Physicians Back up ‘Health and Clean Up’ Drive,” 1923. Folder 2, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>151</sup> “Health Week Linked with Clean up-paint up week,” Detroit Urban League report, 19 April 1927. Folder 20, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 40.

<sup>152</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 58-59.

<sup>153</sup> While there are reports of small groups of African Americans living nearer the outskirts of the city during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this area became open to large numbers of African American migrants in 1921, ironically through connections with the DUL. As DUL director John C. Dancy recounts in his memoir, chairman of their board, Henry Stevens, owned most of this area of land, which he sold to real-estate developer, who in turn subdivided it and sold it to African Americans (Dancy, *Sand Against the Wind*, 1966, 57).

<sup>154</sup> In other cities, African American organizations took part in similar efforts. For example, The Armstrong Association in Philadelphia, an organization similar to the DUL led by Detroit’s own Forrester B. Washington, collaborated with the Department of Public Welfare and “formed a neighborhood club of all the tenants in the street, and has taught them to beautify...their humble apartments by the use of inexpensive curtains, flower boxes, and the like.” The city horticultural department even donated plants. While they admitted, the “effort does not produce new houses, it does serve to check some of the evils growing out of the conditions as they are.” Report of the Detroit Urban League. May 4, 1925. Folder 14, Box 1, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>155</sup> Annual Report of the Detroit Urban League for 1928. Folder 10, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

could give one a comprehensive understanding of the metamorphosis which occurred in this district where rubbish by the truckloads was removed. Flowers were made to bloom and lawns to become green. Houses were painted and such beautiful shrubbery was grown that it was placed on exhibition at the Michigan State Fair and several prizes were awarded to the section.”<sup>156</sup> In 1927, the DUL participated by handing out prizes of flowers and shrubbery to residents for their “untiring efforts in this movement” to improve and maintain the appearance of their neighborhood landscape.<sup>157</sup> The Home and Garden Club “worked in an effort to improve the general surroundings of the homes in which negroes live,” getting the participation of over 70 families, and awarding prizes to 20 residents who “did the best work.”<sup>158</sup> By 1928, the DUL reported, “some of the homes in the section have as beautiful gardens and lawns as many of greater resources in richer sections of the city.”<sup>159</sup> Their work to build a sense of community, increase property values, and create an American identity around the landscape of yards and gardens continued well into the depression years of the 1930s, when Marvel Daines visited the neighborhood.

According to Daines, “the competition is really keen. In the spring and summer the miserable little shacks are surrounded by riots of bloom; dilapidated porches and fences sag under the weight of rambler roses, honeysuckle, and clematis; the yards bloom with myriads of flowers.”<sup>160</sup> Struck by the juxtaposition of beauty and decline, a familiar theme to those looking at Detroit’s cultural landscape that continues today, Daines’ reaction to the sight of gardens

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<sup>156</sup> Eugene Kinckle Jones, “Social Service Progress in 1926,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 14 (January 1927).

<sup>157</sup> “Minutes of the September Meeting,” September 21, 1927, Folder 9, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>158</sup> “Housing” pp. 8, Folder 10, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>159</sup> “8 Mile Road” Folder 10, Box 11, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>160</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 40.

amidst a place she expected to be all but an eyesore is one of near disbelief that such a sight of life and vitality could be found.<sup>161</sup> Aside from subsistence and simple beautification, the gardens in this neighborhood may have had additional salience. As author Alice Walker describes, gardening can be thought of as an expression of black women's creativity in otherwise socially and culturally constraining circumstances. In her work, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker recollects that her mother, living in Georgia, "adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens...Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms."<sup>162</sup> Cultural anthropologist Grey Gundaker also describes that African American yards, "contribute to and are shaped by the ongoing cultural processes that make sense of everyday works and lives."<sup>163</sup> One woman living in the Eight-Mile Wyoming neighborhood expressed a similar sentiment. She described that, because the houses are filled with flowers in the summer, "they make us forget our houses aren't so beautiful."<sup>164</sup> While photographs and records of such places are sparse, it is possible African American gardens in Detroit functioned in a similar way, given the attention they received from residents and visitors alike.

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<sup>161</sup> To Daines, these were what garden historian Kenneth Helphand has called, "defiant gardens, gardens created in extreme or difficult environmental, social, political, economic, or cultural conditions." (Kenneth Helphand, *Defiant Gardens: Making Garden in Wartime* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), 1).

<sup>162</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), 241.

<sup>163</sup> Grey Gundaker, "Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards," in *African Arts*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Apr., 1993), 71.

<sup>164</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 40.

## Conclusion

With the support of the DUL and other civic organizations in Detroit, garden and yard improvement projects continued into the late 1930s. Although leaders had little means of changing deeply seated prejudices and discrimination in the housing market overnight, an urban environmental ethic of the garden was a way that residents of Detroit exercised control to reconcile their place in the city amidst the constraining circumstances of race and inequality during the first decades of the twentieth century. Ultimately, however, the DUL's efforts at creating an equal place for African Americans in Detroit through the cultural politics of assimilation and aesthetic of the well-kept suburban yard and garden, rather than the vegetable patch, did not elicit the response for which they hoped.

The projects were not enough to give their neighborhoods the sense of permanence granted to white districts, in part because when the environmental logic of the DUL was taken to the extreme, it seemed to necessitate the creation of entirely new spaces that could better remake residents into citizens of a modern industrial city. For example, although Daines was taken with the visual effects gardens had upon the houses in the neighborhood, she recommended the residents be relocated, the area demolished, and re-subdivided for sale.<sup>165</sup> In its place, residents would be relocated to developments in "areas close to an industrial center of employment, where Negroes have already settle, and garden space is available. Here a development of small cottages would be built."<sup>166</sup> Daines struggled with the ideas of relocation at the center of the recommendation. As she wrote, "certain questions should be carefully weighted. Has any group, economically more secure and higher up in the social scale, the moral right to go into an area

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<sup>165</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 49-50.

<sup>166</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 49.



such as this, composed of a people who have demonstrated they can meet economic defeat with courage as well as cheerfulness, and take away something they have struggled to keep at real deprivation? This is a question every thinking citizen should ask himself...Already the city has a tremendous shortage of homes within the economic reach of these people. Would we force them back into the already congested downtown slums from which they came twenty years ago in quest of air and sunshine and a garden spot?"<sup>167</sup> While her recommendations were never acted upon, the conclusion did not sit well with residents who had long advocated for connections to city services, access to loans, and neighborhood cleanup. As Avery wrote when she learned of the proposal, "even though we own the land, we are being told to 'get off' because we are not able to develop it the way some people think it should be developed."<sup>168</sup>

Without demolition, real estate developers, who intended to lure white homeowners to new subdivisions beyond Detroit's city limits across Eight Mile Road, and the Federal government, devised their own solution. In 1941, to ensure white residents in this new subdivision would have access to government insured loans, the Federal Housing Administration required the developer build a wall separating the white subdivision from the black neighborhood.<sup>169</sup> Even with sustained efforts to improve the appearance of the Eight-Mile Wyoming neighborhood through gardening projects, it was still impossible for African American residents to gain access to the same financial resources that made a suburban lifestyle possible for other Detroiters. Most city leaders and white residents could not disentangle the rural appearance of the Eight-Mile Wyoming neighborhood from their belief that it marked the

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<sup>167</sup> Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit: Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, 1940), 48-49.

<sup>168</sup> Burniece Avery. *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly* (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 155.

<sup>169</sup> Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 22.

African American residents as backward and unfit for life in a modern industrial city. Other African American neighborhoods in Detroit did not fare much better.



Figure 2.19: Concrete Wall, John Vachon, 1941. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34- 063680-D. Figure 2.20: Concrete Wall c. 1974. Burniece Avery Papers, Detroit Public Library.

On the East Side neighborhood, where Paradise Valley grew into a bustling center of African American life, photographers from the Detroit Corporation Counsel’s Real Estate Division began meticulously photographing and documenting the houses and buildings in the area in order to prepare for the construction of Interstate 75, which would lead to the neighborhood’s demise during the 1950s. In the end, city leaders took the logic of clean up and environmental transformation promoted by the DUL to its extreme and used it to conclude that an entirely new, modern landscape was the only way to rid Detroit of its less than ideal neighborhoods. Even on the West Side, where the DUL and African Americans looked at their homes and middle-class lifestyle as an example for the nation, the construction of Interstate 94 permanently changed the character of the neighborhood and displaced many residents. As West Side resident Susetta McCree recalled in 2005, the expressway “ruined the community. I-94 came right through the middle of our West Side neighborhood. So what does that mean? That means that the neighborhood is torn up for several years. Then you can’t walk to the store

because the highway is going through there. You have to go a roundabout way to get to the street that goes across the highway, to get to McGraw, to go over to Warren or to Milford to do your shopping. The businesses were affected by this. The homes were. It was just a terrible thing to happen. My parents were set for life in that house. They had to go into debt again when, at a time, they should have been able to relax and travel and that kind of thing; they weren't able to do that."<sup>170</sup>

Historian Thomas Sugrue has detailed the social and political history of race and space in Detroit, and historian Andrew Wiese has examined the social history of African American suburbs across the United States, with some attention to Detroit. Yet the actions of the DUL, local residents, and visitors to the area suggest that concerns at the crossroads of culture and environment are also important to understanding how African Americans attempted to advocate for their place in the city amidst political and economic circumstances that were racist and unjust. Industrial factories that transformed the raw materials of nature from far away places into consumer goods dominated Detroit's landscape. Closer to their homes residents also negotiated their relationships with the environment. Single family homes prevailed as the primary housing type in Detroit and the way African American migrants to the city and the DUL thought about the meaning of these domestic, yet no less important spaces, sheds light on how African Americans developed an urban environmental ethic, as they negotiated the politics of class status, assimilation, and race in Detroit.

In Detroit, gardening was a cultural practice African Americans brought to the North, but its meaning and use changed.<sup>171</sup> Rather than a static tradition carried across time and place,

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<sup>170</sup> Susetta McCree, interview with Louis Warren, September 19, 2005. Detroit West Sider Oral History Project, Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>171</sup> Garden historian John Dixon Hunt, building from the work of Eric Hobsbawm, argues that gardens "have often been, from the very earliest examples, an exercise in what modern historians have termed invented tradition.

knowledge of plants and gardening was also used to different ends in the places like Detroit. For Avery and other residents of the Eight-Mile Wyoming area, subsistence gardens provided a way of life, as well as a connection to the past. Through the lens of the DUL and promoters of neighborhood clean-up, a more orderly aesthetic of ornamental gardening and lawns was a way of articulating a higher class status, valuing houses, and defying the racial expectations that black landscapes were inherently disorderly and dilapidated. Furthermore, through garden contests and neighborhood clean up efforts, the DUL partnered with residents in an attempt to build a black community across lines of class using gardening. The way African Americans used yards, gardens, and spaces in Detroit demonstrates that landscape was part of the language black Detroiters used to negotiate their sense of place and, ultimately, advocate for their right to the city. Although fractured along lines of class, the League's beautification program understood African American yards and gardens as "community gardens" in the broadest sense. Using the landscape and a strand of moral environmentalism, the League and its participants sought to build a cohesive African American community, even as they did little to change the ultimate fate of the neighborhood in the eyes of city leaders.

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Gardens are created, adapted, or used to provide spaces and forms of a ritual or symbolic nature that inculcate certain values and norms of behavior having an implied continuity with the past; indeed, they often seek to establish continuity with a suitable historic past that could be objective not idealized but is largely factitious. Some of the most conspicuous examples of invented garden traditions will occur...when society undergoes rapid transformations..." (John Dixon Hunt, "The Garden as Cultural Object," in Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams, ed., *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 19. In Detroit, the Great Migration and industrialization were social and economic transformations that led to the invention of new gardens and garden traditions. The gardens African Americans cultivated in Detroit ranged from meeting subsistence needs to upholding ideals (and dreams) of middle class life, racial uplift, and Americanization through yard contests and clean-up campaigns that sought to shape the behaviors, and representative landscapes, of black Detroiters.

### **Chapter 3: Green Pastures Camp and Environmentalism in Detroit During the Great Depression, 1930-40**

Forrester B. Washington left his position as director of the Detroit Urban League to become director of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, although he returned to the familiar streets of Detroit time and time again to study its African American population and their neighborhoods. On a 1931 trip, however, John Dancy, then the director of the Detroit Urban League, took Washington from Detroit into the Michigan woods. Traveling West from Detroit in Dancy's "Baby Lincoln," the two arrived at Green Pastures Camp, a summer getaway for children from some of Detroit's lowest-income black neighborhoods. Washington described it as a landscape he would never forget.<sup>1</sup> Green Pastures was the Detroit Urban League's (DUL) latest venture in community building. Although the DUL continued their efforts in the city itself, like other organizations across the United States that promoted outdoor recreation, they also looked to idealized landscapes farther beyond the city to promote the health and well-being of city dwellers. At Green Pastures Camp, "rustic bridges" crossed "a beautiful lagoon whose shimmering waters were so clear that the silver fishes could be plainly seen." There was "a natural amphitheater with the side of a grassy hill for the seats and tall trees" with the shore of Little Pleasant Lake "showing between for the back of the stage." The rest of the site was surrounded by 68 acres of "woodland, hills, valleys, fields and streams." In Washington's eyes,

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<sup>1</sup> Forrester Washington, "Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children." *Opportunity*, October 1931, 304. See also draft in Folder 8, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

the place included “everything that is beautiful in country life.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout its 34 years of operation, the DUL conceived of Green Pastures Camp as both an antidote to a modernity of inequality and economic depression, as well as a crucible where the group hoped to further its mission of community building and character development among black Detroiters.

Green Pastures Camp opened for its first season during the summer of 1931, when Washington made his visit. Until its close in 1965, it was a place where thousands of youth from Detroit experienced nature apart from the city along the “serene banks of Little Pleasant Lake.”<sup>3</sup> For Executive Director John Dancy and other leaders of the DUL, Green Pastures was an opportunity to create a didactic landscape removed from Detroit, where they could educate African Americans according to their own vision. With the economic depression offering scant opportunities for adults, let alone youth, the DUL hoped Green Pastures might be the kind of place that could alleviate some of their concerns over youth delinquency and shape the contours of racial consciousness and identity for a new generation of African Americans. To do so, camp organizers transported the moral environmentalism they had used in Detroit to the space of a summer camp, where they could use nature to nurture participants into model American citizens. While the League did not abandon their previous efforts to help those in Detroit through employment programs, housing assistance, cleanup campaigns, and health clinics, they did expand their outlook.<sup>4</sup> What advantages could a landscape away from the city provide during the 1930s and 40s?

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<sup>2</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children.” *Opportunity*, October 1931, 303-304.

<sup>3</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Ends Seventeenth Successful Year of Operation,” *Detroit Urban League Newsletter*, September 1947, Vol. 1, No. 3. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>4</sup> As with neighborhood clean-up and garden contests, leaders of the DUL aimed to convey a sense of “respectability.” As historian Victoria Wolcott argues, during the 1930s “the voices of working-class African Americans were challenging the deafening silence of [DUL Director John] Dancy...who continued to believe that if African American workers could prove themselves worthy of full citizenship, they would eventually obtain it without violence and confrontation.”<sup>4</sup> In light of more radical forms of protests, activism, and interracial labor

## Summer Camps in the United States

Although Washington proclaimed Green Pastures a “remarkable experiment” after his visit in 1931, largely because it was the first large-scale camp exclusively for African American youth, the DUL’s camp evolved from earlier precedents of outdoor camps in American culture. On a national level, the first summer camps appeared in the 1880s, supported by an intellectual architecture not unlike that of urban parks, residential suburbs, and national parks, all of which promised to preserve a place apart from what many considered the moral, physical, and cultural degradations of urban life.<sup>5</sup> As landscape historian Abigail Van Slyck describes,

While camps themselves originated in the Victorian era, the type was constantly reinvented throughout the first half of the twentieth century. What had started, at least at middle-class camps, as an ad hoc arrangement of tents sitting lightly on the land had been transformed by midcentury into a professionally planned environment that required enduring changes to the landscape. Permanent buildings appeared in increasing numbers, some of them supplied with electricity and running water. While interwar camps were nostalgic in tone – using log building to evoke a time when pioneers were still taming the wilderness on the westward moving frontier – midcentury camps enveloped campers in an environment akin to the modern suburb: safe, bucolic, and somewhat artificial.<sup>6</sup>

More than just an escape, however, the structured environments of outdoor camps also originated as part of a cultural process to reaffirm the contours of an American identity in a period of dramatic social and economic transformations. Historian Philip Deloria describes that the founders of America’s first outdoor camps in the nineteenth century, “set out to reimagine the frontier experience through scouting, wilderness, and nature study. Even if one could no longer

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coalitions in Detroit and across the nation during the 1930s (such as the Ford Hunger Strike in 1939), the DUL’s camp remained rooted in the ideals of the League’s earlier projects that leaned toward assimilation and Americanization, rather than protest.

<sup>5</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>6</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 38. Van Slyck also describes that “children’s summer camps were also active contributors to the process of reshaping the landscape – albeit in different ways...Children’s summer camps were part of a widespread but largely uncoordinated process – what we might consider a vernacular process – by which private enterprise reclaimed large tracts of productive land, transforming them into a version of the wilderness and rededicating them to recreational use” (4).

pursue a rugged individualist destiny on the frontier, a rustic week of Indian camping in a national park or a scouting expedition in the country might prove reasonable substitutes.”<sup>7</sup> From their origin, camps were part of a process of making, remaking, and affirming identity. White Americans often used Indian play at camps to imagine Native Americans as primitive others, which allowed participants to reaffirm their own modern identities and positions of cultural power and racial superiority in American society.<sup>8</sup>

Although the leaders of Green Pastures understood race differently than the white individuals Deloria examines, his work emphasizes that race was one node in a network of meanings that shaped individuals’ experience of the great outdoors in American culture. For example, the desire to experience the wildness of nature in the great outdoors was not exclusively an Anglo-American privilege. As historian Colin Fisher argues in his study of Chicago in 1919, “many blacks recognized outdoor recreation as a vital antidote to the ill effects of the modern urban environment...But unlike their white neighbors, African Americans who sought nature frequently had to overcome racism, de facto segregation, and sometimes violence.”<sup>9</sup> Although not specifically aimed at youth, African Americans also found a place within the middle class, back-to-the-country resort tourism, popular across America, in the woods of northern Michigan. As early as 1912, affluent black families began to purchase lots in a subdivision on a lake near the town of Baldwin, MI in a spot they called Idlewild. Also referred to as the “Black Eden,” the area quickly became a popular vacation spot for African Americans

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 101.

<sup>8</sup> As Deloria argues in *Playing Indian* “to be modern, one acted out a heuristic encounter with the primitive. Indian Others, constructed firmly outside American society and temporality, represented this break not only historically, but also racially, socially, and developmentally” (105).

<sup>9</sup> Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 76. For more on African Americans’ experiences with land and the great outdoors, see Andrew Kahr, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Harvard University Press, 2012).



across the United States, but particularly from the Midwest. Famous individuals including W.E.B DuBois, Joe Louis, and Duke Ellington vacationed, performed, and owned property at Idlewild. Other lodging establishments opened up the area to those with less financial means.<sup>10</sup>

The idea for outdoor recreational camps specifically for African American youth living in urban areas during the era of racial segregation was also not new when the DUL founded Green Pastures. As early as 1912, the Baltimore Maryland Chapter of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) participated in the national Fresh Air Movement by purchasing a site in the rural countryside where, according to historian Elizabeth Blum, “the club took poor children for one-week periods to live ‘amid the best environment that tact, love, and skill can procure; they come from the hot, stuffy alleys, dirty homes, where food, sunshine and pure air are scarce.’”<sup>11</sup> Although not a widespread movement for African Americans, the DUL’s Green Pastures Camp built on these legacies. Like earlier generations of camp organizers, the DUL understood the camp environment as a place of character formation, although they acted upon this principle through different practices. The camp’s organizers tapped into a middle-class tradition of outdoor recreation with deep roots in the American consciousness and combined it with their concerns over health, racial justice, juvenile delinquency, and environmental quality in Detroit during the 1930s. In doing so, the DUL embarked on a project to shape a generation of African American youth into model citizens.

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<sup>10</sup> For more, see Rick Coates, “The Rise and Fall of Idlewild” *Northern Express*, June 6, 2002; Ben Wilson and Lewis Walker, *Black Eden: The Idlewild Community* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007); and Stephens, Ronald. *Idlewild: The Black Eden of Michigan* (Arcadia Publishing, 2001). For a the most recent comprehensive history of the resort and its recent revitalization, see Ronald J. Stephens, *Idlewild: The Rise, Decline, and Rebirth of a Unique African American Resort Town* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Blum, “Women, Environmental Rationale, and Activism during the Progressive Era,” in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 85.

## Detroit during the Great Depression

In 1926, Detroit's Committee on Race Relations, formed in response to rising tensions in the city, noted that:

there is a serious lack of summer camping facilities for Negroes, particularly for women and children...Race prejudice in country communities adjacent to possible camp sites adds special difficulty to the problem of providing fresh air facilities for Negro people of the congested districts. We suggest that institutions such as the Y.M.C.A., which possess camping facilities, make these available...the acquisition of additional camping facilities for the use of colored people by such agencies is also highly to be desired.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the recommendation of the Mayor's Committee, outdoor nature camps in Michigan, such as those run by the YMCA and YWCA, remained segregated or entirely closed to African Americans. The same was true of camps in other regions across the country.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, these program's required participants to pay a fee that put the camps out of reach for many of those the DUL thought would benefit most from attending.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the 1920s, John Dancy attempted "to persuade various agencies to provide some kind of camping opportunity for colored children, but all were adamant in their refusal," as he recalled.<sup>15</sup> This unequal access to nature prompted the board of the Detroit Urban League to appoint a committee composed of Dancy, Commissioner of Recreation Clarence E. Brewer and Attorney Cecil L. Rowlette, to investigate the cost and feasibility of creating a camp of their own.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Report of the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations*, Detroit, Michigan, 1926, 12.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cecil Whittaker McFadden's father tried to get her into many local camps, including the Free Press Fresh Air Camp, "but they didn't take any little colored children" (Elaine Moon Latzman, ed. *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community, 1918-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 145.

<sup>14</sup> John Dancy, letter to William J. Norton, June 20, 1930. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>15</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as historian Abigail Van Slyck writes, "summer camps seemed ideally suited to teaching children how to recreate properly. They shared some traits with organized playgrounds, especially in their ability to influence (if not control) where, what, and how campers played. But in many ways, they offered substantial advantages over the organized playground. Camps not only removed campers from the dangers of the city streets on a round-the-clock

Brewer in particular had long been an advocate of supervised outdoor recreation and its health effects, and a supporter of the DUL. He arranged to place leaders from the Recreation Department at the DUL's community centers and playgrounds in African American neighborhoods through Detroit's Department of Recreation. Moreover, as a public recreation professional, he theorized that "health is not merely freedom from illness...health means the possession of a reserve force of strength and energy...Reserve force is the physical capital which is so large a factor in personal success."<sup>17</sup> The physical landscape was also central to this conception of human health. As he wrote in 1922,

the physical and moral dangers of the streets are many and great. Not only does the lack of playgrounds in any city or community cause the death and maiming of hundreds of children; but the loss of play to the children means an enormous moral and intellectual loss, which if computed as an economic loss, would mean millions of dollars each year...If the child is left to his own resources and plays in alleys, sheds and other places unsupervised, delinquency is bound to develop.<sup>18</sup>

Unmediated urban spaces, particularly for youth, Brewer argued, were not only a threat to the health of the human body and mind, but also the economic future of Detroit. This threat appeared even greater for African Americans, who often lived in dense and deteriorating neighborhoods in the city. The onslaught of the Great Depression exacerbated these concerns, as the economic collapse heightened long-standing inequalities. According to Dancy, while seven percent of the city's population was black, "they accounted for 30 percent of those who turned to public charities for support."<sup>19</sup>

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basis for the duration of the camping period, but their natural settings were related to the countryside that had been construed from the late nineteenth century on as an ideal setting for childhood. Better still, their distance from the city made camps more effective than playgrounds in divorcing children from their economic roles as consumers of cheap commercial entertainment" (Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 47).

<sup>17</sup> C.E. Brewer, "Recreation a Necessity," in *Detroit Educational Bulletin*, Vol. 5 No. 9, May 1922, 12.

<sup>18</sup> C.E. Brewer, "Recreation a Necessity," in *Detroit Educational Bulletin*, Vol. 5 No. 9, May 1922, 12.

<sup>19</sup> John Dancy as paraphrased in Keri Bancroft, "Green Pastures Scene II," *Michigan History* Vol. 69, No. 5, Sept/Oct, 1985, 33.

## Back to the Urban Garden

To provide some measure of relief, Mayor Frank Murphy, inspired by reading about Pingree's Potato Patches, used the Unemployment Committee (MUC) to create a similar vacant lot gardening program during the depression. One of the most popular programs of the MUC, Detroit's Thrift Garden Program echoed Pingree's plan some forty years later. Murphy made these connections explicit by naming Hazel Pingree Depew, Hazen Pingree's daughter, honorary chair of the program.<sup>20</sup> Composed of local civic leaders, and eventually the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, this agency solicited land to create gardens on land on the outskirts of the city. Since Pingree's time, however, Detroit had grown. The edges of Grand Boulevard, where many of the Potato Patches were located, once marked the outer boundary of the city. Now, it was well within the city limits, meaning large garden plots were located even farther out, though the committee also promoted smaller home gardens on empty neighborhood lots. Buses were provided to help participants access their plots.<sup>21</sup> The Thrift Garden Committee dealt with similar issues to that of Detroit's first Agricultural Committee of the 1890s, such as soliciting donations of land, transporting gardeners to their plots, and soil quality. Permission to use fire hydrants for water helped gardeners access water.

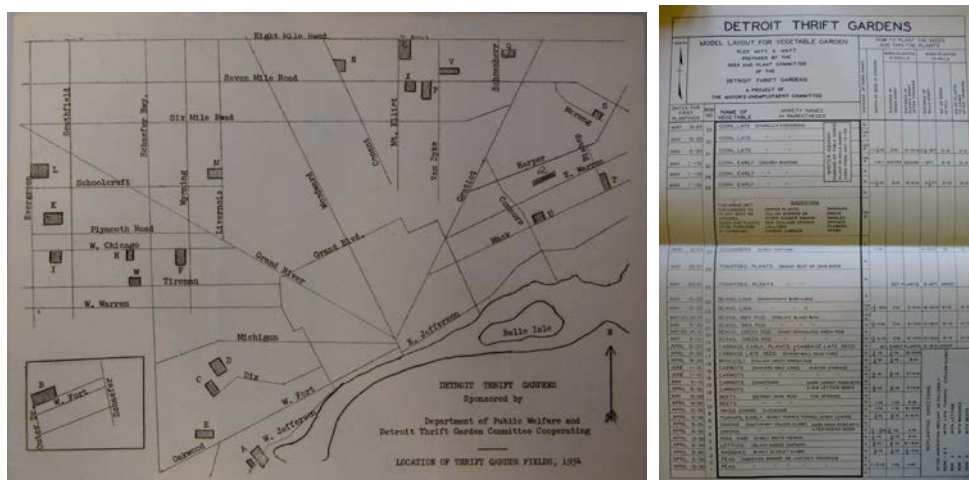
Thrift Gardens also recalled the social ideas of Pingree's Potato Patches. The gardens provided much needed food to unemployed workers. Mayor Murphy and the Thrift Garden Committee feared, "The psychological effect of idleness of large groups of our people," which

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<sup>20</sup> Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The Detroit Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 284.

<sup>21</sup> "Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Gardening Group," March 10, 1931. Detroit Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. As one member noted, "One of the problems during the War time was the matter of soil conditions. It is easy enough to get soil, but to get good soil is a different thing. Twenty years ago potatoes were easily grown, but Detroit has changed in the last twenty years. In Pingree's time, the city limits were just out to the Grand Boulevard and most of the soil was good" (1).

might prove “dangerous to the safety and morale of the country.”<sup>22</sup> One Thrift Garden supervisor, according to historian Sidney Fine, “stated bluntly that the principal virtue o the gardens was that they served to ‘keep funny ideas out of the minds of our unemployed’ and helped them to maintain their ‘self-respect.’” As a result, the gardeners could go back to being “the same industrious law-abiding citizens they were before.”<sup>23</sup> Another committee member noted, “There will be many discouraging features that will arrive but by aiding and educating many of these people, we believe that the effect will be far reaching, not only from the educational standpoint but will be something for the unemployed to take up to make use of their leisure time.”<sup>24</sup> Like Pingree’s Potato Patches, Detroit’s Thrift Gardens were indented to be temporary spaces, a means of reconciling the social tensions produced during times of crisis.



Figures 3.1 and 3.2: Map of Detroit Thrift Gardens, 1934. Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (left) and Model Layout for Thrift Garden plot. Folder 1, Box 1, Detroit Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Murphy as quoted in: Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The Detroit Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 284.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The Detroit Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 284.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Gardening Group, march 10, 1931. Detroit Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

DETROIT THRIFT GARDENS, 176 E. JEFFERSON AVE.		GARDEN NO.	
1. PRINT NAME		FIELD NO.	APP. NO.
2. MARRIED SINGLE WIDOWER	ADDRESS		
3. HOW MANY IN FAMILY?	NEW ADDRESS	CASE NO.	
4. HOW MANY WORKING?	DATE OF APP. BY	DATE ASSIGNED BY	
5. WHERE?	HOME GARDEN, LOCATION		
6. HOURS PER WEEK?	LOCATION OF GARDEN ASSIGNED		
7. HOW MANY SCHOOL AGES?			
8. HOW MANY CAN GARDEN?			
9. HOW LONG IN DETROIT?			
10. HAVE YOU USE OF CAR?	WHAT EXPERIENCE ( FARM TRUCK HOME ) HOW LONG		
11. NATIONALITY? AGE?			
12. HOW LONG IN U.S.A.?			
13. ARE YOU A CITIZEN?	DID YOU HAVE A THRIFT GARDEN IN 1931?		
14. HAS WELFARE EVER HELPED YOU?	I HAVE READ THE RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE DETROIT THRIFT GARDENS AND WILL ABIDE BY THEM TO THE BEST OF MY ABILITY.		
15. ARE YOU NOW RECEIVING HELP?	SIGN HERE _____ FULL NAME		
16. EDUCATION?			

Figure 3.3: Application form for a Thrift Garden. From *Community Programs for Subsistence Gardens*, 1933, pg. 65.

To identify gardeners, the Thrift Garden Committee issues metal badges to each individual, which identified their plot number and “enabled the supervisor to check whether or not each man was at his own plot.”<sup>25</sup> To receive a badge and access to a garden plot for the season, each participant had to sign an agreement that read, “I agree to wear my badge, which shall be provided by the Detroit Thrift Gardens in a conspicuous place at all time when I am working in the garden.”<sup>26</sup> The Committee also provided gardeners with lessons in canning, as well as detailed instructions, including the ideal plot design and rules the gardeners were expected to follow, on an 11 x 7 piece of paper.

During their first season in 1931, the gardens helped to feed 4,369 Detroit residents from 300 acres of land divided into 2,765 gardens that were approximately 40 by 100 feet.<sup>27</sup> The committee also provided seeds for 1,604 home gardens, for those who had space in their yards or

<sup>25</sup> Joanna C. Colcord and Mary Johnston, “Community Programs for Subsistence Gardens,” (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1933), 40.

<sup>26</sup> Joanna C. Colcord and Mary Johnston, “Community Programs for Subsistence Gardens,” (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1933), 40.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, “Subsistence Gardens: Some Brief Reports on Industrial, Community, and Municipal Projects Prepared from Reports Received from States and Local Communities” (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 14.

lots and the ability to till and improve the soil themselves.<sup>28</sup> In addition to distributing seeds packets to be used at home, some plants were also grown in the Belle Isle Green Houses.<sup>29</sup> There were 6,600 gardens covering 400 acres in 1932 and by 1933, 10,569 Detroiters were fed, a number that remained relatively steady for the remainder of the program's existence during the depression years.<sup>30</sup> Garden work, as the Mayor and Committee hoped, did seem to improve the morale of residents. As gardener described, "The work on the garden was a great relief from walking the streets. It gave my mind a rest and made me physically fit for a job when I got one."<sup>31</sup> Because Detroit's Thrift Garden program was run by the city, leaders of the project were concerned with protection and oversight. Similar to the approach taken by Detroit's Agricultural Committee in the 1890s, during the day, field overseers ensure only authorized gardeners were harvesting produce and using the gardens. "To make their position more impressive," these individuals "were made special officers by the Detroit police department and given authority to make arrests."<sup>32</sup> During the evening hours, gardeners themselves took turns watching over the fields where their plots were located. According to one report, each gardener "had only two or three times to watch all season."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, "Subsistence Gardens: Some Brief Reports on Industrial, Community, and Municipal Projects Prepared from Reports Received from States and Local Communities" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes. Meeting of the Detroit Garden Clubs, March 12, 1931. Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

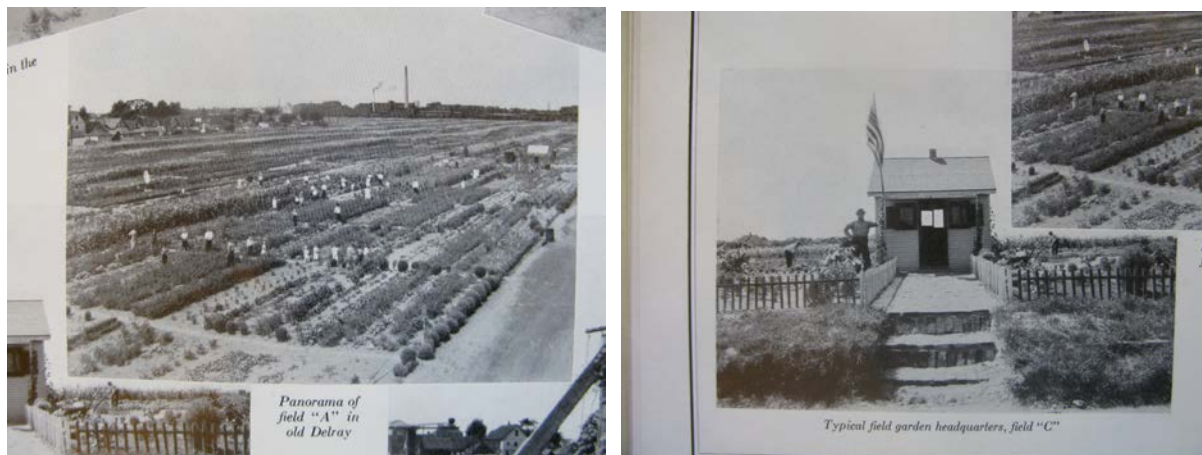
<sup>30</sup> Report of the Detroit Thrift Gardens, 1931; and Letter from Henry A. Johnson, Secretary, March 3, 1933, Detroit Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. See also: <https://detroithistorical.wordpress.com/2012/12/04/thrift-gardens/>

<sup>31</sup> Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The Detroit Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 286.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, "Subsistence Gardens: Some Brief Reports on Industrial, Community, and Municipal Projects Prepared from Reports Received from States and Local Communities" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 16.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, "Subsistence Gardens: Some Brief Reports on Industrial, Community, and Municipal Projects Prepared from Reports Received from States and Local Communities" (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 16.

Detroit's Thrift Gardens were shared amongst the city's many ethnic and racial groups. The *Detroit News* described a garden field in the Delray area as "a Babel of tongues."<sup>34</sup> A report noted that "from one sample field of 134 gardeners there were the following nationalities: seven whites, thirty Negroes, one Austrian, two English, seven German, fifty Hungarian, two Italian, two Irish, three Lithuanian, three Mexican, one Ukrainian, two Polish, three Russian, one Serbian, and two Slavish. Other fields were of similar composition, there being no differentiation as to color, race, or creed."<sup>35</sup> Of this sample, African Americans made up 22% of the gardeners. Although these numbers would likely have varied based on their proximity to African American versus white ethnic neighborhoods, in 1930 African Americans comprised 7.7% of Detroit's total population, suggesting their participation in the program and need to grow their own food, was disproportionate compared to the rest of Detroit's population.<sup>36</sup>



Figures 3.4 and 3.5: A Thrift Garden plot in Southwest Detroit with factories in the distance (left) and a garden headquarters structure with American flag (right). From promotional pamphlet, Folder 1, Box 1, Detroit Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>34</sup> *Detroit News*, April 24, 1932.

<sup>35</sup> Report of the Detroit Thrift Gardens, 1931, Detroit Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. The total number of gardeners in the report appears to be incorrect. From the participants listed the total is 116, making African American 26% of this population.

<sup>36</sup> Detroit population statistics from: Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 23.



When Thrift Garden workers arrived in the neighborhood where many African Americans lived, they remarked how “it was quite a thing you know when we got into this lower East Side section, to find they haven’t any tools or cars or transportation, they just haven’t anything.”<sup>37</sup> It was also here that the young Walter Reuther, who would go on to become Detroit’s famous labor leader, captured a sense of what the landscape of Detroit looked like during this period in a photo album he compiled with his brother Victor. Throughout the album, the Reuther brothers contrast wealth and poverty with not-so-subtle captions advocating for social change. One of their images from Black Bottom, in particular, conveys a sense of why Dancy, the DUL, and others considered the camp so important. African Americans, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, were “contained in a number of crowded, segregated slum housing districts, old run-down residences evacuated by white people. The children play in the streets or on a limited number of public playgrounds.”<sup>38</sup> As Forrester B. Washington explained, “the alleys of Detroit, the unemployment of Detroit, the despair of Detroit produced these children. They were menaced by the vices of Detroit, by the destitution of Detroit, the selfishness of Detroit, the race prejudice of Detroit.”<sup>39</sup> In Washington’s eyes, the environment of the city was closely linked to the racism and social problems that concerned the DUL. His statement demonstrates how “the alleys of Detroit” came to symbolize the larger social problems, like selfishness and racism. The Reuther’s photographs and Washington’s rhetoric led the “alleys of Detroit” to become an organizing framework for thinking about race and social inequality in the city. If alleys seemed to catch Detroit’s low-income African American

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<sup>37</sup> “Minutes,” Thrift Garden Committee meeting, April 30, 1931, Thrift Gardens Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>38</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children’s Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children’s Fund of Michigan, 1957), 140.

<sup>39</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

population in a cycle of poverty, could a different kind of environment stand for, and even advance, social change?



Figure 3.6: African American youth pose for Walter and Victor Reuther on Detroit's East Side, c. 1930. Photograph by Walter and Victor Reuther. Image courtesy of the Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

In addition to raising awareness to the socioeconomic inequality present in Detroit, the Reuther brothers' images of the city make the argument that the environment has a profound effect on the individuals who lived there. They represented an image of the city the DUL wanted to change. Given the scale of inequality in Detroit, the DUL's power to transform deeply entrenched racial attitudes, structures, and spaces was limited. Green Pastures Camp could be, as Washington described it, a "counter-irritant for all these social evils so far as the children are concerned."<sup>40</sup> At camp, he continued, "there was no racial repression for them."<sup>41</sup> While Thrift Gardens could provide food, they were not, in the eyes of the Detroit Urban League, the antidote

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<sup>40</sup> Forrester Washington, "Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.

<sup>41</sup> Forrester Washington, "Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.

to city life or activity that the youth of these areas truly needed.<sup>42</sup> For the DUL, the meaning of a nature-camp environment was not only that of a manufactured wilderness experience, as historian Abigail Van Slyck has described it, but also a place where nature was an escape from racism. An outdoor camp would allow youth to escape conditions so severe that even the Detroit Urban League could not ameliorate or control through clean up campaigns and employment programs.

Motivated to get youth away from the toxic effects of Detroit's alleys, John Dancy wrote to William J. Norton, Executive Vice President of the newly established Children's Fund of Michigan (CFM), to request assistance in establishing a camp for Detroit's African American youth.<sup>43</sup> Former Detroit Mayor, U.S. Senator, and industrialist James Couzens had established the CFM to "promote the health, welfare, happiness and development of the children of Michigan primarily, and elsewhere in the world."<sup>44</sup> As a terminal foundation, the organization ran for 25 years with a ten million dollar gift from Couzens. Dancy had longstanding ties to Detroit's civic leaders and a reputation as "the only black man who could get to white people of means who could change things."<sup>45</sup> Norton, in turn, viewed Dancy as "an exceptionally fine gentleman upon whom the Fund leaned for guidance in any helpful program among Negroes."<sup>46</sup> Dancy used his social connections, as well as the evidence from the League's recreation committee, to argue for funds to create a camp. Although the CFM had a standing rule not to

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<sup>42</sup> While a widespread school gardening movement existed in Detroit from the 1900s-1930s under the leadership of Mary Hamilton Grosvenor and with the support of the Department of Recreation, records do not specifically indicate African American participation in the program.

