

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM

-1-

---

Name of Building or Site

Common: Tenney Park	Historic: same
------------------------	-------------------

---

Location

Street Address:  1440 East Johnson Street Madison, WI 53703	Aldermanic District:  Second
--	------------------------------------

---

Classification

Type of Property:  
  
Site

---

Zoning District: C and W	Present Use: Park
-----------------------------	----------------------

---

Current Owner of Property

Name(s):  
  
City of Madison Parks Division and Dane County

---

Street Address: 215 Martin Luther King Blvd Madison, WI 53709 and City-County Building, Rm 114 Madison, WI 53709	Telephone Number: (608)266-4711  (608)266-4151
---	---

---

Legal Description

Parcel Number: 0709-124-1103-3 0709-124-1101-7 0709-124-1201-5 0709-124-1102-5 0709-124-0095-3 (part north of East Johnson Street)	Legal Description: See attached
--	------------------------------------

---

Condition of Property

Physical Condition:  
  
Excellent

---

Altered or Unaltered?  Mostly Unaltered	Moved or Original Site?  Original Site
---	--

---

Wall Construction:  
  
Not applicable

---

Tenney Park, 1254 Sherman Avenue  
Legal Description

Tenney Park is composed of four parcels and part of a fifth parcel.  
The parcel numbers and their respective legal descriptions are listed  
below.:

0709-124-1103-3

SEC 12, T7N, R9E PART OF SE 1/4 BEG ON  
NW SIDE OF JOHNSON ST AT INTERS OF NE L  
INE OF MARSTON AVE, TH NE ON JOHNSON ST  
TO SW BANK OF YAHARA RIVER, TH NW ALG SD  
RIVER TO LAKE MENDOTA, TH SW ALG LAKE S  
HORE TO NE LINE OF LOT 40, WILLOW PARK,  
TH SE ALG SD LOT LINE TO SHERMAN AVE, TH  
SW ON SD AVE TO NE LN OF MARSTON AVE, T  
H SE ALG SD AVE TO JOHNSON ST & POB. EX  
CEPT THAT PART ASSESSED AS SHERMAN AVE &  
THORNTON AVE, KNOWN AS TENNEY PARK

0709-124-1101-7

ADD TO WILLOW PARK SUBD, LOTS 41 TO 52  
INCL, ALSO SEC 12, T7N R9E, PRT OF SE  
1/4 LYING NE OF SD LOT 52, ADD TO  
WILLOW PARK SUBD AND SW OF CERTIFIED  
SURVEY MAP NO 3601

0709-124-1201-5

SEC 12, T7N R9E, PRT OF SE 1/4 DESC AS  
FOL, COM AT INTERS WLY ROW LN SHERMAN  
AVE & E-W 1/4 LN SD SEC, TH S 19 DEG 26  
MIN W 521.3 FT TO POB, TH N 52 DEG 47  
MIN W TO SHORE LN LAKE MENDOTA, TH SWLY  
ALG SD SHORE LINE TO NELY LN CERTIFIED  
SURVEY MAP NO 3601, TH SELY ALG SD NELY  
LN TO NWLY ROW LN SHERMAN AVE, TH NELY  
ALG SD ROW LN TO POB

continued

Tenney Park, 1254 Sherman Avenue  
Legal Description, continued

0709-124-1102-5  
CERTIFIED SURVEY MAP NO 3601 RECORDED  
IN DANE COUNTY REGISTER OF DEEDS IN VOL  
14 PAGE 239 OF CERTIFIED SURVEYS

and, that part of Parcel #0709-124-0095-3 that is north of East Johnson Street. The entire parcel (including the part south of East Johnson Street that is not included in the landmark nomination) is described as follows:

0709-124-0095-3  
SEC 12, T7N, R9E BEG AT A PT WHICH IS S  
89 DEG 31 MIN W 296.14 FT & S 19 DEG 04  
MIN W 731.44 FT FROM NE COR OF SE 1/4 O  
F SD SEC, TH S 19 DEG 04 MIN W 275.5 FT,  
TH S 39 DEG 34 MIN W 364.28 FT, TH N 53  
DEG 02 MIN W 430.92 FT TO POB, TH S 36  
DEG 58 MIN W 100 FT TO BANK OF YAHARA RI  
VER, TH N 46 DEG 40 MIN W 325 FT, TH N 3  
5 DEG 51 MIN E 100 FT, TH SELY IN A DIRE  
CT LINE 325 FT M/L TO POB.

---

Describe Original and Present Physical Appearance and Construction

Developed in four sections between 1900 and 1911, Tenney Park was originally designed by noted Chicago landscape architect, Ossian Cole (O.C.) Simonds, and modified by prominent Cambridge (Massachusetts) landscape architect, John Nolen. It is an excellent and intact example of the Prairie School of landscape architecture, which used native plants and local landscape features, and arranged them in a naturalistic and Picturesque manner.

Tenney Park contains 44.2 acres. Most of the park lies between Sherman Avenue and East Johnson Street, west of the Yahara River. The plan of this section is composed of a serpentine lagoon with a central, 10-acre island. Narrow paths, some gravel and some dirt, follow part way along the outline of the lagoon. Five footbridges cross the lagoon at various points. Trees and shrubs with a loose-leafed or loose-branched character give a natural, unplanned appearance. At the edges, plantings screen the park from the surrounding streets, and within the park, they create visual interest. Nolen's planting plan, which accompanied his modification of the park, called for 96 varieties of trees and shrubs.<sup>1</sup> Less than one dozen were non-native. Of the exotic plants, only honeysuckle remains. Natives Nolen specified included hickory, oaks, viburnum, elderberry, ash, sumac, pines, willows and paper birch. Native trees and shrubs do remain, and the Madison Parks Division is following Nolen's plan for replanting, especially oaks, maples, lindens and elms. The current plantings are not as dense as they originally were on the island and along Marston Avenue. On the island, there was a "broad meadow," with 4-6" grasses and some flowers, creating a carpet effect. These plantings were reduced over time, and replaced with short grass, to accommodate athletic fields. The Madison Parks Division is currently trying to reestablish meadow grasses on the north half of the island, and limit the athletic fields to the south half. Along Marston Avenue, plantings were reduced at the request of residents, who wished to look onto the park from their homes. These changes do not affect the integrity of the Simonds/Nolen design as the physical form remains, the plantings are in character, and the Parks Division is trying to reestablish plantings that were lost.

