



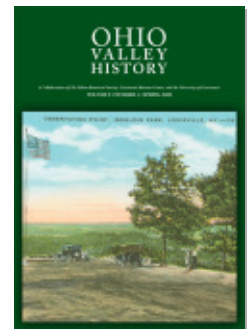
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Racial Segregation, 1895–1930

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“What is the Use of Parks?”:

The Debates Over Parks and the Response of Louisville’s African American Community to Racial Segregation, 1895-1930

Jonathon Free

At an 1897 meeting of the Louisville Outdoor Art and Parks Association, called to discuss the possible uses and future development of the city’s newly created parks system, local saddle maker Andrew Cowan asked a critical, if rhetorical, question: “What is the use of parks?” Dropping his posture as devil’s advocate, Cowan then proceeded to argue to his fellow association members that parks possess the same value as any other public endeavor that assists “the development of human progress.” Cowan’s presentation to the association illustrated the growing importance of nature to city dwellers in the late nineteenth century. To him, the use of public parks was “to promote the well-being and happiness of the people” by encouraging “outdoor recreation and intimacy with nature, to fill the lungs of tired workers from city factories,” with “pure and wholesome air,” during a “day in shady groves, under spreading trees, or on the jeweled meadows.”¹

Cowan was not alone in this opinion. His understanding of urban parks was, in fact, in accordance with a broadly held perception that had developed in late nineteenth-century America. In 1857, after years of public pressure to create more open space within the city, New York City’s officials began construction on what would become Central Park. Cities across the nation soon followed suit. Nineteenth-century urbanites had come to believe that direct contact with the natural world was the best way to ameliorate the unhealthy aspects of city life, and public parks quickly became the most common way for a city to provide such contact. Such reasoning was especially important in the latter years of the century in America. But, as historian Mary Ryan has outlined, the creation of public space in nineteenth-century American cities was often marked by struggles between conflicting racial and ethnic interests. The first sixty years of the nation’s history had been a time of rapid urbanization, during which the percentage of the population in urban areas had increased 15 percent. During a like period in

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the late–nineteenth and early–twentieth centuries, immigrants from eastern and southern Europe crowded into northern cities especially, thus fueling notions of the value of public parks. Migration of African Americans to the nation’s cities from the former slave states of the South contributed to the rise of Jim Crow segregation. Increasingly, African Americans were barred from sharing the benefits of urban parks with their white neighbors.²

The park system of Louisville, Kentucky, which straddled the northern and southern states, exemplified the racially charged conflicts that emerged in various cities over their public spaces. The city’s park system was established in 1895 when the New York landscape design firm Olmsted Brothers, headed by the sons of the famed Frederick Law Olmsted (the nation’s foremost landscape architect who had spearheaded the Central Park project), designed and opened Iroquois, Cherokee, and Shawnee parks. With the Ohio River they virtually framed the city (Shawnee Park located to the west, Iroquois to the south, and Cherokee to the east). At first, the city did not officially segregate its parks. Although white and black Louisvillians were not barred from co-mingling in the parks, they rarely did. Over time, such informal segregation led to the assumption by the city’s black and white communities that the parks were segregated. White city authorities began enforcing the unofficial rule in the early 1920s, and they officially segregated the parks in 1924. Unlike earlier attempts to segregate streetcars and housing, the city implemented the park segregation order with little significant

Central Park, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 1900.

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opposition from black leaders. By the 1920s, the rising influence of a new black middle class, with its roots in black business districts like Louisville's Chestnut Street, had created a divide among Louisville's black leadership. On one side were older, more conservative leaders, who took an accommodationist approach to park segregation and pressured the city for more and better segregated black parks. On the other were a younger, more radical group of leaders who forcibly attacked segregation. This divide was most evident in 1921, when young black leaders—prompted by the sudden enforcement of unofficial park segregation—defected from the Republican Party to form the Lincoln Independent Party. By 1924, when the city issued the segregation order, disagreements between the two had all but crippled the local NAACP, which had been instrumental in the defeat of previous segregation attempts.³