<sup>43</sup> John Dancy, "Letter to William J. Norton" June 20, 1930, Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>44</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children's Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children's Fund of Michigan, 1957), 173.

<sup>45</sup> Ernest Marshall, camp director, 1936-1937, interview with Keri Bancroft, April 1984 as quoted in "The Green Pastures Scene II" *Michigan History* September/October 1985, 33.

<sup>46</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children's Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children's Fund of Michigan, 1957), 140.

purchase properties, the project fell well within the institution's objective to promote "physical health and wholesome character-building" through recreation.<sup>47</sup> Board members agreed to fund Dancy's request, with an initial investment of \$100,000 to purchase the land and build the camp. The CFM also agreed, on a yearly basis, to fund many of the operating costs.<sup>48</sup> Planning for the DUL's camp began in 1930, shortly after this funding was secured.

### **Planning and Building Green Pastures Camp**

The DUL and CFM chose a seventy-nine acre site in, "a region with great natural beauty, characterized by rolling hills, beautiful lake, verdant valleys, and a wide variety of trees including oaks, maples, beech, tamaracks, elms, and varied forms of other plant life. Wild animals and birds were also abundant in this area making it a wonderful place for a child to spend a vacation."<sup>49</sup> According to one of the camp's managers, "from any angle" the site made "a beautiful woodland picture."<sup>50</sup> It was 65 miles west of Detroit, and 10 miles north of the small city of Jackson, far enough away to be removed from the rhythms of urban life in Detroit, yet close enough to facilitate economical transportation and oversight. It also had 1,900 feet of frontage on Little Pleasant Lake, to ensure swimming would be a key part of life at camp.<sup>51</sup> The land was previously divided into subdivisions to be sold, but with the onset of the Great

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<sup>47</sup> William Norton, "Letter to John Dancy," June 23, 1930, Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; and William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children's Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children's Fund of Michigan, 1957), 140.

<sup>48</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton. *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children's Fund of Michigan* (Detroit: Children's Fund of Michigan, 1957), 143.

<sup>49</sup> "Green Pastures Camp Annual Report." 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>50</sup> Bray Conklin, "Green Pastures Camp Report," 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>51</sup> As landscape historian Abigail Van Slyck describes in her work *A Manufactured Wilderness*, lakeside locations for summer camps were an "all but universal" part of their design (11). Little Pleasant Lake was renamed Welch Lake.

Depression and subsequent drop in property sales, it was likely welcome news that CFM's would purchase the land on the northwest side of the lake.

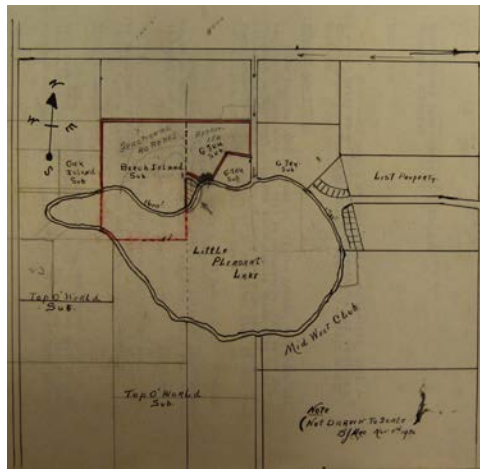


Figure 3.7: Map of proposed property boundaries for Green Pastures Camp. Green Pastures Camp folder, Box 24, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Dancy was also pleased with the site. He wrote, “except for the clearing for the buildings and playgrounds, the setting of the camp was a veritable wilderness.”<sup>52</sup> Even so, the area required additional work to make the wilderness habitable to urban sensibilities, a common practice in American culture. As planned and built, Green Pastures Camp erred on the side of comfort and convenience and simplicity. It was important that the camp's sense of place be constructed to offer an experience different from Detroit. At the same time, because Green Pastures Camp was created by and sought to reflect the values of middle class African Americans in Detroit, it was equally important that the camp exemplify respectability. In planning the camp, leaders at the DUL had to strike a balance between “getting back to nature” and maintaining the image of decorum over the untamed wilderness.

Aside from the camp's location, it also needed a story that would transform it into a cultural landscape with enhanced meaning for African Americans. One of the only stipulations

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<sup>52</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 163.

Senator Couzen's gave when he agreed to fund the camp was that his name not be used as the name of the camp. With his options open, Dancy chose the name "Green Pastures," after a 1929 play of the same name written by white author Marc Connelly. In the play and subsequent film, "Green Pastures," according to Dancy, "purportedly characterized a Negro's dream of heaven."<sup>53</sup> "Somehow," Dancy wrote, "the name seemed appropriate for this beautiful, alluring spot which now was to provide a new dimension in the lives of Negro youngsters who had known nothing but city streets."<sup>54</sup>

The message of the play also spoke to the middle class social vision of the DUL's leaders. As theatre and film historian Thomas Cripps writes, "For blacks, at least those who praised it, even the most nationalistic, had come to embrace – the eventual carving of a black place in American society based upon individual dignity and merit. It was as though Marc Connelly spoke for the achievement-oriented black middle class."<sup>55</sup> The achievement oriented middle class leaders of the DUL, who had used ideals of moral environmentalism to shape neighborhood clean up campaigns a decade earlier, now shifted these environmental ideals outside the city in hopes of instilling ideals of merit and dignity in a generation of low-income African American youth from the city. Cripps writes that the national Urban League's magazine *Opportunity* went so far as to describe that the play as an "uplifting experience that 'transcends the color line.'"<sup>56</sup> Dancy imagined the camp would be a place where the play's ideals could be given material form through an idealized and didactic landscape that he hoped would teach

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<sup>53</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 163.

<sup>54</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 163.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Cripps, "Introduction," *The Green Pastures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 21. Cripps also described that, "Connelly's fable romanticized and memorialized the history of the rural black South that had been decimated by the northern black diaspora and, in disarming style, brought it to a broad national white audience for whom black life had been exotic" (12).

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Cripps, "Introduction," *The Green Pastures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 24. Original quotation from: Howard Bradstreet, "A Negro Miracle Play," *Opportunity*, May 1930, 150-51.

Detroit's black youth how to transcend the color line for themselves, through an education away from the streets of Detroit.

Although Green Pastures was intended to be a retreat from the built environment of the city in a veritable wilderness, the space they selected still had to comfortably accommodate campers. Since it was established “to promote the health, welfare, and educational development of underprivileged Negro boys and girls of Metropolitan Detroit,” the design of Green Pastures Camp had to reflect the DUL's understanding of these values.<sup>57</sup> Mr. R. C. Perkins of Ferndale, a suburb of Detroit, was chosen as the architect. He designed the camp's fourteen simple green and white buildings, which included a dining room that was also used for recreation, first aid station, director's cabin, and ten cabins for campers, eventually expanded to seventeen. While many earlier outdoor camps in the United States used rather elaborate log cabin construction to suggest a more rustic way of life, at Green Pastures the buildings were of simple A-frame construction and cottage-like, with clapboard and exposed beams.<sup>58</sup> There is limited information about the discussions and logic that went into the design of these cabins. However, the choice of an architectural form and style that appeared to mimic tiny homes, rather than log cabins or tents as many camps had, might suggest the ways leaders of the DUL attempted to balance an outdoor camp with the ideals of respectability they sought to instill through moral and environmental reform.

The dining and recreation hall was situated in the center of camp, on top of a hill that divided the property.<sup>59</sup> With the capacity to seat 500 people, it was also used for assemblies and

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<sup>57</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report.” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>58</sup> For an example of the log-cabin ideal earlier summer camps, see Elaine C. Platou: “The Lure of an Ideal Camp,” in *Keith's Beautiful Homes Magazine*, 1926, 78-81.

<sup>59</sup> Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

other gatherings. According to one description, “the Boys’ and Girls’ cottages are situated on opposite sides of the camp site and are well separated by buildings, grove, and a lagoon.” To site these cottages, “the builders took advantage of the natural topography of the grounds which affords a natural separation.”<sup>60</sup> On either side of this “ideally located hill,” there were five cottages for boys, closer to the entrance, and five for girls on the opposite side.<sup>61</sup> All were oriented toward the lake and were designed to maximize proper light and ventilation.<sup>62</sup> The director’s cottage, in addition to being the camp director’s residence, doubled as the administrative offices. There was also a hospital building located near the entrance of the camp, equipped with “four bedrooms, a bath, first aid room and sun porch.”<sup>63</sup>

The site was also designed with an athletic field, created on top of a former lake bottom by filling it in with dirt from near by hills. The lagoon, which emptied into the lake, made a semi-circle around the field and was equally good for natural drainage and fishing. Since this area was situated well below the elevation of the camp, campers and staff had to “descend a series of steps” and go “across a rustic bridge,” before arriving on the field.<sup>64</sup> Although it was often soggy after a good rain, “this situation provided a picturesque scene as well as a wonderful

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<sup>60</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report.” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>61</sup> Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>62</sup> Letter to J.S. Hitchcock from William J. Norton, April 22, 1931. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, CFM Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. As one article in *The Camping Magazine* described in 1932, “there is always a lack of ventilation and light in the buildings hewn logs are used.” (Augustus D. Shepard, “Camp Architecture.” *The Camping Magazine*, Volume 4, 1932, pages 12-14). By opting for a different construction method, the DUL may have sought to further its goal of creating a place that suggested health and well-being, while also saving on the cost of building log structures. Shepard described that “plain mill sawed, dimensioned, rough and faced lumber is the cheapest and most satisfactory” (13). He continued to describe how, “the simpler and inexpensive form of construction can be made most attractive by the proper placing of studs, beams, rafters, trusses...” (13). The architect of Green Pastures took this into consideration, as seen in the image of the dining hall with exposed rafters.

<sup>63</sup> Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>64</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report.” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



playing area,” complete with a regulation boxing ring, ball diamond, volley ball court, and three horseshoe courts.<sup>65</sup>

In the spring of 1931, shortly before the camp opened for its first season, contractors built an access road. Starting at the dining hall, the 14 foot wide road captured some of the natural features of the property, “extending west into the valley and up to the top of the hill on the opposite side.”<sup>66</sup> Trees cut for the construction of the road were used to corduroy the road over “swampy parts” of its path.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the marshy ground along the lake front was graded, and the lake was dredged to create a level, barrier-free swimming area, with separate docks for girls and boys. A channel from the nearby marsh to the lake was also widened and extended, to facilitate canoe trips into this area.<sup>68</sup> One of the “most outstanding features of Green Pastures Camp,” stunning in its “primeval grandeur” was a natural amphitheater created by an impression in the land (embellished with a stage of earth and field stones) that could seat 500 people for outdoor assemblies and Sunday religious services.<sup>69</sup> “The entire camp,” reported manager Conklin Bray, “is hidden from outside view and hundreds of tall, stately trees shelter the campus from the glare of the hot summer sun.”<sup>70</sup> The landscape of beech trees and tamarack interspersed with camp buildings was so moving that one impromptu visitor, Fred Butzel of Detroit, contacted William Norton of the CFM. “I cannot begin to describe the thrill that the visit gave me. I have never seen a more ideal location or a better layout for a children’s camp,” wrote

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<sup>65</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report.” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from R.C Perkins to J.M. Murdock, April 14, 1931. Green Pastures folder, Box 24, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from R.C Perkins to J.M. Murdock, April 14, 1931. Green Pastures folder, Box 24, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from R.C Perkins to J.M. Murdock, April 14, 1931. Green Pastures folder, Box 24, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>69</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; and “My Visit to Green Pastures” Folder 9, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>70</sup> Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Butzel.<sup>71</sup> At Green Pastures, a carefully crafted landscape used the natural environment to shield campers from the racism and constrictions of Detroit. But it was far from only a vision of “nature as a not-modern Place Apart,” as historian Jennifer Price describes Americans’ search for nature outside the places they live.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the camp’s relative seclusion, equally important was Green Pastures’ connections to modern life. Senator Couzens’ influence, in particular, allowed the camp to be hooked to the electrical grid. Not only did “this make it possible for the camp to be electrically lighted throughout,” as Washington noted, but it also, “provide[ed] this type of illumination and power to the farmers of the neighborhood all of whom are whites and who in all the 100 or 200 years that this has been an agricultural community have been forced to burn kerosene oil. This is only one of the many advantages brought to this community for which the neighboring farmers thank God for ‘Green Pastures.’<sup>73</sup> In a small way, the camp was thus a part of the modernization of this area of rural Michigan.<sup>74</sup>

Washington marveled that Green Pastures was “the finest free summer camp in the State of Michigan and probably one of the finest in the whole United States,” not only because of the experience it offered youth in nature, but because of how it was built. Many outdoor camps merely had tents or open-air shelters for lodging. These, according to Washington, were “entirely unsatisfactory” and “far from ideal.”<sup>75</sup> At Green Pastures, the cottages were “well made...which while affording plenty of air offer protection against the elements on rainy days and cool

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<sup>71</sup> Fret Butzel, letter to William J. Norton. 1 August 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), XVIII.

<sup>73</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

<sup>74</sup> Given the deep racial divisions of the era, rural electrification might have also been a way to preemptively ease tensions with residents of the area who may have been apprehensive about having an influx of African American campers to their county each summer.

<sup>75</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

nights.”<sup>76</sup> The cottages also provided each child with an individual cot for sleeping, rather than “bunks arranged in tiers as is the case at so many camps.”<sup>77</sup>

In addition, Washington described that the dining room was so “scientifically planned that there is room for the trays of exactly six children and a counselor at each table...I marveled at the spotless kitchen with its electric stoves and modern equipment of every kind.”<sup>78</sup> One visitor noted in a letter to the DUL that she had “never seen any cleaner work tables, utensils, ice box and equipment in general. No flies, no exposed garbage.” The “kitchen,” moreover, was “flooded with sunshine and plenty of hot water was available.”<sup>79</sup> Washington also wrote that “the white sanitary lavatories and shower baths impressed me as not at all what one would expect so far out in the country but more like those common to a city gymnasium.”<sup>80</sup> This fact was also repeated in the camp’s brochure, which stated that the “twelve green-trimmed cottages offer roomy accommodations with modern sanitation facilities.”<sup>81</sup> Washington of course wanted to promote the camp through his writing. On a practical level, the well-equipped camp offered poverty-stricken youth access to amenities – such as nutritious meals, showers, and healthcare.

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<sup>76</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

<sup>77</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

<sup>78</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

<sup>79</sup> “My Visit to Green Pastures,” 1933. Folder 9, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library. Despite the availability of hot water for this visitor, the volume of use sometimes made showers a cold proposition. As former Green Pastures counselor, Eleanor Jones remembered as an adult, years later, “...it was all cold water. I never felt hot water,” suggesting there may have been a disjuncture between the description of the camp versus actual camp life (*Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes*, 145).

<sup>80</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 304.

<sup>81</sup> “Let’s Go Camping!” Brochure for Green Pastures Camp, Folder 8, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

In addition to these modern amenities, children also “found pine needles in place of city pavements, clear water instead of muddy alleys and bird songs rather than roaring trolley cars.”<sup>82</sup> The cultural landscape of the camp combined the positive attributes of modern life with those of a vision of nature that was not too wild, yet not too manicured. Washington’s indication - and insistence - that the built environment of the camp be ideally situated in a middle landscape between convenience and a more rustic, restorative way of life linked the health of the campers to a particular sense of place. Here, being connected to the land and environment was not “backwards” or “rural” in the way migrants’ vegetable gardens were largely understood, even as the thrift of growing food was lauded during the Great Depression. Green Pastures drew on the notion that camps were places where the middle class might imagine themselves as leisured elites. Similarly, African Americans from Detroit could mobilize the same meanings to imagine themselves as part of a middle class with the same privileges as white Americans. Rather than the labor of growing food or working the land for the benefit of others, at Green Pastures African Americans could enjoy the most modern place in the region for black Detroiters to get back to nature.<sup>83</sup>

Other details also connected Green Pastures to African American identity. For example, each of the cabins at Green Pastures was named after a prominent African American, who had

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<sup>82</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.

<sup>83</sup> As landscape historian Abigail Van Slyck explains, “as much as camp organizers and campers’ parents may have liked to think it was possible to let children experience the wilderness, summer camps were just one component of a complex cultural landscape that was in the process of rapid change. They may have purported to offer respite from the modern world, but they were in fact very much a part of that world. It was a contradictory situation and one that made it particularly important to shape the camp landscape itself to manage – if not disguise – the summer camp’s inherently modern character” (*A Manufactured Wilderness*, 8). While it was important to disguise the modernity of the camp for youth participants, because the quality and success of the camp would be read by white and black Americans as a reflection on the African American community in Detroit, it was also important to convey the modern features and overall quality of the camp, as Washington did in his article.

made a “definite contribution toward the progress of the race.”<sup>84</sup> These included: Fredrick Douglass, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Col. Charles Young, Booker T. Washington, Ira Aldrich, Benjamin Banneker, J.C. Price, Crispus Attucks, Phyllis Wheatley, Aaron Moore, John Merrick, George Washington Carver, and Samuel Coleridge Taylor. As John Dancy recalled, African American history was non-existent in the schools children attended. He described how,

It was possible to go all the way through elementary school and high school without ever hearing of Negroes who had done heroic deeds or made important contributions to American history. I had, from time to time, talked to school officials, seeking a change in this policy, pointing out that it resulted in young Negroes having no image of themselves. But I hadn't much success.<sup>85</sup>

Planned as a didactic environment, each camper “was required to know something of the history of the individual for whom his [or her] cottage was named.”<sup>86</sup> Ernest Marshall, director of Green Pastures in 1936 and 1937, recalled that sometimes “Dancy would stop a child and say, ‘who was Colonel Young?’”<sup>87</sup> The naming of the cottages gave the cultural landscape of the camp an ethos of renewal rooted in ameliorating, at least temporarily, the social and environmental problems of Detroit by exposing participants to new places and ideas. Advertised as a “land of enchantment with rolling hills and green woodland overlooking sparkling Little Pleasant Lake...in a story-book setting,” the camp used its design and programs to tell the story of how African Americans were fundamental to American social life and culture.<sup>88</sup>

With the architecture and storyline of the camp complete, participants were the key variables needed to put this landscape to use. Shortly after the camp was completed in the spring

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<sup>84</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>85</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 162.

<sup>86</sup> John Dancy, *A Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 163; and “Report,” April 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>87</sup> Ernest Marshall, as quoted in: *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes*, 146.

<sup>88</sup> “Let’s Go Camping!” Brochure for Green Pastures Camp, folder 8, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

of 1931, the DUL began accepting applications for staff, college-age counselors, and campers. One of the camp lifeguards recalled that “John Dancy liked men and women who would stand up [strong] like the cottages.”<sup>89</sup> Dancy conducted many of the interviews of children and counselors who applied. Controversially, he often selected counselors from Detroit families who he knew well.<sup>90</sup> Dancy received numerous letters from children, parents, and perspective counselors who wanted the opportunity to attend or work at the camp. But with only approximately 600 spots available each summer, Dancy had to turn away many children and parents who begged him to allow their children to attend Green Pastures Camp. As much as Dancy and others embraced the idea of the camp, Green Pastures could never match the scale of the need.<sup>91</sup>

### **A Healthy Routine in the Great Outdoors**

Every two weeks during the summer, typically on a Monday, those children accepted for a given camp session boarded buses to travel to Green Pastures. Usually leaving from a location near the DUL offices in Detroit, they headed west on U.S. highway 12. The buses turned north just before Jackson, Michigan, where a familiar sign marked the dirt road that led “the contingent of hungry and excited campers” to their destination in the Michigan woods.<sup>92</sup>

The first session during the camp’s opening year began on June 29, 1931. According to Dancy, the 539 children, ages 8-14, who attended “were selected by the various social agencies of Detroit, including the Department of Public Welfare, the Visiting Nurses Association, the

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<sup>89</sup> Dr. Horace Bradfield, telephone interview with Keri Bancroft, May 1984, Detroit, Michigan, as quoted in: Keri Bancroft, “Green Pastures Scene II,” *Michigan History* Vol. 69, No. 5, Sept/Oct, 1985, 37.

<sup>90</sup> Keri Bancroft, “Green Pastures Scene II,” *Michigan History* Vol. 69, No. 5, Sept/Oct, 1985, 36-38.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Thomas, *Life For Us is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 76-77.

<sup>92</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Public Schools, and the Settlement Houses.”<sup>93</sup> Many were away from their homes and parents for the first time. Upon their arrival, Green Pastures’ staff and college-age counselors greeted the campers near the dining hall where they ate before being assigned to their cabins by a lead counselor.<sup>94</sup>



Figures 3.8 and 3.9: Children board a bus for Green Pastures Camp in Detroit c. 1930 (left). Children eat in the dining hall after arriving at Green Pastures Camp c. 1932 (right). Note the relatively unfinished, simple interior with the exposed frame. While partly a move to save costs, the design also created a rustic sense of place. Box 87, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

One of Green Pastures most important roles during the 1930s was providing nutritious food and activities intended to promote overall physical health. A physician examined each participant before they left Detroit. Then shortly after settling into their cabins at camp, the camp nurse screened the children carefully, making note of each child’s weight and height so these statistics could be monitored and measured.<sup>95</sup> During the 1933 season, Dancy noted that “many were at very low ebb in general health...Many children entered camp dejected, hungry and sluggish.”<sup>96</sup> After two weeks at Green Pastures, Dancy reported that “with one or two

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<sup>93</sup> John Dancy, letter to William Norton, September 14, 1931. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>94</sup> Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>95</sup> These physical examinations were given for free by a doctor on the board of the Detroit Urban League. See: “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>96</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

exceptions, every child at camp showed a net gain in weight...all of them came away bright, happy and buoyant after a two week stay at camp.”<sup>97</sup> According to one visitor, the meals were quite a sight, sometimes consisting of “heaping plates of chicken, wax beans, sliced tomatoes, potatoes, ice cream and cake, washed down by tumblers of rich milk.”<sup>98</sup> In the early years of the Great Depression, this was certainly welcome news, even if the weight gain and loss numbers were not always this positive. Nonetheless, the camp was an opportunity to provide some basic healthcare services to participants, continuing a long focus on health that characterized much of the DUL and National Urban League’s work in the first half of the twentieth century.

Aside from strictly health benefits, the logic of physical health at Green Pastures also advanced the DUL’s emphasis on the environment as a moral force that could help campers better acclimate their bodies to city life. As Forrester B. Washington summarized after one of his visits to the camp, “I believe these children, even after only two weeks, will go back to Detroit with stronger lungs prepared to cope with the congestion of Detroit tenements, with stronger legs and arms due to swimming and the other out-door games and greater weight because of the adequately and scientifically planned diet.”<sup>99</sup> Although Washington’s claim is difficult to quantify, the ever-present place of Detroit in his thinking makes Green Pasture’s mission clear: the seemingly wilder environment of the Michigan woods was not only an escape from the city, but also a place intended to transform a generation of urban residents.

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<sup>97</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>98</sup> “My Visit to Camp Green Pastures,” 1933. Folder 9, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library. Much of the food came from nearby stores, bakeries, and directly from farmers when possible. As the 1943 report for Green Pastures stated, “Fresh bread was delivered daily by the Michigan Bakeries from Jackson. Towards the end of the season some fresh vegetables were purchased from the local farmers. Every effort was made to maintain the goodwill of the farmers in the community by purchasing from them whenever their products were available.” (Page 5, microfilm edition). Unlike other camps, there was no kitchen garden at Green Pastures.

<sup>99</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.





Figure 3.10: Children line up for inspection by a nurse in front of Ira Aldridge cabin at Green Pastures Camp, c. 1931. Image courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

After their first day of travel and orientation to life at Green Pastures, campers followed a fairly rigid routine, not unlike those of other outdoor camps of the era, which promoted cultural and physical transformation. According to one report, this routine “proved to be singularly successful” in establishing an order and logic to guide campers’ experience at Green Pastures.<sup>100</sup>

As John Dancy wrote,

the program which was planned for the children took into consideration the educational and cultural side of the child as well as the athletic or physical side. This program provided work in nature study, dramatics, handicraft, swimming and athletics in general. Special attention was given to table manners and the child’s general behavior. Hundreds of people who have visited the camp will speak in highest praise of the results which were obtained from the children on these scores.<sup>101</sup>

The daily routine began at 7 am, when the sound of a bugle woke the campers. By 7:10, campers were expected to begin washing up and airing their beds, with a morning swim optional. Each day at 7:45 am, the campers gathered to raise the flag and sing “America.”

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<sup>100</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>101</sup> John Dancy, letter to William J. Norton, September 14, 1931. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

The flag ceremony was the most obvious way the DUL displayed a sense of citizenship and patriotism at camp. While values of Americanization were a part of the DUL's work since its inception in 1916, they took on a more direct role at Green Pastures. These displays of patriotism at Green Pastures, reported Forrester Washington,

should shame some of the so-called American citizens who are in the habit of denying the parents of these little black tots the full expression of their personality, economically, socially, and politically to see them showing their strong devotion to the 'land of the free' by standing with uncovered heads 'pledging allegiance' before the daily raising and lowering of the American flag.<sup>102</sup>

Washington's words drew not only on a long tradition of defining American identity through experiences in the great outdoors beyond the city, but also made campers allegiance to the United States even clearer by linking it to the American flag. Following Washington's lead, leaders of the Green Pastures combined highly visible patriotic practices, such as reciting the pledge of allegiance as well as ceremonially raising and lowering the flag, with instruction in middle class ideals of good citizenship, such as fair play, good health, and cleanliness. This combination advanced the image and identity-crafting mission of Green Pastures by ensuring that African American youth received the training that might allow them to one day uphold the adults' class-based standards of social decorum. The camp's director, John (Buster) Hopkins, expanded on Washington's thinking by describing how he expected to "imbue the campers with the feeling of citizenship by conducting our flag ceremonies in such a manners that one could not help being impressed regardless of age or mentality."<sup>103</sup> With this logic, Hopkins and Washington linked racial transformation to idealized displays of citizenship and patriotism. Choosing to look past the blatant inequality in Detroit, flag ceremonies at Green Pastures marked

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<sup>102</sup> Forrester Washington, "Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 306.

<sup>103</sup> John (Buster) Hopkins, letter to John Dancy, May 19, 1944. Folder 14, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

one component of a grassroots strategy to reshape the image and identity of African American youth through displays of patriotism, environmental experience, and activities that promoted middle class values. At Green Pastures, the DUL used cultural displays of patriotism to demonstrate that a new generation of African Americans deserved access to the full rights, benefits, and protections of American citizenship. With such overt symbolism, leaders hoped to persuade white society that they were ready to be a part of the nation's middle class, and not an underclass from the alleys of Detroit.

Patriotism was also connected more generally to other attributes of a proper middle class identity. Hopkins emphasized that that camp experience itself could be a transformative process, effecting the minds and bodies of campers, in addition to their sense of racial identity and relationship to the nation. He described how, "the camp should assume a definite responsibility and inculcate the ideals of good citizenship...it should attempt to educate the child in the proper use of leisure time. There should be an inculcation of the ideals of honesty, thrift, and industry...there should be a moral and ethical tone predicated on the basic Christian philosophy of the working world as well as active practice of all the virtues it teaches...Campers should be given the elements of beauty; a means of improving ethically undesirable elements."<sup>104</sup> To further promote this idea, images of these patriotic actions were published in *Opportunity*, the magazine of the National Urban League, to give a sense of this routine at camp.

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<sup>104</sup> John (Buster) Hopkins, letter to John Dancy, May 19, 1944. Folder 14, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



Figures 3.11 and 3.12: Campers and their counselor pose with an American flag in front of the Booker T. Washington cabin at Green Pastures Camp c. 1931 (left) and gathering around the flag pole to recite the pledge of allegiance c. 1931 (right). Images courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

By 1944, the Home Front patriotism of WWII also affected life at camp. To help support the food supply, one report stated, “The boys and girls gave considerable assistance to the farmers in the community, the boys loaded hay on several farms. Both boys and girls picked vegetables and pulled weeds which were endangering the crops. Over 200 boys and girls helped in this effort.”<sup>105</sup> Moving outside the boundaries of Green Pastures’ internal economy, however, pushed the camp’s enterprise into a murky realm. While the efforts were connected to projects, such as Victory Gardens and rationing during wartime, offering the campers as labor to area farmers as an extension of camp life was not the same as teaching citizenship, health, and recreation within camp. Perhaps campers understood the reasons for their volunteer labor in the context of aiding in the war effort. And perhaps the patriotic fervor of WWII shadowed the irony of allowing African American youth to be turned over as unpaid field hands as an escape from the city. The volunteerism may have also been an exchange of labor for good relations with area farmers and a way of further gaining positive publicity in the eyes of white Americans. At

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<sup>105</sup> John Dancy, “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1944. Microfilm edition.

the same time, the desire to be patriotic citizens coupled with unpaid labor in farm fields also shadowed a history of slavery and sharecropping that many of the campers' parents had not left so long ago.

The flag ceremony was followed by a half an hour for breakfast beginning at 8:00 am. Afterwards, campers performed their assigned clean-up tasks, which included activities such as “washing dishes, helping in the kitchen, dining room, or cleaning the cottages, raking leaves, picking up paper, etc.”<sup>106</sup> At 9:00 am it was time for cabin inspection. For this part of the daily routine, the DUL transported the social ideals and moral environmentalism of cleanliness and proper decorum from their clean-up campaigns in Detroit's neighborhoods to the cottages of Green Pastures. These ideas were embedded in issues of race and class. As historian Abigail Van Slyck describes, “many camp organizers embraced the opportunity to introduce campers to standards of hygiene that inadequate facilities sometimes made unfamiliar in households of the urban poor.”<sup>107</sup> Standards of hygiene were even more important at an African-American camp, where appearing “spotless” not only in body but also in environment was a strategy often used to overcome racial prejudice.<sup>108</sup>

In keeping with an ideal of respectability and cleanliness, “each child was required to tidy himself up and arrange the cottage according to special standards.”<sup>109</sup> Campers were taught

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<sup>106</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>107</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 149. In contrast, Van Slyck also notes, “As standards of environmental cleanliness skyrocketed in homes and other institution settings, however, summer camps did not simply follow suit.” Organizers of the largely white camps she examines often embraced “the idea that it was “acceptable for boys to be a bit dirty,” a notion produced by race and class privilege (149).

<sup>108</sup> Historian Nancy Tomes describes the ideal of spotlessness in relation to race and ethnicity in her work *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) as quoted in Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>109</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

how to make their beds in an “approved fashion.”<sup>110</sup> Dancy was pleased to report that after only a few demonstrations, even the “smallest camper could make a bed with little assistance.”<sup>111</sup> Counselors were also expected to “make every effort to exhibit and instill good habits so that the campers will carry them home and they will become a part of their personality.”<sup>112</sup> Counselors then rated each child for their abilities to perform these daily tasks, which counted toward their potential of becoming the “all around camper” for their session.<sup>113</sup> When the camp leaders made their inspection, “the cottage receiving the highest rating was awarded a flag to be displayed during the day.”<sup>114</sup> Reports indicate that the children were quite invested in doing well in this daily competition. The camp report for 1937 also described that in addition to the buildings and grounds, “the camper was also given a careful inspection, including teeth, skin, nails, hair, and clothing.”<sup>115</sup>

Counselors generally came from middle-class backgrounds, were attending college, and were expected to serve as role models for the younger campers. Forrester Washington was pleased to note after his visit to the camp that, “the children learn to emulate these counselors in small as well as big things such as deportment, personal cleanliness and the like.”<sup>116</sup> Another Sunday visitor reported having difficulty locating her son because the scene of order was unexpected. As she wrote, “He was so brown and healthy looking and eating with such decorum

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<sup>110</sup> “Report,” April 7, 1938. Folder 27 Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>111</sup> “Report,” April 7, 1938. Folder 27 Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>112</sup> “Suggestions for Counselors,” 1944. Green Pastures Camp Folder, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>113</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>114</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” April 5, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>115</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Microfilm edition of the Detroit Urban League Records.

<sup>116</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305-306.

that there is little wonder that we couldn't spot him at once (Table etiquette has always bored him, I wonder just how the young counselor achieved such a miracle of orderliness)."<sup>117</sup>

The process of rewarding cleanliness of body and environment was not unlike the prizes of flowers given to the best-kept yards and gardens back in Detroit. With many of the campers from areas such as Black Bottom and Northwest Detroit (Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood, with some seasons reporting more campers from this area than others), the camp was a microcosm for the ideals of urban and community life the DUL wanted to promote, in an environment they had greater ability to control. Elaborate routines, an idealized landscape, and cabins that resembled homes were all meant to "serve as seasonal surrogates, balancing correctives for the failings of conventional, unscientific home life."<sup>118</sup> For African-American leaders of the DUL, the stakes of correcting the perceived moral failings of Detroit's black underclass had even higher stakes than the white campers Van Slyck describes. Through practices such as clean ups and inspections, the organizers of Green Pastures sought to overcome racial prejudice and work toward a more just and equitable way of life for all in the city.

Ten o'clock marked the first rotation of group activities. Although Green Pastures was a coed camp, with the exception of general classes in swimming, music, and drama, "the girls' program of activities was conducted entirely separate from the boys."<sup>119</sup> Although cleanliness routines taught that boys and girls both had responsibility for creating an image of respectability by maintaining an orderly living environment, craft activities drew sharper gendered divisions.

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<sup>117</sup> "My Visit to Camp Green Pastures," 1933. Folder 9, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

<sup>118</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 122.

<sup>119</sup> "Green Pastures Camp," 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

For example, boys were taught woodcraft, and even once embarked on sawing up fallen trees into logs to create seats for the outdoor amphitheater at camp. In contrast, the girls

made use of many tin cans which once contained the food for the camp. They were converted into very pretty flower designs by the added touch of a little crepe paper. The many bottles that once contained mustard and various kinds of extracts were painted in bright colors to be used for flower jars...the junior girls made coat hangers out of tree branches, bracelets from shells and seeds, and little animals from pipe cleaners. It was the aim in both divisions to give the girls some knowledge of just how something could be made out of things ordinarily discarded, and utilize the things that were at hand.<sup>120</sup>

Girls were taught skills that seemed to be more easily translated to the realm of thrifty homemaking rather than contributing to the public life of the camp.

Gendered divisions at Green Pastures suggest the class-based boundaries of Green Pastures' social vision. The DUL imagined the possibility of fostering a new sense of racial identity and empowerment for Detroit's low-income African American youth through a didactic camp experience outside the alleys of Detroit. At the same time, certain programs at camp drew primarily on prevailing, middle class notions of gender where respectable women were shaped through activities related to the home and men were made in the great outdoors. Even so, campers likely had varied responses to the ordered routine and cultural logics of Green Pastures' activities, creating identities that were likely far less rigid than the program suggested. As historian Jay Mechling writes in his study of the Boy Scouts, "the dynamic, interactive nature of the Boy Scout experience means that the organization does not create a single sort of boy or man. Despite the national organization's wishes (maybe fantasies), having a uniform program does not guarantee that the troops crank out a uniform product....Culture is a great deal more messy than that."<sup>121</sup> While the DUL used programs at Green Pastures to nurture the identities of young

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<sup>120</sup> Green Pastures Camp," 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records.

<sup>121</sup> Jay Mechling, *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), xx.



African Americans, how they used these lessons when they returned to their lives in Detroit may have been far more ambiguous than the DUL imagined.

When the first round of morning activities ended at 11:00 am, swimming lessons began, followed by lunch, and then a quiet hour. At 2:30 pm, rotations of boys' and girls' activities continued. At 4:15, there was a second period of swimming. The end of the day was marked by a flag lowering ceremony at 5:15, which included singing the Star Spangled Banner.<sup>122</sup> Dinner was at 5:30, followed by free time for approved campus games (more swimming, jump rope, marbles, checkers, horseshoes, chaperoned row-boat rides around the lake, etc) at 6:00 pm. The daily assembly occurred at 8:00 pm, where there might be a performance of a play or music by the campers, or a lecture on health, nature, or other topic. At 9:15, the sound of taps marked the end of the day and time to return to cabins for sleep.

### **The Nature of Learning at Camp**

The general schedule of the camp served as the foundation for a set of larger values the DUL wanted to convey through activities related to education, health, recreation, nature, and patriotism. As one report stated,

We view this summer camp experience as an important educational activity despite the fact that camping activities...exist for the short period of two weeks. The paramount educational attainment lies in the development of skills both mental and physical...such of which is often swallowed whole by the complexities of urban life. Camp life re-creates many adventurous scenes shared in childhood novel and drama, and is potent in stimulating wholesomely the emotions, imaginations and impulses of young children. The nature of camp life with its intimacy of contact and its sharing of common tasks in the camp concretely reveal to the boy or girl the necessity and value of cooperative living.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> "Report," April 4, 1934. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>123</sup> "Green Pastures Camp Ends Seventeenth Successful Year of Operation," *Detroit Urban League Newsletter*, September 1947, Vol. 1, No. 3. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

The camp's environment and activities were intended to facilitate positive community dynamics between individuals. Participants were encouraged to see the value in "cooperative living" and an "intimacy of contact" with fellow human beings outside the limits of Detroit, where this community ideal was constantly threatened by racism and economic depression. As Van Slyck describes, by the 1930s,

home had lost its undisputed status as the best setting for the nurture of healthy children, and the summer camp was claiming a place as an effective substitute...by the middle of the twentieth century, camps – for all their rusticity – were conceptually closer to child-study laboratories and closely aligned with the scientifically therapeutic environments celebrated in modern culture.<sup>124</sup>

The move away from home that Van Slyck describes was particularly true in the eyes of the DUL, since the African American youth for whom Green Pastures was built came from neighborhoods and living situations that the DUL viewed as the antithesis of the middle class home life and sensibilities they worked tirelessly to promote.

A DUL report from 1934 characterizes Green Pastures as precisely the laboratory that Van Slyck describes:

The program played its part in filling a human need for social idealism, necessary recreation and progressive education. It has received the endorsement of more than a thousand visitors who came to the camp during the season....many visitors interested in children and social work found Green Pastures Camp a well equipped laboratory for further education.<sup>125</sup>

In this "laboratory," campers learned about the practice of everyday middle class life through "community projects." These projects, according to one report, "were an outgrowth of camp needs." For example, a post office was needed to distribute mail, so "postmasters" were elected

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<sup>124</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 99.

<sup>125</sup> "Green Pastures Camp 1934." Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

“from the campers who showed some ability for the job.”<sup>126</sup> Girls managed the camp’s library, which included about 200 books donated by the University of Michigan. There was also a camp bank, where children had to deposit whatever small amount of money they brought with them, in addition to a camp store where candy was sold, in part “to discourage a desire on the part of the children to leave the grounds and go to a nearby store to buy candy.”<sup>127</sup> If children did not have any money, they were assigned small tasks and given money so they could also buy candy and post cards.<sup>128</sup>

Although the creation of such urban features as libraries and banks were unique to Green Pastures camp and may seem out of place in an outdoor nature camp, according to John Dancy, these community projects had very real social values, and were therefore an important part of our procedure. Each of them roused the campers’ interest, particularly the bank. It gave the children an opportunity to function in spheres usually reserved for adults: they could learn to deposit and withdraw money, and best of all, could purchase supplies at the post office and candy window, all this was considered very important to them.<sup>129</sup>

The activities also aligned with the DUL’s on-going mission of instilling the ideals of a middle class life – finances and education for example - as they sought to build community amongst Detroit’s African American population. Here, the environment afforded them opportunities Detroit could not.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> “Green Pastures Camp 1934.” Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>127</sup> “Green Pastures Camp 1934.” Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>128</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>129</sup> “Green Pastures Camp 1934.” Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>130</sup> Green Pastures was not unlike other white American camps. As historian Phillip Deloria argues, “although these camp activities appeared patently antimodern, they invariably pointed back to the modern city. Camps frequently set up miniature economies, campers earning money for chores, subcontracting their work to others, forming companies to handle such contracts, hiring, firing, banking, and loaning money across the camp network...Antimodern campers played the primitive authentic against modernity’s inauthenticity in order to devise a better modern...the two positions – modernism and antimodernism – were, in effect, two sides of the same coin” (*Playing Indian*, 102).