There are seven contributing structures and five noncontributing structures in Tenney Park. The oldest structure in the park is the modest Prairie style Restroom. Located near the intersection of Sherman and Marston Avenues, the restroom was designed by prominent

---

<sup>1</sup>Plan dated June, 1908, on file, Madison Parks Division.

Milwaukee architect George B. Ferry, and built in 1909.<sup>2</sup> The small, one story hip roofed concrete structure features battered corners, and a prominent concrete belt course high on the walls with a series of windows above (boarded). Although the concrete has weathered such that the aggregate shows, giving the exterior finish the appearance of rough stucco, the restroom retains good integrity.

The Marston Avenue Bridge is the oldest of the existing footbridges. Built in 1912,<sup>3</sup> it is a reinforced concrete arch bridge with a smooth finish. The bridge's walls feature concrete work which emphasizes the arch, a heavy concrete handrail and recessed lettering reading: "Marston." Designed by City Engineer John Icke, it is a utilitarian bridge with simple lines, and excellent integrity.

The A.G. Zimmerman Bridge is a reinforced concrete arch footbridge with a rock-faced random limestone ashlar veneer. It was built in 1929,<sup>4</sup> and named in honor of Judge Arthur Zimmerman, who helped finance its construction. A course of smooth-faced limestone outlines the arch. The Zimmerman Bridge is an excellent local example of a rustic bridge, with excellent integrity.

Two identical Concrete Pedestrian Bridges cross the lagoon to the island, one from the East Johnson Street side of the park, the other from the Thornton Avenue side. Both were built in 1930.<sup>5</sup> Each is a simple arch bridge of smooth-faced concrete with metal handrails. The existing handrails replaced and reproduced the originals in 1959.<sup>6</sup>

The Sherman Avenue Bridge carries two lanes of car traffic across the Yahara River. Built in 1934,<sup>7</sup> it is a steel reinforced concrete double arch bridge, connected to the Tenney Lock. The arches are enriched with concrete panels. The balustrades are composed of square concrete piers and geometric metal grill work. There is a sidewalk with a concrete and steel handrail on either

---

<sup>2</sup>Reports of the Officers of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association, (hereafter, MPPDA Reports), 1910, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1913, pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup>Database, Madison Parks Division.

<sup>5</sup>Plans on file, Madison Parks Division.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Database, Madison Engineering Department.

side of the bridge. An interesting local example of an aesthetically designed pre-1940 bridge, with very good integrity, the Sherman Avenue Bridge is one of nine such bridges in the Tenney-Yahara district. However, the Sherman Avenue Bridge is unusual. The other bridges have classical, rustic and/or utilitarian details. The Sherman Avenue Bridge combines classical concrete elements with modernistic metal work.

The last contributing structure in Tenney Park is the Thornton Avenue Spillway. An excellent local example of a rustic bridge, with excellent integrity, the Thornton Avenue Spillway was built in 1936.<sup>8</sup> It is a reinforced concrete bridge with a small arch, veneered with rock-faced random limestone ashlar. The arch is outlined with rock-faced stone voussoirs; the balustrades are wood, with square balusters.

There are two noncontributing structures in the main section of Tenney Park. These are the 1958 Park Shelter near the intersection of East Johnson Street and Thornton Avenue, and the 1970 Steel Pedestrian Bridge, which crosses the lagoon near the Park Shelter.<sup>9</sup> The design of the rustic Park Shelter and the arch Steel Pedestrian Bridge are in keeping with the contributing structures in the main section of Tenney Park, and do not impact the park's integrity. There are various athletic facilities in Tenney Park. Just west of Thornton Avenue, there are three tennis courts. Although these are not the original tennis courts, there were tennis courts in Tenney Park by 1915. There are also two baseball diamonds and a hockey/soccer field on the island. Baseball was being played on the island by 1920, and there was skating in the park as early as 1915. Active use of Tenney Park, and the location of the athletic fields, are in character with Nolen's redesign, and do not compromise the park's integrity.

The remainder of Tenney Park lies north of Sherman Avenue. Sometimes called Tenney Beach, John Nolen transformed this section, always a swimming beach, from a rocky one to a sand beach in 1909.<sup>10</sup> Most of the park's noncontributing structures are in this section. In the west end is the 1979 Bath House.<sup>11</sup> The Tenney Lock, on the Yahara River, was built in 1959.<sup>12</sup> These structures

---

<sup>8</sup>Database, Madison Parks Division.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1911, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>Database, Madison Parks Division.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM

-5-

are all rustic in design, in keeping with the park's character, and do not compromise the integrity of Tenney Park. Toward the east end of Tenney Beach, jutting into Lake Monona just north of the Lock, is a breakwater. The c.1982 breakwater, made from rubble, protects the Lock. There was a smaller breakwater in the same spot from at least 1949 on.<sup>13</sup>

CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES

Tenney Park Lagoon	1900-11	No. 1
Restroom	1909	No. 2
Marston Bridge	1912	No. 3
A.G. Zimmerman Bridge	1929	No. 4
Concrete Pedestrian Bridge	1930	No. 5
new handrails	1959	
Concrete Pedestrian Bridge	1930	No. 6
new handrails	1959	
Sherman Avenue Bridge	1934	No. 7
Thornton Avenue Spillway	1936	No. 8

NONCONTRIBUTING RESOURCES

Park Shelter	1958	No. 9
Locks	1959	No. 10
Steel Pedestrian Bridge	1970	No. 11
Bath house	1979	No. 12

---

<sup>13</sup>Gene Rankin, neighborhood resident, interview February 11, 1994.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM

-6-

---

Original Owner:

Original Use:

Madison Parks and Pleasure  
Drive Association

Park

---

Landscape Architect:

Style:

O.C. Simonds; John Nolen

Prairie Style

---

Dates of Construction:

Indigenous Materials:

1900-1911

Many indigenous plants

---

Bibliographic References:

Gelbloom, Mara. "Ossian Simonds: Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening," The Prairie School Review, XII:5-18, 1975.

Mollenhoff, David V. Madison: A History of the Formative Years. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1982.

Newton, Norman T. Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

Rankin, Katherine H. Unpublished report of the Intensive Survey of the Historic Resources of Madison, no date.

Reports of the Officers of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association. (MPPDA Reports) 1902 through 1929.

---

Form Prepared by

Name and Title: Elizabeth L. Miller  
Preservation Research Assistant

---

Organization Represented: City of Madison  
Planning and Development

---

Address: 215 Martin L. King Blvd Telephone Number:  
Madison, WI 53707 266-6552

---

Date Nomination was Prepared: August, 1994

---



---

Significance of the Nominated Property

Tenney Park is eligible to be listed as a Madison Landmark because it meets criteria 1, 3 and 4 of the Landmarks and Landmarks Sites Designation Criteria (see Madison Ordinances Sec. 33.01(4)(a)). Specifically, Tenney Park "exemplif[ies] or reflect[s] the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the . . . community" for its association with, and affect upon, the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association (MPPDA), an important voluntary association that changed the physical development and environmental character of Madison. In addition, the development of Tenney Park, together with the Yahara River Parkway, triggered an era of incredible park philanthropy in Madison. Tenney Park was also the first in-city park given to the MPPDA. Further, Tenney Park "embod[ies] the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of . . . style . . ." as an excellent and intact example Prairie School landscape design, and it is "representative of the notable work of a master . . . architect whose individual genius influence[d] his age" because it is a representative work by the founder of the Prairie School in landscape architecture, Ossian Cole Simonds.

Historical Context

By the late nineteenth century, after years of haphazard expansion, many American cities were overcrowded, unsanitary, poorly laid out, and lacking in parks. Architects, landscape architects and the civic-minded began to look for ways to make the urban environment more humane. Since designing Central Park in New York City with Calvert Vaux in 1858, America's premier landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, had been promoting the design of cities, with particular attention to parks, as an answer to this problem. In 1890, he was asked to make suggestions regarding the upcoming World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Olmsted seized the opportunity and urged the fair's organizers to create a layout that emphasized harmony, and unified buildings and grounds. Under the direction of Chicago architect Daniel Burnham, who was influenced by eastern architects (notably Richard Morris Hunt), it was resolved to design the fair's buildings in the classical style. Meanwhile, the layout of the fairgrounds was designed by Olmsted's assistant, Henry S. Codman, along with Burnham and John W. Root. The result was the "Great White City," composed of spacious boulevards with imposing classical buildings of uniform height and with white exterior finishes. The unity of the grounds was enhanced by placing utility lines underground, and through the use of painting, sculpture, and water elements, such as lagoons and fountains. This demonstration, and subsequent ones at later fairs, showed what a city could look like if it were planned according to aesthetic principles. All over the country, citizens were inspired, sparking the City Beautiful movement. City planning

commissions were appointed, and classical buildings built to house museums, libraries, art galleries, courthouses and other public governmental and cultural institutions.<sup>14</sup> That the primary legacy of the World Columbian Exposition was the nationwide adoption of classical style was a disappointment to Olmsted.<sup>15</sup> However, the Exposition did create new interest in public parks. In Madison, this movement was led by the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association (MPPDA; see discussion under Historical Significance).

Tenney Park was developed in four sections. In 1899, Daniel K. Tenney purchased 14 acres of marshland and lakeshore, primarily from Anna Thornton and her daughter, Mary. He donated the land to the MPPDA in trust for city as an in-city park for working people. The Thorntons also donated some land, as did the Hausmann Brewing Company and the Willow Park Association (developers of the lake side of Sherman Avenue). Chicago landscape gardener O.C. Simonds designed this first section of Tenney Park in 1900.<sup>16</sup> Simonds' plan called for the construction of a serpentine lagoon with three islands of varying sizes, connecting with the Yahara River at the southeast end of the park, and running under Sherman Avenue to terminate in another small lagoon on the lakeshore.<sup>17</sup> The city built a pumping station in Lake Mendota to bring up sand from the lake bottom to provide part of the fill.<sup>18</sup> By April, 1903, construction on the first section of Tenney Park was complete, including plantings and foot bridges to the islands (designed by Simonds), at a total cost of \$15,158,30.<sup>19</sup> In 1903, the city purchased five lots in the Willow Park subdivision between Sherman Avenue and Lake Mendota for \$6,700. This was the second section of Tenney Park. It was developed that year, and added 250' of lakeshore to the park.<sup>20</sup> In 1905, the MPPDA purchased the third section of Tenney Park. Daniel K. Tenney donated \$5,000 toward the purchase of the 21 acres called Thornton Marsh, located on the west

---

<sup>14</sup>Leland M. Roth, A Concise History of American Architecture, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 213-14.