Despite their differing oppositional approaches, black leaders nationwide consistently pointed to the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of urban parks. This belief in the power of nature—and the impact it had on the urban parks movement—can be explained as a part of the progressive reform movement of the early twentieth century. In fact, historians have traditionally dealt with it as such.⁴ But a more useful way of understanding this desire for contact with nature is as a part of the long evolution of modern environmentalism. Using the story of park segregation in Louisville to illustrate this desire helps to overcome the traditionally whitened history of the subject. Other recent work complicates the idea that the belief in nature as a restorative and generally healthful force was a luxury affordable for only middle-class, white urbanites or wealthy sportsmen-cum-conservationists. Historians Jim Schwab and Chad Montrie, for example, have explored the environmental concerns of working class and poor populations throughout the mid-twentieth century. Also, a recent collection of essays edited by Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll reveals that environmentalism developed beyond white communities, and that African Americans, from slavery to the civil rights movement, were also concerned with access to nature. The story of park segregation in Louisville adds to this growing literature. Local African Americans believed that the parks served an essential service to their community by presenting city dwellers with an opportunity to return for a while to a more “natural” setting, where they could be apart from the crowded, dirty, hectic life they led in the city. Their struggle with white city leaders over access to the parks illustrates that the desire for contact with nature was not the exclusive preserve of the white middle class and that oppressed people fought and negotiated to express their own understanding of their relationship with nature.⁵

City parks, in the form of “commons” and “greens,” were part of the earliest American towns and cities. Not until the half century after New York's Central

Park opened in 1857 did the construction of parks and playgrounds accelerate. From 1892 to 1902, the number of national cities boasting public parks grew from one to eight hundred. During these years of intense urbanization, unhealthy conditions in rapidly growing cities led many—including leading physicians of the day—to suggest that public parks would greatly improve the lives of urbanites. A New York physician, Thomas E. Will, wrote in the medical journal *The Arena* that “the varied opportunities of a park would educate [the city dweller] and his family in the enjoyment of open-air pleasures. Deprived of these, he and his are educated into the ways of disease and vice by the character of their surroundings.” As urbanization continued into the early-twentieth century, the idea spread that parks served an essential role as points of escape from the city and prominent African Americans expressed their belief in the health benefits of parks. In 1914, for example, Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams, in his weekly health column in Chicago’s African American newspaper *Chicago Defender*, wrote “there is an ever increasing demand for us to get out, and away from the city—to get close to nature—to commune with the running brooks, trees, and singing birds, and all growing vegetation—to get far away from the heat, the dust, the hurry, the bustling marts, the streets of the overcrowded, jostling municipality and find some cool, shady spot to camp where one might find rest for mind and body with nature’s purest food, water, and air.”⁶

Louisville’s city leaders, white and black, shared this vision of recreation. In his 1916 report on Louisville’s parks, commissioned by the city’s Board of Parks Commissioners, sociologist L. H. Weir noted that the American public had become “aroused to the need of providing wholesome activities for their leisure time.” To Weir, the most important aspect of a city’s recreational space was its playgrounds, which he insisted “more than any other [improvement] the Board should secure at this time . . . because of their great physical and moral value in the lives of the people and particularly of the youths of the city.” In 1925, a report from the city’s Department of Recreation noted that boys learned honor from their time on playgrounds. All “play means growth,” the report noted, and “all play is social conduct.” City leaders believed that it was important to secure open space within the city that would allow such development to take place. Supervisor of Recreation Dorothea Nelson wrote of the “almost complete disappearance in the modern city of open places” and the dominance of the streets by dangerous automobiles as proof of the need for city parks. Louisville’s black citizens expressed similar beliefs. For example, I. Willis Cole, the editor of the *Louisville Leader*, the city’s preeminent African American paper, noted in May 1921 that it was “better for young men to recreate in the open than to spend the afternoon gambling in foul and fetid gambling rooms.”⁷

Considerable evidence suggests that unofficial segregation took root early in the parks' histories, before the city officially segregated them. Most notably, the discussions of the Board of Park Commissioners about the possible future of the parks emphasized the need for the separation of blacks and whites in public spaces. In 1894, park officials set aside two days for school picnics in Iroquois Park, one for white children and a separate one for African American youths. Likewise, Weir suggested in his 1916 report that in order to expand park acreage, the city should use the city's Colored High School grounds as a playground for "colored children" and playing field for "young colored people." Board president John B. Castleman revealed the assumption of segregation in November of the same year when he wrote that the board had "inexcusably neglected to provide recreation grounds for our negro fellow-citizens." "The same right that includes our liberal provision for their separate education," Castleman noted, "should impel us to provide for them separate recreation grounds, and set aside, if necessary, in each large park separate recreation grounds for their use." The parks were not officially segregated, but the assumption of segregation informed all discussions of parks and recreation.⁸

Leaders of the black community did little to challenge such segregationist views. Rather, they concentrated on securing separate playgrounds within their neighborhoods. In 1910, the first playground officially specified for the sole use of African American children opened on Pearl Street. In April 1916, a committee of the Colored Ministers Alliance appeared before the park

African American playground, Pearl Street, Louisville, 1910. Louisville, Kentucky, Park Commissioners Board, *Playground Report* (1910).