In less explicitly patriotic displays, the cultural values of citizenship were also taught through recreational activities such as sports, craft-making, hiking, and nature classes that took up the majority of a camper's waking hours. Amidst fears of youth delinquency during the depression-era, organized recreational activities were part of the way adults structured life at camp for youth to instill what they considered to be positive cultural values. According to a report on the 1933 season, for example, "treasure hunts, beside being of recreational value, had the purpose of encouraging interest, persistence and perseverance," values the DUL wanted to promote as a part of a middle class ethic of hard work, and no doubt qualities that were useful for maintaining resolve in a city where racism limited equal access to the opportunities to make a living. Field meets were held on the last Saturday of camp. "Their purpose was to develop, through competition, a growing interest in athletics by fair play and clean sportsmanship."<sup>131</sup> At the end of each session, the camp staff selected one boy or girl to be the best "All-Around Camper," an award for those "who did the most outstanding work, and who made a definite contribution to the camp in education, physical activities, citizenship and responsibility."<sup>132</sup>

As one report noted, "the most important phase of any camp program is that directly devoted to the development of character."<sup>133</sup> To these ends, there were also honor councils for both boys and girls intended to reward the behavior of other campers. "For the purpose of banding together those girls who showed definite signs of becoming leaders," the girls chosen for this honor by Green Pastures' staff had to display characteristics of "courage, loyalty, honesty, fidelity, and dependability," as these attributes aligned with the image of "beautiful

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<sup>131</sup> "Green Pastures Camp," 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records.

<sup>132</sup> "Green Pastures Camp," 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records.

<sup>133</sup> "Green Pastures Camp Annual Report," 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

womanhood” the DUL sought to model.<sup>134</sup> In the eyes of the adults leading Green Pastures’ program, the boys’ honor council, “brings forcibly to the boy’s attention the fact that camp is trying to inspire him – trying to make him a better boy.”<sup>135</sup> To become a member, it was necessary to maintain a “high standard of moral and physical excellence.”<sup>136</sup> To create interest in doing well, promote positive role models, and further the didactic mission of the camp, Dancy also “made pictures of the all around campers, the Honor Councils, the two best cottages and the choir from each group,” and then “mounted and placed [them] in the dining hall.”<sup>137</sup>

The leaders of Green pastures also invited inspiring guests to speak with the youth, as role models for them to emulate. The most famous of these was the heavyweight champion boxer Joe Louis, “who generously gave a lot of his time to helping.”<sup>138</sup> On his visits, he would box with children in the ring, where he “submitted to an appalling number of fistic defeats at Green Pastures Camp that never somehow made it into the record books and in which the challenger gave way at very considerable weight.”<sup>139</sup> In the evening Louis sat with campers and staff around the campfire to tell stories. Other visitors were more or less exciting, depending on the camper’s interest. They ranged from a dean from the University of Wisconsin Law School, to singers Lillian Evanti and Etta Moten (Barnett), who memorably performed “Flying Down to Rio” while sitting on the end of the dock as campers, standing on the hillside, joined in on the

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<sup>134</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>135</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>136</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>137</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1935. Folder 27, Box25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>138</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children’s Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children’s Fund of Michigan, 1957), 141.

<sup>139</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children’s Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children’s Fund of Michigan, 1957), 141.

chorus.<sup>140</sup> Not only a back-to-nature experience, Green Pastures camp was a place for campers to meet and learn about African American role models who were successful in various roles in American social and cultural life.<sup>141</sup>

Standards of excellence were also taught through athletics. For boys, the athletic program was intended to stress qualities such as “sportsmanship, leadership, and team work. As one report noted, “the boxing ring was the scene for settling many arguments and unnecessary fights.” For the girls, “athletic activities aimed to create...a spirit of fair play and clean competition, also, an added interest in sports.”<sup>142</sup> Girls also participated in baseball, volleyball, and horseshoe pitching (which “offered keen competition to the boys on special occasions”), but not boxing. One impromptu visitor was so struck by the “fine sportsmanship” he saw that he wrote his friend William Norton at the CFM to explain that he could not “begin to describe the thrill which the visit gave me. I have never seen a more ideal location or a better layout for a children’s camp, and the relationship between the children and councilors was indescribably fine.”<sup>143</sup> As the 1937 report for Green Pastures bluntly described, “life in a civilized world is highly competitive and sometimes unjust. Life at Green Pastures, a miniature world, is competitive, but necessarily just and honest, stressing opportunities rather than inequalities.”<sup>144</sup> While the “civilized world” of Detroit was a marked by dramatic inequality for many African

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<sup>140</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children’s Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children’s Fund of Michigan, 1957), 142.

<sup>141</sup> Not all of the children met these expectations, however. On one occasion in 1933, the camp hosted a session with 100 boys from the Special Education Department of Detroit Public Schools, many of whom were quite difficult for the staff. According to the report filed, six of the children ran away, and five of these were picked up by police from Ann Arbor and taken back to camp. Dancy found the remaining child, who had been gone more than 24 hours, on the road between Ypsilanti and Wayne. There was also vandalism to the camp, done by several members of this “notoriously destructive” group. These incidents, however, appeared to be exceptions, with most other transgressions in the DUL’s reports much less severe.

<sup>142</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records.

<sup>143</sup> Fred Butzel, letter to William J. Norton. August 1, 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder I, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>144</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Americans, Green Pastures was a place where youth and adults alike could imagine a different way of life.

Within this “miniature world,” nature study was one of the ways camp educators strove to stimulate “wholesomely the emotions, imaginations and impulses of young children” through an “intimacy of contact” with the nonhuman world.<sup>145</sup> Small classes were taught daily by college-age instructors. “Through these nature study hours which take place daily,” wrote Forrester Washington, “a new world is opened to these boys and girls of the city streets who know nothing of the trees, the birds and the animal life of the open country and the woods.”<sup>146</sup>

Nature classes were intended to “bequeath to every child a genuine love of the beautiful, especially in nature, an appreciation of nature in all of its manifestations, and a sense of kinship with nature that makes one feel at home in the out-of-doors.”<sup>147</sup> Since Green Pastures’ location was “particularly blessed by beauty in the natural environment,” the camp “afforded a splendid opportunity for dissemination of this principle.”<sup>148</sup> With the exception of general classes in swimming, music, and drama, “the girls’ program of activities was conducted entirely separate from the boys.”<sup>149</sup> This was true for nature classes, in part, because sex-education was also a part of the curriculum for these classes, in addition to more general lessons about “reproduction...among lower animals.”<sup>150</sup> To discuss life processes, “the instructor commenced with the simplest forms of plant life, branched over into animal life such as fish, frogs, and

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<sup>145</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Ends Seventeenth Successful Year of Operation” Detroit Urban League Newsletter, September 1947, Vol. 1, No. 3. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>146</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.

<sup>147</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>148</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>149</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records.

<sup>150</sup> Untitled report on nature classes, 30 August 1935. Folder 10, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

snakes, and completed the series with two lectures on [human] sex.”<sup>151</sup> By doing so, the instructors demonstrated how the campers were a part of a larger ecological system where they were not any less human because of their race.

Victoria McCall and J. Carney’s reports on Green Pastures’ nature study classes for 1935 reveal that daily sessions included lessons that ranged from affective to more scientific approaches to understanding the environment. For example,

In nature study activities, the leaders endeavored to appoint out to the children the beauty of the sunlit forest, tall trees, still waters, wild flowers, formation of the earth’s surface as well as the animal and bird life found in the area. They were taught the appreciation of the beauty in the color of the sunset, reflection of the moon on the silvery waters of the lake, the blackness of the night penetrated by the light of the moon and the twinkling stars.”<sup>152</sup>

McCall, the girls’ nature study instructor for the 1935 season, reported that for some of the children, evening boat trips around the lake, “afforded their first glimpse of a perfect sunset or the early rising of the moon,” as well as taught them about water plants and animals.<sup>153</sup> And even though they “could not identify all of the plants” they found on their hikes, “the children were aware of the beauty of the countryside.”<sup>154</sup> During the 1933 season, one report estimated that “the total distance covered for the entire season exceeded 3,500 hiking miles.”<sup>155</sup>

Other lessons included learning the function of the different parts of plants, astronomy, and cloud formation. To assist with teaching these lessons, children collected leaves, identified trees on the camp grounds, made contributions to Green Pastures’ butterfly collection, cut flowers for the dining hall, created an aquarium, and raised corn sprouts to demonstrate the

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<sup>151</sup> “Report,” 1934, Folder 27, box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>152</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>153</sup> Untitled report on nature classes, August 30, 1935. Folder 10, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>154</sup> Untitled report on nature classes, August 30, 1935. Folder 10, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>155</sup> “Green Pastures Camp,” 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records,



process of germination. In addition to classifying and identifying specimens, children also collected objects of natural wonder from around the camp site, including snake skin, snake eggs, turtle eggs, petrified toadstools, clams, flowers, insects, and leaves. They then used these findings to create “nature lore” exhibits that were displayed in the dining hall during visitors’ day.<sup>156</sup> Sometimes, these exhibits included living creatures, such as bullfrogs, blue racers, garter snakes, field mice, ground moles, horned beetles, clams, butterflies, pollywogs, and turtles. Since “the desire to live and let live was placed foremost in the children’s minds,” all specimens were returned to their “native haunts” after several days of observation.<sup>157</sup> The staff noted that a shelter for storing and mounting specimens would be an asset to Green Pastures camp, since “during the season, children had to keep their treasured material in tin cans and other containers which they placed under their cottages.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Bray Conklin, “Green Pastures Camp Report,” 1949. Folder 2, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; “Boys Nature Study,” 1935 report. Folder 10, Box 26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>157</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937. Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. According to historian Abigail Van Slyck, the practice of collecting bits of nature and presenting them in museum-like displays was a common feature in nature camps, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s (*A Manufactured Wilderness*, 77-78).

<sup>158</sup> “Green Pastures Camp Annual Report,” 1937, Folder 27, Box 25, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. According to historian Abigail Van Slyck, the practice of collecting bits of nature and presenting them in museum-like displays was a common feature in nature camps, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s (*A Manufactured Wilderness*, 77-78). While no documents suggest a permanent building was constructed for this purpose at Green Pastures Camp, the practice indicates how the camp and activities were not unlike those of other camps during this period.



Figures 3.13 and 3.14: Green Pastures campers share a turtle, snake, and butterfly box c. 1931-1932 (Left) and campers swimming in Little Pleasant Lake c. 1931 (right). Image courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, Detroit Urban League Records, University of Michigan.

Although both Boys' and Girls' nature study lessons emphasized an appreciation of nature, camp directors did make subtly gendered differences in their lessons as they did with other camp activities. For boys, "the chief aim was to give the children an appreciation and understanding of the living world about them. This included an elementary knowledge of the processes of life and their significance in both plants and animals."<sup>159</sup> The foundation of the boys' nature lessons grew from appreciation to understanding. Understanding, rather than appreciation alone, suggests a more rational and scientific search for knowledge through curiosity. For girls' nature lessons, the instructors emphasized more affective dimensions of experiencing the natural world, as classes "aimed to instill in them an appreciation and love for nature, and particularly the beauty which constantly surrounded them during their brief stay: to create a desire to preserve nature: to become more observant of their surroundings as well as to instruct them toward higher ideals."<sup>160</sup> While both boys' and girls' nature lessons aimed to

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<sup>159</sup> "Green Pastures Camp," 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records.

<sup>160</sup> "Green Pastures Camp," 1934. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records.

enlighten participants, boys were expected to concern themselves with knowledge of the environment, while girls focused on beauty.

Even with these gendered differences, however, the ideals given to nature at Green Pastures was above all about creating a protected haven away from Detroit. J. Edward McCall, a former counselor and nature instructor, summarizes this idea in his poem, “Green Pastures” where he writes,

The camp, near Grass Lake, Michigan,  
Sits on a hillside green and high,  
And towering birches round about  
Stand guard, their arms raised toward the sky  
The trees are big and tall and straight,  
Friendly and firm as sheltering rocks;  
They look like shepherds on a hill,  
Watching o’er their precious flocks.<sup>161</sup>

In the lines above, natural elements such as trees and rocks insulate the camp with religious significance. It was, McCall continued, “like an earthly paradise” for those who had the opportunity to experience it. More so than public spaces like Belle Isle Park or neighborhood playgrounds, the cultural landscape of Green Pastures Camp provided a common place that allowed the DUL to imagine a better future.

In the minds of the camp’s creators, the process of going back to nature allowed African Americans access to a foundational American experience that modeled the expectations of middle class life. As landscape historian Abigail Van Slyck argues, youth camps acted as a “key signifier of middle-class identity.”<sup>162</sup> Amidst social and demographic changes that coincided with increased growth in America’s urban industrial regions, camp landscapes became important places for the middle class “to address anxieties about gender roles, race relations, class tensions,

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<sup>161</sup> Edward J. McCall, “Green Pastures Camp.” Date unknown. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>162</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxi.

and particularly about modernity and its impact on the lives of children.”<sup>163</sup> While the specific programs to ameliorate these concerns varied at each camp, by the 1930s “summer camps worked their way more deeply into the fabric of the nation,” as places “essential to the production of good citizens.”<sup>164</sup> The DUL tapped into the idea of summer camps as a site of middle-class identity formation and used it to promote racial transformation. If campers could learn the values of fair play, respectability, and social roles valued by Detroit’s white middle class, organizers believed participants would stand a better chance of becoming members of that class.

## **Conclusion**

After Green Pastures’ first season, John Dancy wrote to William Norton at the Children’s Fund of Michigan to report that he was “convinced that the establishment of this camp has proved the most popular move ever made in the interest of colored people in the city of Detroit...Green Pastures Camp has been a Heaven on earth.”<sup>165</sup> Washington also proclaimed that “if John Dancy had not done any more than conceive and bring to actuality ‘Green Pastures Camp’ he would have justified in a large part his retention for so many years a Director of the Detroit Urban League.”<sup>166</sup> Despite the enthusiasm of its organizers and participants, by 1954, the support for Green Pastures Camp began to disappear.

The Children’s Fund of Michigan, planned as a terminal foundation from the beginning, liquidated its assets and organization in April of 1954. As part of this process, the title for the

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<sup>163</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxi.

<sup>164</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxv.

<sup>165</sup> John Dancy, “Letter to William J. Norton,” September 15, 1931. Detroit Urban League Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>166</sup> Forrester Washington, “Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.

land was deeded to the DUL, along with the responsibility to support the camp with other sources of funding. The League began charging a fee for campers, which grew to as much as \$25 before the camp closed in 1965, due to a lack of funds.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, desegregation became law in the United States. This brought increased opportunities, but also led to the closure of many long-standing black businesses and organizations, such as Green Pastures, as African American youth had opportunities to attend other camps and look for employment elsewhere.

During Green Pastures Camp's 34 years of operation, approximately 15,000 children attended the camp's summer sessions. In addition, operational staff, counselors, visitors, and participants in the five national urban league conferences held at the camp were all a part of this place.<sup>168</sup> Some campers and counselors went on to have success in sports, academics, and various other careers. Additionally, as historian Richard Thomas writes, "we probably will never know how many of these poor children became builders of the black community as a result of being exposed to Green Pastures Camp."<sup>169</sup> As a cultural landscape, Green Pastures' combination of design, location, and slate of programs aimed to shape African American youth into men and women who could survive, and thrive in Detroit. In this, it was a classically modern experiment, bringing students from the city to the country in order to better prepare them for life in an industrial city. By crossing the fluid divides between an urban space and a wilder one, leaders of the Detroit Urban League tapped into a tradition of summer camps that has long been a part of the way Americans young and old have sought out a relationship with the natural

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<sup>167</sup> William J. Norton, "letter to Edward Gushee," July 3, 1953. Green Pastures Camp folder, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; "Green Pastures Camp 1953 Summary." *Detroit Urban League Newsletter*, 1953. Green Pastures Camp folder, Box 8, Children's Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>168</sup> William C. Richards and William J. Norton, *Biography of a Foundation: The Story of the Children's Fund of Michigan 1929-1954* (Detroit: Children's Fund of Michigan, 1957), 142.

<sup>169</sup> Richard Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community In Detroit, 1915-1945* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 81.

world. With an explicit focus on race, the cultural landscape of Green Pastures Camps gave a renewed sense of purpose to contact with a wilder environment. Today, although the site no longer exists, the history of this cultural landscape demonstrates how middle class African Americans used an environmentalism of outdoor camping to shape the contours of racial consciousness, Americanization, and urban life during the 1930s and 40s.

Like Belle Isle Park and African American yards in Detroit before it, Green Pastures was a landscape that aimed to reconcile the negative effects of urban industrial life, while also ameliorating social and cultural tensions, this time around issues of race and class. The DUL, like the creators of Anglo-American outdoor camps across the United States, conceived of Green Pastures as an antidote to an urban-industrial modernity and an orderly place to shape American childhood. Unlike other camps, however, the meaning of nature and race at Green Pastures was deeply connected to black Americans' experiences of inequality and marginalization in Detroit.<sup>170</sup> The inability of Belle Isle Park and previous efforts at Americanization to transform the situation for all African Americans living in Detroit, heightened by the severity of the Great Depression, led the Detroit Urban League to rethink their relationship to nature in the city and create a place of moral environmentalism significantly farther apart from the city, although their focus and mission were intimately tied to creating individuals that might be able to make a more just and socially sustainable city in the future.

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<sup>170</sup> As historian Mart A. Steward argues, the origins of an African American environmental thought can be traced back to slavery. As he writes, "African Americans' perceptions of the issues, how they respond to them, the tactics they employ, and the goals they seek have been conditioned by their historical experiences with injustice and by the political culture and environmental ethos that comes from their long history first as an enslaved and then as a marginalized minority in America" (Mart A. Steward, "Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism," in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, 2006, 20). Steward also argues that "African Americans developed what in modern terms might be regarded an environmental ethos long before the environmental justice movement, before the civil rights movement, and before they were emancipated and had citizenship rights conferred upon them" (17). The DUL's Green Pastures camp, I argue, is a part of this historical trajectory in African American environmental thought. As they remade the landscape into Green Pastures Camp, they did more than merely reproduce Anglo American ideals of wilderness and childhood. While they certainly built upon these ideas, they also crafted a distinct vision for how the outdoor camp experience in nature could be used to shape their identity as African Americans.

For organizers, the camp was an opportunity to positively affirm participant's racial identity with programs related to African American history and culture such as cabin names and guests who were role models for the youth. Equally important, the camp also provided leaders of the DUL with a chance to instill African American youth with values such as thrift, respectability, and fair play that were characteristic of the middle class culture they wanted for all of Detroit's African Americans. As Forrester Washington summarized, at Green Pastures the campers "found talks of right standards of conduct, and what was more important, actual training in working unselfishly with others in place of the anti-social 'every man for himself' spirit of the city streets."<sup>171</sup> Even while distanced from it, the city of Detroit had a constant presence and influence on the meaning of the camp. More than an escape into the woods, Green Pastures Camp sought to link the memory and meaning of a quintessential American experience – imagining a life a part from modernity in the wilderness - to issues of race, class, and culture specific to African Americans. While nature alone could not heal the deep social divisions built through years of discrimination in public policies and cultural practices, it did seem to make a difference, however fleeting, to those who made it a place, and memory of their own.

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<sup>171</sup> Forrester Washington, "Deluxe Summer Camp for Colored Children." *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Vol. 9, October 1931, 305.

#### **Chapter 4: Metropolitan Parks, Suburbanization, and the Challenge of Regionalism in Detroit, 1943-1973**

When voters in Detroit went to the polls on November 5, 1940, they had before them a proposal that editors of the *Detroit News* described as “a brave dream” that was both “lofty in conception and tremendous in its social implications.” The measure would allow property taxes to fund a regional governance organization, the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA), for the sole purpose of building and maintaining a system of parks along the watershed of the Huron and Clinton Rivers that made a broad circle around the city as they flowed through rural, suburban, and industrial areas of Wayne, Washtenaw, Livingston, Oakland and Macomb counties. Residents of these 5 counties, totaling more than 3,000,000 people, would have to approve the initiative on the ballot. “It is the kind of a dream worth holding to by persons of vision and resolution,” wrote the editors. “It is the kind of dream, materialization of which will improve the way of life for all of us.”<sup>1</sup>

For its supporters, the measure seemed to be a logical solution to a growing regional concern about suburban development, the effects of industrial pollution, and limited recreational opportunities in outlying areas surrounding Detroit. One of the plans leading proponents, Dr. Henry Curtis, who was an organizer of the National Recreation Association and former director of playground in New York City observed: “Anyone who keeps his eyes open must see that the new houses that are going up along our country roads are not farm houses...the territory between

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<sup>1</sup> “Park and Highway Plan Demands Consideration,” *The Detroit News*, June 15, 1940.



the Huron and Clinton Rivers,” with Detroit at the center, “is peopled much more largely by city people than by farmers.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to residential development encroaching on a once-rural area, geographer Floyd A. Stilgenbauer described the way industry threatened the region’s natural environment. In a speech given at the Michigan Academy of Science Arts and Letters, he conveyed a sense of the anxiety held by many when he stated, “the rapid growth and expansion of this great industrial metropolis...left early scars on the landscape. Some of the finest recreational resources were about to be lost, for virgin forests were being exploited; sewage, oil and factory waste were polluting streams; inland lakes were falling into the hands of private owners and investors; remaining wooded areas were rapidly decreasing and prohibitive costs of land were driving parks and recreational improvements farther away. Factory workers and their families were leaving the city on week-ends in search of places for recreation.”<sup>3</sup> Pollution, uncontrolled growth, and the rising price of land threatened the region’s access to these resources. “If the people of the area are to plan for and secure those objectives that mean progress,” Curtis wrote, “some form of organization is necessary.” With voters’ approval, Curtis and others hoped the HCMA would be the first organization empowered to link the larger metropolitan landscape of Detroit together with a network of parks designed for open space preservation and recreation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Henry S. Curtis, “The Metropolitan Area of Detroit,” undated article (c. 1936-1938) in the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority archives, scrapbook number 1, 1936-1938.

<sup>3</sup> Stilgenbauer, Floyd. “Detroit’s Expansion into the Umland and Related Recreational Planning of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority.” *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science Arts and Letters*, Volume xxxiii, 1947, 215-227.

<sup>4</sup> After years of studies and promotion by a group led by two professors from the University of Michigan during the 1930s, they garnered enough support amongst individuals in the five-county region (Wayne, Washtenaw, Oakland, Macomb, and Livingston) to persuade the State Legislature to enact legislation to create the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority in 1939. Public Act 147 delegated the HCMA with the power/responsibility for creating and maintaining a series of parks along the Huron and Clinton rivers, including the ability to assess and collect taxes to fund this project. Taxes were not to exceed ¼ mill per year on the total assessed valuation of each of the five counties. Although challenged in court, the State Supreme Court upheld the validity of the law in 1942, when the official planning under the HCMA began in earnest.

Like other projects before it – such as Belle Isle Park and the Detroit Urban League’s Green Pastures Camp – plans for the HCMA were vested with a sense of moral environmentalism, the notion that the quality of the environment could reflect and reshape the values of the people who live in it. Through technocratic planning, leaders thought well-designed spaces could use nature and recreation to support well-being of the regions’ residents, promote a greater sense of environmental stewardship, and reconcile the negative consequences of urban growth to make Detroit a more desirable place to live. As a promotional pamphlet leading up to the election described, “The system of parks, playground, bathing beaches, overnight shelters, bicycle, hiking and nature trails, fishing and boating areas, picnic grounds and other facilities for pleasure-seekers could be quickly and easily reached over new express highways radiating from the heart of Detroit.”<sup>5</sup> For supporters, these plans brought a renewed optimism at the end of the Great Depression that a region whose prosperity was forged through an industrial expansion might be able to better survive, and continue to thrive, through a regional effort at balancing natural area preservation and recreation. Yet with an outward focus, what would become of nature and parks in Detroit, and the landscape of the city itself, under such a plan? Over the course of thirty years, residents of Detroit would slowly learn the answer to this question as the fate of the city and its resources became increasingly entwined with that of the suburbs.

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<sup>5</sup> “Proposed Playground for S.E. Michigan,” promotional pamphlet. HCMA Archives scrapbooks, 1936-1938 Volume.



Figure 4.1: “Proposed Playground for S.E. Michigan,” with lines radiating outward from Detroit to the bold outline, which follows the Huron and Clinton rivers. Image on pamphlet produced by The Detroit-Huron-Clinton Park and Parkway Association, c. 1939-40. HCMA Archives scrapbooks, 1936-1938 Volume.

This chapter examines the changing meaning of Detroit’s landscape during the post-World War II era of mass suburbanization by looking at the ideas and regional politics supporting the creation of a metropolitan park system surrounding the city between the 1940s and 1970s. As historian Matthew Gandy writes, “the growth of the suburbs was explicitly fostered by an appeal to a pastoral ideal that served to undermine the rationale for urban nature sustained by the legacy of nineteenth-century urbanism. With mass suburbs and easy access to the countryside provided by cars, the arguments for the provision of nature in cities lost their rhetorical power.”<sup>6</sup> The HCMA played a role in defining a suburban ideal by imagining the region of metropolitan Detroit as a network of large, picturesque parks connected by parkways. At the same time, the politics surrounding the city of Detroit’s relationship with the HCMA also facilitated disinvestment from the city itself. With a vision of regional cooperation, the HCMA

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 147.

believed the environmental cause of creating large regional parks for the benefit of many would unite the area's population. As Adam Rome argues in his work *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* (2001), "In the years after World War II, as the nation's builders turned acre after acre into suburban subdivisions, a large number of Americans became concerned about the transformation of the landscape...the effort to preserve open space was...a critical stage in the evolution of the modern environmental movement."<sup>7</sup> Americans' desire to be closer to nature fueled the suburban rise of the environmental movement between 1940 and 1960, which sought to resolve the contradiction apparent in clearing the land to build homes away from the city.<sup>8</sup> For a growing number of suburban residents, the HCMA was a tolerable form of regionalism because it aimed to preserve some of the recreational amenities and picturesque scenes of nature amidst Detroit's expanding suburbs. Instead of redistributing resources across all areas of Metropolitan Detroit, the HCMA's primary goal was to create new parkland along a particular watershed.

The Metroparks promised a better future for the region through easy access to parks and nature for all. At the same time, the decisions government leaders and voters made about how to locate and fund the Metroparks ultimately helped to facilitate disinvestment from the City of Detroit alongside other policies such as highway construction and low interest loans. The quality of the city's parks and environment deteriorated into the 1970s, while those in suburban regions flourished. With regard to Detroit and other cities like it, Rome's work does not go far enough to explain how the suburban environmentalism he examines grew hand in hand with what historian Thomas Sugrue has described as "the origins of the urban crisis" during the 1940s and 50s.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119 – 120.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>9</sup> As historian Thomas Sugrue argues in his work, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996), the seeds of Detroit's urban crisis began not with the riots of 1967, but with the problems of housing, employment discrimination, and urban disinvestment of the post-war era. Although Sugrue's work does not cover parks as a part of this narrative, the

policies of urban disinvestment Sugrue examines divided Detroit from its suburbs along lines of race. At the same time, this chapter demonstrates that public policies that supported suburbs over the city had devastating consequences for Detroit's environmental assets, such as Belle Isle Park. Rather than becoming a unifying space, as those in power imagined, the development and implementation of the Metroparks system fueled the unequal distribution and maintenance of environmental amenities within the region. Without a strong vision or agreement on how to preserve and protect the natural spaces, parks, and gardens existing within Detroit's cultural landscape at the origins of the urban crisis, the seeds of investment, and environmental benefits, grew outside, and not within, Detroit's city limits. The way regionalism was put into practice in metropolitan Detroit by the HCMA hurt the city of Detroit itself because leaders were stalled by political divisions and began creating new spaces – a “playground for S.E. Michigan” – rather than equitably distributing resources between municipalities. These decisions continue to affect the city and its resources today.

### **“A Great Harmonious Whole:” Suburban Growth and the Origins of the HCMA**

The Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority evolved from the context of New Deal programs during the Depression, the national parkway and highway movement, and the federally enabled growth of mass suburbs in the United States, all of which promoted a decentralized vision of American life. The organization's origins can be traced to 1936, when Henry Curtis was leading a National Youth Administration project to survey the quality and extent of recreational opportunities in Washtenaw County, the county immediately to the west of Wayne County, where Detroit is located. This project involved interviewing residents “to determine their

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development of a regional park system in the post-war period was one of many factors contributing to the disinvestment of Detroit's urban environment. Metropolitan parks on the periphery of Detroit created a cultural and environmental amenity in closer proximity to residents in Detroit's suburban communities, rather than the city itself.

opportunity and desire to utilize public recreational facilities.”<sup>10</sup> Curtis’ survey found there were very limited recreational opportunities and parks in Washtenaw County. Moreover, much of the land, particularly around the Huron River and its surrounding lakes, was privately owned. People he talked to were “overwhelmingly in favor of the development of extensive public recreational facilities.”<sup>11</sup> Seeking others who might be interested in working to devise solutions to the lack of public recreational resources in the area, Curtis approached Harlow O. Whittemore, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.<sup>12</sup> Whittemore shared Curtis’ interest in recreation and environmental preservation, and had long been interested the Huron River Valley, particularly because pollution of the river threatened to make it incompatible with other uses. For example, there was a garbage reduction plant at French Landing, where “12-15 carloads of garbage” were brought every morning from Detroit and turned into fertilizer.<sup>13</sup> The smell reportedly carried five to ten miles “and probably takes at least \$10 from the value of every acre of land lying within a five-mile radius.”<sup>14</sup>

Fueled by Curtis’ survey and the growing fear that the natural features of the area might be forever changed by development and pollution, Whittemore and Curtis began thinking outside the political boundaries of Washtenaw County, and toward the ecological boundaries of the Huron and Clinton rivers, by conducting a large survey of the watershed that extended through Wayne, Washtenaw, Livingston, Oakland, and Macomb Counties and flowed into the Detroit

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<sup>10</sup> David Laidlaw, ““A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority” (1948), 4. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>11</sup> “Creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” undated (after 1947), pg. 1. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>12</sup> “Creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” undated (after 1947), pg. 1. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Dr. Curtis was also a long-time advocate of regional and county parks, as described in his 1927 article, “Two Thousand Counties Need Parks” published in *The American City*, April 1927. Curtis and Whitmore also partnered to write a guide to the Huron River valley sponsored by the Federal Writer’s Project.

<sup>13</sup> “Reasons for Huron-Clinton Development are Listed,” HCMA Scrapbook, 1936-1938.

<sup>14</sup> “Reasons for Huron-Clinton Development are Listed,” HCMA Scrapbook, 1936-1938.

River, and ultimately, the Great Lakes. As Whittemore wrote in 1937, “All of this scenery, this intimate beauty of detail, this historic human interest, these recreational opportunities for fishing, boating, camping, picnicking, hiking, horseback riding, and motoring, not to mention convenient and deeply satisfying home sites, all lie, as it were at the doorstep of the nearly 2,500,000 inhabitants of the Detroit metropolitan area. But for a long period the valley has been, and is continuing to be, devaluated for these purposes by uncontrolled use and unpunished misuse of the river and its shores.”<sup>15</sup> Both men fit the model of open-space environmentalists that historian Adam Rome describes in his work, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*. As he writes, “open-space activists made three kinds of arguments. In the words of the time, one was a ‘conservation’ argument. Another argument, essentially aesthetic, focused on ‘amenity’. The third argument dealt with ‘outdoor recreation.’”<sup>16</sup> Together, Whittemore and Curtis used such arguments to draw the public’s attention to these issues, with the hope that knowledge and the possibility for change would help others to imagine a new future for the region.

One of the first steps Curtis and Whittemore took to develop a solution to the environmental problems they observed in the region outside of Detroit was to organize a conference held on March 5, 1937. Held at the University of Michigan, the event was held, “for the purpose of formulating and forwarding the executing of a coordinated plan for the development, improvement, and utilization of the resource of the valley in the best interest, both

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<sup>15</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Proposed Huron-Clinton Parkway.” *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review*, Vol. 44, 1937-38, pp. 207-226; 208.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123. Planning for the HCMA, however, began much earlier, during the 1930s. This suggests that the intellectual structure of regionalism and decentralization supporting the planning and development of the Metroparks was connected not only to a suburban environmental ethic, but also (as Whittemore’s reference points above suggest) to an earlier urban-industrial impetus for preserving and ensuring access to nature through parks and outdoor spaces. Moreover, the Metroparks would not have been conceptualized as such without the support of New Deal programs, such as the Federal Writer’s Project, and recreation surveys that were sponsored by the Federal government, as well as the institutional support and intellectual space of the University of Michigan, where Whittemore and Curtis developed their plans.

of their owners and the general public.”<sup>17</sup> Representatives from all five counties attended the meeting. Shortly after the conference, a group of “industrialists, philanthropists and educators” formed the Huron-Clinton Parkway Committee “to help people of the Detroit metropolitan area organize themselves into a park and recreation district.”<sup>18</sup> To forward the mission of cleaning up the Huron River and laying out plans for recreational development of the two rivers, the committee made a survey of recreational facilities of the entire five-county region in southeastern Michigan, with the assistance of the National Park Service.<sup>19</sup>

A Federal Writer’s Project program to author a guide to the Huron River Valley also provided an opportunity for Whittemore and Curtis to begin to publicize some of their ideas to a wider audience. Whittemore went so far as to write that “the scenery of the valley...is no longer and can never be again classed as natural.”<sup>20</sup> The region around Detroit, he argued, was a damaged landscape, in need not only of preservation, but also restoration. While industrial pollution was one culprit responsible for transforming the landscape’s appearance, in his essay Whittemore also began to notice, and critique, some of the aesthetic and environmental effects of suburban development like other national critics of suburbia, such as William Whyte. “There certainly is no reason why suburban homesteads should be ugly or obtrusive when the scenery is usually the reason for choice of location,” Whittemore explained.<sup>21</sup> “Yet,” he continued, “there are so many rural homes that resemble huge pillboxes carelessly dropped by some passing Paul

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<sup>17</sup> Report of the Secretary of the Conference on Improving the Huron Valley. As quoted in: David Laidlaw, ““A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority” (1948), 4. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>18</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Proposed Huron-Clinton Parkway.” *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review*, Vol. 44, 1937-38, pp. 207-226; 209.

<sup>19</sup> David Laidlaw, ““A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority” (1948), 7. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>20</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “Improvement of the Scenery of the Huron Valley.” Draft of *A Guide to the Valley of the Huron River with Map and Plan for its Development*, 1937, Federal Writer’s Project. Huron River Valley Guide Folder, Box 3, H.O. Whittemore papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>21</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “Improvement of the Scenery of the Huron Valley.” Draft of *A Guide to the Valley of the Huron River with Map and Plan for its Development*, 1937, Federal Writer’s Project. Huron River Valley Guide Folder, Box 3, H.O. Whittemore papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



Bunyan.”<sup>22</sup> Unplanned suburban development, according to Whittemore, seemed incongruous with the idealized vision of the land he imagined.

Whittemore believed, “The Huron Valley possesses great natural beauty and scenery. But such beauty is easily neutralized or destroyed by the introduction of inharmonious utilities, necessary as they are, and by unintelligent treatment of the open spaces, woods, farms and building and by uncontrolled uses by crowds of people.”<sup>23</sup> He continued,

Thus all of the necessary and desirable uses and activities that are to be provided must be studied and developed as part of a great harmonious whole, a landscape design for the whole valley in which the natural and rural scenic beauties are preserved as far as possible and new areas created by the introduction of objects and features of good intrinsic design value, sympathetically blended with their surroundings. Such objects are highways, bridges, power dams, and plants, railways, residences, club-houses, farmsteads, cultivated fields, orchards, pastures, and fences and cemeteries. Certain features are almost impossible to harmonize such as telephone poles and power lines, outdoor billboards, rubbish dumps, fishing shacks, and tramp shelters.<sup>24</sup>

Within his vision of a “great harmonious whole,” as Whittemore imagined it, large regional parks would offer the opportunity to reconcile or “harmonize” the machines, such as roads and dams, into a suburban garden to create a more beautiful “pictorial composition” from a landscape in danger of losing the elements that made it seem closer to nature. Not unlike earlier urban-environmental advocates, Whittemore’s aesthetic also came with a subtle sense of class distinction that situated his vision within a suburban pastoral. Landscape elements such as highways, residences, and club-houses – elements of progress and urban civilization – Whittemore notes were more easily “harmonized” compared to “rubbish dumps,” where the

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<sup>22</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “Improvement of the Scenery of the Huron Valley.” Draft of *A Guide to the Valley of the Huron River with Map and Plan for its Development*, 1937, Federal Writer’s Project. Huron River Valley Guide Folder, Box 3, H.O. Whittemore papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>23</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “Improvement of the Scenery of the Huron Valley.” Draft of *A Guide to the Valley of the Huron River with Map and Plan for its Development*, 1937, Federal Writer’s Project. Huron River Valley Guide Folder, Box 3, H.O. Whittemore papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>24</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “Improvement of the Scenery of the Huron Valley.” Draft of *A Guide to the Valley of the Huron River with Map and Plan for its Development*, 1937, Federal Writer’s Project. Huron River Valley Guide Folder, Box 3, H.O. Whittemore papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

byproducts of progress find their final resting place, and “fishing shacks,” that are associated with rural and working class populations who were probably more likely to use the land for subsistence and labor rather than recreation.

During the 1870s, urban leaders in Detroit worked to create Belle Isle Park as an idealized green space, also removing fisheries, out of a fear that the city’s masses were becoming alienated from nature amidst a rapidly growing industrial landscape. Similarly, Whitmore inherited this line of thinking as he expressed concerns that the long arm of real estate development and its associated elements, such as telephone poles, power lines, and billboards, was stretching into areas many still considered rural retreats outside the crowded central city. Since Belle Isle was already working to preserve nature in the city proper, Whittemore and Curtis saw a need for the similar resources outside Detroit. With a decentralized, suburban region at the center of their ideas, however, the city ultimately became the place to escape, rather than transform.

While the aesthetic vision of a suburban pastoral that Whittemore described was shared by many who imagined suburban life as a desirable alternative to the crowded industrial city, the movement of large numbers of Americans to areas outside cities would not have been possible without federal policies created during the 1930s. Although the movement out of American cities would increase after the Depression and World War II, the seeds of the growth that Whittemore and Curtis began to notice were planted during the 1930s through federal housing policies.<sup>25</sup> Two years before Curtis and Whittemore began surveying recreational opportunities, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was created as a part of the National Housing Act on June 27,

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<sup>25</sup> Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

1934.<sup>26</sup> While this piece of legislation had many components, including building standards that improved the quality of new housing construction, one of the most notable and far-reaching effects was its mortgage insurance program. As Adam Rome describes, “if lenders and builders met a number of conditions, the newly created Federal Housing Administration would guarantee 20-year loans for up to 80 percent of the value of a home.”<sup>27</sup> In short, if private lenders and builders met certain conditions established by the 1934 act, which included an overwhelming focus on new housing development, it would be significantly easier for homeowners to acquire loans. While suburban development in the United States dates to the late nineteenth century, the 1934 act made it possible for more people to pursue this vision of life outside the city. “Quite simply,” as Kenneth Jackson explains, “it often became cheaper to buy than to rent...Not surprisingly, the middle-class suburban family with the new house and long-term, fixed-rate, FHA-insured mortgage became a symbol, and perhaps a stereotype, of the American way of life.”<sup>28</sup> Although the act had more limited effects during the Depression years when it was first introduced, it is one of the more significant reasons the development of suburban areas dramatically increased between the 1940s and 1960s.

In practice, this suburban-centered logic also pervaded the FHA’s insurance policies, which, as historian Kenneth T. Jackson describes “went to new residential developments on the edges of metropolitan areas, to the neglect of core cities.”<sup>29</sup> The FHA’s 1939 *Underwriting Manual* taught, “crowded neighborhoods lessen desirability,” and “older properties in a

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<sup>26</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 203.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 205-206.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 206.

neighborhood have a tendency to accelerate the transition to lower class occupancy.”<sup>30</sup> In addition to class, Jackson and other scholars have thoroughly documented how the FHA gave extraordinary attention to race by allowing, “personal and agency bias in favor of all-white subdivisions in the suburbs to affect the kinds of loans it guaranteed – or, equally important, refused to guarantee.”<sup>31</sup> The FHA *Underwriting Manual* warned that the “infiltration of inharmonious racial groups,” would cause an area to lose its investment value.<sup>32</sup> “A change in social or racial occupancy,” the manual warned, “leads to instability and a reduction in values.”<sup>33</sup> The racist language of the FHA *Underwriting Manual* built on years of private and government-backed lending practices that literally divided the landscape along racial, and to a lesser extent, class lines.<sup>34</sup> For example, the Federal Homeowners Loan Corporation, created in 1933, which focused on long-term loans for home owners foreclosed upon or nearing default during the Depression, created risk maps that “applied...notions of ethnic and racial worth to real-estate appraising on an unprecedented scale.” These maps and corresponding classification scale usually rated neighborhoods with even a small portion of black inhabitants at the lowest grade, noted with a red line drawn around these neighborhoods.<sup>35</sup> “The damage caused by the HOLC came not through its own action,” Kenneth T. Jackson describes, “but through the influence of its appraisal system on the financial decisions of other institutions,” as private banks used the

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<sup>30</sup> As quoted in Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 207.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 207.

