

History of Chicago's Parks

In the 1830s, Chicago's emerging government adopted the motto "Urbs in horto," a Latin phrase meaning "City in a Garden." The slogan proved to be prophetic. For nearly two centuries, Chicago's citizens have rallied for the creation and protection of parkland, and many of the city's parks have served as testing grounds for important ideas and social movements. Many of the parks were originally created or shaped by nationally acclaimed architects, planners, landscape designers, or artists, such as Daniel H. Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., Jens Jensen, Alfred Caldwell, and Lorado Taft.

In the early 1850s, a park movement emerged in Chicago, when visionary citizens began to rally for the creation of the nation's first comprehensive park and boulevard system. A physician, Dr. John Rauch led a successful protest to set aside a 60-acre section of a public cemetery as parkland, marking the beginnings of Lincoln Park. This inspired citizens to press for three separate acts of state legislation establishing the Lincoln, South, and West Park Commissions in 1869. Although the three park commissions operated independently, the overall goal was to create a unified ribbon of green that would encircle Chicago.

The three agencies began creating pleasure grounds that could be enjoyed by the whole city. The Lincoln Park Commissioners constructed the old Lake Shore Drive and established the Lincoln Park Zoo. The West Park Commissioners created Humboldt, Garfield and Douglas Parks, which each had their own small conservatory. The South Park Commission hired Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. to lay out its park system, now known as Washington, and Jackson Parks and the Midway Plaisance. The South Park Commissioners also formed a vast park on reclaimed land known as Northerly Island and Burnham Park; served as host to two world's fairs in 1893 and 1933-34; and pioneered new neighborhood parks that offered recreational opportunities as well as social and educational programs. These parks, which included the nation's first field houses, were described by President Theodore Roosevelt as "the most notable civic achievement in any American city."

At the turn of the century, Chicago experienced significant growth and expansion. The most remarkable increases occurred in 1889, when areas outside of Chicago were annexed to the city. An 1895 state act allowed voters within newly annexed areas to create their own park districts. By 1930, 19 new park districts had been formed resulting in a total of 22 independent agencies operating simultaneously in the city.

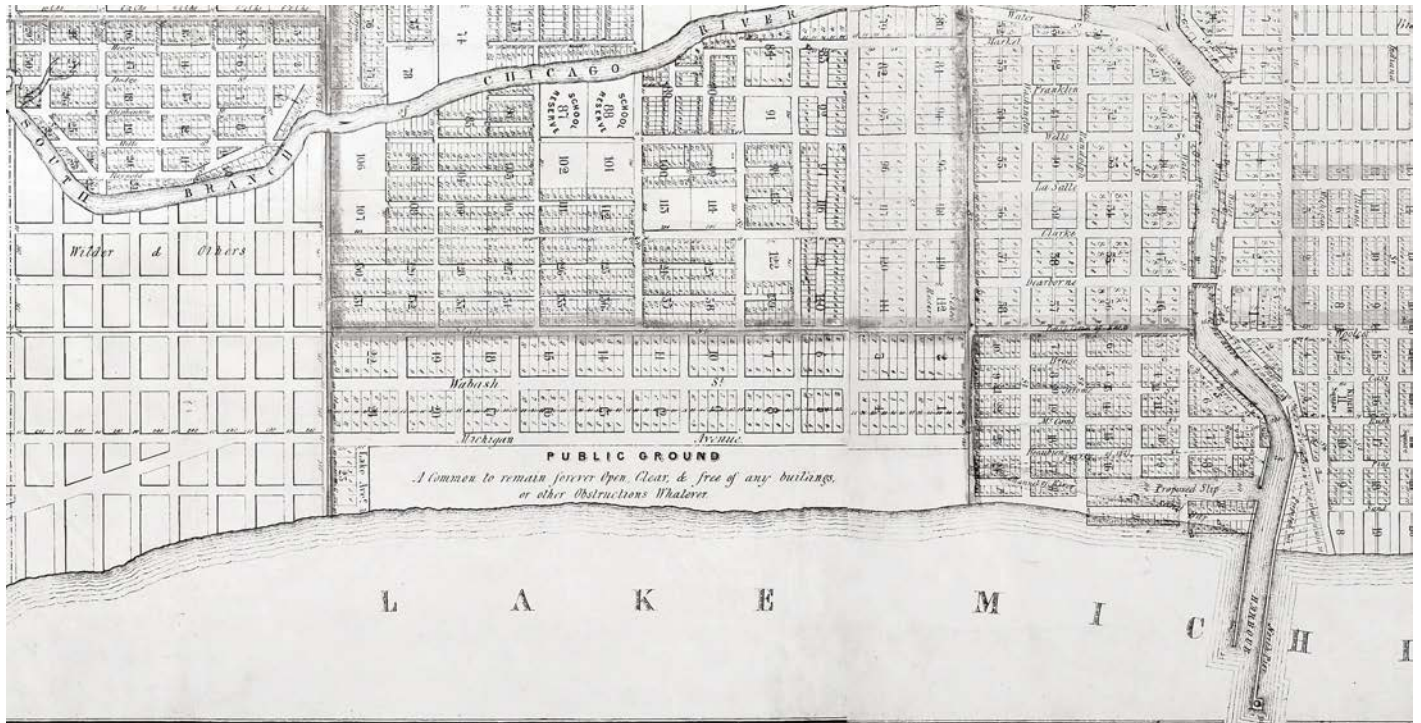
By 1934, all of Chicago's 22 park districts were terribly hindered by the Great Depression. To reduce duplication of services, streamline operations, and gain access to funding through President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, voters approved the Park Consolidation Act of 1934, which established the Chicago Park District. The Chicago Park District Seal was created in 1934, almost 100 years after the first park was dedicated. Two instructors from the School of the Art Institute, Park Phipps and Lloyd Cowan, won a contest to design the official seal for the newly-created Chicago Park District, which combined 22 different park districts into one. The designers received a \$150 prize for their "Garden in the City" seal.

Since its formation more than seventy years ago, the Chicago Park District has continued its tradition of innovative programs and ideas, and beautifully designed landscapes and facilities. In the late 1940s, a Ten Year Plan led to dozens of new parks including a progressive school-park concept. In 1959, the system expanded again, when the City of Chicago transferred more than 250 parks, playlots, natatoriums, and beaches to the Chicago Park District. Now the steward of 8,000+ acres of open space, totaling more than 570 parks, 31 beaches, 50 nature areas, and 2 world-class conservatories, and host of thousands of special events, cultural, nature, sports and recreational programs, the Chicago Park District remains the nation's leading provider of green space and recreation.

1836

Forever Open, Clear, & Free

The story of Chicago's parks began even before the city was officially incorporated. Early leaders foresaw the importance of saving lakefront property as open space. When preparing land sale maps to generate revenue to build the Illinois and Michigan Canal, they labeled an area of the lakefront with the inscription: "Public Ground— A Common to Remain Forever Open, Clear, and Free of Any Building, or Other Obstruction Whatever." This inscription established a legal precedent for lakefront protection and marked the beginnings of what later became known as Grant Park.



1837

City in a Garden

Chicago officially became a city on May 4. Despite a lack of green space at that time, city leaders adopted the motto "Urbs in Horto," a Latin phrase that means "City in a Garden." Illustrated in a red ribbon within the City seal, this phrase presented Chicago as a verdant place.