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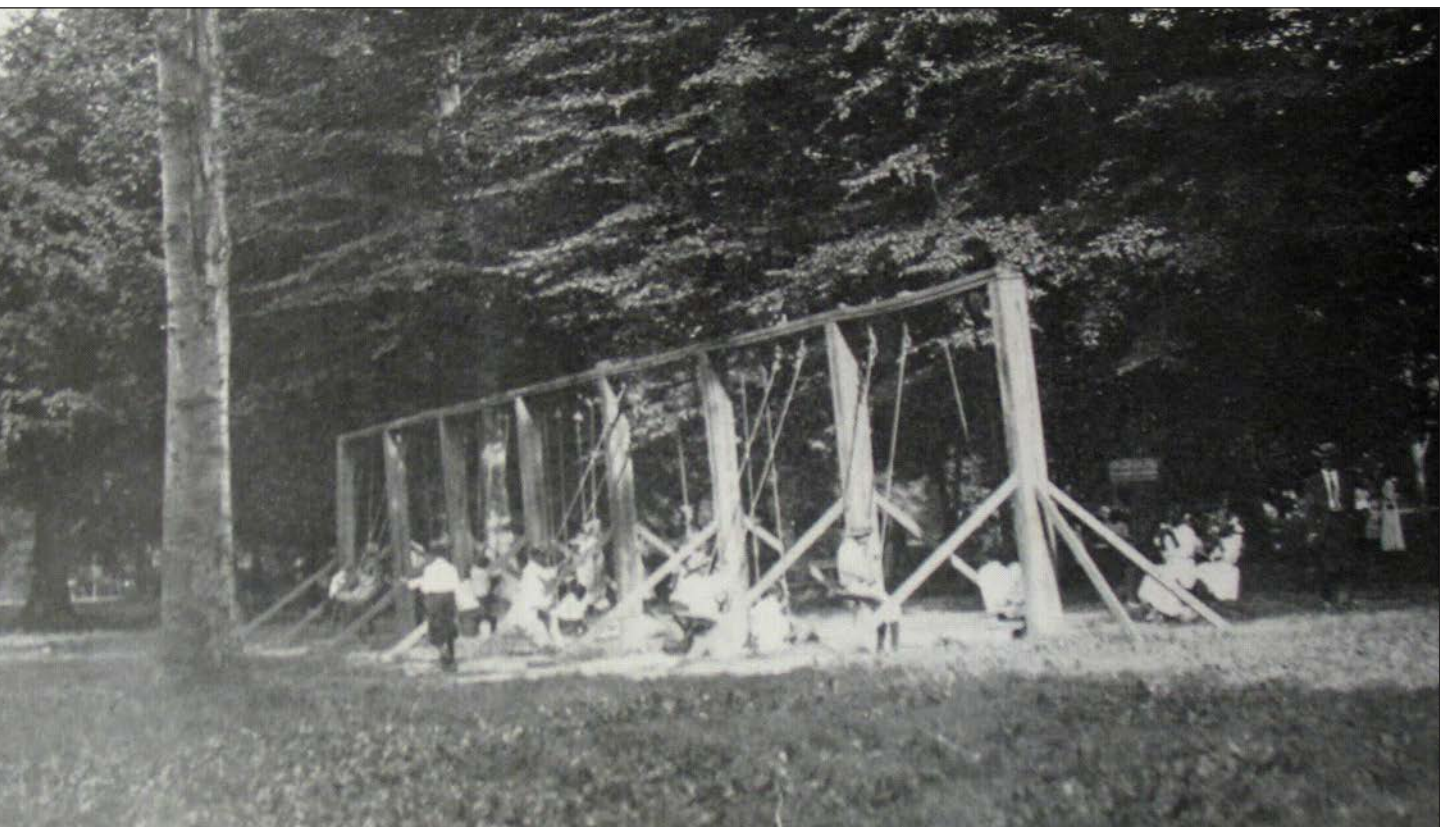
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commissioners to request additional and improved parks and playgrounds for African American children, and in August the Colored Orphan's Home donated its grounds for the establishment of a park. By 1918, the city had set aside three of Louisville's playgrounds specifically for African American youths. Strongly desirous of recreational space for their community, members of the black community banded together to create recreational space when white city leaders would or could not provide it. In June 1921, African Americans living in the vicinity of Seventeenth and Magazine streets raised two hundred dollars of their own money and opened a tennis court on the corner.⁹