<sup>32</sup> Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual*, (Washington, DC, 1936), paragraph 323, part 3. For further discussion, see also Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 208.

<sup>33</sup> Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual*, (Washington, DC, 1936), paragraph 233, par 2. For further discussion, see also Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 208.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 203.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 201.

government's discriminatory Residential Security Maps in lending decisions "until at least the 1970s."<sup>36</sup> These policies worked to confine many African Americans in Detroit to crowded and deteriorating neighborhoods, without equal access to the financial means to improve their homes, despite efforts to do so through clean up campaigns. Likewise, the policies of suburban growth meant that the largest constituency in closest proximity to large regional parks would be white suburban residents.

From the beginning, the ecologically minded "great harmonious whole" Whittemore imagined was also a deeply racialized cultural landscape, lined with the social divisions created between "inharmonious racial groups" that characterized suburban expansion across the United States. Although the racial lines between Detroit and its suburbs rarely drew the explicit attention of environmental advocates during this period, remaining invisible in the face of dramatic environmental change, they had profound implications for the constituencies who would ultimately come to use and benefit from the places Whittemore and others wanted to see preserved and turned into parks. As geographer Richard Schein explains, "the cultural landscape is especially adept at masking its complicity with processes of racialization when it is enacted as part of other, seemingly more benign narratives of American life."<sup>37</sup> The growing suburban environmentalism of this period, for example, began to resonate with a large segment of the region's population because it made aesthetic and quality of life appeals that were, on the surface, seemingly untainted by the social and political dimensions of race. As plans for the region gained momentum, however, the effects of an environmentalism focused on the promise

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 203.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Schein, "Race and Landscape in the United States," in *Landscape and Race in the United States* ed, Richard Schein, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10. Similarly, as Thomas Sugrue writes, "In the postwar city, blackness and whiteness assumed a spatial definition...the completeness of racial segregation made ghettoization seem inevitable, natural consequence of profound racial differences. The barriers that kept blacks confined to racially isolated, deteriorating, inner-city neighborhoods were largely invisible to white Detroiters" (9).

and potential of nature beyond the city limits would have consequences for the meaning of race, place, and inequality in Detroit beyond the intent of those involved with the movement to preserve the land along the Huron and Clinton rivers.

### **“A Logical and Necessary Unit:” Regional Planning and the Campaign for the HCMA**

While the racial inequality built into suburban expansion promised to make the social logics of a “great harmonious whole” difficult to achieve, expressways, another critical component of decentralization and suburban expansion, promised to link the region. In 1937, Whittemore articulated the discussions and ideas he had with Curtis and others into a more formalized plan for the region, which was first published in the *Michigan Alumnus*. According to Whittemore’s plan,

Such a district will take over land and create a chain of parks, parkways, and drives, of wild life and forest reservations all the way around from Lake Erie up the Huron to near its source, cross the country to the sources of the Clinton...then down...the Clinton to Lake St. Clair. Here we would not leave our Detroit friends out in deep water for it is proposed to create along Lake St. Clair a great waterside parkway leading into the Detroit River. Here another riverside drive...would lead into downtown Detroit, then out along the lower river to Grosse Isle, and along a chain of new islands to a site opposite the mouth of the Huron, the place of beginning.<sup>38</sup>

This five county loop of large-scale park and recreation facilities would be connected by 200 miles of road, which were originally as important to the plan as the parks themselves since personal automobiles would be the primary means of accessing the new parks.<sup>39</sup> “The immensity of the program,” wrote one observer, “can’t help but stir the imagination.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Proposed Huron-Clinton Parkway.” *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review*, Vol. 44, 1937-38, pp. 207-226; 211.

<sup>39</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Proposed Huron-Clinton Parkway.” *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review*, Vol. 44, 1937-38, pp. 207-226; 211.

<sup>40</sup> Van Schaack, Gordon. “Metropolitan Parks for Detroit” *Landscape Architecture*. Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, October 1943, pp 3-7; 6.

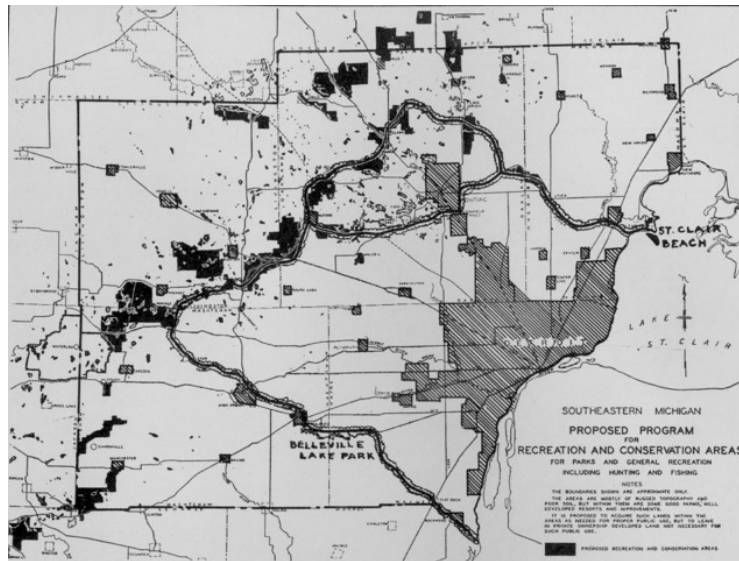


Figure 4.2: A Preliminary Study of the Huron-Clinton Parkway, 1937. From *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review*, Vol. 44, 1937-38, pg. 211. The Clinton River flows southeasterly from the north into Lake St. Clair, while the Huron River flows southwesterly, then turns southeasterly to flow into Lake Erie at the mouth of the Detroit River.

Although a groundbreaking idea for the Detroit region, Whittemore and Curtis’ proposal built on precedents in other cities as well as the parkway movement in the United States that began in the early twentieth century. For example, Whittemore wrote in a speech that Boston’s Metropolitan Park System, started in the late nineteenth century, was “the actual prototype for the Huron-Clinton.”<sup>41</sup> Olmsted’s “emerald necklace” around the city is a central part of this system, which he started planning as early as 1878, shortly before beginning work on Belle Isle Park. Whittemore and Curtis also studied the Westchester County and Long Island state parks and parkways in New York, in addition to Cook County Forest Preserves surrounding Chicago, included in Daniel Burnham’s 1908 Plan of Chicago, and implemented in 1914.

More timely, however, was the “technological modernism” of urban parkways during the 1920s and 30s that gradually supported what historian Mathew Gandy describes as “the

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<sup>41</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Founding of a Metropolitan Park System.” Undated manuscript. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, Harlow Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

automobileization of the American landscape.”<sup>42</sup> During the 1920s and 30s, Gandy writes, “the nineteenth-century legacies of...the city beautiful traditions, and the Olmstedian picturesque were gradually displaced by a larger scale urban vision with a more ambitious sense of interaction between the social, functional, and aesthetic dimensions to landscape design.”<sup>43</sup> Just as Belle Isle Park was built as an imaginary escape amidst Detroit’s crowded, near “total industrial landscape,” the vision of recreational parks, combined with the modernist aesthetics underlying Whittemore’s parkway and proposal plan, now promised to be a better solution to allow residents to escape the crowded city and the creeping development across the region. In line with the thinking of other noted mid-century architects and landscape architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Garrett Eckbo, for Whittemore and other proponents of the Huron-Clinton Parkway, the automobile offered the possibility of a decentralized urban form that could more easily connect people to nature. “This opportunity for continuous movement,” Matthew Gandy writes, “facilitated easy access to and departure from the city and contributed to the emergence of suburbia as an increasingly dominant urban form.”<sup>44</sup>

As the United States emerged as a leader in the construction of landscaped roads and parkways during the 1920s and 30s, Matthew Gandy describes that “these new features of the American landscape form part of a steady progression from the locally based urban beautification phase of tree-lined boulevards, to the regional extension of urban roads into sparsely developed fragments of nature at the edges of cities,” as was Whitmore’s plan for Metro

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 115-116.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 121. See also Christian Zapatka, “The American Parkways: Origins and Evolution of the Park Road,” *Lotus International*, 56 (1988): 115.



Detroit.<sup>45</sup> The first precedent was the Bronx River Parkway, completed in 1925.<sup>46</sup> However when Whittemore began writing in the late 1930s, the most notable person associated with the urban parkway and expressway construction was New York's Robert Moses.

Moses was head of the New York State Parks Council and the Long Island State Park Commission between 1924 and 1964, as well as the commissioner of a centralized department of parks for the City of New York.<sup>47</sup> His first major achievement was the construction of Jones Beach State Park in 1929, the first model of a mass recreational facility for the city that loomed large in Whittemore's ideas for a beach on Lake St. Clair, approximately twenty miles north of central Detroit. Jones Beach included a parking lot for thousands of cars connecting in-ding parkways that "allowed affluent New Yorkers the chance to escape the city."<sup>48</sup> Moses also oversaw the creation of new limited access bridges, parkways, and expressways throughout the New York region, including the circumferential parkway that encircled the city by 1944.

Construction of these massive regional park facilities and expressways was well underway when several members of the Huron-Clinton Parkway Committee and representatives from each of the five counties made a tour of the New York Metropolitan Park System in July of 1939 as Robert Moses' guests. Leaders of the committee made the trip to develop their plans and gain public support, and images from this trip were widely publicized in newspapers of southeastern Michigan. By 1940, for example, the *Detroit News* published a rendering by George W. Walker, a Detroit industrial designer and Wayne County member of the Parkway

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>46</sup> For more on the development of urban parkways and their relationship to changing conceptions of nature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see "Technological Modernism and the Urban Parkway" in: Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 115-152.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 127.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 129.

Committee, which illustrated “the type of ‘limited access’ highway which is planned for the Metropolitan Detroit area.” With slick, stylized geometric forms easily fitting together as the roadway fades into the horizon, the image seemed to renew the promise of technology and infrastructure to achieve a balance with the environment at a new regional scale never before possible for urban residents. As Marshall Berman wrote, Moses’ parkways leading to Jones Beach offered, “a spectacular display of the primary forms of nature – earth, sun, water, sky, - but nature appears with an abstract horizontal purity and luminous clarity that only culture can create.”<sup>49</sup> The precedents of Robert Moses and their adaptation to metropolitan Detroit helped to explain the need for these developments while the committee lobbied the state legislature and voters in the region to support their proposal for a regional authority to oversee their planning and construction.<sup>50</sup>

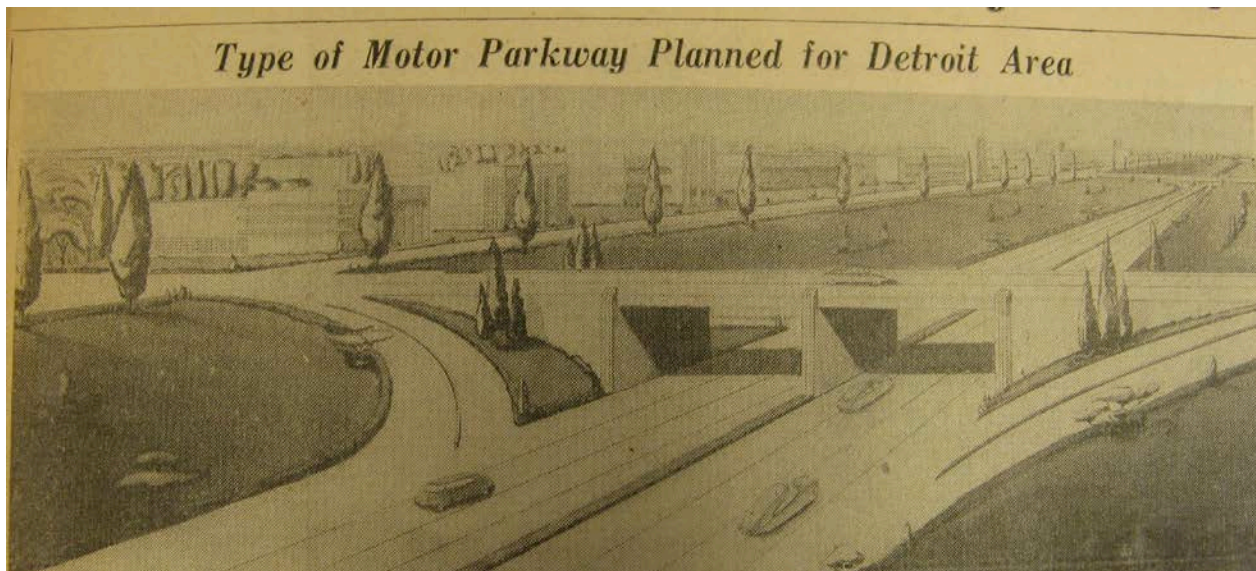


Figure 4.3: “Type of Motor Parkway Planned for Detroit Area,” rendering by George W. Walker, published in *The Detroit News*, September 8, 1940.

<sup>49</sup> Marshall Berman as quoted in Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 129.

<sup>50</sup> “Creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” undated (after 1947), pg. 1. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. For the image of Jones Beach, see: Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1942.

While members of the Huron-Clinton Parkway Committee refined their plans for the region in light of Whittemore's ideas and Moses' precedents, they also considered the logistics of creating an organization to build and manage a network of parks and parkways, how to fund them, and build public support for the idea. During the first three months of 1938, for example, committee members gave broadcasts to publicize their ideas on Detroit's WJR radio station.<sup>51</sup> The work of the committee culminated with the writing of a bill to create the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, a regional unit of government with representatives from each of the five counties, to oversee the planning, construction, and maintenance of a new park system along the Huron and Clinton Rivers. Importantly, legislation was written so that organization would not be able to levy taxes to support this work without the approval of voters in all five counties. The legislation passed the Michigan State Senate in February of 1939. Yet members of the State House representing the City of Detroit objected to the bill. After negotiations that reduced the maximum allowable tax levy from ½ to ¼ mill, however, the legislation passed and was signed into law a Public Act no. 147 on May 26, 1939.<sup>52</sup> The Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority was born. Its funding was far from secure, however.

Although the enabling act allowed for the creation of the HCMA, the voters of all five counties would have to approve the ¼ mill property tax to support the Authority in its mission to build a system of parks and parkways in metropolitan Detroit. To help garner public and political support, Whittemore, Curtis, and others set out to give a series of lectures under the auspices of the Huron-Clinton Parkway Committee. "The major effort of the campaign was directed toward furnishing speakers to civic organizations, labor unions, voter groups and high

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<sup>51</sup> David Laidlaw, "A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority" (1948), 7. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>52</sup> David Laidlaw, "A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority" (1948), 8. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

schools.”<sup>53</sup> Eventually, they created a non-profit organization called the Huron-Clinton Park and Parkway Association, which quickly changed its name to the Detroit-Huron-Clinton Park and Parkway Association.<sup>54</sup> The organization raised \$40,000 for a campaign to put the funding referendum for a vote on ballots in the five-county region. The measure would allow for the funding of the newly created regional park planning authority, with the power to collect taxes that would fund the purchase of land on or near the Huron and Clinton Rivers, the development of that land into parks, as well its subsequent management.

As part of the campaign, approximately 15,000 high school students attended lectures about the proposed plan, and 5,000 entered essays in a contest sponsored by the association, with a \$150 prize awarded to the winner.<sup>55</sup> Through Whittemore’s courting, the organization also garnered “enthusiastic” support from leaders of the United Autoworkers Union, as well as the American Federation of Labor, who addressed meetings in Detroit.<sup>56</sup> Thirty-thousand pamphlets

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<sup>53</sup> “Creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” undated (after 1947), pg. 1. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>54</sup> David Laidlaw, ““A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority” (1948), 9. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>55</sup> “Creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” undated (after 1947), pg. 1. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>56</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Creation of the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority.” Undated manuscript. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. And Whittemore, Harlow. “The Founding of a Metropolitan Park System.” Undated manuscript, pg. 6, HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. As historian Chad Montrie argues in his work *Making a Living: Work and Environment in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 91-112, labor unions, and particularly those associated with Michigan autoworkers, helped to forge modern forms of environmentalism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chapter 5, “A Decent, Wholesome Living Environment for Everyone: Michigan Autoworkers and the Origins of Modern Environmentalism”). As he writes, “Although it might seem counterintuitive, the people who left hinterland homes for industrial cities in the interwar years and after, to make the cars that posed an increasingly potent threat to the environment, also helped forge a robust environmental movement” (91). Although Montrie focuses on the UAW’s recreation department, sportsmen clubs, a children’s camp during the 1940s, and other environmental actions, the support of the UAW in the creation of the HCMA suggests another way in which labor unions forged an environmentalism focused on recreation and leisure time during the 1940s. As Montrie describes, Olga Madar, director of the UAW’s recreation department, argued that autoworkers needed recreation and outdoor spaces, “because labor on an assembly line was less likely than most to satisfy inherent ‘mental and spiritual cravings,’ need that has to be fulfilled for people ‘to become complete and happy individuals.’” (103-104).

explaining the project were distributed in advance of the 1940 election, when the measure would appear on the ballot.<sup>57</sup>

Despite a growing sense of enthusiasm and momentum for the plan, the Wayne County Board of Supervisors was skeptical of the measure. As home to the City of Detroit, the region's most densely populated area, they objected on the grounds that Wayne County would provide approximately 88% of the financial support, yet have only one representative on the HCMA Board of Commissioners, the same as other counties with a lower financial stake in the project.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the residents in Wayne County and the City of Detroit would likely have to travel the greatest distance to reach even the closest of the proposed metropolitan parks. The *Detroit Free Press* was also an active voice of opposition to the plan, primarily expressing concern about Detroit money leaving the county.<sup>59</sup> Taxes and the spatial distribution of the proposed parks was the primary cause for opposition.

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<sup>57</sup> David Laidlaw, "A Financial Study of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority" (1948), 11. Box 56, Bureau of Government Library (University of Michigan) Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>58</sup> "Creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority," undated (after 1947), pg. 1. HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>59</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. "The Founding of a Metropolitan Park System." Undated manuscript, pg. 6, HCMA History Folder, Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

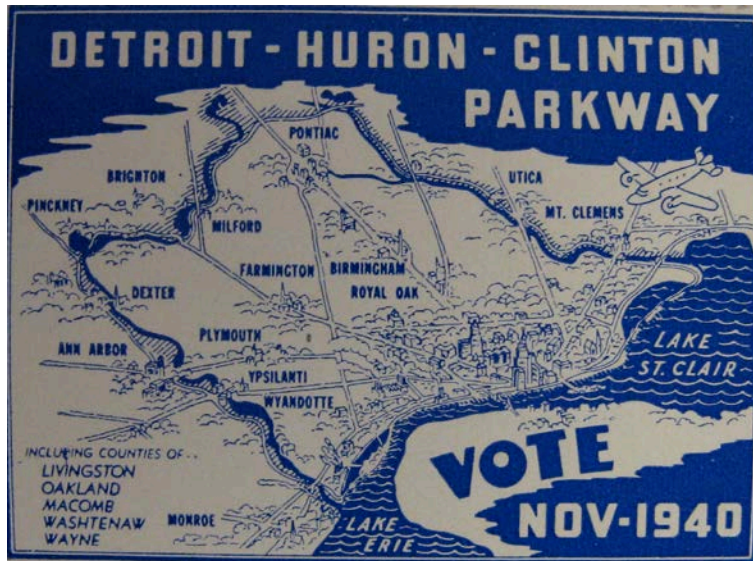


Figure 4.4: Sticker from the 1940 campaign, with an outline of the region. Harlow Whittemore papers, Folder: Detroit-Huron-Clinton Park and Parkway Association correspondence 1939-1946, Box 3, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

As opposed to their commissioners, voters of Wayne County apparently had a more optimistic vision for the region. Even with arguments in opposition presented by government officials in Wayne County, voters in the five counties approved the measure creating the HCMA by a margin of two to one during the general election of 1940. “The moral,” Whittemore wrote, “is simple. People want parks. They want enough of them to have room. They want them well planned and well kept up. And they 2<sup>1/2</sup> to 1 are willing to pay for them.”<sup>60</sup> Voters approval of the ballot measure allowed the authority to levy up to a ¼ mill in taxes from individual property taxes in the five counties of the region. The organization was also allowed to acquire funds through other state appropriation and outside grants, but the Authority was not allowed to incur debt through bond measures. The board of commissioners would be chosen by the board of supervisors in each of the five counties, with two appointed by the State of Michigan, all serving four year terms.

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<sup>60</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Creation of the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority.” Undated manuscript. HCMA History folder. Box 2, H.O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Officials in Wayne County remained skeptical of the new organization. While voters in Wayne County approved the legislation, the Wayne County Board of Supervisors, which had opposed the measure, filed a lawsuit against the HCMA, questioning the legality of the Authority's power to levy and collect property taxes. Citing the issues they had raised from the beginning, "the Board argued that Wayne County, which included the City of Detroit, would pay the lion's share of the taxes, but would not receive the benefits of a large park nearby."<sup>61</sup> Planning and construction were put on hold until January of 1942, when the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in favor of the HCMA. By this time, however, the United States' involvement in World War II meant that the construction phase could not begin until the war's end.<sup>62</sup>

### **Belle Isle Park and Detroit During World War II**

While the HCMA began to plan the logistics of a new postwar park system leaders imagined would knit together the region as a "great harmonious whole," social tension in Detroit presented grave challenges to the HCMA's vision. With few housing options and limited economic opportunities compared to white Detroiters, racial tensions and violence increased in the months and years the HCMA spent planning a regional park system. Playgrounds and parks in Detroit sometimes provided space for brawls, such as one with a hundred teenagers in April 1943.<sup>63</sup> Throughout June of that year, there were reportedly more than 500 people involved in fights at parks in different parts of the city.<sup>64</sup> These tensions culminated on Sunday June 20, 1943, when thousands of Detroiters made their way to Belle Isle Park to find relief from the

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<sup>61</sup> Moilanen, David. "Placement of Regional parks: A Case Study" *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, Volume 20, Number 2, Summer 2002, pp. 111-124; 114.

<sup>62</sup> Reynolds, Cynthia. *Metroparks for the People: A History of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority*, Ypsilanti: Harbor Links Publishing, 2006, pp. 28-29.

<sup>63</sup> Sitkoff, Harvard. "The Detroit Race Riot of 1943," *Michigan History*, LIII, 3, 1969, pg. 188.

<sup>64</sup> Sitkoff, Harvard. "The Detroit Race Riot of 1943," *Michigan History*, LIII, 3, 1969, pg. 188.

summer heat and humidity. Since it opened in the 1880s, generations of city and civic leaders, as well as everyday residents, imagined the Olmsted-designed park as a democratic space, endowed with a sense of moral environmentalism they believed could shape residents into more perfect citizens despite the class, ethnic, and racial animosity that defined social relations in much of the city. On this day, however, the meaning of the park, particularly the moral authority it seemed to embody, was dramatically changed. As park-goers were heading home in the evening, fights broke out between African Americans and Anglo-Americans in the park. These clashes spread across the bridge linking the island park to the mainland, partly fueled by vicious rumors, and resulted in two violent days of rioting, leaving hundreds injured, and 34 people dead. Twenty-five were African American and nine were white.<sup>65</sup> Whatever democratic ideals, and vision of progress the park was intended to convey seemed to disappear as mob rule spread across the city. President Roosevelt sent federal troops to stop the violence on the evening of June 21 and the unrest slowly subsided.

With housing, environmental, and neighborhood conditions still deplorable for many African Americans, it is no surprise that Belle Isle Park became a space they frequently used, particularly since the bridge and one ferry dock were in close proximity to the East Side neighborhoods where many lived.<sup>66</sup> Ever since a Naval Training Station was established on Belle Isle in 1940, the NAACP noted “some of the soldiers have adopted an attitude of resentment toward the use, particularly by Negroes of the bathing beach at Belle Isle.”<sup>67</sup> As the National

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<sup>65</sup> National Urban League. “Racial Conflict: A Home Front danger: Lessons of the Detroit Riot,” 1943, pg. 5. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>66</sup> The National Urban League (NUL) observed that compared to a 1926 survey, many of the observations around housing made in a 1941 survey remained appallingly similar, particularly in the Black Bottom neighborhood, where crowded and unsanitary housing conditions prevailed. “In their efforts to adjust themselves in this unhealthy situation,” the NUL noted, “tensions have been created and conflict areas have appeared.” (“Racial Conflict: A Home Front danger: Lessons of the Detroit Riot,” 1943, pgs. 9; 16-17).

<sup>67</sup> White, Walter and Thurgood Marshall. *What Caused the Detroit Riot?: An Analysis*, NAACP, New York, 1943, pg. 21. The NAACP report continued to describe that, “numerous physical and verbal attacks by sailors on Negroes



Urban League summarized in their report on the riots, “It is not surprising, therefore, that the rumors which followed the altercations at Belle Island [sic] fell on fertile ground – nourished by insecurity, fear, and suspicion – and produced one of the most disastrous race riots in the nation’s history.”<sup>68</sup> Racial tension grew particularly acute where white and African Americans shared space in the city.

Riots and racial altercations had festered in Detroit before. But the 1943 riots fundamentally called into question the ability of Detroiters to use and inhabit the common spaces of the city as Detroit’s African American population increased. The reputation of the city’s premier public space, not to mention the city itself, was dramatically changed with the effects of systemic racism that had been festering since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the riot, Mayor Jefferies formed an Interracial Committee, headed by William J. Norton, who had previously worked with the Children’s Fund of Michigan and helped fund the Detroit Urban League’s Green Pastures Camp. The committee recommended actions the city could take to ameliorate racial frictions. They worked in collaboration with the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation to discuss options for returning the city’s parks a renewed sense of order as percentage of African Americans in Detroit continued to grow.

For example, on May 21, 1944, Belle Isle hosted the first in a series of programs sponsored by the Recreation Department “designed to give the listeners a respect for the abilities of various racial groups.” A white and black writer collaborated to write the script.<sup>69</sup> Staff also surveyed the use of space at the park. They noted that African Americans made up nearly 90

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have been reported. It is known that sailors participated in the rioting, though there was one notable instance of three sailors rescuing a Negro from a white mob. We suggest, also, an investigation of the extent and nature of participation by sailors stationed at Belle Isle in the rioting and in incidents prior to the riot, which formed a part of the basis for the subsequent riot.” (21).

<sup>68</sup> National Urban League. “Racial Conflict: A Home Front danger: Lessons of the Detroit Riot,” 1943, pg. 17. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>69</sup> Minutes of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, May 26, 1944. Interracial Committee Folder 2, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

percent of those using the public swings, “which results in the congregation of large crowds in a small area.”<sup>70</sup> To ameliorate the issue of congregating masses that may have felt threatening to many white park users, parks department staff attempted to come up with a proposal to redistribute the swings across the park, rather than in one location, and put a “play leader” in charge of monitoring the use of the swings. They also had similar concerns with regard to the location and distribution of grills across Belle Isle Park.<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, the Mayor’s Interracial Committee raised the issue of “how Belle Isle is organized for strict enforcement of order.”<sup>72</sup> The police commissioner, Mr. Ballenger, “explained that there is a precinct on Belle Isle and radio which keeps the island in constant communication with the other divisions of the police department.”<sup>73</sup> The police department also received “regular reports on the attendance of colored and white on the island each weekend.” In response to the civil unrest of 1943, these surveillance measures were coupled with an increased use of military police on the island, and the open fields of Olmsted’s design proved a useful space for training this new unit of police officers in “commando tactics.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Minutes of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, June 9, 1944, pg. 3. Interracial Committee Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>71</sup> Minutes of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, June 9, 1944, pg. 3. Interracial Committee Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>72</sup> Minutes of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, May 19, 1944. Interracial Committee Folder 2, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>73</sup> Minutes of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, May 19, 1944. Interracial Committee Folder 2, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, June 9, 1944, pg. 3. Interracial Committee Folder 1, Box 8, Children’s Fund of Michigan Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

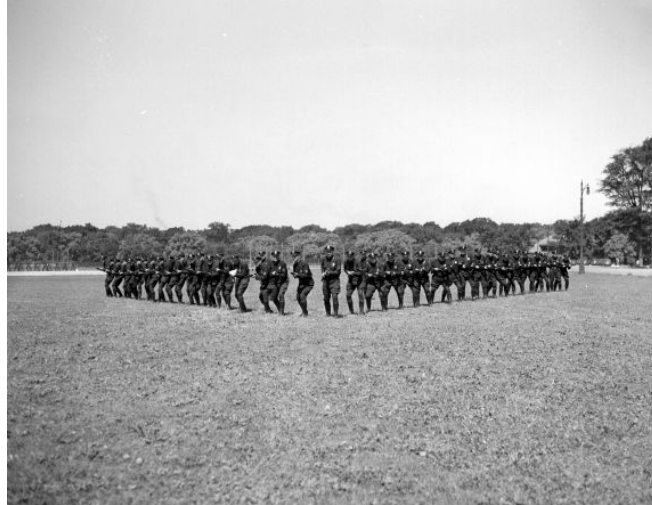


Figure 4.5: Detroit Police Department, Riot Squad Training, Belle Isle, Detroit, 1943. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. The control of people on Belle Isle was a concern for city leaders from the beginning of its use as a public space during the 1880s. Olmsted's plan used pathways to curate a spatial experience as people moved throughout the park on various routes. Although the park commissioner originally attempted to partially conceal the presence of police through design in the nineteenth century, the racial conflicts at the heart of the city's expansion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by the 1943 riots, prompted officials to take a more visible approach to try and maintain Belle Isle's image as a democratic public space of leisure and nature away from the problems of the city.

Leaders in the City of Detroit looked inward to examine how they would maintain and expand civic spaces and access to nature among an expanding but divided population, further driven apart by policies that labeled racial and ethnic groups “inharmonious.” At the same time, Belle Isle was long the only large recreation area in close proximity to many residents of the region. To some, the civil disorder seemed to be a symptom of a region strained for recreational space. Four months after the riots, the HCMA's landscape engineer Gordon Van Schaack, described that,

Park use, particularly on holidays or weekends, has long since reached the saturation point, and the areas are hopelessly inadequate to serve the needs of the people. The city of Detroit has grown tremendously in the past twenty years under the impetus of industrial expansion. Population growth has far exceeded the growth of recreational facilities.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Van Schaack, Gordon. “Metropolitan Parks for Detroit: A Large-Scale, Long-Term Plan to Meet Recreation Needs,” *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. XXXIV No. 1, October 1943.

Additionally, he noted, “on the basis of comparative studies of seven large cities as to percentage of park areas, or park acreage per thousand population, in metropolitan regions, Detroit stands last,” behind New York, Chicago, as well as Boston, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Buffalo.<sup>76</sup>

Because the civil disorder that began on Belle Isle seemed to mark the failure of an earlier strand of moral environmentalism, building Whittemore’s and Curtis’ vision of “a great harmonious whole” seemed more relevant than ever. Historian Robert Self explains in his work, *American Babylon*, that the cultural and social vision of a decentralized “postwar industrial garden...embodied the optimism of growth liberalism. Cities and suburbs alike were to bloom and prosper, with workers and their families lifted into the middle class by high wages, the easy accessibility of homeownership, and new state activism at both federal and local levels...more than a metaphor, the garden came to represent a concrete political and spatial formation: class harmony in pastoral cities where factories and homes existed in unobtrusive balance...”<sup>77</sup> The HCMA believed they could help make this vision a reality through regional parks. As the HCMA’s engineer Gordon Van Schaack proclaimed, “Recreation is no longer a luxury, but an essential to good living. It is the purpose of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority to provide this essential service, through the development of parks, parkways, and access roads which will add immeasurably to the desirability of the Detroit metropolitan area as a place in which to live.”<sup>78</sup> After the eruption of the 1943 riots, however, the presence of an increasingly black and militarized urban park juxtaposed pastoral alternatives in the largely white suburbs meant that

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<sup>76</sup> Van Schaack, Gordon. “Metropolitan Parks for Detroit: A Large-Scale, Long-Term Plan to Meet Recreation Needs,” *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. XXXIV No. 1, October 1943.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Postwar Struggle for Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>78</sup> Van Schaack, Gordon. “Metropolitan Parks for Detroit” *Landscape Architecture*. Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, October 1943, pp 3-7; 7.

the racial conflicts built into the region's geography were notable as planning for the Huron-Clinton Metroparks began.

### **Park Planning and Building under the HCMA**

With a backdrop of uncontrolled growth, years of industrial development, and racial violence, the HCMA focused on open space and the environment, along with what boosterish supporters described as “one of the most interesting waterways in the world,” the HCMA began to define itself as the solution to these issues as it started to plan and build parks from 1940 into the 1970s.<sup>79</sup> For example, the organization's 1942 report described, “In its transition from ‘The Beautiful’ to ‘The Dynamic,’ the metropolitan district of Detroit lost some of the finest natural assets a city could possess and enjoy. The Detroit River, which had inspired the early settlers to found a city, became polluted and unfit for swimming...The Huron and Clinton Rivers, like the Detroit River to the South, were soon running with partially treated sewage and the oil and waste of modern industry...No one could have foreseen that the general public would soon be barred from access to the hundreds of lakes which gave the district a great deal of its charm and attraction...Only those who had known the district of old could realize what had been lost as a sacrifice to industry, and they decided to start a movement to restore some of the beauty which had been its natural heritage.”<sup>80</sup> In this narrative, the HCMA framed Detroit's industrial urbanism and uncontrolled growth as the cause of the region's very visible environmental decline. To preserve what was left of the area's natural heritage, the HCMA argued that a regional effort was needed to repair the sacrifice of nature to industry.

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<sup>79</sup> “The Huron Clinton Metropolitan Association: A Statement of Objectives.” Topical Folder: Detroit-Huron-Clinton Park and Parkway Association Correspondence, 1939-1946, Box 3, Harlow O. Whittemore Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>80</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1942.

As the newly created organization navigated the perils and promises of decentralization, it also articulated a social mission. “When this Authority came into being the reason for our existence was very apparent,” one report described. “We faced a citizenry of dense population with more and more leisure time but with few opportunities to use this leisure for constructive avocations. Our job – to provide the people we serve with recreational facilities *and* the leadership to nudge our youth and adults toward the constructive use of such time.”<sup>81</sup> A well-planned vision of nature, they hoped, might provide the infrastructure of leisure necessary to bring a generation of metropolitan Detroiters in closer contact with the natural world.

Metro Detroit’s population of youth and laborers were important considerations. Organizers suggested that parks would result in a decrease in juvenile delinquency.<sup>82</sup> “Any mother,” they described, “will have more peace of mind knowing her children are engaged in clean healthful sport in controlled and supervised areas, rather than risking their lives in dangerous and polluted waters or playing on the streets in congested areas.”<sup>83</sup> Additionally, the HCMA described that, “In peacetime as well as wartime, the efficient worker requires some relaxation of mind and body. There is no better way to attain these than healthful outdoor exercise and sunlight.”<sup>84</sup> To respond to these social needs, the HCMA imagined itself as the intermediary between an expanding urban population and the great outdoors, which organizers represented through the Authority’s logo. As they explained in the introduction to nearly every biennial report, “The Authority symbol is a representation of a human figure with a skyscraper in

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<sup>81</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, *1961 Annual Report of the board of Commissioners*, 1961.

<sup>82</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1942.

<sup>83</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1942.

<sup>84</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1942.

one hand and a forest in the other, signifying the desire of urban people to enjoy and preserve for the future the natural surroundings of unusual scenic beauty.”<sup>85</sup>

The location of these large parks would be an important part of the HCMA’s ability to offer these benefits. Their definition of proximity, however, was much different than that of earlier generations. The Authority explained that, “by constructing facilities in close proximity to the heavily populated districts, the public will be within fifteen or fifty minutes ride of one or more of these parks.”<sup>86</sup> The HCMA combined an ethic of environmental preservation with that of recreation. This meant that land within or closer to Detroit was not ideally suited to their goals because it was either already developed, or near areas that were developed. According to the Authority’s original plans, park users would travel along a network of parkways that would be the physical intermediary providing urban and suburban residents access to the natural world.

During a period of initial planning, just after the Detroit riots of 1943, the HCMA was not oblivious to the racial conflicts in Detroit either. At a meeting in July of 1943, less than a month after the civil unrest, HCMA commissioner Earhart met with William J. Norton, chair of the Mayor’s interracial committee, as well as John Dancy, director of the Detroit Urban League, to discuss “subsequent to the recent race riots in Detroit, and the problems it presents to the Authority in future park construction.”<sup>87</sup> The HCMA briefly considered acquiring a portion of the “Joe Louis Farm for the development of a Negro recreational area,” in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Conservation, and presumably Louis.<sup>88</sup> However, during the meeting Dancy “indicated that the Negroes would not be satisfied with parks built especially for their

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<sup>85</sup> HCMA Biennial Report, 1971, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1942.

<sup>87</sup> Minutes, Board of Commissioners Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, July 9, 1943, pg. 5. HCMA Minutes and Correspondence Folder, Box 5, G.D. Kennedy papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>88</sup> Minutes, Board of Commissioners Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, July 9, 1943, pg. 5. HCMA Minutes and Correspondence Folder, Box 5, G.D. Kennedy papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

race, which in his interpretation would amount to segregation – the very thing they were trying to eliminate.”<sup>89</sup> This misguided gesture toward a discussion about segregation and the recreational needs of Detroit’s African American residents was short lived.

Mayor Edward Jefferies contacted the HCMA in 1943 to inquire about the possibility of the Authority operating a beach at Belle Isle Park. In response to his inquiry, “it was suggested that the Chairman and Engineer...call on the Mayor and explain that the Authority now has a Beach project under way on Lake St. Clair and it would be impossible to take part in another project of this kind at this time.”<sup>90</sup> From the beginning, Detroit was pushed to the periphery of the HCMA’s vision for the region. As the HCMA explained in their report for 1942, “while swimming takes place in many locations along the mainland nearer to Detroit and in the Detroit River, it is done without the sanction and against the advice of the State Department of Health – an approval which would be necessary where a public body assumes responsibility for beach and swimming developments.”<sup>91</sup> According to the HCMA, the State Department of Health and Stream Control Commission reports “will dictate their location,” not proximity to residents or existing facilities that might be renovated. At the same time, they sought to use “shorelines where the private development has been limited.” Such a policy, HCMA officials described, would “avoid removing large assessed values from the future tax rolls.”<sup>92</sup> Of course, this policy also precluded much of the land closer to Detroit. In 1947, the City of Detroit offered to donate 200 acres to the HCMA, which was also declined “because the property was of no use.”<sup>93</sup> From the start, the policies supported by the HCMA’s large-scale vision of the landscape set up

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<sup>89</sup> Minutes, Board of Commissioners Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, July 9, 1943, pg. 5. HCMA Minutes and Correspondence Folder, Box 5, G.D. Kennedy papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>90</sup> Minutes, Board of Commissioners Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, July 9, 1943, pg. 5. HCMA Minutes and Correspondence Folder, Box 5, G.D. Kennedy papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>91</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, *1942 Annual Report of the board of Commissioners*, 1942.

<sup>92</sup> Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, *1942 Annual Report of the board of Commissioners*, 1942.

<sup>93</sup> Jerry C. Bosworth, “How the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority Responds to its Public,” *Papers in Public Administration*, No. 42, 1961, 25.



problems for including the City of Detroit within a regional vision. The HCMA's overwhelming focus continued to be on preserving lands and creating recreational opportunities surrounding, rather than within, the city limits.

While the Authority argued that busses or streetcars could provide access to some parks for those without cars, the HCMA's plans relied on the opportunities for mobility presented by the limited access highway to reach more distant spaces. As the commissioners described 1962, with freeways "distance becomes immaterial."<sup>94</sup> Of course, if this was the case, only access to an automobile could make this decentralized vision practical. "The placement of the parks had all been predicated on the willingness and ability of people to travel by private automobile to get to the parks," described David Moilanen, Chief of Interpretive Services and Public Relations at the HCMA in a 2002 article.<sup>95</sup> Just as a large urban park was understood as a necessity in the late developing industrial environment of Detroit during the late nineteenth century, the Metroparks were intended as a healing salve for the suburban growth and an escape from the industrial labor of Detroit. Yet by creating natural spaces that were physically and conceptually distanced from Detroit, they drove a wedge between nature and the city. As the HCMA described in 1959, the parks were designed, "*not* to substitute for the responsibilities of local governmental units in their duty to provide neighborhood, municipal and county recreational facilities," but "to *supplement* all other efforts by acquiring and preserving not too distant land in anticipation of urban trends, and to create and operate new recreational areas where large numbers of people can enjoy their leisure in the environment of "open country."<sup>96</sup> The only way to find the amenities of a more authentic nature would be to leave the city. As conceptualized, this was the only way

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<sup>94</sup> HCMA Biennial Report, 1963, 14.