<sup>15</sup>Albert Fein, Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition, (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1972), p. 66.

<sup>16</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1902, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1906, fold out.

<sup>18</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1902, pp. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1903, pp. 15-16.

<sup>20</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1904, pp. 25-26.

side of the park. Nearly all of the marsh property was owned by Anna and Mary Thornton. To finance the remainder of the \$8,500 purchase price and part of the development of the new section, the MPPDA earmarked 15 acres as an addition to the park and platted the rest as the Parkside Subdivision. This created Marston Avenue (named in honor of Tenney's wife), and the lots facing it.<sup>21</sup>

O.C. Simonds' design for the third section of Tenney Park called for a lagoon, connecting to the existing lagoon in three places, and two islands.<sup>22</sup> The MPPDA sold the 20 lots it owned in the Parkside Subdivision for \$1,000 each in 1905 and 1906.<sup>23</sup> Construction on the third section of Tenney Park began in June, 1907.<sup>24</sup> In June, 1908, the city's newly hired consulting landscape architect, John Nolen, modified the design for Tenney Park. Nolen's plan called for filling in part of the lagoon to create one large, 10 acre island, and filling in the lagoon on the beach.<sup>25</sup> Nolen proposed this design to bring more visitors to the park. Tenney Park had been designed originally to be a passive, aesthetic experience, where the visitor would admire nature from the path or a boat, much as the pleasure drives presented views for the carriage passenger. This type of park did not appeal to the public; not many came.<sup>26</sup> Nolen's design gave Tenney Park large open spaces where people could gather and listen to a band concert, or play baseball. His design transformed the park's character from passive to active. After Nolen's design was completed in 1910, people thronged to the park.<sup>27</sup> In 1908, the city purchased the fourth and last section of Tenney Park. This consisted of seven lots of the Willow Park Subdivision, and added 350' of lake shore to the park, for a total of 44.2 acres. In October, 1908, the city issued bonds to cover the purchase price of \$19,670.75.<sup>28</sup> Nolen prepared plans for a sand beach for children with playground for

---

<sup>21</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1905, pp. 19-23.

<sup>22</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1906, fold out dated March 7, 1906.

<sup>23</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1906, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1908, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1909, fold out.

<sup>26</sup>Wisconsin State Journal, (hereafter, WSJ), November 6, 1907.

<sup>27</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1911, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1909, pp. 19-23.

this site.<sup>29</sup> The Prairie style restroom near the corner of Sherman and Marston Avenues, designed by Milwaukee architect George B. Ferry, was built in 1909.<sup>30</sup> Tenney Park was essentially completed in 1911. The total cost of park up to April, 1912, was \$79,650.<sup>31</sup> In the fall of 1912, the Marston Avenue Bridge was built. It was designed by City Engineer John Icke as a reinforced concrete arch bridge with concrete finish. Daniel K. Tenney paid for the bridge, which cost \$3,321.<sup>32</sup> The first bath house (demolished) in Tenney Park was built in 1913. Also designed by Ferry, it was located on the site of the present lakefront parking lot.<sup>33</sup> Concerts were being held in the park by the summer of 1913, and were well attended.<sup>34</sup> Six tennis courts were built in 1915, and in the winter of 1915-16, the lagoons scraped and flooded for skating.<sup>35</sup> By 1920, baseball was being played on the island.<sup>36</sup>

The city has continued to improve Tenney Park. The stone-veneered A.G. Zimmerman Bridge, which crosses the lagoon at Sherman Avenue, was built in 1929. The Thornton Avenue Spillway, also stone veneered, was constructed in 1936. The Sherman Avenue Bridge, a concrete arch bridge which crosses the Yahara River, was built in 1934. The two concrete foot bridges that cross the lagoon were originally built in 1930, and repaired in 1959. The park shelter was built in 1958. The present locks were erected in 1959. The current breakwater was built c1982, although there was a smaller one in place by 1949.<sup>37</sup> The steel arch foot bridge across the lagoon was erected in 1970. The present bath house was built in 1979.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1911, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1910, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1912, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1913, pp. 25-26.

<sup>33</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1914, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1915-16, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1920-21, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>Gene Rankin.

<sup>38</sup>Bill Bauer, Madison Parks Division, Interview, December 12, 1993.

---

Historical Significance

Tenney Park is significant for its association with, and affect upon, the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association. Together with the Yahara River Parkway, it triggered an era of incredible park philanthropy in Madison. Tenney Park was also the first in-city park given to the MPPDA, and the first city park with lake access for the public.

The MPPDA was the most influential voluntary organization in Madison's history. From its founding in 1894, until it dissolved in 1938, this organization transformed Madison from a city with one 3-1/2 acre public park, to one with a wealth of parks, playgrounds, athletic fields, beaches and open space. In fact, the MPPDA was instrumental in securing almost all the parks created in Madison during that organization's 44 years.<sup>39</sup> The MPPDA also set high aesthetic standards, hiring the most talented landscape architects of the era to design these public improvements, most notably Ossian Cole Simonds and John Nolen. The MPPDA's efforts changed the physical development and environmental character of Madison, and set a precedent for the support of parks as an integral part of the fabric of the city, which continues today.

The MPPDA got its start in 1892, when John M. Olin and some of his friends began purchasing lands for the development of pleasure (scenic) drives along Lake Mendota. Olin (1851-1924), an attorney who practiced in Madison for 33 years, also taught in the Law School at the University. He is best known for his work with the MPPDA. The MPPDA was formally organized in 1894 with 26 members. Olin was chosen as president. He would prove a highly effective leader. The MPPDA initially focused on pleasure drives. The organization was very successful in its first five years, establishing over 17 miles of scenic roadways in the Madison area, much of it along Lake Mendota. Membership grew to 400 by 1899, and consisted primarily of Madison's leading business and professional men. They and their families were also the primary beneficiaries of the pleasure drives. The roadways were not accessible to the three-quarters of the population who could not afford to own or rent a horse. Although the MPPDA was highly regarded for what it had accomplished, it was criticized by some as elitist for this reason.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup>Katherine H. Rankin, unpublished report of the Intensive Survey of Historic Resources of Madison, no date.