African Americans' collective belief in the moral uplift provided by playgrounds to their community suppressed individual opposition to segregated spaces. The same month as the tennis court solicitations, black Louisvillians again petitioned the park commissioners requesting more playground facilities for African Americans. “Colored children who have scarcely any place to play save the dusty and dangerous streets,” the petition noted, “are . . . children most in need of wholesome recreation.” The petition also reminded the board that African Americans paid taxes that supported facilities for whites. It did not lead to more African American parks. Although city officials had not yet formally stated that whites and blacks should occupy separate parks or even separate sections of the same parks, another portion of the African American community believed they could not use or enter certain “white” areas. As columnist N. T. Medford asked in the *Leader*: “When were certain parts of any of the public parks

Segregated swings, Shawnee Park, Louisville, 1910. Louisville, Kentucky, Park Commissioners Board, *Playground Report* (1910).

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of the city set off for colored people?” “Do not invite segregation,” he cautioned readers. “Ask for playgrounds, parks, tennis courts, ball parks, etc., convenient to the people that need them . . . [and] leave the color question out.”¹⁰

An incident in late July 1921, revealed the resistance to informal segregation within the leadership of the black community. It also became a watershed event for segregationism in Louisville that accomplished far more than the creation of Louisville’s first all-black park. The controversy began when a park guard removed Dr. Noah W. Williams, minister of the city’s largest black church—Quinn Chapel—from Cherokee Park during the Williams’s family picnic. The park guard first suggested that Williams and his family move their picnic to a section of the park set aside for African Americans. Williams replied that the park lacked signs designating a black section and, after a heated argument, Williams suggested that the guard arrest him. The guard at first complied with Williams’s proposition, but declined to incarcerate the minister after he realized his prominent position within the black community. Williams took his complaint to the park board later that week, and the commissioners decided that while special provisions might be made for large picnics, African Americans could otherwise use only designated areas in Shawnee and Cherokee parks. As a result, park officials erected segregated signs in each of the parks. The pages of the *Leader* erupted in outrage. An article on July 30 noted that signs restricting the movement of black citizens in the public parks were “an insult that the race has not heretofore been forced to swallow.” The *Leader* interpreted this first step toward park segregation

Big Rock, Cherokee Park, Louisville, Kentucky, n.d.

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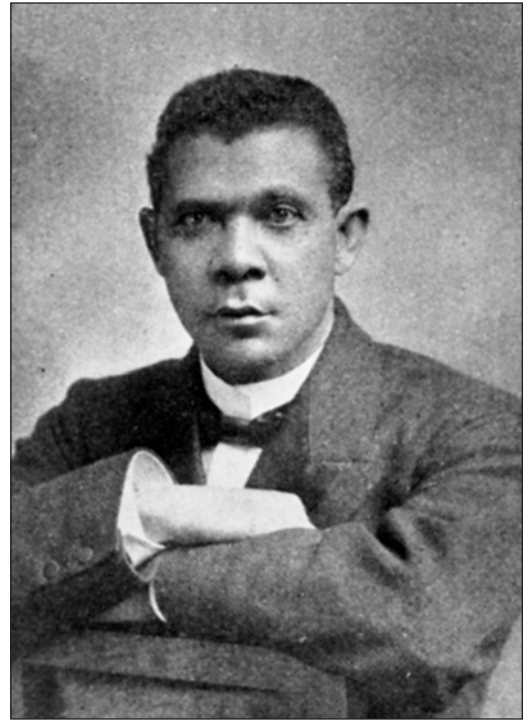


as proof that the local Republican Party had abandoned the African Americans who had helped elect it to power. The signs, wrote the commentator, were “the most flagrant significance of the unappreciation of the party of the solid vote of the Negro.” Williams agreed, and told the *Leader* that he was “through” with the local Republican Party. “Colored people of Louisville commit suicide,” he told the paper, “if they vote blindly and solidly for the local city and county Republican ticket.”¹¹

The relationship between Louisville’s African Americans and the Republican Party reflected necessity rather than choice. Local Democrats were openly hostile toward blacks, and since the Civil War had unsuccessfully tried to pass ordinances segregating street cars and housing. Louisville’s black community had rallied behind the Republican Party to help defeat these attempts, and after the local NAACP successfully challenged residential segregation before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Buchanan v. Warley* in 1917, African Americans were instrumental in a Republican sweep of local office. Once in power, the local party of Lincoln did as little for its black supporters as had the Democrats, and appeared as eager as Democrats to extend Jim Crow segregation. In 1918, the Republicans refused to support William Warley, editor of the African American *Louisville News*, in his bid for the state legislature, and two years later party leaders assisted in the victory of a white Democrat over a black Republican candidate for the school board. On two separate occasions in 1918, the local NAACP helped strike down streetcar segregation ordinances that Republican aldermen had introduced.¹²