<sup>95</sup> David C. Moilanen, "Placement of Regional Parks: A Case Study," *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, Volume 20, Number 2 (Summer 2002), 121.

<sup>96</sup> HCMA, *Ninth Biennial Report*, 1959, 18.

to preserve lands from development and provide recreational opportunities. The HCMA shifted the spaces of moral environmentalism from the city to outlying areas. As the HCMA's plans were put into practice, beginning with the purchase of land in 1945, the Authority's brand of environmentalism planted the seeds for divisions between Detroit and its expanding suburbs.

Although the HCMA aimed to preserve open space, leaders also argued that the land they selected for parks was marginal, damaged, and worthy of preservation, which allowed them to justify large transformations of these spaces to meet their aesthetic and recreational vision. Throughout the process of planning and building, the lines between preservation, recreation, and aesthetics became murky as the Authority balanced competing demands. For "a movement to restore some of the beauty" which had been the area's "natural heritage," many of the Authority's plans involved fairly dramatic changes in the land to realize their vision.<sup>97</sup> The first two parks to take shape were Kensington, which opened in 1948 on 4,200 acres northwest of Detroit on the Huron River, and Metropolitan Beach, a 550 acre site, smaller than Belle Isle's nearly 900 acres, that opened in 1950 on Lake St. Clair at the mouth of the Clinton River. Both projects are indicative of the Authority's approach, which included purchasing "marginal" lands that were less expensive, and transforming them into picturesque parks.

The Metropolitan Beach site, twenty-two miles from downtown Detroit, was the first property purchased by the HCMA. Although "the original tract of land was low and swampy in character," the area was chosen because the location seemed to be a "fitting terminus to the Lake St. Clair end of the parkway."<sup>98</sup> Moreover, a public beach was high on the list of priorities for the Authority's planners.<sup>99</sup> To create a park suitable for an enjoyable beach-going experience,

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<sup>97</sup> HCMA, *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1.

<sup>98</sup> HCMA, *Third Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1947, 5; HCMA, *Fourth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 4.

<sup>99</sup> HCMA, *1942 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners*.

however, required that “over two and a quarter million cubic yards of fill” to be pumped from Lake St. Clair by “hydraulic dredge and pipeline over the swamp to bring the area several feet above the water line.”<sup>100</sup> Then, the Authority pumped thousands of yards of “clean white sand” from the bottom of the lake to form the 6,000-foot long crescent that became the beach. The result, commissioners reported, was “perfectly natural in appearance.”<sup>101</sup> Other amenities to complement the beach included a set of buildings for a bathhouse, restrooms, picnic shelters, and refreshment stand. All were designed with the slick orderly lines of modern architecture that seemed to mimic the clean and expansive lines of the newly created beach and horizon. The HCMA even enlisted W. Earle Andrews, a park engineer who worked with Robert Moses in New York City, as a consultant to assist in creating the beach park on Lake St. Clair.<sup>102</sup> At his recommendation that “park facilities be constructed of the finest quality materials...and that properties be kept immaculate,” the “structures which are constructed with wood and cement in Detroit parks are constructed with brick, steel, and tile at HCMA facilities.”<sup>103</sup> Newness in materials and design distinguished the Metroparks from those in Detroit. Moreover, Metropolitan Beach had parking for 7,500 cars and capacity to accommodate 60,000 people per day. Like Jones Beach on Long Island before it, the 550-acre Metropolitan Beach Park was well suited to bring residents of an increasingly automobile-centric population closer to a refined and contemporary vision of nature as recreation away from the city when it opened in 1950.<sup>104</sup>

Kensington Metropolitan Park, approximately thirty-five miles from Detroit, involved a similarly complex reworking of the land to create a landscape that suited the recreational,

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<sup>100</sup> HCMA, *Fourth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 4.

<sup>101</sup> HCMA, *Fourth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 4.

<sup>102</sup> Jerry C. Bosworth, “How the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority Responds to its Public,” *Papers in Public Administration*, No. 42, 1961, 33.

<sup>103</sup> Jerry C. Bosworth, “How the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority Responds to its Public,” *Papers in Public Administration*, No. 42, 1961, 33.

<sup>104</sup> HCMA, *Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 4-5.

aesthetic, and environmental goals of the HCMA. According to officials, the area possessed, “a large section of one of the most picturesque ranges of hills in Southeastern Michigan...there are many points from which spectacular views may be had for miles over the surrounding countryside.”<sup>105</sup> Kent Lake and the Huron River were also prominent features on the site, although apparently they did not provide quite enough water to suit the tastes of the HCMA’s planners, who wanted to “provide adequate water facilities, eliminate swamps and enhance the recreation values of the area.”<sup>106</sup> To meet these goals, the Authority constructed a dam on the Huron River below Kent Lake, which created a new iteration of Kent Lake on land that was previously “low, swampy,” and of “little economic value.”<sup>107</sup> Compared to its 60-acre predecessor, the new lake was a massive 1,200 acres studded with islands, four and a half miles long, and had a shoreline of 22 miles.<sup>108</sup> When the 4,200-acre park was completed in 1948, it was the first of the HCMA parks to open to the public. A technological modernism of dams and access roads transformed a marginal landscape into an idealized garden outside the city.

To assist in the planning process, New York City’s planner Robert Moses was brought in for a very short time as a consultant during World War II. His most substantial recommendation was for the Authority to focus on building parks, rather than the parkway system.<sup>109</sup> He argued building parks was a more urgent need. Moreover, if the parks were in close proximity to access roads, such as the freeway system being planned for the region, the parkways would not be necessary. Moses’ recommendation led the HCMA board members to gradually move away from the original park and parkway concept developed by Curtis and Whittemeore in favor of a

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<sup>105</sup> HCMA, *Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1945, 10-11.

<sup>106</sup> HCMA, *Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 13.

<sup>107</sup> HCMA, *Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 13.

<sup>108</sup> HCMA, *Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1949, 13.

<sup>109</sup> Jerry C. Bosworth, “How the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority Responds to its Public,” *Papers in Public Administration*, No. 42, 1961, 33.

parks-only approach, with limited parkways connecting HCMA facilities to primary thoroughfares. A shift in focus, however, meant that the park and parkway along the Detroit River that might have been Detroit's Metropark would not be built. Rather, the planned construction of expressways such as Interstates 94, 75, and 96, would take the place of landscaped parkways, as they reshaped and divided the city's neighborhoods to facilitate easy access for cars into and out of the city.

Following Moses' advice to re-focus their efforts on building parks to accommodate a rapidly growing regional population, the HCMA was able to report that they had built seven parks by the time the organization celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1960. By this time, the population of the region reached 3,973,033. In addition to Metropolitan Beach and Kensington Metropolitan Park, a chain of three parks in rural Washtenaw County totaling 1,724 acres, Lower Huron Metropolitan Park (1,258 acres) in southwest Wayne County, and the much smaller Marshbank Metropolitan Park with 115 acres in Oakland County provided 17.8 acres of recreational land per person.<sup>110</sup> The Authority also had plans for an eighth, Stony Creek Metropolitan Park, in Macomb County, which would open in 1963 and include a 600-acre lake created by damming the creek.<sup>111</sup>

Yet amidst "the speed with which urbanization has taken over the fringe areas of our cities," and "reduced open space land to a frustratingly few spots," the Authority was still concerned that the rate of population growth left the total number of acres per person virtually static since 1950.<sup>112</sup> To address these concerns, in 1960 the HCMA partnered with the Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission and allocated funds to hire a planner, Rudolf

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<sup>110</sup> HCMA, *Tenth Biennial Report*, 1961, 11.

<sup>111</sup> HCMA, *Eleventh Biennial Report*, 1963, 21.

<sup>112</sup> HCMA, *Eleventh Biennial Report*, 1963, 7-11.

B. Habben, in 1961 to produce a regional recreational land plan, intended to meet the needs of the region to 1980. The report, published in 1964, described that

The Detroit urban area today is a large, sprawling multi-city mass extending over 800 square miles. Continuous development stretches from the Detroit Central Business District for twenty-five miles northwest to the City of Pontiac. Forty miles of unbroken urban use connect Mt. Clemens on the northeast with Trenton located south of the central city.<sup>113</sup>

With so much land area apparently being overtaken for built environments, the report argued that “Prospective regional park sites are limited to the outer fringes of development,” where land was less expensive and not being held for speculation.<sup>114</sup>

While the HCMA’s growth during the post war years created environmental and recreational amenities that made the quality of life outside the central city appealing, their plans also acknowledged the role of other facilities in contributing to the recreational potential of the region. For example, the 1964 plan included Detroit’s Belle Isle Park and Rouge Park in its calculations of open space and recreational needs. As the document described, “The City of Detroit presently operates two parks that actually function as regional facilities. These are Belle Isle and Rouge Park. Both of these parks are developed 1,000 acre sites and are intensively used.”<sup>115</sup> It also noted that “With the existing facilities at Belle Isle and Metropolitan Beach, the sector is well supplied with special facilities such as band shells and conservatories.”<sup>116</sup> The plan for the HCMA included these Detroit spaces, and others they did not own or manage, in calculating the demands for future park sites in the region. This gave the Authority a sense of how it might supplement existing facilities.

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<sup>113</sup> Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission, “A 1980 Regional Recreation Land Plan for the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” April 1964, 12.

<sup>114</sup> Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission, “A 1980 Regional Recreation Land Plan for the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” April 1964, 13.

<sup>115</sup> Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission, “A 1980 Regional Recreation Land Plan for the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” April 1964, 44.

<sup>116</sup> Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission, “A 1980 Regional Recreation Land Plan for the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” April 1964, 36.

As early as 1959, a regional park user survey, conducted by the Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission in 1959, also confirmed that Belle Isle Park continued to be a popular recreation spot, even with the construction of Metropolitan Parks and an increasingly suburban population. The report noted that although Belle Isle Park “is a ‘city’ park it is used by people from the entire metropolitan area. The park is centrally located in relation to the high density area in the region...Because of its location on the Detroit River, it has additional appeal to those who go to a park to sit and watch the lake freighters move up and down the river.”<sup>117</sup> Additionally, the survey reported “half of the people in the park desired improvement and 30 percent desired additional facilities.”<sup>118</sup> The financial means to enhance existing facilities, however, became difficult because population decline and suburban expansion were beginning to leave the city in dire financial straits.

On the ground, however, this practice meant that the Metroparks increasingly provided amenities that enhanced the quality of life for a suburban population that lived in close proximity to HCMA facilities. The 1964 planning report also found, “that primarily persons in the middle income brackets were more likely to use regional park facilities. This is understandable since high income families are more likely to join country clubs or other semi-private organizations providing recreational facilities. Low income families lack the means to get to major parks located outside the urban area.”<sup>119</sup> In their modern, automobile-focused design, the Metroparks were quickly becoming what Marshall Berman describes as a “distinctively techno-pastoral garden, open only to those who possessed the latest modern machines...a uniquely privatized

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<sup>117</sup> Miller, James. “Park Users Survey: A Survey of persons using eight selected regional parks in the Detroit Region,” *Detroit Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission*, 1959, 24.

<sup>118</sup> Miller, James. “Park Users Survey: A Survey of persons using eight selected regional parks in the Detroit Region,” *Detroit Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission*, 1959, 24.

<sup>119</sup> Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission, “A 1980 Regional Recreation Land Plan for the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority,” April 1964, 17.

form of public space.”<sup>120</sup> At the same time, the location of a “garden” well outside the city and county that provided the most financial support could be justified because the underlying vision of the Metroparks sought to balance recreational, aesthetic (open space), and environmental preservation needs. Mere existence, rather than ease of access, seemed to be enough to validate the HCMA’s mandate to provide “facilities for the use and benefit of the public”<sup>121</sup>

As the HCMA’s parks and plans developed between the 1940s and 1960s, there was little attention to how areas closer to Detroit would be incorporated into the system, particularly after plans for a network of parkways were gradually dropped. The Detroit City Planning Commission, however, began to piece together how a park could revitalize the Detroit riverfront. The Planning Commission’s *Detroit 1990: An Urban Design Concept for the Inner City* was the most recent of several proposals for transforming Detroit’s riverfront from industrial to recreational and civic uses that began when Mayor Hazen first proposed the idea in the 1890s. The 1968 plan proposed a linear park that would run eastward from the Ambassador Bridge through downtown to Belle Isle. While it was an ambitious proposal that could have transformed the city, it was never officially adopted or acted upon, since maintaining and redeveloping other areas of the city took priority.<sup>122</sup> As historian Francis Desiderio describes, “The riverfront along the central business district remained a jumble of empty space, warehouses, factory buildings, and train tracks.”<sup>123</sup>

By the late 1960s, the HCMA’s vision of a regional system of parks that included Belle Isle Park, without any financial support, became increasingly untenable for leaders in Detroit.

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<sup>120</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1982), 299.

<sup>121</sup> State of Michigan Public Act 147 of 1939, Sec. 2.

<sup>122</sup> Desiderio, Francis. “‘A Catalyst for Downtown:’ Detroit’s Renaissance Center,” *Michigan Historical Review*, Volume 35 Number 1, (Spring 2009), 88.

<sup>123</sup> Desiderio, Francis. “‘A Catalyst for Downtown:’ Detroit’s Renaissance Center,” *Michigan Historical Review*, Volume 35 Number 1, (Spring 2009), 89.



Taxpayers had funded the development of parks far from their homes at a time when the City of Detroit, in particular, was losing population and revenue, while at the same time providing environmental amenities for those who left the city for suburban communities, most of which had closer and easier access to HCMA facilities. Given the extensive focus of the HCMA on purchasing land and building parks to the southwest, west, and northwest of Detroit during the first two decades of the Authority's existence, Belle Isle Park would have seemed ideally situated to be the eastern link in the chain of parks that planners at the HCMA imagined. It was not until the 1970s, as Detroit faced an increasingly dire outlook, the Authority began to look more closely at its relationship with the city.

### **Urban Environmental Crisis and the Case for a Metropark in Detroit**

On April 22, 1970, amidst an increasing sense of urgency about the threat posed by pollution and environmental degradation, people across the United States celebrated the first Earth Day. In Detroit, Belle Isle played a central role in the city's celebration of the day, as 250 teenagers cleaned up the park as part of the Keep Detroit Beautiful Club. According to one account, "teens emphasized what the individual can do to make the environment cleaner when they removed litter from Belle Isle...The group loaded dozens of plastic bags with litter as their contribution to a non-polluted landscape."<sup>124</sup> Mayor Gribbs and city officials also met at the trash-burning part of the island park to declare plans to "remove a house-sized pile of refrigerators, bedsprings, airplane parts and junk from the 1967 civil disorders" that shook the city three years earlier.<sup>125</sup> Even with these individual actions, however, the city continued to have difficulty maintaining the park. For example, by June 1970, a city parks spokesman said

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<sup>124</sup> Andrew Mollison, "E-Day Bears Plea: 'Please Let Me Live,'" *Detroit Free Press*, April 23, 1970.

<sup>125</sup> Andrew Mollison, "E-Day Bears Plea: 'Please Let Me Live,'" *Detroit Free Press*, April 23, 1970.

that “pigeons began roosting” in the carillon bell tower on the park and began, “gnawing away vital parts of the wooden speakers,” which the city did not have sufficient funds to repair.<sup>126</sup>

Deferred maintenance issues were symptomatic of larger political issues facing Detroit in the era of mass suburbanization. The city itself was in increasingly dire financial straits, and population decline was more and more apparent. In 1970 the city’s population was 1,511,482, down from 1,849,568 people in 1950. The 1967 riots, stemming from years of racial discrimination in housing and employment opportunities, added to the sense that Detroit was in need of a transformation and assistance.<sup>127</sup>

There were signs that the HCMA and the City of Detroit might be willing to collaborate on creating a Metropark within the city limits. A record high of over 7,858,450 people visited the Metroparks in 1969, an increase of 900,000 visitors.<sup>128</sup> By 1971, this number reached 9,285,645.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, according to the 1970 census, the population of the five-county region was 4,493,001, and projected to reach 6,000,000 by 1990.<sup>130</sup> Macomb County’s population, for example, grew from 406,000 in 1960 to 620,000 by 1970.<sup>131</sup> With these figures, HCMA chairman Kurt Keydel argued that, “based upon expected population growth, reputable planning agencies in this area indicate the present Huron-Clinton system should nearly double its lands by 1990.”<sup>132</sup> In the context of a dramatic shift in population to Detroit’s suburbs, George N. Skrubb, director of the Oakland County planning department warned, “someone has to look forward to the development of metropolitan areas with the same dramatic foresight that went into Central

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<sup>126</sup> “Belle Isle Bell Silenced,” *Royal Oak Daily Tribune*, June 18, 1970.

<sup>127</sup> For more on the origins of the urban crisis in Detroit during the 1950s, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 1996.

<sup>128</sup> “Record Numbers Visit Parks in ’69,” *South Lyon Herald*, January 14, 1970.

<sup>129</sup> Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority, “The Fifteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners,” 1971, 11.

<sup>130</sup> Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority, “Sixteenth Biennial Report,” 1973, 14.

<sup>131</sup> Selwa, Robert. “200-Acre Sterlign Park will be County’s First,” *Macomb Daily*, November 9, 1970.

<sup>132</sup> Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority. “The Fifteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners,” 1971, 3.

Park and Belle Isle in Detroit.”<sup>133</sup> Thinking such as this seemed to suggest that the outlook for parks in the region’s future was bright. To meet these demands, the HCMA developed proposals for three new parks over the next 15-20 years.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, according to David Laidlaw, “to better serve the inner city, the Authority proposed...to become responsible for, develop and operate Belle Isle Park.” All of this, however, Laidlaw cautioned, “will depend on increased millage.”<sup>135</sup> The proposal seemed to offer hope that the Authority’s outlook might be changed to bring resources into the city at the center of the region.

The relationship between the City of Detroit and the HCMA had been fraught since the 1940s, when Wayne County objected to the very creation of the Authority. Tensions had continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s, when it became clear that no parks or parkways would be built in the City of Detroit. By 1971, the HCMA had built nine parks, none of which were in the City of Detroit, despite Curtis and Whittemore’s original idea to incorporate the city into the new park system. The three closest parks to Detroit were Metropolitan Beach in Macomb County (22 miles from downtown), Lower Huron Metropark in southwest Wayne County (24 Miles from downtown) and Willow Metropark, also in southwest Wayne County (30 miles from downtown Detroit). The ¼ mill per dollar tax on the property of residents in the five-county region brought in 4.6 million dollars per year in revenue. Wayne County contributed the most, at 2.7 million dollars, with the City of Detroit making up \$1.3 million of this total. By contrast, Oakland County contributed \$1,006,540, Macomb \$609,000, Washtenaw \$276,995, and Livingston \$56,000.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Gainor, Paul. “Oakland Plugs Bigger Metropark Plan,” *Detroit News*, September 15, 1970.

<sup>134</sup> Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority. “The Fifteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners,” 1971, 7.

<sup>135</sup> Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority. “The Fifteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners,” 1971, 7.

<sup>136</sup> “Park Authority Eyes Belle Isle,” *South Lyon Herald*, February 26, 1970.

The proposal, created between the HCMA and the City of Detroit, to redevelop and lease Belle Isle Park to the Authority seemed to mitigate the uneven distribution of parks-to-financial-input ratio, particularly in the eyes of many Detroiters and Wayne County Commissioners. The plan, which called for \$40 million in improvements to the park over ten years, was created after months of study by the HCMA. Belle Isle became the focus of their efforts after planners at the HCMA determined there was no other block of land “within Detroit suitable for a new metropolitan park easily accessible to inner city residents without private transportation.”<sup>137</sup>

Amidst what one planner described as an “epidemic of civic paranoia...irrational suspiciousness or distrust between officials in the region’s many municipalities that inhibited greater cooperation, William Kreger, Wayne County’s representative on the HCMA Board of Commissioners, hoped that transforming Belle Isle into a Metropark might help to ameliorate tensions between units of government in the region and create a greater sense of regional cooperation.<sup>138</sup> He described that the proposal was “a grand opportunity for all units of government, Federal, State, County, City, and the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority Park system to demonstrate to the people an intelligent analysis and solution to a perplexing problem – a regional park facility for the substantial numbers of citizens who depend solely on public transportation for their recreational needs.”<sup>139</sup> Mayor Roman Gribbs supported the proposal, in part because he was “impressed by the high quality parks that have been developed and

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<sup>137</sup> “Detroiters to Decide if Belle Isle Should be Run by Park Authority,” *Brighton-Livingston Argus-Dispatch*, July 23, 1970.

<sup>138</sup> Kent Mathewson, a planner at the Metropolitan Fund, a nonprofit corporation founded to research and action in the larger Detroit region described these circumstances at the organizations “state of the region” address in 1970. Richard, Tim. “Civic Paranoia Hurts; Seek Regional Clout,” *Plymouth Mail and Observer*, February 5, 1970. Mathewson went on to say that since the 1960s “it was no longer logical to talk about Detroit and its suburbs as two entities. The parent-offspring relationship between Detroit and the suburbs was no longer pertinent. Rather the relationship is one of older brother and younger brothers. And the suburban youngsters has reached his majority...They are now equals in the game of life.”

<sup>139</sup> “Park Authority Eyes Belle Isle,” *South Lyon Herald*, February 26, 1970.

maintained by the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority.”<sup>140</sup> In 1970, Detroit also faced a budget deficit of \$22.5 million.<sup>141</sup> The proposal would relieve the city of the 1.5 million dollars it spent annually on Belle Isle, a sum not enough to maintain the park and make needed improvements.<sup>142</sup> Supporters of the proposal argued that with Detroit financially strapped, and prospects for the situation to get worse, Belle Isle’s redevelopment would remain at the bottom of city improvements for some time. Leasing the park to the HCMA offered the opportunity to ensure the park’s future.

Others were not as optimistic about the prospects of Detroit relinquishing control of the park to the Authority. Detroit City Council members Mel Ravitz, Anthony J. Wierzbicki, and Robert Tindal, in particular, voiced concern over the prospects of a tax increase and losing control over the island park. Since it was estimated that approximately 27 percent of the parks’ users were from outside the city, they argued it was unfair to place an additional tax burden on Detroit residents who had been paying a major portion of financial support into the HCMA system for 30 years, without the benefits of a park in as close proximity as many suburban residents.<sup>143</sup> As one resident articulated, “The City of Detroit needs help now! Let us see what kind of Michiganders the rest of us are. Let HCMA take over Belle Isle and eliminate that part of expenditure for the City of Detroit. Postpone new parks which are out of reach to those that need them the most anyway.”<sup>144</sup> An additional concern for political leaders was the organization of the HCMA’s board. There was only one representative from the City of Detroit, which many feared would lead the city to have little influence in the future operation of the park. Instead, the councilmen and their supporters argued that an agreement should allow the HCMA to spend

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<sup>140</sup> Hallas, Clark. “Gribbs Favors Leasing Belle Isle to Authority,” *Detroit News*, July 28, 1970.

<sup>141</sup> “Belle Isle Bell Silenced,” *Royal Oak Daily Tribune*, June 18, 1970.

<sup>142</sup> Hallas, Clark. “Gribbs Favors Leasing Belle Isle to Authority,” *Detroit News*, July 28, 1970.

<sup>143</sup> Hallas, Clark. “Threat of Tax Boost Perils Belle Isle Plan,” *Detroit News*, May 21, 1970.

<sup>144</sup> Van Zanen, Reyer. “HCMA Cheating Detroit,” Letter to the Editor, *Michigan Chronicle*, June 8, 1972

revenues from the city's contribution to the HCMA on Belle Isle Park, a solution closer to co-management of the site.<sup>145</sup>

With a majority of City Council and the Mayor in favor, however, the proposal to lease Belle Isle Park to the HCMA was put on the ballot for the August, 1970 election, and voters in the city approved the measure.<sup>146</sup> Now, the HCMA could move forward with a ballot initiative to raise its millage, which it argued was necessary to acquire Belle Isle and continue building parks.<sup>147</sup> Delays ensued. The primary issue in bringing the larger question of raising the Authority's tax revenues to voters in the five-county region, which HCMA said was necessary for revitalizing Belle Isle as well as building new parks in outlying areas, stemmed from the HCMA's 1939 enabling act, which required the state legislature's approval to increase the tax millage.<sup>148</sup> It was not until two years later that the State Legislature approved the referendum with Public Act 145 of 1972, which Governor William G. Milliken signed into law on May 26. The measure was allowed to appear on the August ballot.<sup>149</sup>

The HCMA's campaign to increase its funding by another ¼ mill focused on the need for funds not only to redevelop Belle Isle Park, but also to build three new suburban parks, one in western Washtenaw County, one in Oakland County, and one in Macomb County. The proposal fit with the Authority's adherence to the idea that large, regional parks accessed by expressways were at the core of their mission. Since a record 9,022,600 people visited the eight Metropolitan

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<sup>145</sup> Hallas, Clark. "Threat of Tax Boost Perils Belle Isle Plan," *Detroit News*, May 21, 1970.

<sup>146</sup> The measure read: Do you favor the city of Detroit leasing Belle Isle Park to the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority to operate, maintain and develop it as one of its metropolitan district parks, subject to approval of the Common Council and mayor of the City of Detroit and subject to a possible county millage increase of a maximum quarter mill? (Neuman, Ladd. "Voters Face Belle Isle Issue," *Detroit Free Press*, August 2, 1970).

<sup>147</sup> HCMA, *fifteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1971, 11.

<sup>148</sup> Getz, Anne. "Belle Isle Tax Vote Delayed until 1972," *Detroit News*, September 30, 1970.

<sup>149</sup> "HCMA Millage Increase to be Sought on August 8<sup>th</sup>," *South Lyon Herald*, June 8, 1972.

parks in 1970, and given Given voters' support of the original ballot measure creating the organization in 1940, the Authority was optimistic about the chances of success.<sup>150</sup>

With ever increasing political power in outlying suburban areas, connecting the tax increase to parks outside and inside the City of Detroit seemed politically savvy, as well as practical in the eyes of the Authority. As one newspaper in support of the proposal declared, "we need taxes to get some fresh air and beautiful land in our rapidly diminishing outdoors."<sup>151</sup> Yet the proposal before voters drew opposition for a variety of reasons. Some of those opposed argued that Belle Isle could be maintained by the Authority, but not redeveloped, for far less than the proposed \$40 million plan. Others thought population growth did not necessarily justify the need for new parks in outlying areas. Some argued that the parks, rather than aiding in the preservation of open space, would lead to congestion, traffic, and unwanted changes in the land from agricultural to recreational use.<sup>152</sup> Many in Detroit thought the Authority's existing funds should be reallocated more equally to parks in or near the city, and did not see the need for the HCMA's plan to dramatically redevelop the island park by relocating features and infrastructure.<sup>153</sup>

Residents in rural areas where new parklands would be purchased were skeptical of the changes the parks might bring, and others saw them as a threat to more profitable development of the land that suburbanization could bring. Even before the election, many residents of Ray Township in Macomb County were opposed to the Authority's proposal for a new 3,000-acre park. The group they formed, "Citizens for Realistic Priorities," helped to organize opposition

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<sup>150</sup> "1970 Attendance Breaks Records for HCMA Parks," *Milford Times*, January 14, 1971.

<sup>151</sup> "HCMA Deserves Support," *Livonia Observer*, August 3, 1972.

<sup>152</sup> Van Zanen, Reyer. "HCMA Cheating Detroit," Letter to the Editor, *Michigan Chronicle*, June 8, 1972; and Ball, Robert. "Macomb Group Fights Metro Park Tax Hike," *Macomb Daily Tribune*, August 3, 1972.

<sup>153</sup> "Beautifying Belle Isle," *Detroit Free Press*, August 14, 1972.

for the measure.<sup>154</sup> At the same time, they also proved an unlikely ally to those in Detroit who argued the HCMA should use its existing funds to support Belle Isle, rather than build new parks in outlying areas. As the organization's chairman, Donald Maertens wrote in a letter to the *Macomb Daily*,

After reading recently that the City of Detroit is contemplating closing the Belle Isle Aquarium because of lack of funds, I was prompted to write...I would ask the HCMA to start recognizing its responsibility to Detroit and its people...HCMA, the course is obvious. Detroit could use the million it is spending on Belle Isle elsewhere, and you could start assuming your responsibility to the Detroit residents by re-evaluating your priorities."<sup>155</sup>

Residents in Lima Township, in western Washtenaw County, also vociferously protested the HCMA's plans for Mill Creek Park, whose recreational mission they viewed as "a threat to the beauty, peace and production of the farm lands west of Ann Arbor."<sup>156</sup> Other suburban residents were uneasy about seeing their tax dollars fund what they considered to be only Detroit's park.<sup>157</sup>

Amidst opposition to new park plans, as well as a concern the Authority's proposed renovations for Belle Isle were unnecessary, voters rejected a tax increase for new parks in 1972.<sup>158</sup> Population and political power had shifted to suburban areas of the five-county region. Existing HCMA facilities were popular amongst suburban residents. Now that that they had parks, built with Detroit's money, an expansion into the city was not palpable. While the HCMA seemed to succeed in promoting a regional vision in the beginning, its plans had been rooted in a moral environmentalism based in the suburbs. Once the organization's plans shifted to include an equitable distribution of resources to the city, the region's residents rejected the idea, continuing the HCMA's original vision. As one columnist wrote, "Parks, you would think, are like the flag

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<sup>154</sup> Ball, Robert. "Macomb Group Fights Metro Park Tax Hike."

<sup>155</sup> Maertens, Donald. "Belle Isle Being Neglected," letter to the editor, *Macomb Daily*, January 25, 1972.

<sup>156</sup> Staples, Mary Jo. "Crusader in Lima Fights Park Plan," *Ann Arbor News*, January 10, 1972. By the late 1970s, the plan was eventually tabled because of opposition by local residents.

<sup>157</sup> Richard, Tim. "Parks Lose Public Favor As Voters Reject New Funds," *Redford Observer*, August 17, 1972.

<sup>158</sup> Wendland, Michael. "Tax Increase for New Parks, Belle Isle, Loses," *Detroit News*, August 9, 1972.



and apple pie – something everyone is for, especially in an era of concern for the environment.”<sup>159</sup> According to HCMA director David Laidlaw, the organization would “have to reanalyze our financial situation to see what we can do to move ahead with park improvement and construction. But we can’t assume the responsibility of Belle Isle.”<sup>160</sup> The claim must have seemed outrageous to a generation of residents who watched the promise of a regional park system become subsumed by logic of a flawed regionalism because it was really a vision for a suburban region instead of one that included the city itself. This brand of regionalism failed to recognize Detroit as anything other than the cause of the region’s environmental woes because of its industry and lack of seemingly unspoiled environmental assets.<sup>161</sup>

In the wake of the proposal’s defeat, some argued a citizens league should be created to care for Belle Isle Park and others suggested Detroit should ask the HCMA for funds to support the day-to-day operations of the park.<sup>162</sup> The city was allocated a one-time sum of 2.3 million dollars from the State of Michigan recreation funds to renovate and improve some aspects of the park, such as the bathhouse.<sup>163</sup> But these measures were far from the permanent solution for which city leaders hoped would alleviate the uneven redistribution of financial resources to outlying suburban areas of the region at the expense of Detroit’s long-term viability.

The HCMA continued to negotiate with city officials about how they might manage the park now that the HCMA could not pay for a \$40 million renovation, but leaders on both sides failed to arrive at a post-election agreement about how to manage Belle Isle Park. While the relationships between Detroit and the HCMA were fraught since the creation of the organization

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<sup>159</sup> Richard, Tim. “Parks Lose Public Favor As Voters Reject New Funds,” *Redford Observer*, August 17, 1972.

<sup>160</sup> “Millage Vote’s Failure Threatens Belle Isle,” *Hartfield Eccentric*, August 24, 1972.

<sup>161</sup> As historian Robert Self describes in his analysis of Oakland, “African Americans and whites, workers and employers, urbanites and suburbanites, renters and homeowners agreed on the garden’s allure but imagined the distribution of its costs and rewards differently. Those differences were the mainspring of politics” (8).

<sup>162</sup> Glazier, Douglas. “Belle Isle Citizen Unit Urged,” *Detroit News*, August 10, 1972.

<sup>163</sup> Lanhausen, Don. “\$2.3 Million Improvements for Belle Isle Announced,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 7, 1972.

in 1940, they grew increasingly so throughout the 1970s. In no small part, tensions increased because the HCMA board almost immediately moved forward with plans for three new parks in outlying areas, including two that were opposed by many local residents: Mill Creek Metropark in western Washtenaw County and North Branch Metropark in Macomb County. The third, Oakwood Metropark in Wayne County, was located just down river from the Authority's Lower Huron Metropark, and essentially served to expand this site into a larger park. The land acquisition was expected to cost \$15-18 million. If the Authority waited, its director David Laidlaw worried, the land would be developed, unavailable, or more expensive. While the HCMA eventually tabled Mill Creek due to opposition, North Branch was opened by 1981 under the name Wolcott Mills Metropark.<sup>164</sup>

According to HCMA deputy director James Pompe, the Authority was "still very much interested in acquiring Belle Isle" because "the island is too much of a treasure to be left as is."<sup>165</sup> Yet it remained, according to Detroit's concert band director, "a precious jewel buried under a pile of garbage." He also warned, "conditions now threaten to turn this beautiful park into a lawless jungle."<sup>166</sup> Yet it was apparently easier to acquire new land than negotiate with the city. James Trainor, executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) explained, their opposition to the HCMA's plans for parks in outlying areas by summarizing that "residents of Detroit have paid more than half of all the money the authority has used to build it string of metropolitan parks, yet they are the ones who least benefit from

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<sup>164</sup> Reynolds, Cynthia Furlong, *Metroparks for the People*, 2006, 57. Opponents in Lima Township as well as Detroit also argued that the park proposal made little sense because the Waterloo State Recreation Area was very close to the site.

<sup>165</sup> Wendland, Michael. "Is Belle Isle Becoming a 'Lawless Jungle'?", *Detroit Free Press*, July 22, 1973.

<sup>166</sup> Wendland, Michael. "Is Belle Isle Becoming a 'Lawless Jungle'?", *Detroit Free Press*, July 22, 1973.

these parks.”<sup>167</sup> As the editorial board of the *Detroit Free Press* explained, the outlying parks may have been good plans, but they were bad politics.<sup>168</sup>

In response to HCMA’s lack of action on a plan for Detroit, the Wayne County Board of Commissioners voted in May of 1973 to withhold \$2.4 million taxes the county was scheduled to pay to the HCMA, or approximately 56 percent of the Authority’s budget.<sup>169</sup> Wayne County Commissioners “urged that Belle Isle be taken into the HCMA system and encouraged development of other park space inside Wayne County.”<sup>170</sup> When the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced it would open Marbury State Park in Wayne County in 1973, the HCMA’s logic that it could not find a suitable site in the county seemed even less plausible to Detroiters. As one article described the DNR’s announcement, “when you can’t take the city folks to the park, you take the parks to the city folk.”<sup>171</sup> While closer than many Metroparks, it was, however, still far from the solution for which leaders in Detroit hoped.

A survey conducted at the request of the HCMA in 1973, however, suggested that continued attention to Belle Isle was important, and this encouraged the Authority’s new willingness to take on responsibility for the park.<sup>172</sup> The survey found visitors rated the Metroparks very highly. Approximately 48% of residents in the five-county region, or 2,156,640 people, visited one or more Metroparks.<sup>173</sup> The same survey, however, also found that “Belle Isle Park was used more widely than any of the nine [individual] HCMA parks;” approximately 39%

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<sup>167</sup> Tschirhart, Don. “SEMCOG Faces Test on Park,” *Detroit News*, February 23, 1973.

<sup>168</sup> “Good Plans, Bad Politics,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 4, 1973.

<sup>169</sup> “Wayne Cuts Park Funds,” *Lansing State Journal*, May 6, 1973.

<sup>170</sup> Wisler, Robert. “Park Authority Tax Funds Withheld,”

<sup>171</sup> “New Park Aimed at Urban Area,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, May 2, 1973. Although it was still about as far away as the closed Metroparks, Lower Huron and Metropolitan Beach, the DNR suggested they would, “like to see a while system of state parks in the metropolitan area, some of them right within the city limits of Detroit where we can bring the outdoors even closer to the city dwellers.”

<sup>172</sup> “HCMA Plans to Lease Belle Isle,” *Belleville Enterprise*, January 3, 1974. As the *Detroit Free Press* wrote, “The search for a better way to operate Belle Isle has been going on for several years, spurred by the knowledge that the island park, the metropolitan area’s busiest and most beautiful, has been deteriorating” (“New Belle Isle Proposal Offers a Starting Place,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 3, 1974).

<sup>173</sup> HCMA, *The Sixteenth Biennial Report of the Board of commissioners*, 1973, 14-15.

of the areas total population, or approximately 1,752,270 people had visited the island park over the past year.<sup>174</sup> In contrast, only 26 percent of the region's population used Kensington Metropolitan Park, the busiest HCMA facility. According to the 1970 United States Census, the population of Detroit was 1,511,482. With the number of people greater than the city's population using the park, the survey made clear what many in Detroit already knew: Belle Isle Park was a shared public resource enjoyed by many from the surrounding region, but for which the city was solely responsible, while public policies drained the city's ability to care for the site.

After a month of financial tension for the Authority, the two sides met to discuss Wayne County's concerns over the HCMA's priorities.<sup>175</sup> The situation was resolved, for the time being, after the HCMA agreed to continue to look for ways to operate parks that could be more easily accessed by residents in Wayne County and Detroit. By the end of 1973, HCMA held a press conference, and "publicly proposed to the City of Detroit that most of Belle Isle Park be leased to the Authority for operations and maintenance."<sup>176</sup> At the same time, it also was moving forward plans for an additional park, Indian Springs, in Oakland County.

Under the HCMA's proposal for Belle Isle Park, the Authority proposed to spend 1.9 million dollars per year to maintain and operate Belle Isle Park as one of its regional park facilities, although it would leave the maintenance of the children's zoo, aquarium, and conservatory to the City of Detroit. It also proposed that "a parking fee of some kind will be required at some future time on Belle Isle," and by 1974 the HCMA instituted a parking fee for

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<sup>174</sup> Bowles, Billy. "Metro Plan for Belle Isle Includes Fee for Parking," *Detroit Free Press*, December 29, 1973. The same study found that six out of every 10 persons in Detroit used the park and seven out of every ten African Americans from the city. Additionally, "nearly three-fourths of all those surveyed (73 percent say Belle Isle should be improved...this concern was expressed almost the same extent by residents of the City of Detroit, Wayne County, Macomb County and Oakland County, plus a good percentage from Washtenaw and Livingston Counties." Fifty-three percent said they were in favor of having Belle Isle operated by the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority ("Huron-Clinton Eyes Lease Plan," *South Lyon Herald*, January 10, 1974).

<sup>175</sup> "Officials 'Making Up' After Parks Funding Tiff," *Lakeland Tribune*, June 21, 1973.

<sup>176</sup> HCMA, *The Sixteenth Biennial Report of the Board of commissioners*, 1973, 5.

visitors using its facilities.<sup>177</sup> The fee, as the editors of the *Detroit Free Press* articulated, “is troublesome; the city has to fight for access to the park by people for whom it is the only refuge from the city’s burdens. The city ought to insist on some mechanism that will permit the people of the city to exercise some influence over the way the park is administered...The important thing, though, is that Huron-Clinton is trying to get negotiations going again that will permit it to make a more direct contribution to the welfare of the people of Detroit.”<sup>178</sup> The *Detroit News*, on the other hand, was more cautious. As their editors characterized the issue, “The latest proposal for regionalizing Belle Isle contains too many pitfalls. Either HCMA takes full possession and financial responsibility for the island or it should remain in Detroit’s hands with the aid of the regional authority. Trying to have it both ways only invites intergovernmental disputes and wasted tax dollars.”<sup>179</sup> Others, such as city council Member Joseph A. Young, argued that leasing control of Detroit’s prized, if neglected, park was unthinkable given that the taxpayers of Detroit and Wayne County provided a majority of the Authority’s funding since 1942. As he stated, “The time has come when this authority should recognize its obligation to those who have contributed so much through the years to make suburban parks possible.”<sup>180</sup> Yet Detroit’s acceptance of the HCMA’s proposal was far from certain.