<sup>40</sup>David V. Mollenhoff, Madison: A History of the Formative Years, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 232-34.

In 1899, the focus of the MPPDA abruptly changed. Several property owners offered to sell 14 acres of land, situated along the west bank of the Yahara River at Lake Mendota, to the city as a park. The owners were asking \$1,500 for the parcel; it was easily worth \$8,000. The MPPDA Board of Directors immediately passed a resolution urging the city to buy and develop the land as a park. Before the city could respond, Daniel K. Tenney came forward with an offer which would change the purpose of the MPPDA, and ultimately, the history of Madison. Tenney was an ardent supporter of the MPPDA, and Madison's best-known conservative activist. He offered to buy the land for \$1,500 and give another \$2,500 for its development as a park. Tenney attached conditions to his gift which challenged both the MPPDA and the city to become involved in the support of in-city public parks. First, he specified that the MPPDA hold the land in trust for the city; second, that the MPPDA develop and maintain the park; and third, that another \$2,500 be raised for the development of the park from other sources.<sup>41</sup>

This offer posed the question: what agency should be responsible for public parks in the city? Olin and the MPPDA Board of Directors sincerely believed that parks were necessary for the health and well-being of all citizens. Further, the city had only one park, the block-long abandoned cemetery known as Orton Park, to serve a population of some 19,000 persons. The city could finance the development and maintenance of parks within city limits through property taxes. The pleasure drives, because they were mostly located outside the city, could not be supported with taxes. The MPPDA must therefore support the pleasure drives with their own funds, which were all voluntary contributions. Supporting both would financially strap the MPPDA. Olin concluded that the acquisition, development and maintenance of parks in the city should be a municipal responsibility.<sup>42</sup>

However, a majority of the Common Council disagreed with Olin. This may have stemmed in part from the fact that the city was very near the limit of its statutory borrowing power as a result of recent expenditures to set up a water system and a sewage treatment system, as well as having on-going obligations for street maintenance and so on. The MPPDA accepted Tenney's gift and began raising the required \$2,500. The MPPDA also persuaded the Common Council to contribute \$1,500. The Common Council named the park after its primary benefactor, Daniel K. Tenney.<sup>43</sup> Olin hired Ossian Cole (O.C.) Simonds, a talented landscape architect from

---

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 326 and 475.

Chicago to design the park. It would be the first of many collaborations between Simonds and the MPPDA. Development of Tenney Park began in 1900 and was completed in 1911.

Tenney Park itself is important as the first Madison park with lake access for the public, and as the first in-city park given to the MPPDA.<sup>44</sup> However, the establishment of this park is much more significant, in several ways. First, it changed the relationship between the MPPDA and the city. Holding land in trust for the city changed the character of the MPPDA from private to quasi-public. At the moment the MPPDA took title to Tenney Park, it essentially became the Madison Parks Department.<sup>45</sup> This quasi-public function was formalized by a law (Chapter 55) passed by the Wisconsin Legislature in 1899. This law gave both the city and the MPPDA power to own, improve and maintain parklands.<sup>46</sup> Second, the creation of Tenney Park forced the city to take its first real step in accepting responsibility for the development and maintenance of city parks. Third, the establishment of Tenney Park marked an expansion in the focus of the MPPDA from pleasure drives outside the city to include in-city parks for the less affluent. This ended much of the criticism of the MPPDA as elitist, and broadened the organization's appeal to the public. Recognizing both an opportunity for growth, and an obligation to citizens of modest means, Olin reduced the annual membership fee from \$25 to \$5 in 1899. The response from the public was very favorable.<sup>47</sup>

Over the next few years, the MPPDA strongly encouraged city officials to develop more parks. The city ignored the MPPDA. Olin, frustrated with the city's inaction, undertook a bold initiative. In January, 1903, Olin presented a plan to a group of Madison's most influential citizens at the home of Senator William F. Vilas. He called for widening (to 50') and deepening the Yahara River between Lakes Mendota and Monona, creating a parkway on both sides, raising the railway bridges across the Yahara so that launches (small boats) could easily pass beneath them, and constructing a lock at the Mendota outlet.<sup>48</sup> The plan was lauded by the local press. Daniel K. Tenney objected to the plan, primarily on the grounds that wealthy launch owners would be the greatest beneficiaries. Tenney's objections were overridden by a

---

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>48</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1903, pp. 22-23.

coalition made up of park activists; property owners, who foresaw their real estate rising in value; town boosters; and the growing number of launch owners, most of whom were association members.<sup>49</sup>

Olin pursued the development of the Yahara River Parkway with characteristic vigor. He sent Senator Vilas to convince the presidents of the Chicago & Northwestern, and Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroads to raise their four railroad bridges across the Yahara. By the end of January, 1903, both presidents had agreed. In the event that the railroads reneged on their promise, Olin got the Wisconsin Legislature to adopt a bill that would force the railroads to cooperate. Olin also got the endorsement of Madison's Common Council for the project. By April, Olin announced that 482 persons had subscribed \$20,614.60 for the project--over \$5,000 more than the goal--and that nearly all the necessary land had been donated to the city for the project.<sup>50</sup> Work on the Yahara River Parkway was begun in June, 1903, and completed in 1906 (see discussion in landmark nomination for the Yahara River Parkway).