The black community divided on how to respond to increasing segregation in their city, reflecting the changing composition of its black middle class and black leadership across the nation. In the years immediately following emancipation, northern cities enacted segregationist measures in advance of those in the southern states. Elite African Americans believed that education would offer acceptance into their segregated societies and pave the way toward a lessening of racial proscriptions. As Jim Crow segregation spread across the southern states after 1890, and after the landmark ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 that affirmed the constitutionality of segregationist laws everywhere, leaders like Booker T. Washington advised African Americans to secure all of the gains they could within the bounds of segregation. As more white businesses refused to serve the needs of black citizens, a new black middle class consisting of educated businessmen, doctors, dentists, newspaper editors, and shop owners emerged in cities across the country. Members of this new middle class became leaders in the community alongside accommodationists, and called more consistently for the abolition of segregation than their African American neighbors, who were frequently less accomplished.¹³

For some of Louisville's younger leaders, the erection of park segregation signs was only one of several last straws. Many in the black community were similarly outraged to find Jim Crow signs at the Kentucky State Fair, held in early August at the city's fairgrounds. There, African Americans met with signs designating specific hot dog stands and restrooms "For Colored People." In August 1921, a group of them defected from the Republican Party and formed the Lincoln Independent Party (LIP). In the *Leader*, William Warley cited his primary reasons for joining the new party as being the installation of "Jim Crow" signs in the parks along with the Republicans' reluctance to appoint African Americans to office "in any fair proportion." Although the LIP ran a full slate of candidates that fall, they were unsuccessful in rallying the black community or in removing the park signs. Instead, the new party only managed to increase the split between the city's younger and older black leaders.¹⁴



Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). *The Story of My Life and Work: An Autobiography of Booker T. Washington* (1901).

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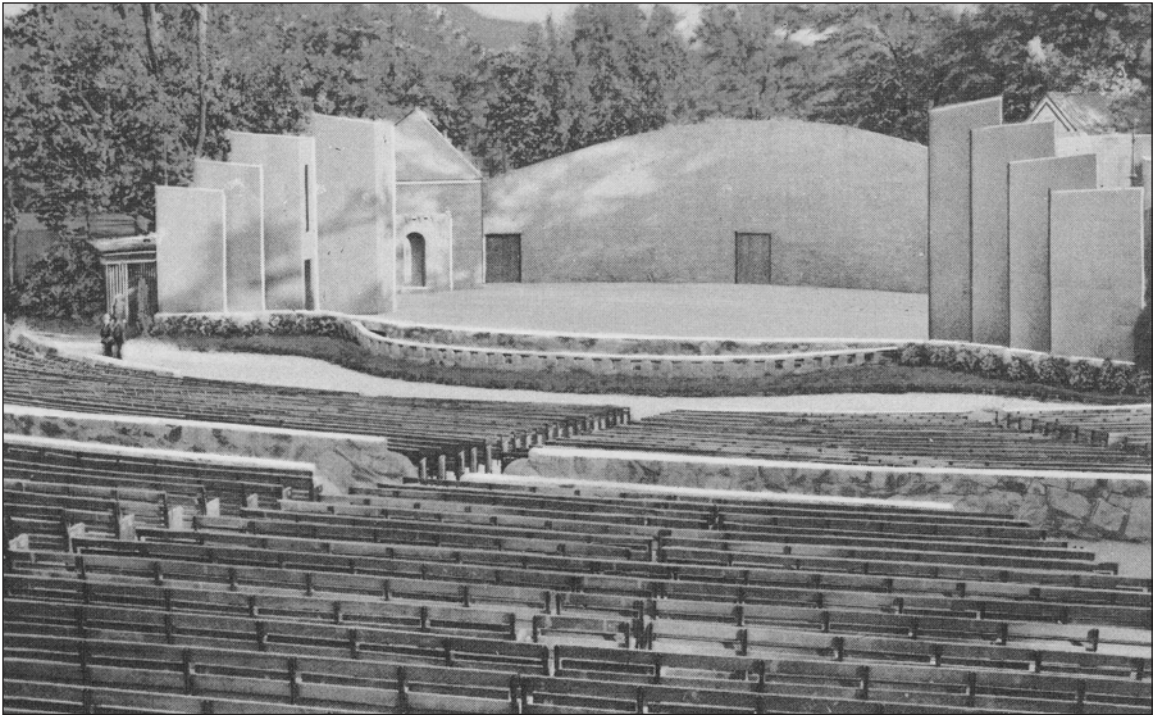
The same month, city leaders made a series of decisions they hoped would make obsolete the division of the large parks into white and black sections. On September 9, the board approved the purchase of the John H. Whalen Estate, which would become Chickasaw Park. A month later, the park commissioners announced that they would reserve the new park exclusively for the use of African Americans. The *Leader* was not impressed. "If the Republican Party expected this to settle the park problem," the paper reported, "it is mistaken." Long after it opened in spring 1922, Chickasaw was a sore spot between the black community and the city. Chickasaw was much smaller than the other three major parks in Louisville. In fact, Iroquois, the largest of the three, was nearly three times the size of Chickasaw. Most problematic, the park was inconveniently located for most of the city's black residents. As in most southern cities in the late-nineteenth century, African Americans lived throughout Louisville. With the exception of the white and wealthy South End, black and white Louisvillians often lived on the same streets, although their houses were usually separated by the street itself