Detroit’s new mayor, Coleman A. Young, the first African American to hold the office, was equally skeptical of the HCMA proposal and instead suggested the HCMA give the City of Detroit a portion of its revenues to maintain Belle Isle.<sup>181</sup> Fearing this would set a dangerous precedent for other municipalities within the region, the HCMA rejected Young’s proposal. In 1975, the HCMA’s director David Laidlaw reported, “the search for a site for an urban

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<sup>177</sup> Bowles, Billy. “Metro Plan for Belle Isle Includes Fee for Parking,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 29, 1973.

<sup>178</sup> “New Belle Isle Proposal Offers a Starting Place,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 3, 1974.

<sup>179</sup> “Pitfalls in Belle Isle Plan,” *Detroit News*, January 3, 1974.

<sup>180</sup> “Resolution Opposes Take Over of Belle Isle by HCMA,” *Belleville Enterprise*, February 21, 1974.

<sup>181</sup> Richard, Tim. “Detroit Threatens Parks Authority,” September 25, 1975.

Metropark in Detroit has not been successful. The previously reported proposals to operate and maintain a major facility on Belle Isle have not met with City of Detroit approval. Several possible other sites have been investigated and discussed with no agreement as yet.”<sup>182</sup> At the same time, Young proposed his own redevelopment plan for the park. As he described to city council members when he presented his budget for a \$4.1 million renovation, “Belle Isle is undoubtedly our greatest recreation complex – large, centrally located and naturally beautiful...but Belle Isle has too long been neglected and is now in a deplorable state of deterioration and disrepair.”<sup>183</sup> The proposal, the administration hoped, might further entice the HCMA to invest in other facilities there.<sup>184</sup>

As one reporter described, Belle Isle’s proposed multi-million dollar renovation during the 1970s was “accountable to both Mayor Coleman Young’s personal fondness for the island and his administration’s desire to rebuild downtown Detroit.”<sup>185</sup> Leon Atchison, Detroit’s director of Parks and Recreation, recalled that when the Young administration came into office they, “found a very lovely park that had been allowed to deteriorate to the point where people had stopped using it...it had developed the reputation of being a place *not* to be, rather than a place *to* be.”<sup>186</sup> As political power and the tax base increasingly migrated to Detroit’s suburbs, funds for vital city services, as well as recreational spaces such as Belle Isle Park, began to run short. With this reputation, some residents “began using neighborhood parks, while those with transportation flocked away from the city to the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority’s several regional parks.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> HCMA, *Seventeenth Biennial Report*, 1975, 4.

<sup>183</sup> Boyer, Edward. “Belle Isle Set to Undergo \$4.1 Millin Face-Lifting,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 17, 1974.

<sup>184</sup> Boyer, Edward. “Belle Isle Set to Undergo \$4.1 Millin Face-Lifting,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 17, 1974.

<sup>185</sup> Joel Greer, “The Rebirth of Belle Isle,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 1.

<sup>186</sup> Joel Greer, “The Rebirth of Belle Isle,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 1.

<sup>187</sup> Joel Greer, “The Rebirth of Belle Isle,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 23.

The Young administration wanted to draw people back to the city, and they considered Belle Isle Park as a component of their redevelopment strategy. Delivering on a campaign promise from 1973, the plan to renovate Belle Isle Park was thought of as a way to boost Detroit's image as a place to lure convention business.<sup>188</sup> With an existing aquarium and conservatory, the renovation plans also included \$900,000 for a new children's zoo. Eventually, Atchison and Young hoped to lure a "first-class restaurant" to the island. They reasoned that "conventioners and tourists would benefit most if a good meal could be had without leaving the island."<sup>189</sup> This, they hoped, might lead to a smaller version of "Trivoli," the a highly concentrated area of restaurants, entertainment, and gambling in an amusement park and garden setting in Copenhagen, Denmark.<sup>190</sup> The plan also called for reviving ferry service from the downtown riverfront to the Island, with the goal of making Belle Isle a pedestrian-only park by banning automobiles and "reestablishing Belle Isle's romantic atmosphere by correcting the canoe course through the canals and improving the general appearance of the island."<sup>191</sup> The proposal, the administration hoped, might also further entice the HCMA to invest in other facilities there.<sup>192</sup> Although it did not become the Trivoli of the Midwest, small renovations and improvement were made to the park. Major redevelopment efforts during Young's term, however, focused on much larger projects completed during his tenure as mayor, such as the Renaissance Center, GM's Hamtramck Assemble (Poletown), and his proposal to allow casinos to be built within the city limits.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Joel Greer, "The Rebirth of Belle Isle," *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 1.

<sup>189</sup> Joel Greer, "The Rebirth of Belle Isle," *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 23.

<sup>190</sup> Joel Greer, "The Rebirth of Belle Isle," *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 23.

<sup>191</sup> Joel Greer, "The Rebirth of Belle Isle," *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976, 23. Although seemingly a way to go back to a more "romantic" era by banning automobiles, throughout the twentieth centuries, cars were actually central to the way visitors experienced the island.

<sup>192</sup> Boyer, Edward. "Belle Isle Set to Undergo \$4.1 Million Face-Lifting," *Detroit Free Press*, April, 1974.

<sup>193</sup> As June Manning Thomas writes, Young used "visible redevelopment projects to cover up [the] deep seated social and economic decline" of Detroit's neighborhoods. "The Young administration was very good at symbol."

By 1977 there was still no agreement between the City of Detroit and the HCMA, despite criticism of the organization in the face of Detroit's decline. As the Authority's director David Laidlaw responded,

Some critics say that HCMA is not doing its job because it does not have a Metropark in Detroit and that any park site outside of Detroit should be opposed. Others say that the Authority should build small parks in neighborhoods and furnish transportation for patrons to outlying parks. The Authority is a dynamic and changing organization striving to provide new facilities and better service, but the basic HCMA mission has not changed. Providing a variety of outdoor recreation activities in large parks on good natural resources is the Metroparks goal, as one part of the overall recreation pattern of many agencies in Southeastern Michigan. This goal is not rigidly defined in the HCMA Enabling Act, which was written broadly, but was the widely understood reason and purpose of establishing the organization in 1942 and has been carefully refined and followed by the Board of Commissioners over the years. Area residents, including a great many from Detroit, do presently visit Metroparks in large numbers and the system is a vital element in the recreational capacity of the whole region.<sup>194</sup>

To many in Detroit affected by urban decline during the 1970s, however, the “dynamic and changing” organization's insistence on following a deeply modernist vision that required a blank slate to build parks and access to nature well outside the city limits seemed deeply flawed. The inability of leaders in Detroit and at the HCMA to agree upon a solution was another arena where growing divisions between Detroit and its suburbs played out during the 1940s and 1970s. Rather than uniting the region behind a shared vision of environmental stewardship, open space preservation, and recreation, by the 1970s the inability of the HCMA to come to a solution pitted Detroit – a city that was 44 percent African American in 1970 – against the largely white suburbs and marked another period of uneven development and environmental inequality within the region.

The ecological boundaries of the Huron-Clinton watershed outlined by the HCMA's founders also seemed more and more arbitrary, rather than logical. As the *Detroit Free Press*

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(June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 151, 177.

<sup>194</sup> HCMA, *Eighteenth Biennial Report of the Board of Commissioners*, 1977, 4.



reflected, “If the Rouge River had been considered years ago for Authority park sites, the community would have been spared some distressing problems and gained handy facilities.”<sup>195</sup> Leaders in Detroit during the 1940s welcomed the idea of the HCMA operating a park within the city limits, but the Authority’s plans were driven by the notion that lands well outside the city were those most suitable to the area’s recreational needs during an era when decentralization and expansion seemed inevitable. Perhaps the Metroparks system’s focus was not surprising, given that its founders hailed from Ann Arbor, on the western edge of the region. Yet their plans would not have been possible without the massive financial support of residents in Detroit and Wayne County. Organizers knew as much when they began their campaign for the “*Detroit-Huron-Clinton Parkway*” in 1937. As the organization’s founder, Harlow Whittemore wrote, “Here we would not leave our Detroit friends out in deep water for it is proposed to create along lake St. Claire a great waterside parkway leading into the Detroit River. Here another riverside drive...would lead into downtown Detroit, then out along the lower river to Grosse Isle, and along a chain of new islands to a site opposite the mouth of the Huron, the place of beginning.”<sup>196</sup> During the 1970s, however, it became clear that without the financial resources of the HCMA to support Detroit’s largest park, leaders would need to find other solutions to maintaining and revitalizing Detroit’s urban spaces.

## **Conclusion**

When civic leaders and voters in metropolitan Detroit imagined the possibilities of a regional park and parkway system during the late 1930s and 40s, their focus on preserving large tracts of land in outlying regions no doubt seemed logical and necessary. By the 1970s however,

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<sup>195</sup> “Good Plans, Bad Politics,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 4, 1973.

<sup>196</sup> Whittemore, Harlow. “The Proposed Huron-Clinton Parkway,” *Michigan Alumnus*, Vol. 44, 1937-1938, 209-210.

a growing environmental and urban crisis began to call into question the logic behind using the city's financial resources to develop parks that made the suburbs seem like an even more appealing place to live. An earlier generation of urban reformers once imagined that Belle Isle Park would help save the city from its social and environmental problems. Although moral environmentalism claimed to be a means of promoting a unified civic identity, racial and class presumptions were structured into the idea from its nineteenth century origins. Between the 1940s and 1970s, growing tensions between the city and suburbs, seen through the case of the HCMA, revealed just how tenuous the concept was. The inability of either the HCMA or City of Detroit to devise a plan to more equitably distribute financial assets between Detroit and its suburbs demonstrated that merely shifting moral environmentalism to spaces outside the city could not bring residents of the region together under the banner of civic unity. As historian Matthew Gandy writes, "the growth of the suburbs was explicitly fostered by an appeal to a pastoral ideal that served to undermine the rationale for urban nature sustained by the legacy of nineteenth-century urbanism."<sup>197</sup> More than only a pastoral appeal, the mass production of a suburban landscape was also achieved through the racial segregation of residents in the region. Historians have effectively demonstrated how public policies during the postwar era of the 1950s made it possible for white residents to leave Detroit, while many African Americans were left with little means of reaching the same quality of life white residents found in the suburbs of metro Detroit. Although the motives, class, and racial connotations of the individuals and organizations using varied forms of moral environmentalism throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem questionable today, in the 1970s civic leaders appeared to have given up on the very premise that the environment of the city could be shaped to promote social and cultural change.

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<sup>197</sup> Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 147.

The rise of environmentalism in the suburbs came at the expense of an on-going urban crisis in cities like Detroit. The city was left with little ability to solve problems created at such a large scale it could scarcely handle alone. Across a landscape left without financial resources to rebuild, many residents and visitors to the city began to reimagine and reevaluate urban nature amidst the effects of disinvestment and deindustrialization in the city. With political and financial power now resting with the suburbs, residents of Detroit were left with a landscape marked by ruins and abandonment willingly cultivated by years of planning that imagined a more wholesome nature and better way of life outside, but not within the city limits.

## Chapter 5

### Rustbelt Ecology: Gardens, Ruins, and Nature in Detroit After Industry, 1980-2010

During the 1930s and 1940s, a regional scale captivated the imagination of planners as they landscaped Metropolitan Detroit with vast suburban parks. By the 1970s, residents in Detroit were increasingly left to contend with a scale of a different sort. Mass suburbanization and the relocation of industry from the city created a landscape where abandonment and open space were a common sight across many areas of the city. The coarseness of rust, tones of grey, and the lingering grittiness of an industrial past shape a familiar cultural palate of urban decline that denote industrial rustbelt cities like Detroit. But along side the imagery of attrition recalled by rust, gardens and photographs of the city attach different stories and meanings to the city as they imagine a sense of place amid the scale of urban decline.

Earthworks Urban Farm, for example, creates a distinct sense of place from lots on the city's East Side as rows of crops interrupt the grid of streets. An extension of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, Earthworks started in 1997 with the efforts of Brother Rick Samyn, son of a Detroit grocer, who started the urban farm to address "the systemic causes of poverty, broken relationships, and a wounded earth."<sup>1</sup> Comprised of seven gardens on 20 city lots in a two-block radius, spaces long relegated to the status of vacant lots, members of Earthworks grew approximately 8,000 pounds of organic produce in 2009, helping to feed residents in a neighborhood where access to grocery stores is often difficult. More than one hundred years after Mayor Hazen S. Pingree used "wasteland" on the suburban outskirts of Detroit at the turn of the

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<sup>1</sup> Molly McCullagh, "History of the Earthworks Urban Farm," 2009, <<http://www.cskdetroit.org/DWG/history.cfm>>.

twentieth century to create gardens known as “Pingree’s Potato Patches” where residents could grow food, many Detroiters at the dawn of the twenty-first century were once again turning to the symbolic and practical potential of gardens in an attempt to live with the city’s unprecedented decline. Rather than the city-sponsored plan Pingree devised, partially as an attempt to control a fractured social order, Earthworks is a more grassroots effort. Small in scale, it represents a post-industrial pastoral, a vision of environmental and cultural renewal with a social justice bend that, like earlier forms of moral environmentalism, attempts to use the landscape to transform the circumstances of those left disempowered by the effects of macro processes like deindustrialization and suburbanization. Rooted in the politics of food and urban revitalization through small-scale changes in the land that many individuals and organizations in Detroit have turned to since the 1970s.

Not far from Earthworks, photographer Andrew Moore captured a scene that also seems more pastoral than urban, although it creates a very different sense of place. In the photograph, titled *Cooper Elementary School, East Side*, which Moore took on one of his visits to the city between 2008 and 2009, a field of Queen’s Anne’s Lace and two poles frame the abandoned school in the distance. Off to the left, a barely visible road looks more like one found in the rural countryside than an urban neighborhood. Dramatic clouds contrast with the land below to create a view that is also eerie, making it a scene that is also sublime, one that evokes a feeling of awe and terror. The gradual encroachment of uncontrolled nature and a quality of openness defines the post-industrial city. With an ominous feeling, the photographer creates a dystopian vision of environmental renewal where plants create an existence in the wake of human destruction. Moore frames a scene of nature amidst the ruins of an industrial city that has become a familiar way of seeing the city by professional photographers and amateurs alike. Weeds consume an

abandoned structure. Mold creeps over a broken window. A carpet of moss softens wood floors. Prairies grow on former lawns. Trees sprout from impossible places while the peopled parts of the city remain unseen and a sense of wildness returns. This, according to these photographers, is nature in the so-called rustbelt.



Figure 5.1: One of Earthworks' farm lots.



Figure 5.2: "Cooper Elementary School, East Side," 2009. © Andrew Moore

Earthworks Urban Farm and Moore's photograph are examples of two very different cultural responses to the spaces of Detroit's decline, and both grew in visibility since the late 1970s: community gardening and ruins photography. While metaphors of rust have long been used to describe America's once-industrial cities, these two seemingly disparate examples demonstrate that it is open space and nature - a rustbelt *ecology* - rather than rust alone, that shapes the patchy landscapes of cities like Detroit.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on urban gardening efforts since the 1970s and images that depict Detroit's ruins alongside overgrown vegetation. "Photography," writes landscape scholar Anne Spirn, "can be a way of thinking about landscape, a means to read a landscape, to discover and display processes and interactions, and to map out the structure of ideas."<sup>3</sup> The same could be said of urban gardens. While these two examples may seem arbitrary, I examine photography of the city's ruins and gardening together because both use the spaces of Detroit to create ideas and ideals about the landscape and its history as they debate what it means to be a part of this place socially, culturally, and environmentally. These two examples also demonstrate that Detroit's cultural landscape continues to be imagined through a "contentions collaboration," between insider and outsider; between differing interpretations; and competing visions of what the city was, what it is, and what it could be in the future.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>In his work *Concrete and Clay* (2003), historian Mathew Gandy advances the concept of "rustbelt ecology" to describe environmental justice activism in the Bronx. Through my research, I aim to expand upon his concept to encompass a wider terrain of visual and material practices that create shared, if competing, stories about the cultural landscapes of deindustrialization. As Dell Upton defines it, the cultural landscape: "fuses the physical fabric of the city and the material culture of its residents with the imaginative structures that urbanites use in constructing, explaining, and representing them." In this way, cities are "artifacts" of material culture, ideas given form. Dell Upton, "The City as Material Culture" in James Deetz, Anne E. Yentsch, and Mary Carolyn Beaudry, *The Art and mystery of historical archaeology* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1992), 51-53. Additionally, Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott's edited volume, *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization* (2003) foregrounds the cultural meaning of deindustrialized landscapes, and links the study of deindustrialization to cultural landscape studies.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Spirn, "Photography as a Medium of Inquiry," *Space Time Place Duration*, (Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture, 2013), 259.

<sup>4</sup> Historian David Stradling describes the idea of the landscape as a "contentions collaboration" in his work *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), xxiii.

Previous visions of urban nature in Detroit, such as Pingree's Potato Patches and Olmsted's plan for Belle Isle, used ideas about nature to reconcile the negative effects of industrialization. Similarly, community gardening and ruins photography build on longer histories of environmental thought – “landscape ideas and ideals” as historian Kenneth Helphand would describe them. Together, these practices use the vacant spaces of Detroit to shape competing visions of the city's environment after decline. Although the city's community gardens are not elaborate visual constructions, they rely on a human presence on the land to shape an urban environmental ethic. Photographs of the city's abandoned buildings overgrown by a “botanic anarchy” of vegetation recall ideas of a sublime wilderness where humans are displaced from an active role and responsibility toward the land. By examining the ideas represented in photographs and gardens, this chapter looks at the role visual culture plays in shaping environmental thought and a sense of place in the city after industry.

### **Making Meaning from the Landscape after Industry**

Detroit was once the largest factory town ever built. The city drew thousands of African Americans and European immigrants to the city. Since the 1970s, the cumulative effects of urban disinvestment, suburbanization, and deindustrialization – the dismantling and relocation of industry to areas where labor and the cost of doing business are cheaper - became increasingly visible across Detroit's landscape. Discriminatory policies of suburban development such as redlining and highway construction had created a region that was also dramatically segregated by race. Detroit's population increased six-fold between 1900 and 1950 to a peak of over 1.8 million residents, approximately 16 percent of whom were African American. Two decades later,



the city's population was slightly over 1.5 million with 44 percent African American.<sup>5</sup> By 2010, the city had just over 700,000 residents, 80% of whom were African American. In 2010, it was estimated that there were 90,000 vacant lots in Detroit or approximately 18 percent of the city's 139 square mile area.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, researchers noted that disinvestment also led many parts of Detroit to become a "food desert," a place without adequate grocery stores within convenient proximity.<sup>7</sup> Urban gardening and photography of the city's ruins gain their symbolic meaning from the material context of deindustrialization and the landscape it produced.

Gardeners and photographers repurpose space visually and materially, in terms that can be understood through philosopher Henri Lefebvre's concept of representational space. Lefebvre describes this as, "space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols...space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."<sup>8</sup> Lefebvre's theory illustrates the way thoughts, memories, actions,

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<sup>5</sup> Populations numbers are from the United States Census as reprinted in Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Lawson and Abbilyn Miller, "Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture as Antithesis to Abandonment: Exploring a Citizenship-Land Model," in Margaret Dewar and June Manning Thomas, eds. *The City After Abandonment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 27. Some estimates put vacant space to be thirty percent or 20,000-30,000 city owned parcels. John Gallagher, "Acres of Barren Blocks Offer Chance to Reinvent Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, December 15, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of one prominent look into Detroit's status as a "food desert" see Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group. *Examining the Impact of Food Deserts on Public Health in Detroit*, 2007. The report, commissioned by LaSalle Bank (now Bank of America) as a community outreach gesture, confirmed what most Detroiters already knew: over half of the city's majority African American population, approximately 550,000 people, reside in "food deserts," or neighborhoods where they must "travel twice as far or further to reach the closest mainstream grocer as they do to reach the closest fringe location" (4). In this study, "fringe retailers" were defined as gas stations, liquor stores, party stores, dollar stores, bakeries, pharmacies, fast food restaurants and convenience stores. These locations made up 92 percent of food retailers in Detroit. As this inhibits the access to healthy food options, Detroit residents have a greater risk of premature illness and death from diet related health effects (4). As one eastside resident conveys his experience: "There is only one store in the city I'll pick up some stuff at, but my kids jokingly call it the 'ghetto store' because everything is sub-par. Some of these stores make the argument that they are catering to black clientele, so they have to make room to carry stuff like ham hocks and chitterlings, but that's just an excuse for bad quality. Here we are, trying to revitalize the water front and make this city whole again, but people who live here can't even find something decent to eat. Where's the justice in that?" (Nathan Hurst and Joel Smith, "Grocery Store Closings Hit Detroit Hard," *The Detroit News*, July 5, 2007, 01A).

<sup>8</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1991), 39. Because he theorizes a triad of spaces that rely on one another, Lefebvre's theory avoids a strict dichotomy. This is useful because it foregrounds the symbolic and material presence of gardens and photographs.

and imagination shape space. Although gardens are physical spaces, compared to the scale of Detroit's decline, they are incredibly small physical realities, yet they have strong ideological value as symbols of perseverance and renewal. Their meanings and value to participants dwarfs their relatively small physical reality. Photographs, on the other hand, are more vested in making meaning and ideas through visual representation, although they can only do so through Detroit's landscape. Photographers and gardeners in Detroit both appropriate spaces in the city to make symbolic use of the physical reality of Detroit's landscape. In doing so, they create competing ideas about the nature and urban space as they look for environmental meaning in Detroit's decline.

To make symbolic use of space in Detroit, community gardening and photography reframe and appropriate older ways of looking at landscapes of industry and modern development in the context of deindustrialization and urban decline. For example, in his study of technology and the pastoral ideal in American culture, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Leo Marx uses the idea of the "Machine in the Garden" to convey the way artists and writers imagined modernity as an idealized, seamless merging of industry and rural life, "a pastoral which plants machines in the garden as benign presences, powering away quietly, industriously, harmoniously, as if they had always been there."<sup>9</sup> With the effects of deindustrialization and urban disinvestment in Detroit, urban gardening supporters, such as activist Grace Lee Boggs, the Gardening Angels, Earthworks Urban Farm, the Detroit Agriculture Network, and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network rework Marx's idea. In their gardening efforts they

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Moreover, looking at space this way helps to explain commonalities and overlaps between gardening and photography, even as their meanings are quite different.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 140. Leo Marx uses George Inness' 1855 painting Lackawanna Valley as a classic example of the "machine in the garden" because of the way the railroad blends seamlessly with the surrounding landscape as if it were a natural feature.

move from the “machine in the garden” to make “gardens in the machine,” spaces within Detroit that repurpose the meaning of Detroit’s ruins by making visible changes to the landscape that, while small, hold important symbolic meaning in their social vision while helping to provide access to food. As garden historian Kenneth Helphand describes, “when we see an improbable garden, we experience a shock of recognition of the garden’s form and elements, but also a renewed appreciation of the garden’s transformative power to beautify, comfort, and convey meaning despite the incongruity of its surroundings.” Urban gardeners grow improbable gardens that fulfill a practical need and basic right for healthy food while also conveying a deeper meaning – that despite widespread abandonment, Detroit remains a peopled place, with community, safe places amidst the danger, and that residents are not helpless but can take charge of their destiny. From a once-industrial landscape, residents use the symbolic power of gardens within the machine to advocate for their place in a city where their presence is often erased by narratives that imagine the city as an empty place.

A similar incongruity exists in photographs of Detroit’s ruins, although their imagery is far from comforting. Beginning with the same landscape, they also shape ideas about the meaning of nature in a post-industrial city. Images of Detroit’s ruins are pervasive today. They have become the topic of poignant reflection, heated debate, and mostly jaw-dropping disbelief for viewers as they have circulated in exhibits, books, and digital formats on blogs and social media sites in recent years. A search on Google or the photo-sharing site Flickr inundates viewers with a countless number of results from hobbyists and urban explorers depicting the abandoned Michigan Central Station and Packard Motors Factory to houses and vacant lots overgrown by dense layers of weeds. The ability to quickly reproduce and display a plethora of these images for viewers from across the world has caused controversy, leading many to

justifiably describe these images by photojournalists, hobbyists, and professionals alike as “ruin porn” for the narrowly focused, exploitative, and voyeuristic way they look at Detroit, typically from the perspective of outsiders who do not know the city in the same way as residents who live with the effects of urban decline as a part of their everyday lives.<sup>10</sup> Those that photograph the city’s ruins are typically outsiders who do not have to live with the effects of the city as a part of their everyday lives.

The “ruin porn” critique arises from the context of Detroit and cities like it, where artists, journalists, and amateurs’ fascination with urban and industrial ruins exploits the city and its people by only representing it as a ruined place, leaving much of the unseen social, economic, racial, and political context that created the ruins up to the viewer to learn. At the same time, artists’ rendering of ruins has a long tradition in the history of art. During the late nineteenth century, Jacob Riis photographed how the other half lived in New York City’s tenement districts. Vergara and Moore’s photographs evolved from this tradition, as well as the 1970s, when photographers began representing the ruinous effects of deindustrialization that were increasingly present across industrial areas of the United States.<sup>11</sup> The images I examine contain elements that leave them open to a standard “ruin porn” critique. They represent people-less places that viewers often take to represent the entire city. At first glance they seem to imagine

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<sup>10</sup> This way of looking creates what geographer George L. Henderson has described as “the apocryphal landscape,” landscape “as a way of seeing, especially a way of seeing that relishes the gaze” and “asserts power by privileging perspectival vision.” George L. Henderson, “What (Else) We Talk About When We Talk About Landscape,” in Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, Ed. *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 192.

<sup>11</sup> Photographer Lee Friedlander, for example, embarked on a National Endowment for the Arts funded project to document America’s industrial heartland through a project called *Factory Valleys*. While Friedlander made black and white images, this book and exhibit contain several images that are precursors to Andrew Moore’s work for their focus on overgrowth taking over industrial spaces. The Akron Art Museum also played a central role in exhibiting both projects. Someday, I’ll write an article just discussing these two projects and the longer history of photographing the Rustbelt.

Detroit as a new terrain to be explored and discovered, and rarely present viewers with a context that can help viewers understand the policies that produced the ruins they represent.

At the same time, these photographs are also more complex. Like urban gardens, they also begin with the city's landscape to imagine a future while reflecting upon the past. Professional photographers Camilo Jose Vergara and Andrew Moore are two of the most nationally known to taken up the subject of Detroit ruins in their photographs, often with a particular eye for the way nature, in the form of overgrown plants, seems to overtake the city and give it a sense of wildness.<sup>12</sup> With countless examples, their works are one touchstone for examining the role of visual culture in shaping a strand of environmental thought about cities after industry.

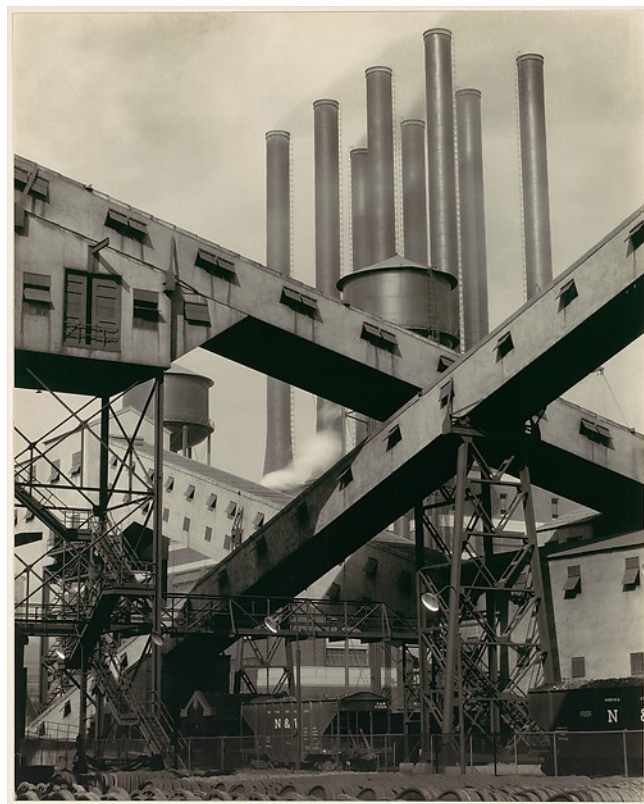
Scholars such as historian David Nye have also used the idea of the “technological sublime” to describe the sense of aesthetic wonder that accompanied earlier images of industrialization, images that pre-load the visual perception of industrial ruins. For example, Charles Scheeler's photographs of the River Rouge factor in Detroit from the 1920s and 1930s are often considered icons of an industrial or technological sublime for the way they represent industrial landscapes on par, if not surpassing, the scale and sense of awe invoked by nature. The power of these images lingers in the viewer of images that depict nature reclaiming industrial buildings that once was thought to be the established order. The obsolescence of technology and focus on nature amidst industrial ruins in more recent images of Detroit transform the city into a “post-industrial sublime,” an unsettling reimagining of a landscape that

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<sup>12</sup> Sociologist George Steinmetz has argued that the obsession with Detroit's ruins stems from white suburbanites desire to “nourish their nostalgic longing for the city's golden era of Fordist prosperity.” However the photographers I examine seem more interested in the sense of adventure and visual intrigue that comes from an overgrown landscape laced with evidence that it was once wholly and completely human controlled. The images they create reflect on history, human failure, and the inevitable passage of time. George Steinmetz, “Harrowed Landscapes: white ruingazers in Nambibia and Detroit and the cultivation of memory,” *Visual Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, December 2008.

is sublime in its toxicity and scale of decline, not for its seemingly pristine state of being.

Vergara and Moore's photographs of unruly plants consuming abandoned structures combine the industrial sublime with nineteenth century ideas about the sublimity of wildness to imagine nature taking back the city, despite a past that illustrates Detroit's decline was anything but natural.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> In their work *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*, historians Steven High and David Lewis use the term “deindustrial sublime” to analyze landscapes of deindustrialization in North America, such as videos and photographs of building demolitions, as well as the work of ‘urban explorers’ who photograph abandoned buildings and post their images and narratives on blogs and websites. They describe it as a “sense of being swept away by the beauty and terror of economic change” (11). In this paper I build on their idea under the heading of the “post-industrial sublime,” to examine photographs of Rust Belt cities and the ideology of nature and environment they represent.

Figure 5.3: Criss-Crossed Conveyors, River Rouge Plant, Ford Motor Company, 1927. Charles Scheeler, Photographer.

### Surveying the Urban Crisis

In 1977, Chilean-born photographer Camilo José Vergara began a project to photograph places that were, like Detroit, devastated by urban and industrial decline. Using time-lapse images, sometimes over the course of decades, he surveyed the transformation of urban landscapes across the United States, including Gary, Camden, the South Bronx, Compton, and Brooklyn. By 1987, he made his first trip to Detroit, returning nearly every year to photograph the effects of time on the same places in the city to create an archive of the city's ruins that has had lasting ramifications and caused much debate over the ethics of depicting the city as a ruin when hundreds of thousands still call it home.<sup>14</sup> Two books in particular, *The New American Ghetto* (1995) and *American Ruins* (1999) circulated his images widely and recount his experiences, as did numerous exhibits. He is often compared to Jacob Riis for the way he has thoroughly documented conditions in the ghettos of late-twentieth century America. Vergara described that each of his photographs "represents an instant history" that serves "to rack change over time." Today, his archive of photographs is housed at the Library of Congress.

Trained as a sociologist, Vergara creates images that illustrate the gradual effects of erosion, neglect, and abandonment of cities as represented by their architectural infrastructure. He describes that, "Bricks, signs, trees and sidewalks have spoken to me the most truthfully and eloquently about urban reality. For me, a people's past, including their accomplishments, aspirations and failures, are reflected less in the faces, postures and clothing of those who live in these neighborhoods than in the material, built environment in which they move and that they modify over time. Photographs taken from different levels and angles, with perspective-

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<sup>14</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 229.

corrected lenses, form a dense web of images, a visual record of these neighborhoods over years and even decades. I write down observations, interview residents and scholars, and make comparisons with similar photographs I have taken in other cities.”<sup>15</sup> On one level, the buildings he represents signify human misery without representing people.

For example, in the Brush Park neighborhood of Detroit a few blocks from the Detroit Institute of Arts, Vergara photographed one of the area’s former mansions multiple times in order to chronicle the changing effects of the seasons, plant growth, and time on its structure, which became almost entirely subsumed by weeds by the time he photographed it in 2002.<sup>16</sup> Later images revealed the house was at least partially stabilized with boarded up windows and beams, although it appeared that the slow pace of change and redevelopment had once again left it to the weeds. By tracking this visual change over time, Vergara calls viewers’ attention to the wildness of nature that seems to prevail with the inability of an industrial social order and economic system to make a permanent reclamation of this space. The tightly focused image, first published in *American Ruins*, calls the viewers attention only to the mansion itself. Although a lone figure walks by, like nineteenth century paintings of the American West, “the solitary figure, especially, operates as a spatial coordinate, often becoming as much a part of nature as the trees and rocks, which join with it in a harmonious unity...”<sup>17</sup> As all photographers do,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/camilo-vergara-photographs.html#statement>

<sup>16</sup> Vergara’s persistent documentation of this particular house reveals that it has been rebuilt from its formerly collapsed state, although it remains boarded up. Through a digital gallery on his website, Vergara depicts the abandoned house’s change over time with 16 images: <http://camilojosevergara.com/Detroit/Former-Ransom-Gillis-Mansion/16/thumbs/>. As Vergara described in a 2014 interview with Time Magazine, “Perhaps Detroit’s neighborhoods will rise again and the desolate streetscapes that made such an impression on me will be gone. That would be a cause for celebration. But I will always remember the nights, when gliding along the ruined streets of Motown I felt I was somewhere out of this world.” <http://lightbox.time.com/2014/04/28/detroit-by-night-haunting-desolate-streetscapes-by-camilo-jose-vergara/#1>

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 191.



Vergara frames out surrounding contexts to draw attention to a specific detail that carries a larger meaning in order to evoke feelings, emotions and meaning.



Figure 5.4: Former Ransom Gillis House, Detroit, 1994. Camilo José Vergara, photographer. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-vrg- 00097



Figure 5.5: Ransom Gillis Mansion, Alfred at John R Streets, Detroit, 2000. Camilo Vergara, photographer. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-vrg-00100.

In Vergara's images of Detroit's ruins, their meaning, in part, comes from the juxtaposition of human structures and untamed nature that convey the limitations of human

power and control. They may evoke emotions like sadness, wonder, and even guilt, which could be motivators for social change. At the same time, ruins and nature create a seemingly novel environment to be explored by visitors to the city, which becomes easily romanticized when one does not have to live with reminders of a troubled history of abandonment on a daily basis.<sup>18</sup> As Vergara described, nature transforms these spaces into subjects that merit documentation: “decay renders even the most ordinary buildings picturesque...As they lose their original features and gain a covering of dirt and plants, edifices achieve boldness of form and richness of colors and textures.”<sup>19</sup> Looking for nature in the ruins of Detroit, Vergara argues, transforms these spaces of decline - the product of racialized disinvestment and relocation - into, “‘ripe ruins,’ like Highgate Cemetery and Abney Park, the much loved monumental resting places of London. After half a century of neglect, these cities of the dead have become pleasant places to pick berries, stroll, and bird watch. Americans can learn how to live well with their symbols of decline, their ruins of past grandeur.”<sup>20</sup> This visual effect also recalls eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic traditions in the history of art, and Vergara describes many who worked in this mode as models for his own approach.<sup>21</sup>

The process of re-discovering nature in Detroit through photography is also similar to the way an earlier generation of survey photographers looked at the American West. For example, American Studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg argues that the natural environment documented by photographers such as Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, cannot be “understood simply as ‘nature’ existing prior to and apart from the social activity of [photographic] survey, but as the

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<sup>18</sup> In their study of deindustrialized spaces in Canada and The United States, historians Steven High and David Lewis describe that a common theme among urban explorers, “relates to the wild. Urban explorers regularly compare industrial ruins to the natural world” Steven High and David Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 56.

<sup>19</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 216.

<sup>20</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 219.

<sup>21</sup> Vergara specifically mentions Claude Lorrain, Giovanni Bellini, Pieter Saenraedam, Jacob van Ruisdael, Claude Monet, Hubert Robert and Panino Panini. See *American Ruins*, 24.

product of a distinct mode of seeing, knowing, and possessing.”<sup>22</sup> Vergara’s photographs function similarly. He uses relatively tight frames to depict scenes that, while containing eerie looking abandoned structures, still imagine a romantic, wild sense of nature. In two photographs of Detroit’s East Side from 1987, for example, Vergara describes how the landscape “resembles the Midwestern prairie.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, “In the vast ‘nature preserves’ of ghettos,” Vergara writes, “I have experienced familiar sensations. Walking through vacant lots in the South Bronx in the early 1970s brought back to me the harsh smell of weeds and the pungent stench of rotten carcasses. Something primordial was restored to my life.”<sup>24</sup> Like Americans exploring the West for the first time, Vergara’s photographic excursions amidst urban decline were more than merely trips to document places. They were an opportunity to discover oneself through the wildness of the post-industrial city.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Trachteberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 154.

<sup>23</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: The Montacelli Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>25</sup> The visual search for urban nature is not unique to Detroit or cities commonly described as a part of the Rust Belt. In 2001, for example, photographer Joel Sternfeld published *Walking the High Line*, a collection of photographs that depicts the overgrown plant life between rows of buildings found along an abandoned elevated train line on the west side of the Manhattan. Now a park and popular destination for visitors, Sternfeld’s images are credited as part of the inspiration for transforming the space into a park, which preserved a similar sense of green space and history in the city while also creating usable park. Compared to Vergara’s proposal for a “Smithsonian of Decline” in Detroit, The High Line attempts to preserve the past through adaptive reuse, rather than gradual attrition. Robert Hammond, “High Line: New York City’s Park in the Sky,” Penny W. Stamps Lecture, Michigan Theatre, Ann Arbor, MI, February 2, 2012.



Figures 5.6: View East Along East Palmer Towards Chene, Detroit, 1995. Camilo Vergara, Photographer. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-vrg-00252.

In his comparison of the derelict spaces of American cities to “nature preserves,” Vergara calls attention to the scale of openness that has given Detroit and other “post-industrial” cities a “rural” appearance in some neighborhoods, present in his photograph of a street on the east side of the city where a narrow street bordered by a derelict building and overgrown lots stretches endlessly into the distance as overgrown lots (Figure 5.5). In this photograph and others of “urban prairies,” Vergara captures a sense of the scale of open space that poses a significant problem for Detroit as the city attempts to live within a land area once intended for a city of nearly two million. The encroachment of wild nature, Vergara’s images suggest, transform Detroit into a place worthy of documenting and preserving. Vergara’s aesthetic vision has limitations, however. The viewers’ sense of place and understanding of the context of Detroit’s decline, the histories of disinvestment, racial conflict, and suburbanization that created Detroit’s post-industrial landscape, is inherently constricted by the medium of the photograph, even as it is

these historical processes that give Vergara the material landscape from which he is able to produce his photographs.<sup>26</sup>

Others who live in the city have also attempted to document and survey the industrial ruins. In 1997, for example, Detroit-based painter Lowell Boileau aimed to preserve Detroit's ruins through a widely-visited website called "The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit." The site is intended to be a virtual tour of the city's ruins. "This guided pictorial tour of the contemporary ruins of Detroit," the site's introductory page describes, allows visitors to "discover a snapshot of the ruins of Detroit in the mid-1990's."<sup>27</sup> The images – which number in the thousands according to Boileau – contain very brief captions of the history of the building represented in the photograph and allow viewers to "visit" the derelict and seemingly dangerous spaces of Detroit from the comfort of their personal computers. As Boileau told the *New York Times* in 1998, "I did this site from the heart. Over the years, I have painted a number of these settings and have had a long interest in their symbolism of the transformation of the industrial age to the information age. As such I have enjoyed a spectacular front row seat here in Detroit."<sup>28</sup> Projects like Boileau's attempt to put Detroit on the map for its very real collection of ruins by preserving their image in a digital environment.

A conflict arises, however, when visitors perception of the reality on the ground are distorted by the images. Boileau, like Vergara, asks visitors to "Put aside their [Detroit's ruins] negative image...and view them, for a moment, as you might one of the celebrated ruins of the

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<sup>26</sup> American Studies scholar Liam Kennedy writes that Vergara's images may signify "social forms of neglect" such as redlining and suburbanization that helped produce uneven regional development. But evoking nature and decay also suggests, "a natural environmental process" not "a historical and social one." Liam Kennedy, "Between Pathology and Redemption," in *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 109 -113.