The Yahara River Parkway, together with Tenney Park, "primed the pump" for the golden era of park-oriented philanthropy in Madison. In 1904, William F. Vilas gave the MPPDA \$18,000 to create a park in honor of his son Henry, who had died at a young age. In 1905, Thomas E. Brittingham donated \$8,000 for a park in his own name. These contributions were just the beginning of large additional gifts from Vilas, Brittingham and Tenney. Other large gifts were received from George B. Burrows and A.H. Hollister.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps more impressive were the small annual gifts of hundreds of citizens of modest means. Between 1902 and 1909, an average of 765 Madisonians, about one household in ten, voluntarily contributed money in support of parks. About 60 percent of all pledges were just \$5. As a result of MPPDA efforts, by 1906 Madison had been changed from a city with only one three-and-a-half acre park and no public water frontage, to a city with 154 acres of park and 4.6 miles of public water frontage, more than most cities in the nation.<sup>52</sup>

Despite Olin's success in raising funds from the private sector, he continued to believe that in-city parks were a municipal responsibility. Olin and the MPPDA continued to push the city to

---

<sup>49</sup>Mollenhoff, p. 329.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 329; and MPPDA Reports: 1903, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup>Mollenhoff, p. 332.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.



accept more financial responsibility. In 1905, he persuaded the Common Council to hire a park superintendent to oversee the day-to-day operation and development of the parks. The superintendent was selected by the MPPDA and worked under its direction, but the city paid his salary. Emil T. Mische, who had worked for Frederick Law Olmsted, was selected. Mische held the post from January 1, 1906 until March 1, 1908. When Mische left Madison for Portland, Oregon, Olin secured the services of John Nolen.<sup>53</sup> Nolen (1864-1937) was quickly gaining a national reputation as a leader, along with Frederick Law Olmsted, in the new discipline, "city planning." City planners promoted the concept (later called the City Functional) that all the components of urban life should be integrated to make cities not just more beautiful, but more liveable as well. Nolen was under contract to the city part-time from 1908 until 1911. During that time, he redesigned Tenney Park (1908), and produced a thoughtful comprehensive plan of Madison (1910).<sup>54</sup> But Olin's greatest success in getting the city to shoulder financial responsibility for parks took place in 1909, when Olin finally convinced the Common Council to pass a one-half-mill park tax. This brought much more money for parks. Instituted in 1912, the park tax brought nearly \$50,000 a year between 1912 and 1920, as compared to an average of \$22,000 a year in annual contributions made to the MPPDA during its peak years of 1901-11. After adoption of the park tax, the MPPDA continued to oversee maintenance and development of city parks. Membership and contributions dropped precipitously after 1912, but because the MPPDA's financial responsibility was limited to maintaining the 23 mile pleasure drive system, the organization remained solvent.<sup>55</sup>

During the period 1912-1932, the MPPDA continued to improve existing parks and build playgrounds, golf courses and new parks. Improvements to existing parks included bridges, baseball diamonds, tennis courts, bath houses and boat houses. New parks created during this time included Olin Park (1912), Frank W. Hoyt Park (1924), Glenway Golf Course (1926), James R. Law Park (1927) and Nakoma Park (1931).<sup>56</sup> On May 8, 1931, the Common Council passed a charter ordinance (Section 3.03 of the General Ordinances of the City of Madison) creating a board of park commissioner to "govern,

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., pp. 338-341.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., pp. 342, 346-49.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>56</sup>James G. Marshall, "For Pleasure and Play," WSJ, centennial edition, 1939, p. 8.

manage, control, improve and care for all public parks. . ."<sup>57</sup> On April 26, 1933, the newly appointed Board of Park Commissioners assumed their responsibilities. On July 12, 1937, the MPPDA transferred all the property that it had held in trust to the city by quit-claim deed. The MPPDA was dissolved at its final meeting, held July 11, 1938.<sup>58</sup>

It should be noted that there was a second private organization that also contributed to the development of Madison's parks. The Madison Parks Foundation, organized by Michael Olbrich in 1922, established Olbrich Park, Yahara Place Park, and acquired the first parcel of the University of Wisconsin Arboretum.<sup>59</sup> But, according to David Mollenhoff, the MPPDA is unparalleled in Madison history "for its persistence, commitment, foresight, selfless public service, and above all else, its achievements."<sup>60</sup> This is evident not only in the large amount of public open space created by the MPPDA but also in its concern for the aesthetics, always hiring the finest designers, such as O.C. Simonds and John Nolen. That the MPPDA was highly successful in establishing parks in Madison is in large part due the efforts of John Myers Olin. Olin served as president from 1894 until 1909, when ill health forced him to retire. As a result of his work, John Olin is recognized as the "father of Madison's park system."<sup>61</sup>

#### Landscape Architectural Significance

Tenney Park is an excellent, intact example of Prairie School design. It is also significant as representative of the work of the founder of the Prairie School of landscape architecture, O.C. Simonds.

Nineteenth century American landscape architecture was dominated by the romantic, picturesque school of design, which sought to imitate

---

<sup>57</sup>James G. Marshall, "The Madison Park System: 1892-1937," Journal of Historic Madison, volume 5, 1979-80, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>59</sup>Rankin, no page numbers.

<sup>60</sup>Mollenhoff, p. 338.