or by houses intentionally left empty. Despite the Supreme Court’s 1917 decision in *Buchanan v Warley*, Louisville became increasingly residentially segregated in the first decades of the twentieth century. By 1920, the bulk of the African American population lived in the central ninth and tenth wards of the city. The 4,884 African Americans who lived in the tenth ward in 1890, for example, constituted 33 percent of the ward’s total population. In contrast, by 1920 the African American population in the ward had grown to 8,385, or 69 percent of its residents.¹⁵

Chickasaw, however, was located in the city’s far west end, home to a primarily white, working-class population. Indeed, as African Americans migrated into the western section of the city in the early-twentieth century they met fervent white resistance. White residents formed the West Louisville Civic Club in order to keep African Americans out of the West End, and white citizens who lived west of Thirtieth Street changed street names in order to identify more clearly the line between black and white. The city’s decision to place a black park in an openly hostile white neighborhood did nothing to assuage the demands of the black community. As the *Leader* noted in 1924, Chickasaw was “an unfit plot of ground far out of the way.”¹⁶

With the creation of Chickasaw Park in 1922 and the erection of signs designating separate areas for whites and blacks within the city’s largest parks, the park board had taken a large step toward fully segregated parks. Not until the arrest of Naomi Anthony and Margaret Taylor, two African American teachers at South Coleridge Taylor School, in Iroquois Park in June 1924, and subsequent outrage in both the white and black communities, would park commissioners implement official segregation in Louisville’s park system.

On June 16, Anthony and Taylor took some of their students for a picnic in Chickasaw Park. The children, however, shared the black community’s contempt for the park and complained to the teachers that they did not wish to hold their picnic in Chickasaw. (One student refused to go because someone had recently drowned there.) As a result, the teachers decided to take the children to Iroquois. Toward the end of the day, three white park guards received complaints about black children playing on the white playground and ordered the children back to the “section set aside for negroes.” Trying to avoid an incident, Anthony and Taylor gathered the children and prepared to leave the park. As they waited for a street car to arrive, however, several of the children returned to the playground, followed by the guards who claimed that the African American children pushed whites from the sliding boards. One of them, Ben Tyler, again ordered the teachers to remove the children from the playground. In response, Naomi Anthony, echoing Noah Williams’s answer three years earlier, stated that there



Amphitheatre, Iroquois Park, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 1920s.

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was no law segregating the parks. The situation escalated when Tyler restated his order and Anthony threatened to check with the guards' supervisor when she returned downtown. The black teacher's apparent insolence infuriated Tyler, and the teachers later claimed that he began choking Anthony. The white guards, of course, disputed the black teachers' testimony, but no one disputed the outcome: the guards arrested the teachers and removed the children from the park.¹⁷

The arresting officers had a hard time finding a precinct that would book the prisoners, and by the time they arrived at the downtown police station a large black crowd had gathered. Despite the protestations of Bertha Whedbee, an African American constable who supported the teachers' claim that they had been attacked without provocation, the police charged the teachers with disorderly conduct and resisting park guards. The teachers subsequently took out warrants on Tyler for unlawful assault and battery, and court dates were set. The arrest of Anthony and Taylor guaranteed that large numbers of agitated whites and blacks would attend the next meeting of the park commissioners, eager to express their outrage. At the meeting, two white mothers objected to African Americans' use of Shawnee Park and black members of the city's Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) protested the arrest of Anthony and Taylor. After hearing the complaints, commissioner Heyburn announced that "pending an investigation of the complaints made regarding the ejection of certain

colored people from the playgrounds of Iroquois Park, and the adoption of a permanent policy regarding the use of the parks by the white and colored people, and in view of the feeling aroused by this incident and in order to prevent any further friction, the supervisor is hereby instructed to exclude colored people” from a large number of the city’s parks and playgrounds, including Cherokee, Iroquois, and Shawnee. The board designated Chickasaw, Ballard, Baxter Square, the Sixteenth and St. Catherine Street Playground, and the Plymouth Settlement Playground—parks either traditionally used by or specifically created for African Americans—for the exclusive use of the city’s black community. A week later, the commissioners made permanent their temporary order.¹⁸