<sup>27</sup> Lowell Boileau, "The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit," last modified April 2014. Accessed April 29, 2014. <http://www.detroityes.com/fabulous-ruins-of-detroit/home.php>

<sup>28</sup> Jason Chervokas and Tom Watson, "Digital Monuments to the Urban Past," *The New York Times*, March 1, 1998.

world. Then you may come to understand why I call them the Fabulous Ruins of Detroit.”<sup>29</sup> For Vergara, this came in the form of a deadpan proposal in 1995, reprinted in the conclusion to *The New American Ghetto* and circulated in several national magazines, in which he even went so far as to imagine a section of Downtown Detroit’s landscape as a “Smithsonian of Decline” to preserve the artifacts of the city’s abandoned twentieth century skyscrapers, not as buildings, but as ruins. “What would be lost if these symbols of wealth, gentility, and boundless ambition were torn down?” he asked. “We should let this environment age ‘naturally.’” In this space, he wrote, “I would do nothing but secure the buildings and would allow the passage of time to create an urban ruins park, an American Acropolis.”<sup>30</sup> At this park, “In the process [of decay], ever new and surprising aspects of their semi-covered skeletons would emerge, opening perspectives right through them. Trees and bushes would give these enormous human-made mountains a covering of nature, changing in color with the passing of the seasons.”<sup>31</sup> Because of its location, Vergara also imagines that Detroit’s downtown core is advantageous to creating these effects. “This fantastic cityscape rises in a spectacular setting between Midwestern prairies to the north and the Detroit River to the south,” he describes. “Midwestern prairie would be allowed to invade from the north. Trees, vines, and wildflowers would grow on roofs and out of windows; wild animals, goats, squirrels, possums, bats, owls, ravens, snakes, insects, and perhaps even an occasional bear would live in the empty behemoths, adding their calls, hoots, and screeches to the smell of rotten leaves and animal droppings.”<sup>32</sup> Nature, Vergara imagines, could give Detroit’s ruins a

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<sup>29</sup> Lowell Boileu, “Prologue” to “The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit,” last modified April 2014. Accessed April 29, 2014. <http://www.detroityes.com/fabulous-ruins-of-detroit/home.php>

<sup>30</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: The Montacelli Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>31</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: The Montacelli Press, 1999), 206. Vergara continues to describe that in Detroit, “unlike recent celebrated buildings, which are cold and distant in their perfection, derelict structures form some of our most moving urban spectacles. But their dramatic quality and extraordinary beauty are often lost on local residents. Understandably, they see in them a reflection of how bad things have gotten in their community and would like them fixed or demolished” (207).

<sup>32</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 220.

positive association. As he later recalled, “I was one of the few who loved the derelict skyscrapers, a sentiment characterized as that of an outsider and an aesthete.”<sup>33</sup>

To create an urban wilderness park, however, denies the fact that the city itself is not abandoned. His vision missed the central problem of Detroit: that it is partially and not fully abandoned. While it is highly unlikely the city will ever be fully repopulated, a vision of the city overgrown by nature removes all human possibility. The desire to survey and document decline becomes conflated because the reality is that one cannot map abandonment and decline on the entire city. The landscape displays social inequality in a much more uneven way, in which redevelopment and decline, wealth and poverty, are starkly juxtaposed across the city and larger region. This is the reality of Detroit.

### **Urban Wilderness and the Postindustrial Sublime**

At the height of the Great Depression, Diego Rivera’s murals vividly represent the mix of people, industry, and natural resources that made Detroit the crucible of American industry. With colors no less vivid, New York based photographer Andrew Moore photographed Detroit’s vacant and abandoned spaces to imagine the return of a sublime sense of nature after industry, like the last sequence in Thomas Cole’s *The Course of Empire*. His journey to the city began in 2008, when French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, who had been photographing Detroit since 2005, invited Moore to join them, which he did “for nearly three months” between 2008 and 2009.<sup>34</sup> With large-format cameras in tow, Moore describes that the group, like many urban explorers before them, was driven by “the spirit of exploration and

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<sup>33</sup> Camilo José Vergara, “Detroit Is No Dry Bones: The Eternal City of the Industrial Age,” (Ann Arbor: Taubman College of Architecture and Planning, 2014), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 118.

discovery and trying to get into places that nobody had seen pictures of.”<sup>35</sup> More than only a practice of making art, like Vergara before him, photographing Detroit was an act of exploration and discovery. The result of his short stint in the city was a collection of works titled *Detroit Disassembled*, first exhibited in the Akron Art Museum and in a book by the same name.

A large portion of the photographs in this collection, as Moore describes, focus on “the idea that in an urban setting you could also have a landscape happening, the forces of nature intersecting with American urbanism, the process of decline also intersecting with the revival of nature.”<sup>36</sup> Long interested in the theme of time, transformation, and change, Moore’s previous projects documented Cuba, post-Soviet Russia and Robert Moses’ New York City legacy. As one writer noted, however, “unlike his work in Russia and Havana, Mr. Moore’s Detroit photos are largely devoid of people, giving them an eerie, post apocalyptic feel.”<sup>37</sup>

Like Vergara before him, who photographed similar urban prairies on the sites of former neighborhoods during the 1980s, Moore was struck by “a landscape where the evidence of human endeavor was slowly being subsumed by nature.”<sup>38</sup> For example, in 2010, Moore photographed the former Detroit Public Schools Book Depository. In the pictures, crumbling concrete columns and contorted steel beams form an improvised courtyard. Clumps of unruly trees grow in a compost of soggy books, inching upward, partially concealing the ruins.

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<sup>35</sup> Jeffery Kaczmarczyk, “Ruin Porn or Art? Andrew Moore’s Photos of ‘Detroit Disassembled’ at the Grand Rapids Art Museum are Open to Interpretation,” *Mlive* [http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/06/ruin\\_porn\\_or\\_art\\_andrew\\_moores.html](http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/06/ruin_porn_or_art_andrew_moores.html)

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Moore as quoted in: Mike Rubin. “Capturing the Idling of the Motor City,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Mike Rubin. “Capturing the Idling of the Motor City,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Tannenbaum and Mitchell Kahan in: Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 122.





Figure 5.7: Birches Growing in Decayed Books, 2009. © Andrew Moore

Moore describes with a sense of disbelief how, “formerly manicured courtyards have become impassable forests, trees sprout from cornices of office buildings, and former living rooms lie suspended in the rising undergrowth.”<sup>39</sup> Instead of the romantic and picturesque sense of nature intertwined with ruin that Vergara illustrates, however, Moore’s work goes farther to adapt the visual language of the sublime to represent Detroit, particularly through his use of color, the scale of his work, some prints measuring five by six feet, and his emphasis on the power of nature in the absence of people.

The sublime has a long history of shaping the way American’s look at the landscape. While sublime ideas can be traced back to Burke’s writings in eighteenth century Europe, in the United States it grew in popularity during the mid-nineteenth century with Hudson River School painters such as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, who painted scenes of the Catskill Mountains. As historian David Stradling describes, “One of the most powerful idealizing

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 119.

sentiments, or really a collection of them, was called ‘the sublime.’ A variously defined set of feelings, ranging from awe to terror...”<sup>40</sup> Nineteenth century writers and painters alike went out in search of “extreme landscapes, those in which witnesses might easily discern the hand of God.”<sup>41</sup> The scenes they painted, dramatic compositions with vivid colors, overwhelmed viewers senses with emotional experiences that were often greater than what they experienced when viewing the actual landscape. Moreover, as art historian Barbara Novak writes, “the sublime was being absorbed into a religious, moral, and frequently nationalistic concept of nature, contributing to the rhetorical screen under which the aggressive conquest of the country could be accomplished.”<sup>42</sup> The sublime was an idealized vision that, while sparking intense emotions from its beauty, masked the environmental destruction of industrialization by rendering the seemingly pristine beauty of an American wilderness outside human intervention.

With the extreme landscapes of the nineteenth century well traversed and memorialized in photographs and paintings, Detroit and America’s fading industrial past became the next frontier. Moore himself cites American landscape painters, such as Frederic Church and Martin Johnson Heade, who depicted sublime scenes, as inspiration.<sup>43</sup> Instead of rendering pristine nature untouched by humans, like Heade, Church, and other American painters who used the sublime imagined, Moore takes the idea of the sublime farther. Like twentieth century artists, such as Charles Scheeler who rendered industrial factories on par with natural features to create a “technological sublime.” Moore creates scenes that imagine a postindustrial sublime, where nature once again begins to overpower signs of human structures on the landscape. The ability

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<sup>40</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 57.

<sup>41</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 57.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 38.

<sup>43</sup> Mike Rubin, “Capturing the Idling of the Motor City,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2011.

for nature to grow in ruins cultivated by years of willful urban disinvestment invites viewers to contemplate the lingering consequences of industrialization. Through an aesthetic of deindustrialization his images characterize an environmental vision where nature, not culture, survives.

This influence is particularly apparent in his photograph, *Former Bob-Lo Island Steamboat*, which depicts the Detroit River and a ghostly looking skeleton of a steamboat docked at the U.S. Steel facility in Ecorse, just downriver from Detroit. Photographing this scene at twilight allows Moore to capture a pale pink light on the towers, in the dramatic clouds, and reflected in the water. This light gives the image a sense of warmth, recalling many of Moran's paintings, such as *Green River Cliffs* (1874). The twilight sky provides Moore with the colors to create a surprisingly majestic and tranquil vision of the way trees and grasses grow alongside the towers of industry, giving viewers a renewed way of looking at an otherwise derelict landscape. Like nineteenth century representations of the American landscape that used the aesthetic of the sublime, Moore's epic photographs of America's quintessential post-industrial landscape use nature to overwhelm the viewer's senses and create a scene that arrives at the boundaries of human comprehension.



Figure 5.8: “Former Bob-Lo Island Steamboat, Docked at U.S. Steel, Ecorse,” 2009. © Andrew Moore.

Detroit poet Philip Levine describes his reaction to Moore’s photographs by writing that, “this sudden revelation of sublimity in a place I can only think of as a hellhole simply stops me. I know I never saw anything like this, probably because I wasn’t seeing.”<sup>44</sup> Struck with awe, Levine’s sense of the city is transformed by the stunning natural effects that Moore captures. The curators of Moore’s exhibit write that his photographs approach Detroit’s “social, economic, and political dilemma with emotional impact and unexpected visual splendor.”<sup>45</sup> As photographs, of course, they have everything to do with representing nature and little to do with the context that created such a landscape in the first place. Moore’s works have drawn some criticism of the “ruin-porn” sort for observing Detroit’s “social, economic, and political dilemma” with photographs that use the “emotional impact and unexpected visual splendor.” At the same time,

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<sup>44</sup> Phillip Levine, “Nobody’s Detroit” in *Detroit Dissassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 115.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Tannenbaum and Mitchell Kahan in: Moore, Andrew. *Detroit Dissassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 123.

they have also made a presumably critical viewer notice elements of the city he had never seen before.

Similar encounters with nature are present in Moore's photograph of the former Ford Motor Company headquarters in Highland Park. Here, there is an eerie and oddly pastoral quality to the rolling landscape in miniature created by moss covering an abandoned office floor. Rather than the sense of balance achieved through sweeping landscape vistas in nineteenth century paintings, Moore frames a single room with an open door, a mere portion of the landscape, to convey the visual sublimity and potential for renewal found in unencumbered nature. As he recalls, "it's the undisturbed vitality of nature that transforms a leftover soggy carpet into a lushly florescent bed of moss."<sup>46</sup> By representing the process of decay through nature, Moore demonstrates how, in his words, "Detroit's transfiguration has led it beyond decay into a surreal landscape, where the past is receding so quickly that time itself seems to be distorted."<sup>47</sup> The fleeting presence of the industrial past becomes subsumed by a wild nature that transforms the landscape of the city room by room, block by block, into an unexpectedly sublime place. At the same time, his representational practice defies easy categorization because it combines elements of surrealism, the sublime, and pastoral.

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 119.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 119.



Figure 5.9: “Former Ford Motor Company Headquarters, Highland Park,” 2008. © Andrew Moore.

Like some nineteenth century painters whose use of the sublime “did not require the accurate presentation of a real scene,”<sup>48</sup> Moore’s photographs achieve acts of “disguise and revision,” as Detroit-poet Philip Levine has described, in their tight, controlled focus on only the people-less parts of Detroit’s landscape that leave much unseen in order to evoke awe, wonder, and disbelief for audiences outside the city.<sup>49</sup> The title for this image in particular, “Former Ford Motor Company Headquarters, Highland Park,” gives one pause because it demands the recognition of the history of the automobile and industrialization, the knowledge of what came before, for which Detroit is well-known. The legacy of industrialization and its long-lasting effects on the landscape can be seen everywhere in Moore’s images. In the photograph, the sight of unencumbered nature appears to gradually erase industrial society. As historians Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott describe, “In the end, what may be most troubling about these ruined industrial landscapes is not that they refer to some once stable era, but rather that they

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<sup>48</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 61. Stradling continues to write that, “In fact style encouraged otherwise. In the interest of capturing some larger truth, artists could transform reality, especially by adding or removing natural objects...to heighten the desired effects. Mountains rose to meet artists’ expectations; their features became more dramatic, more rugged.”

<sup>49</sup> Philip Levine, “Nobody’s Detroit” in *Detroit Disassembled*, 114.

remind us of the ephemeral quality of the world we take for granted.”<sup>50</sup> By representing nature overtaking the ruins of Detroit’s industrial past, Moore’s images focus viewers’ attention on the devastating effects a relatively short-lived industrial order had on one American city.

As Moore writes, “although poor leadership on many levels has beset the city, the true engineer behind its disassembly is Janus-faced nature, which renews as it ravages this shadowed metropolis.”<sup>51</sup> But nature is not the only problem Detroit faces in these images. They are also about deindustrialization and they make the viewer see its effects on parts of Detroit’s landscape first hand. As Thomas Sugrue and other historians have demonstrated, the nature Moore finds in Detroit is anything but natural. Rather it was created by specific policies of urban disinvestment that prioritize suburban areas. Moreover, as historian Kevin Boyle describes, “The ruins of Detroit – the week-choked lots where houses once stood, the shells of factories, the blocks of boarded up storefronts...stand as symbols not of decay but of power, the power of corporations to shape the rise and fall of a great American city.”<sup>52</sup> Despite all the tropes of wilderness and nature used in Moore’s photographs to convey a sense of the sublime, his images should be shocking because they represent places that humans have cultivated through policies of deindustrialization, racial discrimination, and urban disinvestment. These photographs do not represent a distant wilderness. They depict spaces that are part of a larger landscape and region, some of it in ruins, and some not, that 4.5 million people call home, more than 700,000 of whom live in the city of Detroit.

For Moore, there is assurance in open spaces of a postindustrial sublime. “Out of this reordering have come new symbols of renewal and growth...Perhaps this re-ruralization is a sign

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<sup>50</sup> Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 119.

<sup>52</sup> Kevin Boyle, “The Ruins of Detroit: Exploring Urban Crisis in the Motor City,” *Michigan Historical Review* 27:1 (Spring 2001): 109-27; 27.

of hope,” he explains. “Detroit has become an open city repopulated by trees, grasses, flowers, moss, and pheasants. This emptiness is an invitation to wander and reflect upon new and radical solutions for the Detroit of the future.”<sup>53</sup> The quality of emptiness Moore finds in Detroit challenges the boundaries between urban and rural, wild and controlled. Yet just what “new and racial solutions” Moore imagines remains unseen.

To counter the increasingly prevalent representations of the city as only a people-less place of unexpected nature, the Detroit Institute of Arts hosted an exhibit titled *Detroit Revealed*, 2000-2010. The exhibit featured the work of primarily Detroit-based artists, in addition to two works by Moore, in an attempt to convey a more nuanced sense of the way artists and photographers were thinking about the city during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Some of the works represented the city’s ruins, while others portrayed the gardens of Southwest Detroit’s Latino communities and portraits of individual Detroiters. As curator Nancy Barr described, the exhibit was “Intended as a corollary visual statement.” She continued, “*Detroit Revealed: Photographs 2000-2010* offers recent imagery inspired by the complex identity of this remarkable and once industrious city.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, she described that, “One thing that differentiates this decade’s photography from that which came before is the rise of digital technologies and internet access. The ubiquity of the Internet exploded along with digital, wireless and high-speed broadband technology. [things like] photo sharing sites emerged...It fueled urban exploration, particularly throughout Detroit, and a great deal of ruins photography

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 119.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy Barr, “Identity Management” in *Detroit Revealed* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2011), 16. While Vergara and Moore’s photographs overemphasize ruin and the plight the city, by the same token exhibits and photographs that focus overwhelmingly on conveying the resilience of individuals may convey the false sense that they city is doing just fine and will persist through individual efforts, rather than political and structural changes.



emerged on the Internet, spurring dialogues in the art community that continue here in Detroit. The burning question: How will Detroit be represented, and who should represent it?”<sup>55</sup>

Since then, similar exhibits and projects, such as Corrine Vermeulen’s *Detroit Walk in Portrait Studio*, have represented the city through images of the people who live there. As she writes, “I didn’t come to Detroit to witness the end of an era. I just wanted to find out if there was a future and what would it look like. My conclusion is that it’s about people; it’s about people empowered.”<sup>56</sup> One of her photographs in particular, titled *Peacemakers’ Garden*, illustrates this sense of the city. Located on Chene Street, the garden Vermeulen photographed creates a unique place within the ruins of Detroit. The rectangular brick walls of this former warehouse sit without a roof. Rusted steel I-beams span the length of the structure. Within this impromptu courtyard, so visibly embodying an end to Detroit’s industrial era, gardens of lettuce, broccoli, cabbage and tomatoes growing and rabbits are raised in cages for food.<sup>57</sup> The interplay of the visually distinct natural and built environments seems at once jarring and hopeful, utopian and complex. As the bucolic murals on the walls suggest, *Peacemakers’ Garden* repurposes the abandoned spaces of Detroit to give them a renewed sense of place. Teresa Miller, the garden’s caretaker in 2008 describes that residents “just wanted to use space.”<sup>58</sup> And use it they do, producing fresh vegetables for residents in the neighborhood. Like Moore and Vergara’s

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<sup>55</sup> Emma Mustich, “Detroit: City of Stunning Contradictions,” *Salon.com*, September 24, 2011, <[http://www.salon.com/2011/09/24/detroit\\_slide\\_show/singleton](http://www.salon.com/2011/09/24/detroit_slide_show/singleton)>. Similarly, works such as *Reveal Your Detroit* (2013) a collection of photographs taken of the city by everyday Detroiters, continue the work of re-presenting the city in the wake of urban explorers and visitors who only seem to find meaning in overgrown parts of the city that have little to do with the past, present, or future of the city.

<sup>56</sup> Corrine Vermeulen, *Detroit Walk in Portrait Studio*, exhibit introduction, Detroit Institute of Arts, November 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Nickole Fox, “Treasure in the Bricks: Peacemakers Garden,” *The Detroit Farmer’s Quarterly*, (January 2008), 1.

<sup>58</sup> Betsy Stevens, “Detroit Urban Farm and Garden Tour,” *YouTube*, August 3, 2007. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzX-XXw2D04>>. Accessed June 3, 2014.

photographs, gardens also complicate the boundaries between rural and urban through an ideal of environmental renewal rooted in the logic of community gardening.



Figure 5.10: Peacemakers Garden in 2007. Museum of Contemporary Photograph, Columbia College. Corrine Vermeulen, Photographer.

### **Gardens in the Machine**

On the ground, another type of environmental renewal is taking root as a corollary visual statement of its own. Through the reuse of spaces, some of Detroit's residents are transforming the land – and in turn themselves – by creating urban gardens steeped in ideals of neighborhood revitalization and social change. Juxtaposed with the visual representations of nature and abandonment, Detroit's urban gardeners use a medium of land and plants to challenge the assumption that Detroit is an abandoned, post-industrial sublime. By making visible changes to claim their heritage on a landscape, where it was frequently erased, Detroiters have built on earlier ideals of urban environmental reform efforts and moral environmentalism that have

evolved since the late nineteenth century, such as growing food, urban beautification, and the personal benefits of connecting to the outdoors. In doing so, they created what might be described as a post-industrial pastoral. Although supporters often instill it with values and a sense of urgency that make it seem entirely new, it has evolved from more than a century-long history of turning to gardening and nature for solutions during periods of social change, economic collapse, and racial conflict.

At the same time Camilo Vergara began photographing America's urban ghettos, and when Belle Isle Park faced perpetual challenges over maintenance and funding with resources flowing to suburban areas through the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority, urban gardening programs again became the inner-city's response to environmental inequality. Urban gardens and larger urban farms geared toward producing food for markets became increasingly visible in Detroit and other American cities as a tool for rebuilding a sense of community, identity, and place.<sup>59</sup> Historian of gardening Laura Lawson argues that the origins of community gardening in the 1970s was part of a larger environmental movement in which, "individuals and households seeking to reduce their impact on the environment turned to recently published books and to organizations that provided advice and technical information on home gardening as part of a more ecological, self-sufficient lifestyle."<sup>60</sup> In cities like Detroit that were disproportionately affected by policies of urban disinvestment, many people looked at the garden as a grassroots way to connect with a burgeoning environmental movement, provide food for themselves, and

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<sup>59</sup> As historian of community gardens Laura Lawson describes, "Special interest stories describing an urban garden project would occasionally appear in newspapers and magazines during the 1950s and 1960s, but in general, public attention was minimal. This changed in the mid-1970s when renewed interest in urban gardening grew as an expression of self-reliance amid the energy crisis, rising food prices, and an emerging environmental ethic." Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 205.

<sup>60</sup> Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 216.

visibly improve conditions in the city as part of a struggle for a more sustainable place.<sup>61</sup>

Backyard gardens began to spill over onto nearby vacant lots.

The significant number of individuals growing food on vacant lots in Detroit during the 1970s also sparked government action. In 1974, residents received support for vacant lot gardening when Coleman A. Young, Detroit's first African American mayor, created the Farm-A-Lot program. Through this effort, residents with an interest in gardening could request a vacant lot from the city and receive soil tilling, seeds, and gardening advice in order to "help fight food price inflation and to contribute to the 'greening of Detroit.'"<sup>62</sup> According to another report, "one unexpected aspect that developed was the cooperation and unity developed by many of the programs participants."<sup>63</sup> Building community and attempting to remake the social fabric of the city was a significant, if not larger, part of the program than actually growing food.

Accordingly, the same report found that "the average garden was farmed by approximately six people, who put in fourteen hours of work on their lot each week; the average garden produced \$139 worth of vegetables, and five urban farmers also won blue ribbons at the State Fair."<sup>64</sup> The study reported that 525 lots were a part of the program, with thirty nine percent of the 3,000 participants unemployed.<sup>65</sup> One newspaper article reported that, "Detroit's urban farmers realize they, too, are facing a common enemy – rising food prices and inner-city blight."<sup>66</sup> While \$139 split six ways may have made a small dent in monthly grocery bills, it was hardly a replacement for the employment lost from factory jobs. The rhetoric of urban

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<sup>61</sup> As historian Laura Lawson writes, in American cities, "some activists and gardeners used their energy and their faith in gardening as a healing activity to counteract the failing conditions of the city. While a seemingly small gesture, gardening facilitated community unity and transformed a detriment – the vacant lot – into a resource. Social conditions were ripe for this kind of grassroots action." Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 218.

<sup>62</sup> C.D. Bearre, "Detroiters Turn Vacant Lots Into Gardens," *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976.

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<sup>66</sup> C.D. Bearre, "Detroiters Turn Vacant Lots Into Gardens," *Ann Arbor Sun*, April 8, 1976.

revitalization rarely matched the results and cultural aspects of gardening outweighed economic ones, as they had in past programs. The Farm-a-Lot program's first director, Ann Besser recalled that, "The mayor loves this program," but the project relied heavily on non-governmental sources of funding to sustain itself, like Pingree's Potato Patches in the nineteenth century. For example, in the spring of 1976, the J.L. Hudson Company awarded a \$5,000 grant to support Farm-a-Lot's efforts. As a result, while the program was popular, its scale, level of support, and ability to assist residents interested in gardening varied widely each year. While food was produced, like Pingree's Potato Patches and the Detroit Urban League's projects during the 1920s and 1930s, urban beautification and creating a unified sense of community was an important aspect of the program.

In 1976, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) also offered support for urban gardening projects in cities across the United States through the Cooperative Extension Urban Garden Program.<sup>67</sup> Detroit was one of six initial cities chosen by the program to receive a portion of the \$1.5 million dollars in appropriations to support urban gardening projects. The others were Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia.<sup>68</sup> By 1979, Detroit had 6,995 participants in the program, second only to New York among the original six cities, and fourth including those added in 1978.<sup>69</sup> The total value of the crops was estimated at \$484,500. In later years, however, Detroit's initially strong involvement in the program waned, with only 1,145 participants affiliated with the USDA program in Detroit by 1985. As with previous programs, the reasons for the ebb and flow of interest varied, from improving economic

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<sup>67</sup> For information on the origins of this program, see Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 225-227.

<sup>68</sup> Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 225-229.

<sup>69</sup> Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 227. Nationally, funding for the program tapered off by 1993, although some state extension offices continued to fund and support urban gardening projects through use of their general fund, or through soil testing, classes, etc. (Lawson 228-229).

conditions, leadership transitions, and neighborhood population changes. The USDA Urban Gardening Program continued until 1993, when it was cut from the federal budget.

Even without a strong presence in the USDA program every year, another strand of urban gardening evolved from cultural connections many African Americans in Detroit had to gardening traditions that were connected to their family's heritage in the South and in Detroit. During the 1980s, for example, a group of African American women, primarily elders, who called themselves the "Gardening Angels," also used vacant lots for gardens.<sup>70</sup> Many in the group were from the congregation of Bethel Baptist Church East.<sup>71</sup> They "began viewing the vacant lots in their neighborhoods less as eyesores and more as invitations to practice the food-growing skills they had brought with them from the South."<sup>72</sup> For example, Laura Washington, who moved to Detroit from Mississippi with her husband in 1966 when Detroit's factories offered a better opportunity than their occupations as sharecroppers, started a community garden on vacant land where four houses once stood.<sup>73</sup>

Lillian Clark was one of the first "gardening angels" to expand her personal garden onto a nearby vacant lot.<sup>74</sup> Upon seeing this formerly "blighted" vacant lot transformed into gardens of "green beans, corn, peas, tomatoes, celery, okra, lettuce, geraniums, and more than 30 kinds of roses," others in her east side neighborhood offered help tending the garden. It quickly became a

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<sup>70</sup> According to Marty Hair, the group "got their name from their religious devotion and because an early community garden on Belvidere had a planting in the shape of the cross, as well as prayer and tribute gardens." Marty Hair, "Gerald Hairston: Urban Gardener was a Visionary," *Detroit Free Press*, July 2, 2001, B5.

<sup>71</sup> Patty LaNoue Sterns, "Tomato Days: Detroit Coop Gardeners Spread Harvest Around," *The Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 1994.

<sup>72</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, "Urban AgriCulture in Detroit," *The Michigan Citizen*, September 13, 2003, B8.

<sup>73</sup> Jim Stone, "Gardening Angels," *In Context*, 42 (Fall 1995), 28  
<<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC/IC42/Stone.htm>>.

<sup>74</sup> Jim Stone, "Gardening Angels," *In Context*, 42 (Fall 1995), 28  
<<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC/IC42/Stone.htm>>.

space that interested members of the community shared.<sup>75</sup> Detroit resident Gerald Hairston, eulogized as “a man who used gardens as though they were weapons in the war to save neighborhoods,” was instrumental in helping to organize and support the Gardening Angels in collaboration with a local 4-H Club.<sup>76</sup> Gerald was remembered as, “the glue that caused the Gardening Angels to bond. He made sure that every spring their gardens were rototilled and that they got seeds from the city’s Farm-a-Lot program.”<sup>77</sup> The gardens they tended, which numbered 26 in 1994, were a means of providing a small amount of food for their families, as well as the larger community.<sup>78</sup> All grew from “lots that once held tangled weeds, broken glass and old mattresses.”<sup>79</sup> As another member of this group, Annie Brown commented, “When I look at my garden I see that I am in charge! I have the final say as to what happens and what doesn’t.”<sup>80</sup> Gardening amidst urban disinvestment becomes not only a means of subsistence, but also a way to assert hope, optimism, and rebuild identities.

The vacant lot gardens of the 1980s and 90s also resemble the Detroit Urban League’s earlier efforts in their emphasis on beautification and an orderly appearance. One observer, for example, noted the unexpected visual impact of finding gardens in between the ruins of Detroit. She wrote that on a “drive into their neighborhood, bordered by the gray ruins of a Detroit freeway...suddenly the landscape changes: well-kept houses, manicured lawns, lavish borders of

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<sup>75</sup> Betty DeRamus, “With his Hands and Heart, Man’s Gardens Sprouted Seeds of Hope,” *The Detroit News*, July 23, 2002, 01D.

<sup>76</sup> Betty DeRamus, “With his Hands and Heart, Man’s Gardens Sprouted Seeds of Hope,” *The Detroit News*, July 23, 2002, 01D.

<sup>77</sup> Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige, “Detroit, Place and Space to Begin Anew,” *The Next American Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 117. She continued to describe that, “He opened up hearts and minds so that eyes could see vacant lots not as blight but as opportunities to develop urban agriculture and build a new society from the ground up. Born in the South, growing up on the Eastside of Detroit, and having worked in the factory, Gerald, like Jimmy Boggs, knew that we were suffering the agonies of a dying industrial society where caring for each other and the Earth would be a priority.” (117-118).

<sup>78</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, “A New Kind of Citizenship,” *The Michigan Citizen*, December 16, 2007, A10.

<sup>79</sup> Patty LaNoue Sterns, “Tomato Days: Detroit Coop Gardeners Spread Harvest Around,” *The Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 1994.

<sup>80</sup> Jim Stone, “Gardening Angels,” *In Context*, 42 (Fall 1995), 28  
<<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC/IC42/Stone.htm>>.

red, purple and pink flowers. And then you see their garden, lush and high with corn, beans and tomatoes ripening in the sun. In the center of the plot is a planting done in the shape of a huge cross, brimming with kale and cabbage.”<sup>81</sup> Through practical use and cultural meaning, vacant spaces become places, not as a radical reinvention of the city, but in their ability to recall suburban middle-class ideals such as “well-kept houses and manicured lawns.”<sup>82</sup> The way these spaces were valued and interpreted varied greatly, however.

### **Little Gardens, Big Ideals**

In 1992, longtime Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs and her husband James Boggs were so inspired by the work of the Gardening Angels that they built on this idea to create a program called “Detroit Summer,” through which they partnered with Hairston to involve youth participants and elders in creating community gardens spaces on vacant lots throughout the city. This gardening program grew to include some 150 gardens and 500 participants.<sup>83</sup> Boggs

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<sup>81</sup> Patty LaNoue Sterns, “Tomato Days: Detroit Coop Gardeners Spread Harvest Around,” *The Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 1994.

<sup>82</sup> Writer and cultural critic Rebecca Solnit wrote after her visit to Detroit in 2007 that, “it is unfair, or at least deeply ironic, that black people in Detroit are being forced to undertake an experiment in utopian post-urbanism that appears to be uncomfortably similar to the sharecropping past their parents and grandparents sought to escape. There is no moral reason why they should do and be better than the rest of us – but there is a practical one. They have to. Detroit is where change is urgent and therefore most visible.” Rebecca Solnit, “Detroit Arcadia,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 2007, 65-73, 73. While this may be true, much of the work of community gardeners attempts to reframe growing food as an empowering action, along the lines of Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. Moreover, as this dissertation demonstrates, not all African Americans gave up a rural lifestyle or gardening when they moved to Detroit. Many willingly continued planting flowers and vegetable gardens like all Americans. More recent community gardening projects, such as the Gardening Angels, are ways of using positive gardening traditions to extend an African American tradition into the present, claiming a presence in the city.

<sup>83</sup> Jim Stone, “Gardening Angels,” *In Context*, 42 (1995), <<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC/IC42/Stone.htm>>, 1. As Grace Lee Boggs recalls, “Through Gerald we discovered that southern-born elders, mainly but not only African American, were already planting garden sin their backyards and neighboring vacant lots, to grow food along with people and community, because their gardening embodied the human values of caring for young people and for each other” (118). Boggs took interest in these gardens because of the human values they seemed to represent within the context of Detroit and the city’s history. Moreover, nature also played a role in her thinking. As she describes, “Detroit Summer brought us into contact with the Gardening Angels, a loose network of mainly African American southern-born elders, who planted gardens not only to produce healthier food for themselves and tier neighbors but also to instill respect for Nature and process in young people.” Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige, “Detroit,



became one of the most outspoken to describe the possibilities of urban gardening and agriculture in Detroit. From the changes she witnessed on the ground, her lifetime of activism, and her training as a philosopher, Grace Lee Boggs began to connect these gardening projects to a philosophy meant to “rebuild, redefine and respire” the city of Detroit.<sup>84</sup> Boggs, who received her PhD in philosophy from Bryn Mawr in 1940, may not seem the likeliest horticulturalist. In 1950 she moved to Detroit, where she married labor organizer James Boggs and became active in many of the defining social movements of the twentieth century, including the struggle for civil rights, and the women’s, black power, and environmental movements. More recently, she has come to understand gardening as a lens through which to consider a philosophy for the revitalization of Detroit. As she stated in a 2003 interview, “my thinking has very much been shaped by the realities of Detroit.”<sup>85</sup> Through her ideals of political and social change, the garden represented a departure from the status quo.

Boggs describes that a key moment in her urban agricultural thinking came during the late 1980s, when Mayor Coleman Young proposed a casino industry to take the place of Detroit’s declining automotive industry. This led some, such as Boggs, to question the effectiveness of the corporate centered paradigm of redevelopment.<sup>86</sup> For this reason, the call to create jobs through casinos initiated an outcry from many residents of the city who were concerned not only with jobs and the physical infrastructure of the city, but, as Boggs recalls,

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Place and Space to Begin Anew,” *The Next American Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 115.

<sup>84</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, “These are the Times that Grow Our Souls,” Speech given at the Central Methodist Church, 2004. An earlier version with this text was printed in: *Animating Democracy*, October 2003, <[http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading\\_room/Grace\\_Lee\\_Boggs\\_Grow\\_Our\\_Souls.pdf](http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading_room/Grace_Lee_Boggs_Grow_Our_Souls.pdf)>, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Emily Lawsin, “Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship: Interview with Grace Lee Boggs.” *University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender* (2003): Accessed February 24, 2009. <[http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/transcripts/us/Boggs\\_U\\_E\\_102806.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/transcripts/us/Boggs_U_E_102806.pdf)>.

<sup>86</sup> Geographer David Harvey has termed this mode of urban redevelopment “the great betrayal,” as the supposed benefits for the citizenry never materialize, David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 124 and 141. See also Neil Smith’s work, *New Urban Frontier* for an examination of the ideology and effects of gentrification on the social, demographic, and economic challenge facing American cities.

“how our city has been disintegrating socially, economically, politically, morally and ethically...We are convinced that we cannot depend upon one industry or one large corporation to provide us with jobs. It is now up to us - the citizens of Detroit - to put our hearts, our imaginations, our minds, and our hands together to create a vision and project concrete programs for developing the kinds of local enterprises that will provide meaningful jobs and income for all citizens.”<sup>87</sup> Although a proponent of the city’s Farm-a-Lot program, Young was concerned with bringing economic vitality back to the city, and described his critics as “a bunch of naysayers,” asking “What is your alternative?”<sup>88</sup>

Young’s question prompted James Boggs to give a speech, “Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling,” on June 24, 1988 at the first Unitarian Universalist Church. Boggs stated that “to rebuild Detroit we need a long-range perspective and not just a quick-fix solution,” asking residents to consider “what is the purpose of a city?”<sup>89</sup> He continued, “We need to think of human beings as more than just bodies to be clothed and housed...we need a philosophy...we are going to have to break with most of the ideas about cities that we have accepted in the past...we have to see that our capital is in the people and not see people as existing to make capital for production or dependent on capital to live.”<sup>90</sup> As Grace Boggs later summarized, his ideal was “to see the 21<sup>st</sup> century city as a collection of communities and...to

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<sup>87</sup> This community organization, Detroiters Uniting, was a “coalition of community groups, blue collar, white collar and cultural workers, clergy, political leaders and professionals, led by two preachers, United Methodist pastor William Quick and Baptist pastor Eddie Cobbin, one white and one black” (Boggs, “Evolution,” xii) Voters defeated proposals for casinos three times, until 1996, after Windsor, Ontario (across the river from Detroit) built a casino across the river, which was enough to persuade enough voters of the economic need to compete with the city across the river.

Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), xix.

<sup>88</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), xix.

<sup>89</sup> James Boggs, “Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling,” 1988. <<http://boggscenter.org/jbcasino1988.html>>, 2.

<sup>90</sup> James Boggs, “Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling,” 1988. <<http://boggscenter.org/jbcasino1988.html>>, 2-3.

bring the country back into the city.”<sup>91</sup> In this sense, looking to the garden and the “country” was a way to counter the problems of inequality and environmental contamination created by Detroit’s industrial era. In their eyes, community focused gardens and urban agriculture, could be repurposed to again create social and environmental change at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>92</sup> However, even while urban gardening projects were successful at creating a sense of community and some food, it remained unclear just how they could reinvent the economy of the city itself.

Meanwhile, during the late 1990s and 2000s, city leaders and developers began reshaping the city through a very different set of redevelopment ideas. New stadiums, casinos, loft living and the relocation of corporate offices of companies like Quicken Loans provided incentives for people to return downtown and produced an image of the city that sharply contrasted with photographs of ruins and urban gardens. Corporate redevelopment has been the focus of a vast majority of the city’s resources in recent years, and historically since the 1960s. Nonetheless, alongside urban gardening projects, redevelopment projects grew, particularly in Detroit’s downtown. Project such as this brought a sense of optimism that at least certain areas of Detroit

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<sup>91</sup> Emily Lawsin, “Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship: Interview with Grace Lee Boggs.” *University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender* (2003): Accessed February 24, 2009, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Boggs continues to describe that, “One of the things that Detroit does to you is it...the reality and the history almost forces you to think in terms of Black and White. The city itself is so segregated, its past is so racist...you’ve been able to see the city polarizing itself—the Whites going to the suburbs, the Blacks ghettoized...And so your mind gets to accept that as eternal. So how do you break through that? Because you know that while that’s happening to Detroit, the world is changing. The country is changing. There are cities now in the country - Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, where the majority of the people are people of color, of different backgrounds - Latinos, Asians, South Asians, everything. And here we are in Detroit frozen in Black and White thinking.” Emily Lawsin, “Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship: Interview with Grace Lee Boggs.” *University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender* (2003): Accessed February 24, 2009. <[http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/transcripts/us/Boggs\\_U\\_E\\_102806.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/transcripts/us/Boggs_U_E_102806.pdf)>, 33. Boggs also discussed the efforts to renew the China town neighborhood in the Cass Corridor, bringing back the multi-ethnic sense of place that once defined Detroit (similar to what Hayden discusses in *The Power of Place*). Furthermore, the Mexican Town neighborhood on Detroit’s southwest side is a testament to the city’s multiethnic future. Here, Vernor street has become a lively and active main street, functioning in much the same way advocates of “new urbanism” could only hope to recreate. It is a reuse of space that needs to be considered before new development and could be another “alternative” redevelopment to be considered for future analysis, although it is outside the scope of this paper.

could be redeveloped.

For Boggs and others in the city, these types of project were the antithesis of the urban garden. In a 2004 speech at Detroit's Central Methodist Church, she admitted that amidst Detroit's fall, "it would be easy to abandon all hope for Detroit's future – or be satisfied with pseudo-solutions like casinos and luxury sports stadia."<sup>93</sup> As Boggs continued, "Out of the ashes of industrialization we decided to seize the opportunity to create a twenty-first century city, a city both rural and urban, which attracts people from all over the world because it understands the fundamental need of human beings at this stage in our evolution to relate more responsibly to one another and to the Earth."<sup>94</sup> The "quiet revolution" toward urban agriculture that Boggs imagines uses gardens as a starting point for creating a new sense of the city, where residents use nature through gardening to reconcile the devastating social and environmental effects of deindustrialization. Rather than a "machine in the garden," Detroiters were left to visualize how gardens might grow from the ruins of Detroit.