<sup>61</sup>Rankin; "Annual Report of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association: 1925," pp. 7-8; "Business Associates and Lifelong Friends Mourn Passing of John M. Olin," "John M. Olin," and "Death Relieves Lawyer of Long, Painful Illness," WSJ, December 8, 1924; and Proceedings of the Wisconsin State Bar Association, vol. 15, pp. 17-18, 1925.

nature, with undulating terrain, curving planting beds, and groves of trees which appeared to have sprung up on their own. A romantic landscape design provided a proper setting for picturesque architecture, but as the influence of the Ecole des Beaux Arts and its classically-inspired architecture took hold, a more formal, architectonic style of landscape design came into being. One of the earliest manifestations of this was Olmsted's design at Biltmore. In 1889, Richard Morris Hunt designed a French-inspired country mansion for George W. Vanderbilt. Olmsted designed the grounds to reflect the mansion itself, with its strong geometric form, in developing the immediate grounds as a rectilinear, formal series of spaces. This is regarded as the beginning of the Country Place Era, and is related to the City Beautiful movement in city planning. As classically-inspired architecture in public, commercial and residential buildings grew in popularity, landscape architecture naturally turned to well-structured spatial order and simple geometry.<sup>62</sup> City Beautiful and Country Place design is characterized by clear spatial structure that is crisply geometric and often symmetrical; by a series of rectilinear spaces tied together with a long line of sight; spaces defined or implied with vertical planes using walls and steps; a layout that is formal, organized and simple; a meticulous attention to detail; and a short list of plant materials, usually compact in nature.<sup>63</sup> This type of design, which borrows from England, France and Italy, became very popular in the Eastern U.S. in the early twentieth century, and was imitated in the Midwest.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, in Chicago, artists and designers, among them architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, were rejecting the resurgence of the classical and the dominance of Easterners, and turning to the prairies for inspiration. In landscape architecture, the Prairie School promoted restoring and recreating regional landscape features, and using local rock materials and native plants in a naturalistic design. As Professor Wilhelm Miller of the University of Illinois, the most vocal proponent of

---

<sup>62</sup>Norman T. Newton, Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 345-52, 372-84 and 413-426.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 375, 427-28.

<sup>64</sup>Mara Gelbloom, "Ossian Simonds: Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening," The Prairie School Review, vol. XII, 1975, p. 6.

the Prairie School in landscape architecture, exhorted: "study nature and make pictures full of local color."<sup>65</sup>

Jens Jensen has received a great deal of recognition as the leading practitioner of the Prairie School of landscape architecture. His name is synonymous with the use of hawthorne, flowering dogwood and crabapples to suggest the horizontality of the natural Midwestern landscape. However, Ossian Cole Simonds (1855-1931) was the first to recreate a regional landscape, and the first to use native Midwestern species in a planting plan (including hawthorne, dogwood and crabapples), which he did as early as 1880.<sup>66</sup> "Thus, the ideas and techniques of the Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening were first expressed in Simonds' work and philosophy..."<sup>67</sup>

Simonds believed that local character should be preserved through the use of indigenous plants, and that they should be arranged for the convenience and safety of people, according to the principles of the Picturesque movement, rather than in the haphazard way they might appear in the wild. The principles of the Picturesque movement, as articulated by Frederick Law Olmsted (a great influence on Simonds), have been summed up as follows: avoid formal design except in very limited areas around buildings; keep open lawns and meadows in large central areas; provide circulation by means of organically curving and wide sweeping roads and paths; and place the principal road so that it will approximately circumscribe the whole area.<sup>68</sup> Simonds also drew inspiration from local topography, and gave his designs a sculptural quality and a sense of movement, through massing of plants, low, rolling hills and sinuous water elements.<sup>69</sup> Lagoons were used to symbolize the prairie rivers; meadows symbolized the prairie landscape.<sup>70</sup>

Simonds' design for Tenney Park exemplifies both the Prairie School of landscape architecture, and Simonds' work. In 1900, when Simonds prepared his first plan for Tenney Park, the park was much smaller, encompassing 14 acres just west of the Yahara River. For this site, Simonds designed a serpentine lagoon (the "prairie

---

<sup>65</sup>Wilhelm Miller, "Successful American Gardens VII," Country Life in America, September 1, 1911, p. 38.

<sup>66</sup>Gelbloom, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

river") with a series of islands, curving paths along the outer edge of the lagoon, and undulating planting beds with mostly native plants.<sup>71</sup> Thornton Avenue was later constructed, a curving road at the east edge of the park. In 1906, Simonds prepared a plan for a major addition to Tenney Park (which brought the main section of the park to its current size). This built on the original, enlarging the lagoon and adding two more islands. Significantly, Simonds used the natural bed of the Yahara River (which had been abandoned when Leonard Farwell built his dam and flour mill on the site around 1850) for part of the new lagoon. As part of the addition, Marston Avenue was created at the west end of the park. As of 1907, Tenney was a passive park, and underutilized. In June, 1908, John Nolen modified Simonds' design to create an active park. Nolen did this by filling in the lagoon between the five islands, to create one large 10 acre island. Most of this was called the "broad meadow," and was in keeping with the Prairie School of landscape architecture, as a symbol of the prairie landscape. It also conformed to Olmsted's Picturesque principle of "meadows in large central areas." Nolen's planting plan also emphasized native species. Of the 96 varieties he specified, less than one dozen were exotics.<sup>72</sup>

Tenney Park retains excellent integrity. The physical form of Simonds' plan, as modified by Nolen, has been retained, with the exception of a small wading pool on the island, filled in sometime after 1911. As design elements in the landscape, the noncontributing structures are all in keeping with the character of the park. The contributing structures in the park were likely a part of Simonds' vision; the earliest foot bridges in the park were arch bridges, at least one of which was concrete, and all were designed by Simonds.<sup>73</sup> Four of the park's bridges, Marston Avenue, A.G. Zimmerman, Sherman Avenue and Thornton Avenue Spillway are all good local examples of aesthetically designed pre-1940 bridges (of which there are 11 in Madison), as well as good examples of their various styles. In comparison with other early twentieth century park buildings, the simple Prairie School Restroom does not have the character of the Brittingham Boat House (1909), or the zoo buildings in Vilas Park, built in the same era.<sup>74</sup> The plantings, although less dense than the Simonds/Nolen

---

<sup>71</sup>Shown on plan dated March 7, 1906, on file, Madison Parks Division.