City authorities, however, had not yet decided the fate of the teachers, Anthony and Taylor. The charge of disorderly conduct and assault placed their jobs in jeopardy. The Louisville Board of Education immediately summoned them to a hearing to explain why they “should not be fired for inciting a riot.” A few days later, the teachers’ criminal trial drew a large crowd to the downtown courthouse. George W. Schardein, president of the Board of Park Commissioners, testified that a policy of segregation existed and had been enforced in the parks for years, and that it was “about time someone got behind the situation, because the Board has been overrun with complaints of negroes occupying white picnic grounds in the parks.” (No mention of such complaints appear in the minutes of the Board’s regular meetings prior to June 17.) Lawyers from the NAACP represented Taylor and Anthony, who along with one of their students testified that they had been attacked by the park guards. In contrast, the prosecution

Baxter Square playground, 1910. Louisville, Kentucky, Park Commissioners Board, *Playground Report* (1910).
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called seven white witnesses who claimed that the black children had pushed their youths down and argued that it “wasn’t right” for whites and blacks to be playing together in the first place. Prosecution witnesses described the teachers as having “fought like tigers.” The court never called the park guards involved in the altercation to testify in person. Instead, John Gess, the supervisor of parks, read a statement prepared by Ben Tyler—whose assault and battery charges had already been thrown out of court—in which Tyler claimed that the teachers had attacked him. In the end, the court fined Anthony ten dollars for striking an officer but dropped the disorderly conduct charge against Margaret Taylor. A week later, the board of education released its decision on the teachers. Its members voted to retain both teachers, noting in part that the park incident would never have occurred had the city segregated its parks as it had its schools. However, the board also warned that any teacher who in the future taught “against law and order” would lose his or her job.¹⁹

In the weeks following the decision, the African American community was vocal, if not always unified, in opposition to the segregation ordinance. African American leaders noted above all the moral injustice of denying children access to parks and playgrounds. In a speech to the Board of Park Commissioners, James Bond, director of the local CIC and a moderate black leader, argued that children had sought only “a day’s outing in the open, away from the crowded alleys, where most of them must play if they play at all.” An impassioned *Louisville Leader* called the Iroquois incident and the ordinance that it sparked “one of the most flagrant acts of injustice on the part of the officials of the city.” Echoing the fervor that had surrounded the formation of the LIP three years earlier, the *Leader* reminded its readers that the Republican Party controlled the city largely because of African American ballots. Over thirty thousand African Americans had voted for Mayor Hustin Quin, the *Leader* argued, and they had made for the success of the local Republican ticket. However, when a committee representing black voters and headed by Dr. Charles H. Parrish protested to Mayor Quin, he responded blandly that the black community had effectively accepted segregation when they campaigned for new parks in their neighborhoods.²⁰

Even in their opposition to the order, the city’s black moderates adopted a dual strategy with which to attack segregation, employing both pragmatic and ideological positions. In the most significant public statement, nineteen black leaders addressed a letter to the editor of the *Courier-Journal*, the city’s leading newspaper. Their list of grievances was long. They described the area set aside for blacks in Iroquois as nothing more than an open field; the Baxter Square and Ballard playgrounds, they added, were “small and able to accommodate only a few children at a time.” Chickasaw, they argued, was poorly equipped and located

too far from the city’s African American locus of population in the central districts. More broadly, they attacked the reality of “separate, but not equal” implicit in white segregationist ideology. Beyond being largely impossible to achieve, absolute segregation was impractical. Racial antagonisms that existed in the city resulted from too little rather than too much contact between the races. Printed in a newspaper read by both blacks and whites, the letter argued that parks, like streets and businesses, were places of social mixing where interaction between the races was inevitable. The signers ended their strong letter with the deferential claim that “we have and shall continue to urge our people to respect the laws of the land even when these laws are known to be unjust and greatly handicap the progress of our group.”²¹

Like the city’s moderate black leaders, local civil rights organizations challenged the segregation order conservatively. Overall, Louisville’s black leaders and political organizations counseled moderation. In a meeting with Mayor Quin, Dr. Ellis Whedbee, spokesman for the African American delegation, evinced his belief that the best way to advance the station of African Americans was to work within the boundaries that the white establishment set for the black community. Whedbee visited Taylor and Anthony during

the aftermath of their arrest and advised them not to make waves. It was best for everyone involved, he told the teachers, if they kept their jobs. Louisville’s NAACP, which during the preceding decade had earned a reputation as one of the most active and successful branches of the national organization, was paralyzed by political in-fighting and poor organization. Immediately following Taylor and Anthony’s arrest, the NAACP organized a meeting in Quinn Chapel to protest the park commissioners’ decision to enact the ordinance and to raise money—\$391 in all—to help pay for the teachers’ legal counsel.