Thinking of urban space through the lens of gardens sparked the creative interest of architecture students at the University of Detroit Mercy who, under the leadership of Professor Stephen Vogel and Korean born architect Kyong Park, spearheaded a conceptual project entitled "Adamah" (a Hebrew word meaning "of the earth") in 1999. This project, a representation of space with direct input from community residents through the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, called for transforming 3,000 acres of the post-industrial landscape on the eastside of Detroit into an urban agricultural village. Plans called for re-using buildings such as the abandoned Packard Motors plant, co-housing, windmills for electricity, unearthing a

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<sup>93</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, "These are the Times that Grow Our Souls," Speech given at the Central Methodist Church, 2004. An earlier version with this text was printed in: *Animating Democracy*, October 2003, <[http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading\\_room/Grace\\_Lee\\_Boggs\\_Grow\\_Our\\_Souls.pdf](http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading_room/Grace_Lee_Boggs_Grow_Our_Souls.pdf)>, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige, "Detroit, Place and Space to Begin Anew," *The Next American Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 112.

buried creek for irrigation, and of course ample land for farming and spaces to become markets. To put it bluntly as a 2005 *MetroTimes* article did: “Adamah recognizes that we are in a post-industrial era and must redefine ourselves to bring forth the city of the future. We must take a holistic approach to development, incorporating land planning, social needs, community health, regional resources, food, housing, jobs art and more.”<sup>95</sup> Like Hazen Pingree’s plan for agricultural parks in the 1890s, an environmentalism of the garden became one way to think about the city’s future.



Figure 5.11: A 2003 *MetroTimes* cover featuring Adamah.

As Vogel commented, “when you first look at this, people say it’s wild and crazy. But when you look at it closer, it’s not so wild and crazy at all. What we are talking about doing are all very pragmatic things.”<sup>96</sup> Rather than attempting to return Detroit to the days of its industrial past through new industries and ideas that resemble large-scale urban development models of the past, Adamah is a vision of the landscape inspired by the possibilities of environmental renewal through agriculture. With this vision laid out, however, proponents described that Adamah is a

<sup>95</sup> Lisa M. Collins and Curt Guyette, “Outside the Box,” *Detroit Metro Times*, January 26, 2005, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Curt Guyette, “Down a Green Path,” *Detroit Metro Times*, October 31, 2001, 2.

process, not a definitive end in itself. It is a catalyst, not a destination. “What’s important,” proponents say, is to “consider the possibilities.”<sup>97</sup> Rather than a specific project, Adamah can be conceived of as an exercise in utopian thought, what geographer David Harvey terms an “optimism of the intellect” in his work *Spaces of Hope* (2000).<sup>98</sup> As Grace Lee Boggs describes, “As people watch the 20 minute Adamah video you can almost feel their minds and imaginations expanding. Community residents draw from Adamah ideas for rebuilding their own neighborhoods...this is what revolutions are about. They are about evolving to a higher humanity, not higher buildings, about expanding people’s imagination so that they begin creating a new society in the places and spaces left vacant by the disintegration of the old.”<sup>99</sup> In this sense, “a revitalization of the utopian tradition gives us ways to think about the possibility of real alternatives.”<sup>100</sup> Instead of photographs where a toxic nature of untamed plants and florescent moss consume Detroit’s industrial past to create a dystopian environmental renewal without humans, utopian thought paves the way for considering alternatives for social, urban and environmental change, in a city that seems plagued by its tendency to fall into the latest redevelopment fads, while inequality and urban dysfunction remain intact.

For participants, the experience of working on the Adamah Project was empowering on multiple levels. As Detroit Mercy alumnus Chris Pomodoro recalls, “when we went out into the

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<sup>97</sup> Curt Guyette, “Down a Green Path,” *Detroit Metro Times*, October 31, 2001, 7.

<sup>98</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 15

<sup>99</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, “These are the Times that Grow Our Souls,” Speech given at the Central Methodist Church, 2004. An earlier version with this text was printed in: *Animating Democracy*, October 2003, <[http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading\\_room/Grace\\_Lee\\_Boggs\\_Grow\\_Our\\_Souls.pdf](http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading_room/Grace_Lee_Boggs_Grow_Our_Souls.pdf)>, 7.

<sup>100</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 156. Harvey contends that this revitalization requires the development of a “dialectical utopianism,” which is “rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical development” (196). Much akin to Boggs’ own Hegelian philosophical thinking, the project of urban agriculture in Detroit can be seen as a form of “dialectical utopianism,” in that the landscape of farms and gardens in the city produced through the social practice of urban farming (as informed by Boggs’ conception of the practice) is a dialogue on the city and environment; moving beyond initial conception of industry and cities, agriculture and the country, to produce a higher conception which transcends both modes of thought to produce a new agri-urban form. Perhaps it is a conception of dialectical urbanism that is required today.

community and talked to people about the project, it was exciting. You could see that their own ideas were being sparked that you could not only do this, but that you could also do this and this and this. It was a way of helping empower the people who live there, a way of providing a more powerful way of approaching city planning.”<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, the task of funding and gaining broad community and government support for a project such as this remain elusive. This is particularly so in Detroit, where neighborhood development is on such unequal footing against “big ticket” projects downtown. As Vogel states, “it’s great that you have a company like Compuware coming here [as a result of government incentives and support for downtown redevelopment]. But you should be devoting equal time to making sure that my neighborhood is not declining. And that’s not happening.”<sup>102</sup>

Boggs’ recollections and conceptions for the city of Detroit can be read as one of the starting points for the “ideas and ideals” redefining the space and sense of place in Detroit through farms and gardens.<sup>103</sup> As Boggs wrote in 2007, “All over Detroit, as hope replaces despair, there is a hum of activity, not only practical but cultural and philosophical.”<sup>104</sup> A complex new “human and natural ecology” is developing in Detroit, largely by those residents who know its failures best.<sup>105</sup> From the practical reality of their personal experiences of space in Detroit, residents are beginning to create an urban landscape aesthetic from their experiences with a dysfunctional city. Yet to date, a specific plan of action for how to get there, like those enacted with the political force of the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority, remains elusive.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Curt Guyette, “Down a Green Path,” *Detroit Metro Times*, October 31, 2001, 8.

<sup>102</sup> Curt Guyette, “Down a Green Path,” *Detroit Metro Times*, October 31, 2001, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Kenneth Helphand, “Leaping the Property Line,” in *Perspectives on Garden Histories* (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999), 139.

<sup>104</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, “A New Kind of Citizenship,” *The Michigan Citizen*, December 16, 2007, A10.

<sup>105</sup> Rebecca Solnit, “Detroit Arcadia,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 2007, 65-73, 73.

<sup>106</sup> Large-scale urban plans such as these have produced results in the past. The Huron Clinton Metroparks, for example, began as a vision for a chain of parks around Detroit. Although they neglected to take into account the needs of the city of Detroit and its residents in their planning process, the organizers were able to make their vision a

Moreover, even as Boggs traces the genealogy of more recent urban gardening efforts in the city to the Gardening Angles and residents in Detroit's neighborhoods, it was far from a new idea. Waves of small-scale environmental action through gardens and outdoor spaces ebbed and flowed amidst the cultural, political, and economic struggles African Americans and others experienced in Detroit since the 1890s when Pingree went down a similar path of imagining Detroit through a vision of agricultural urbanism. And like the Detroit Urban League's neighborhood beautification programs during the 1920s and 1930s, the community gardening efforts of African Americans and others in the city was adapted to making visible changes in the land to reshape their place and identity in a Northern city.

Boggs argues that, "Precisely because physical devastation on such a huge scale boggles the mind, it also frees the imagination to perceive reality anew; to see vacant lots not as eyesores but as empty spaces inviting the viewer to fill them in with other forms, other structures that presage a new kind of city embodying and nurturing new life-affirming values in sharp contrast to the values of materialism, individualism and competition that have brought us to this denouement."<sup>107</sup> In many ways, this influence of space on Boggs' thoughts is not so dissimilar to Moore. After spending three months in Detroit, he writes, "Perhaps this re-ruralization is a sign of hope. Detroit has become an open city repopulated by trees, grasses, flowers, moss, and pheasants. This emptiness is an invitation to wander and reflect upon new and radical solutions

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reality by building political support, but they also benefited from public policies that favored the suburbs over the city. It remains to be seen if urban gardeners can shape their vision into a plan of large-scale action, or, if like past gardening projects, it remains largely symbolic and focused on stories of individual and community-based change, rather than structural change.

<sup>107</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, "These are the Times that Grow Our Souls," Speech given at the Central Methodist Church, 2004. An earlier version with this text was printed in: *Animating Democracy*, October 2003, <[http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading\\_room/Grace\\_Lee\\_Boggs\\_Grow\\_Our\\_Souls.pdf](http://www.artsusa.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading_room/Grace_Lee_Boggs_Grow_Our_Souls.pdf)>, 5-6. Similarly, Yakini describes how, "given the vast number of vacant lots in Detroit, we're creating a model of how we can utilize that space. We're trying to create greater access to fresh produce, generate income and create jobs. To change the community's vision of what a city is and how space is used in a city. I don't think we're going to feed Detroit on vacant lots but we can grow 10-25 percent of the food and that's a significant impact" (Larry Gabriel, "Life in the Desert," *Detroit MetroTimes*, September 26, 2007, 2).



for the Detroit of the future.”<sup>108</sup> Yet in the past, gardens in Detroit have been a means of reconciliation and control that, more often than not, helped maintain the status quo, not radically transform it. The landscape of Detroit may have been good to think with. How could urban gardens in more recent years rethink this past? And what could they produce, practically speaking?

### **The Labor of Urban Gardening**

Real challenges face efforts at creating urban gardens in Detroit. Toxic brown fields, contaminated soil, a means of organizing residents, and providing support to name just a few. Several organizations were formed to assist residents and advocate for gardening in the city. From a loose network of individuals during the 1970s and 1980s, urban agriculture began to grow in organization and structure in Detroit’s neighborhoods during the 1990s. Unlike nineteenth-century Potatoes Patches in Detroit, which were driven by the city’s organization, the grassroots networks of urban gardeners at the turn of the twenty-first century in Detroit had to develop their own supporting structure to connect, advocate, and sustain their spaces in the city. Amidst a “growing interest in using the vacant lots of Detroit for agricultural production,” one such structure was the Detroit Agriculture Network (DAN), founded under the umbrella of the Hunger Action Coalition, a nonprofit advocacy organization.<sup>109</sup> It developed further when it became a non-profit organization in 2003, receiving funding from public and private

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<sup>108</sup> Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum and Damiani, 2010), 119.

<sup>109</sup> DAN also hosts an annual tour of Detroit’s urban gardens. Hundreds of people participated in 2007, filling six buses. As one former city planner on the tour commented to Grace Boggs after her experience on the tour: “I got a sense of how important community gardens are to our city and how we need to replicate them all over the city. They reduce neighborhood blight, build self-esteem among young people, provide them with structured activities from which they can see results, build leadership skills, provide healthy food and a community base for economic development. People, especially young people, not only learn where food comes from but how to prepare healthy food” (Grace Lee Boggs, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Detroit, *The Michigan Citizen*, August 12, 2007, A16). Govind Gopakumar. “A Case Study of Community Gardens: Detroit, Michigan,” 2005, 4.

foundations, and individuals. The organization's name was changed to "Keep Detroit Growing" in 2013.<sup>110</sup> As an organization that sponsors and aids community members engaging in gardening and advocating for urban food security, DAN, according to board member Ashley Atkinson, "promotes and fosters urban agriculture, sustainable use, and appreciation of urban natural resources...and collaborations that advance urban food security, good nutrition, healthy land and communities."<sup>111</sup> The group advances an environmental ethic rooted in the neighborhood communities of Detroit: "The idea is to grow community, to grow people and to grow food at the same time."<sup>112</sup> A sense of equity and sustainability are intertwined in this thinking.<sup>113</sup>

The organization was awarded a \$150,000 Community Food Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2004, which provided the resources for the DAN to establish the Garden Resource Program (GRP).<sup>114</sup> This organization provides residents, schools, churches, and other community centers with the seeds, plants, soils, composts and raised beds they need to garden in addition to the social support "to become connected with residents and to build communities gardening in their same neighborhood."<sup>115</sup> The GRP is a collaborative effort between the DAN, Earthworks Urban Farm, the Greening of Detroit, and the Michigan State University Extension (MSUE). The GRP also holds educational events relating to "environmentally friendly" gardening practices, such as the "Detroit Urban Gardening Education

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<sup>110</sup> Ashley Atkinson, personal correspondence with author, April 12, 2009.

<sup>111</sup> Govind Gopakumar. "A Case Study of Community Gardens: Detroit, Michigan," 2005, 5.

<sup>112</sup> Cleo Woelfe-Erskine, *Urban Wilds: Gardeners' Struggles for Land and Justice* (Oakland: Water/Under/Ground Publications, 2002), 42.

<sup>113</sup> For a case-study of creating and managing a youth garden on Detroit's southwest side, see: Kameshwari Pothukuchi, "Hortaliza: A Youth 'Nutrition Garden' in Southwest Detroit," *Children, Youth and Environments* 14.2 (2004): 124-155-155. Sadly, this garden was razed when the lot was sold by the city to build a convenience store (Stohr, F10).

<sup>114</sup> "USDA Grant Promotes Urban Farming in Detroit," *High Plains/Midwest Agriculture Journal* (August 2004). Accessed February 23, 2009. <<http://hpj.com/archives/2004/aug04/aug09/USDAgrantpromotesurbanfarmi.cfm>>.

<sup>115</sup> Govind Gopakumar. "A Case Study of Community Gardens: Detroit, Michigan," 2005, 5.

Series,” which included 26 classes, drawing 366 participants in 2012.<sup>116</sup>

The Garden Resource Program also assists urban gardeners with one of their greatest challenges: soil contamination.<sup>117</sup> The organization provides testing to ensure lots are safe for growing food. The legacy of the toxic industrial past Moore frames so vividly by depicting the wildness of weeds and overgrowth poses significant health risks if these sites are to be used for growing food. While former residential lots are often safe, old industrial areas are frequently not. To compensate, urban gardeners and farmers have several remedies. Some choose to remove and import new soil. This technique was used at the Detroit Market Garden, where crews removed up to two feet of soil over a nearly three acre lot. In smaller gardens, raised beds are often filled with new soil so food is not grown in the underlying soil. Another solution used by some growers is to focus on crops that are not for consumption, such as sunflowers, which can be used simply to beautify a space, or the oil from the plants can also be turned into fuel, or even used to remediate the soil over the long term. As Detroit journalist John Gallagher describes the situation, “Community gardeners run to the idealistic, which helps motivate them to accomplish a huge amount of good in cities. But the cautions of...doubters about urban farming should not be brushed aside. The policy agenda remains clear: We need to test our soil on a lot-by-lot basis before we farm, and we need to conduct more research on how plants absorb contaminants in the soil and which plants work best in an urban setting.”<sup>118</sup>

Even with these challenges, according to reports from 2009, approximately 8,000

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<sup>116</sup> Garden Resource Program Collaborative, “2012 Annual Report,” 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Aside from a lack of governmental support, perhaps the greatest obstacle to urban agriculture is soil contamination from former industry on what could be contaminated brownfield sites. While an analysis of the remediation techniques are beyond the scope of this paper, some resources discussing the way these challenges of contamination can be mitigated can be found in: Amar-Klemesu, Margaret. “Urban Agriculture and Food Security, Nutrition and Health.” *RUAF Foundation*. 1999, <<http://www.ruaf.org/node/58>>, 99-117; Lock, Karen and Henk de Zeeuw. “Health and Environmental Risks Associated with Urban Agriculture.” <<http://www.ruaf.org/node/697>>, 245-253.

<sup>118</sup> John Gallagher, *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 57.

residents were registered and gardening under the organization of GRP.<sup>119</sup> By 2012, participants in the GRP included 16,128 youth and 5,411 adults.<sup>120</sup> They participated in cultivating 1,416 gardens on over 138 acres “in rich soil surrounding community centers, block clubs, churches, and in backyards of families across the city.”<sup>121</sup> This included 843 family, 408 community, 86 school, and 79 market gardens. The Garden Resource Program helps to connect smaller gardens to resources without controlling what they grow or how they run their programs. Participant’s motivations for gardening are varied.

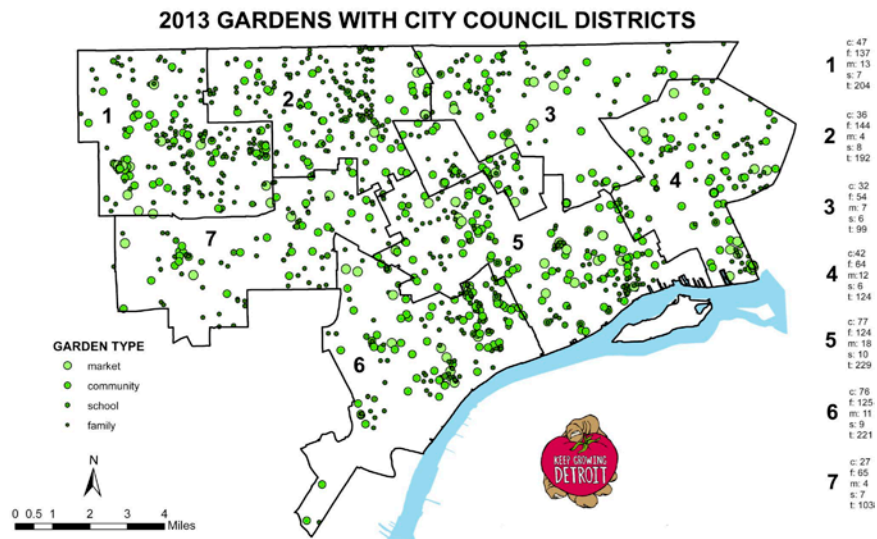


Figure 5.12: Garden type and Garden Cluster Groups (city council districts). From Keep Detroit Growing, 2013.

Larger urban farms, such as Earthworks, have more direct goals and ideology. As their mission explains, “Earthworks Urban Farm seeks to restore our connection to the environment and community in keeping with the tradition of our spiritual patron, St. Francis.”<sup>122</sup> Growing from a religious order of Capuchin monks, Earthworks demonstrates the diverse ideas and beliefs

<sup>119</sup> Ashley Atkinson, personal correspondence with author, April 12, 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Garden Resource Program Collaborative, “2012 Annual Report,” 2012.

<sup>121</sup> Garden Resource Program Collaborative, “2012 Annual Report,” 2012.

<sup>122</sup> <http://www.cskdetroit.org/EWG/>

that are mapped on to the sense of possibility symbolized by the post-industrial urban garden. St. Francis, of course, is associated with caring for animals and the environment. He has also been the patron Saint of ecology since 1979. These type of associations give relatively small spaces tremendous power as symbols of renewal and forward-looking environmental thought in the context of a post-industrial landscape. The everyday experiences of living with and witnessing the poverty of Detroit combined with Franciscan ideals influenced brother Rick Samyn, son of a Detroit Grocer, to create Earthworks Urban Farm.<sup>123</sup> The garden was a means to supplement the Capuchin Soup Kitchen (CSK) with the belief that “the people who come to get food assistance deserve to eat well too.”<sup>124</sup> As Brother Rick Samyn, founder of the garden explained, “if you want people to change, it’s based on relationships...we are in relationships, and relationships shape us.”<sup>125</sup>

Since 2004, Patrick Crouch, has been the manager of the farm, overseeing an endeavor that was recently named the 3<sup>rd</sup> most productive urban farm in the United States by Natural Home Magazine.<sup>126</sup> These crops grown range from myriad greens and tomatoes to cucumbers, in addition to approximately 1,000 pounds of honey from their apiary.<sup>127</sup> They further produce a few value-added products such as jam from their berries, and balm made from beeswax, which are also sold locally. Crouch also writes a blog called “Little House on the Urban Prairie,” with seasonal updates, a play on the rural frontier character of Detroit. A self-described “working study in social justice and in knowing the origin of the food we eat,” the leaders of Earthworks

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<sup>123</sup> Lynne Schreiber, “Seeds of Knowledge,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 6, 2008, 1CK.

<sup>124</sup> Cleo Woelfe-Erskine, *Urban Wilds: Gardeners’ Struggles for Land and Justice* (Oakland: Water/Under/Ground Publications, 2002), 42.

<sup>125</sup> Lynne Schreiber, “Seeds of Knowledge,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 6, 2008, 1CK.

<sup>126</sup> Letitia Starr, “America’s Top 10 Urban Farms,” *Mother Earth Living*, March/April 2009, 1.

<sup>127</sup> Patrick Crouch, “Earthworks Urban Farm Year in Review,” 2010, <[http://www.cskdetroit.org/ewg/docs/Year\\_in\\_Review\\_2010.pdf](http://www.cskdetroit.org/ewg/docs/Year_in_Review_2010.pdf)>, 2. This number is up from 2008, when 6,000 pounds of organic produce were grown here, ranging from myriad greens to tomatoes and cucumbers in addition to 900 pounds of honey from their apiary, and jams (Patrick Crouch, “Earthworks Urban Farm Year in Review,” 2008, <http://www.cskdetroit.org/EWG/docs/YearinReview2008.pdf>).

have combined a socially conscious mission with an environmental ethic to create a pastoral vision suitable for the context of urban decline.

Other gardens and gardeners more explicitly engage with, and evolve from, the African American experience in Detroit. For example, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network's D-Town Farm, established in 2006, has a particular emphasis on empowering African American participants to understand growing food as a way challenging the structures of racism and discrimination that affected their lives in Detroit. As Malik Yakini, founder of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network describes, "one of the challenges of organizing African-Americans for this work is that many of our people associate agriculture with enriching someone else...slavery and sharecropping enriched whites with our labor. What we're doing is reframing agriculture for African Americans as an act of self-determination and empowerment."<sup>128</sup> To ensure that urban agriculture in Detroit has a strong African American presence, Yakini describes that "we want to assert that black people have always been involved with agriculture in this country....and that we have as much claim to this movement as anybody else."<sup>129</sup> For Yakini and his fellow organizers, the urban garden represents a way to gain a sense of visibility and control in the face of the city's extreme state of dysfunction. The D-Town Farm began as a quarter acre garden on a former city run nursery at Rouge Park on the West side of the city. Organizers of the DBCFSN chose the site in part "because of its proximity to two fire hydrants that sit adjacent to a nearby access road," which gave them easy access to water.<sup>130</sup> Since its founding in 2006, the site has grown into a seven acre urban farm with a complete set of programs and two part time farm managers. The farm is funded in part by grants from the

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<sup>128</sup> E. Campbell, "Economic Planning Inspires Food Farm in Rouge Park," *Michigan Citizen*, August 17, 2008, A1.

<sup>129</sup> Hannah Wallace, "The Faster Times Interview: Malik Yakini of Detroit's Black Community Food Security Network," December 15, 2011 <http://www.thefastertimes.com/foodpolitics/2011/12/15/tft-interview-malik-yakini-of-detroits-black-community-food-security-network/>.

<sup>130</sup> E. Campbell, "Economic Planning Inspires Food Farm in Rouge Park," *Michigan Citizen*, August 17, 2008, A1.

Kellogg Foundation, which focuses on racial equity and healing. In this way, the community building capacity of the gardens has attracted attention as a means to at least partially empower and reshape the relationships between residents in the city.

While the DBCFSN's mission to "build self-reliance, food security and justice in Detroit's Black community by influencing public policy, engaging in urban agriculture, promoting healthy eating, encouraging cooperative buying and directing youth towards careers in food-related fields"<sup>131</sup> is distinct from the Detroit Urban League's goals in promoting neighborhood clean up in Detroit's African American neighborhoods during the 1920s, the D-Town farm evolves from the same legacy of shaping space as a form of environmental action in the face of inaction and discrimination. Moreover, in his work on Boston's community gardens, historian Sam Bass Warner, Jr. also argues that the "political force of community gardening does not rest upon philanthropy but springs from a new kind of local politics that grew out of the civil rights movement. This politics emphasizes self-help, and it insists on the dignity of all participants."<sup>132</sup> Seeking a healthy food supply within their control creates a new sense of sovereignty in the city, rather than a world where only uncultivated nature has the power to renew. Human history and culture has a place within this ecological system.

Even with their symbolic power to imagine a different future for Detroit, the city's largest urban farms, such as Earthworks, D-Town, and the Detroit Market Garden, create a relatively small impact on the city's food supply. Like Pingree's Potato Patches and the Detroit Urban League's clean up campaigns, they primarily gain their power from their symbolic value.

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<sup>131</sup> <http://www.detroitblackfoodsecurity.org/misson.html>

<sup>132</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *To Dwell is to Garden: A History of Boston's Community Gardens* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 5. As sociologist Monica White also argues, "D-Town activists, by creating community centers, providing nutrition education, and establishing the farm as a beacon of progress in an economically abandoned area, demonstrate a different strategy of resistance to structures of oppression. See Monica White, "D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit," *Environmental Practice* 13 (4) December 2011.

According to a 2009 report, the Greening of Detroit estimates that the city's urban gardeners produced 330,000 pounds (165 tons) of food per year valued at approximately half a million dollars. That is not insignificant. Yet according to another report from Michigan State University, this is estimated to be only enough to feed about 275 people a year, in a city with a population of approximately 700,000.<sup>133</sup> In 2013, according to numbers from Garden Resource Program, Detroit had more urban gardens than any city in the United States. With 1,200 gardens Detroit surpassed Cleveland and New York, its closest competitors.<sup>134</sup> Still, by 2014, the city's gardens and farms produced approximately 200 tons of food, which still remains a relatively small number.<sup>135</sup> As with past urban gardening programs, the rhetoric of growing a sense of community, place, and changes in individuals who make the gardens a part of their everyday lives remains greater than their ability to produce food enough food to create a more environmentally sustainable city.

The availability of space to grow in Detroit has attracted interest in large-scale farming plans, but these are often at odds with the community-oriented vision of Detroit's existing urban gardens and farms. For example, in 2009, businessman John Hantz proposed a 70-acre farm for vacant land on the east side of Detroit, stirring a debate over whether urban gardening and

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<sup>133</sup> John Gallagher, *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 65. At the same time, another study found that with approximately 4,800 acres of land available in Detroit (on 44,000 publicly owned lots), the city could grow enough food to supply 76 percent of the vegetables and 42 percent of the fruit needed for a million people using green houses and other techniques to extend the growing season (66). It could be done. But scale and the ability to create such a farm remain limitations, partly because urban gardening gains its meaning from being community based, and not entirely like other forms of agriculture. Its ideology is about building relationships, a sense of security, beautification, employment training, and making a claim to the city, rather than being entirely about a practical solution to providing food. In this way, it is distinctly urban and connected to a long history, described throughout this dissertation, where residents, city leaders, and community organizations have used parks and gardens as tools to promote social order and identity formation, even though they have never been particularly practical political solutions to periods of urban crisis.

<sup>134</sup> Michael Levenston, "Detroit: We're No. 1 – In Community Gardening," *City Farmer*, <<http://www.cityfarmer.info/2012/06/03/detroit-were-no-1-in-community-gardening/>>.

<sup>135</sup> Jeff McMahon, "Why Can't More Cities Be Like Detroit?" *Forbes Magazine*, August 6, 2014. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcmahon/2014/08/06/why-cant-more-cities-be-like-detroit-epa/>>.



farming should be a community-rooted effort or open to private enterprise.<sup>136</sup> Rather than food crops, however, the proposal asks viewers to “picture oaks, maples, and other high value trees planted in straight, evenly spaced rows.” To make it a viable business venture, the type of agriculture Hantz proposed differs from community-based efforts focused on building food security.

## Conclusion

In 2009, Carolyn Leadly and her husband Jack VanDyke started Rising Pheasant farms on Detroit’s East Side. The farm, which hopes to expand to a full half acre in the future, specializes “in naturally-grown microgreens and a wide variety of heirloom vegetable crops” that are “all delivered to local markets and restaurants by bicycle.”<sup>137</sup> As Leadly describes, “We are growing in the city in a truly sustainable model.”<sup>138</sup> For the couple, the material conditions of Detroit’s decline offered them the opportunity to test their environmental ideals. Like other long time Detroit residents and newcomers attracted to the city, Leadly recalled that she, “got excited about all the folks here doing urban agriculture.”<sup>139</sup> As much as photographs of Detroit’s ruins, urban gardens and small-scale farms have become a part of the city’s image as a post-industrial place and part of the way residents experience nature in the city.

Compared to Pingree’s Potato Patches, the community gardens in Detroit today stem from a more grassroots effort that is not as vested in a vision of class-based social order and control. Yet while the social, political, and economic context from which they have grown is

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<sup>136</sup> Mark Lewis, “Businessman Pitches Urban Farm Proposal for Detroit,” *Crain’s Detroit Business*, April 2, 2009.

<sup>137</sup> <<http://www.risingpheasantfarms.blogspot.com>>

<sup>138</sup> Jon Zemke, “Rising Pheasant Farm Grow Urban Ag Operation on East Side,” *Model D*, February 10, 2015. <<http://www.modeldmedia.com/startupnews/risingpheasantfarmsdetroit021015.aspx>>. Accessed February 16, 2015.

<sup>139</sup> Jon Zemke, “Rising Pheasant Farm Grow Urban Ag Operation on East Side,” *Model D*, February 10, 2015. <<http://www.modeldmedia.com/startupnews/risingpheasantfarmsdetroit021015.aspx>>. Accessed February 16, 2015.

different than that of the late nineteenth century, these spaces continue to have a larger symbolic value than a practical one, achieved by mapping a deeply held belief in the ability of the environment to transform the social circumstances of city dwellers. Beginning with the conditions of deindustrialization and disinvestment they experienced on ground, Detroit's most recent generation of urban gardeners have used strands of Pingree and Olmsted's urban pastoralism, and transformed it into a post-industrial pastoral, an environmental vision that, while still moralistic, imagines the garden as a space to empower individuals and reconcile continuing concerns over race, inequality, and social justice, not only in Detroit, but also the larger region.

At the same time, *Detroit Free Press* journalist Mark Stryker summarizes, "In Detroit distortions of so-called ruin porn, images of postindustrial decay, have been widely criticized as reductive. But upbeat images and those that idealize the city's grit or its eccentricities also can distort."<sup>140</sup> Real challenges exist in the city, and it is unclear if Detroit might point the way to a different urban form in the future. The city has seen a significant amount of investment and redevelopment over the last 10 years, particularly in downtown and midtown. As Camilo Vergara summarizes, "Through neglect and disinvestment, Detroit became a city of unique environments that are 'blighted,' 'edgy,' 'picturesque,' and 'free.' What would give identity and character to a Detroit that makes few cars and lacks grandiose ruins and desolate landscapes? A new city of sidewalk cafes, bars, casinos, sport stadiums, and local celebrities in a fortified downtown, and large urban farms in the ghetto would not capture the world's imagination."<sup>141</sup>

Photographers such as Vergara and Moore, like Detroit's community gardeners, have also attempted to capture the world's imagination by using photography to reveal their

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<sup>140</sup> Mark Stryker, "The Whole Picture," *Detroit Free Press*, August 3, 2014.

<sup>141</sup> Camilo José Vergara, "Detroit Is No Dry Bones: The Eternal City of the Industrial Age," (Ann Arbor: Taubman College of Architecture and Planning, 2014), 7.

experiences with nature in Detroit. In particular, they capture the way the material conditions of the city's decline have sprouted a sublime and terrifying landscape of luminescent moss and plants overgrowing abandoned buildings. In their representations of Detroit, Moore and Vergara map a deeply moralistic strand of American environmental thought, the sublime, onto the city's landscape to imagine what nature looks like after deindustrialization. Through a post-industrial sublime, rather than the pastoral of urban gardeners, photographs of Detroit's decline offer a glimpse at the toxic consequences of America's industrial development. They evoke awe, terror, and controversy for residents, as well as a sense of surrealism for viewers because they suggest the failure of efforts to reconcile the social and environmental challenges of urban-industrial life. Despite more than a century of efforts led by city and civic leaders, residents, and community organizations to use the landscape to imagine and create a more socially and environmentally sustainable way of life, the Vergara and Moore's photographs offer viewers a glimpse of an environmental future where some of Americans most deeply held visions of environmentalism, such as the pastoral, are called into question. In historical context, the narrative of the photographs suggests that social divisions, like racial and class inequality, and the relocation of industry from Detroit, will create a place where nature, and not culture, survives.

Together, these photographs and gardens of Detroit create a complex rustbelt ecology from the material conditions of deindustrialization. Like other environmental visions in metropolitan Detroit before them, the gardens and photographs are imaginative structures used by outsiders and residents of Detroit to search for meaning and values through the moral authority that seems to come from nature. As they fuse different meanings to the landscape they blur the boundaries between urban and rural, wild and contained. The orderly rows of plants in

gardens and the wilder image of plants overtaking the structures of the city's industrial past are part of the same cultural landscape.

**Epilogue:**  
**The Past and Future Landscape of Detroit**

When Hazen S. Pingree envisioned a network of permanent, city-owned agricultural parks throughout a rapidly industrializing Detroit in 1895, he scarcely could have imagined the circumstances of urban decline under which residents and nonprofit organizations would again create a network of urban garden plots as part of the city more than a century later. Since Pingree's time, the landscape of metropolitan Detroit has revealed nuanced strands of environmental thought that reflected the racial and class tensions of the region. More than only a reflection of social conditions, however, this dissertation has argued that the landscape was also a cultural terrain that had very real consequences for people in the city. Under the shifting rubric of moral environmentalism, people, such as everyday residents, artists, planners, and city leaders, used the landscape to define and contest the contours of race and class, shape identity, and mark differences in ways they believed could reconcile some of the challenges of urban-industrial life, such as economic and racial inequality, access to food, and poor living conditions. Individuals and organizations reworked the land at various scales, from the front yard to the metropolitan region. From a top-down instrument of social control to a grassroots tool of community building, environmental change in Detroit has been a means to transform individuals and the land.

In dialogue with the physical landscape and built environment of the city, Detroiters invented and tested ideas about their relationships with the natural world and one another. When city leaders hired Frederick Law Olmsted to transform Belle Isle into a pastoral oasis at the edge

of the city, they tapped into a national park-building movement to imagine a place that could promote social order and unity while providing laborers and elite Detroiters an escape from the city's ever-expanding industries. A decade after the park officially opened, an economic crisis led Mayor Hazen S. Pingree to devise a plan for the city's unemployed, primarily recent Polish and German immigrants, to cultivate vacant lots in order to have a means of subsistence. Both park supporters and Pingree's Agricultural Committee imagined that remaking the land could influence the behaviors of individuals for the benefit of society, ameliorate class and ethnic tensions, and create a cohesive urban citizenry during a period of economic turmoil and social unrest. During the late nineteenth century, these two uses of spaces on the peripheries of the city proved a popular means of instilling order and control. But it was Belle Isle that remained a permanent part of Detroit's civic identity.

When African Americans began moving to Detroit in large numbers as part of the Great Migration between 1916 and 1940, black middle class leaders at the Detroit Urban League (DUL) shaped and responded to Detroit's landscape through yards, gardens, and neighborhood clean up campaigns. Although black Detroiters used Belle Isle Park as a civic space for outings, the scale of the yard and neighborhood became a more potent symbolic terrain. While Detroit offered many opportunities for migrants from the South, racism and economic inequality relegated many to second-class status. One way they sought to overcome injustice was through programs of environmental reform. Leaders of the DUL grasped the potential of moral environmentalism and combined it with their ideas of racial uplift through programs of neighborhood clean up. By promoting an orderly, modern landscape aesthetic most often associated with white middle class homeowners, rather than the more "rural" vegetable gardens that migrants cultivated out of necessity and choice, the DUL attempted to transform African

American migrants from the South to fit their image of respectable citizens. Migrants, however, often chose to maintain their semi-rural ways of life and revealed that, although they lived in Detroit, exactly what it meant to be “urban” at any given moment was continually in flux and varied depending upon one’s class and racial status.

During the 1930s, the DUL continued their efforts to uplift African American residents of Detroit, although their outlook expanded to areas outside the city limits. In 1931, the organization opened Green Pastures, a camp some 60 miles west of Detroit, although the city was never far from organizers’ minds. During the Great Depression, the DUL used Green Pastures as a way to reduce poverty by providing participants with meals. At camp, the landscape and program of recreational activities was also designed to instill middle-class ideals of respectability, such as cleanliness, thrift, and fair competition in Detroit’s lower-class African American youth. Back in Detroit, leaders hoped these experiences in nature would advance their mission of racial uplift, increase African Americans’ chances of finding equal opportunity in Detroit, and curtail youth delinquency.

By the end of the Depression era, environmental advocates Harlow Whittemore and Henry Curtis looked with concern at the Huron and Clinton Rivers, whose banks they feared were in danger of becoming significantly altered by suburban expansion, industrial pollution, and general disregard. With a technocratic and rational approach to creating parks and green spaces through regional planning, Curtis and Whittemore imagined a park system along the rivers that would unite metropolitan Detroit. They led the campaign that created the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA), an agency charged with developing a system of regional parks around Detroit that coincided with increasing suburban development. While a seemingly beneficial program, the politics and decisions leaders and voters in the region made about how to

fund the new park system largely left the city of Detroit out of sight, while continuing to remove financial resources from the city's coffers with minimal benefit to Detroit residents. Many factors contributed to Detroit's decline. But by the 1970s it was increasingly clear that Detroit's parks and green spaces deteriorated in part because financial resources went to outlying suburban areas.

The process of urban disinvestment – planned through highway construction, suburbanization, and the relocation of industry - left Detroit's landscape dramatically transformed. Vacant lots, abandoned structures, and the open spaces of urban prairies became common sights that Detroit's residents had to live with on a daily basis. Two responses to Detroit's decline emerged after 1970 that reworked a sense of moral environmentalism amid Detroit's post-industrial landscape. Individuals and grassroots groups once again turned to urban and community gardening as a means of improving their quality of life in the city. More than only a means of subsistence, these spaces were powerful symbols through which residents imagined the city. At the same time, photographers and urban explorers became enthralled with Detroit's ruins. In stark contrast to the environmental ethic promoted by urban gardeners, a subset of these photographs imagined the city as a veritable post-industrial wilderness, by focusing on the way nature seemed to be returning to the city through the weeds and plant life that grew over abandoned structures. Photographs and gardening projects created between 1970s and 2010 created competing environmental narratives from Detroit's decline.

A long view of Detroit's urban environmental history reveals that moral environmentalism changed from a top-down instrument of social order and control to a grassroots tool of empowerment into the twenty first century. Rather than a government-supported plan such as the one Pingree developed, today Detroit's urban gardeners have had to



work to gain recognition by city leaders. In 2009, advocates of using Detroit's vacant lots as productive agricultural spaces began working with the City Planning Commission to create an amendment to the city's zoning ordinance. Approved in April 2013, the Urban Agriculture Ordinance makes urban gardening and farming practices a legal use of urban land for the first time in the history of the city's zoning regulations. With continued interest from residents in urban gardening, the ordinance has granted them a sense of permanence and recognition. Meanwhile, Belle Isle Park has remained the city's largest park and an important civic space. Without support from the surrounding metropolitan region, however, the city's ability to adequately maintain the park has been severely constrained. On February 10, 2014, the legacy of this past came to the foreground, when Belle Isle Park became Michigan's 102nd State Park, as part of an agreement brokered by Detroit's Emergency Financial manager, rather than elected officials. The legacy of Detroit's green spaces continues to influence the way residents and city leaders contend with the present and imagine the future of the city.

Landscape architect Anne Spirm theorizes that, "every landscape has both real and potential form – what is, what has been, and what will, what might be."<sup>1</sup> In Detroit, city and civic leaders, everyday residents, artists, and planners transformed the real and potential forms of the urban landscape to instill social order and contest it, reconcile the inequalities of industrial capitalism, and imagine a middle class way of life. As the case studies in this dissertation demonstrate, Detroit's cultural landscape was a dynamic terrain that residents of the region used to change the land and themselves and imagine what the future of the city might look like. Although the landscape could scarcely live up to some of their grandest hopes and dreams, the social and environmental meanings they gave it had a significant influence on their life in the city. Residents, city leaders, and planners grew complex strands of environmentalism in spaces

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Spirm, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 19.

on the peripheries of urban life to improve the quality of the places they called home. The gardens in the machine of industrial capitalism were where residents and city leaders invented, contested, and defined ideas and ideals about urbanism, nature, and each other through outdoor spaces. Looking back to the urban environmentalism crafted in the crucible of American industry and post-industrial decline should help us to see more clearly what is, what has been, and what might be in a rustbelt city that is not as rusty as it may seem.

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