<sup>72</sup>Nolen's design and planting plan, dated June, 1908, on file in the Madison Parks Division.

<sup>73</sup>MPPDA Reports: 1903, p. 15; and MPPDA Reports: 1905, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup>Rankin, no page numbers.

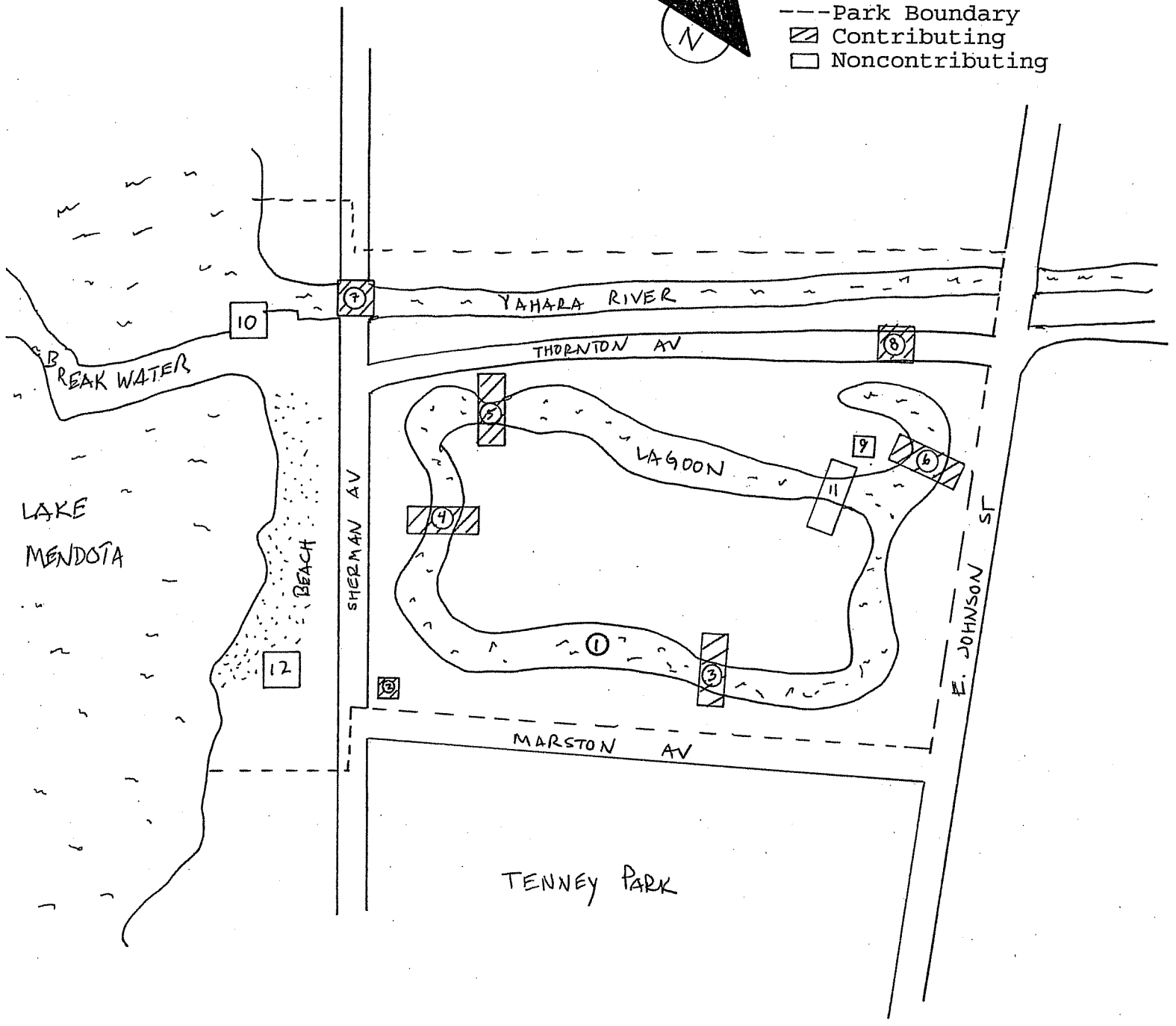
plan called for, are still mostly native species arranged in a naturalistic manner. Although the broad meadow was lost to athletic fields (probably by 1920, when baseball was played there), the Madison Parks Division is in the process of recreating it on the north half of the island.

In conclusion, Tenney Park is significant for its association with, and affect upon, the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association (MPPDA), an important voluntary organization that changed the physical development and environmental character of Madison. The creation of Tenney Park changed the character and purpose of the MPPDA, from a private group developing pleasure drives for the well-to-do, to a semi-public parks department responsible for urban parks as well as pleasure drives. The development of Tenney Park, in concert with that of the Yahara River Parkway, triggered an era of incredible park philanthropy, a time in which 10 percent of all the households in Madison voluntarily donated money to support public parks, and several wealthy men gave large gifts to create parks in their names (Vilas, Brittingham, Burrows). Tenney Park itself was the first in-city park given to the MPPDA, and the first to provide public access to lake frontage. In Landscape Architecture, Tenney Park is an excellent, intact example of Prairie School design. It is also significant as representative of the work of the founder of the Prairie School of landscape architecture, O.C. Simonds.

Tenney Park  
Madison, Dane County, WI



- No scale
- Park Boundary
- ▨ Contributing
- Noncontributing



TENNEY PARK