Huston Quin (1876-1938), mayor of Louisville, 1921-1925.
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Eventually, NAACP executive council member William Warley filed a legal suit against the segregation order. Warley's case reached the Kentucky Supreme Court in 1930, but by that point Warley had lost the support of the rest of the association's leadership and was unable to collect enough money to take the case further. The most active opposition to the segregation order came from Dr. James Bond's CIC, an interracial group comprised of moderate blacks and whites. Rather than denounce segregation broadly, CIC pushed for more funding for African American parks and playgrounds and within a year the group praised the city for its efforts to improve them.²²

Over the next two decades, various individuals and organizations from the African American community asked the city either to create more black parks or desegregate the parks completely. In April 1928, a man identified by the park commissioners as the "cashier of the Colored First Standard Bank" appeared before the board requesting that it rescind the segregation ordinance. Then, in 1934, five African Americans representing the Recreation Advisory Council advised the board that four additional tennis courts were needed in Chickasaw, and requested a municipal golf course for blacks. From 1935-1941, individual African American citizens or groups petitioned the board at least five times for additional or improved recreational facilities. Normally, these requests drew little response from the board, taking the request "under advisement." In April 1939, a group of African American citizens representing the NAACP appeared before the board to request access to the parks. Dr. H. O. Wilson, a professor of chemistry at the city's African American Municipal College, told the *Courier-Journal* that it was "embarrassing when entertaining out-of-town visitors to have to tell them that the city's most beautiful parks were restricted to white citizens." They complained that Chickasaw was not accessible to many in the black community, and that its facilities were limited. They also requested access to or creation of African American golf courses, a topic that would remain contentious through the 1940s.²³

However reluctant city leaders were to respond directly to requests from the black community, in the months and years following the segregation ordinance the park commissioners did make serious if uneven attempts to improve the number and quality of its African American parks. Black leaders, for example, had complained in their July 1924 letter to the *Courier-Journal* that the city provided no swimming pool for African Americans. In response, the board formed a committee in late July to investigate and recommend sites for additional African American playgrounds, focusing particularly on the need for a swimming pool. In January 1925, the city hired a park designer to prepare plans for a black-only facility. The pool, which the board described as a "beautiful playground," opened



The golf course at Cherokee Park, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 1920s.

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at the corner of Magazine and Seventh Streets the following year. (Its first day was marred by a drowning.) Maintenance and supervision of the black playgrounds remained a high priority for the board, and the commissioners hired instructors for the newly segregated playgrounds to teach children popular outdoor games. African American instructors likely received unequal pay. A 1925 list of instructors' pay rates indicates that "colored" teachers received no reimbursement; in contrast, a 1926 list states that they each received the minimum rate—seventy dollars per year—while the city paid most white instructors more than the base salary. The city continued to expand its playgrounds and parks through the end of the decade. In April 1928, the city condemned the land adjacent to the black-only swimming pool at Seventeenth and Magazine in order to expand the playground surrounding it, and commissioners proposed a new African American playground at Ash Bottom Road and Phillips Lane. The city spent a significant amount of money to develop African American parks over the next few years, including, in 1928, appropriating sixty-five thousand of a nearly four hundred thousand dollar park budget for "negro park and playground improvement." This included thirty-three thousand dollars spent on Chickasaw, which received significantly more than any other park, white or black, in the city. The same year the city opened Shawnee Park, its second black-only park.²⁴



Opening day at the segregated Shelby Pool, Louisville, 1918. Louisville, Kentucky, Board of Park Commissioners, *Year Book for the Fiscal Year Ending August 31st, 1918* (1918).

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Louisville's white leaders officially segregated the city's parks when it became clear that African Americans, demanding green spaces within the city, were not unified in their opposition to "Jim Crow" signs or sporadic enforcement of unofficial segregation. For city officials the desire for social harmony following the black community's outrage after the ejection of Noah Williams from Cherokee Park and black unrest after the arrest of Margaret Taylor and Naomi Anthony justified park segregation. When African American community leaders rekindled the fight to desegregate the parks immediately following World War II, white leaders again argued that the parks should remain segregated to avoid the racial violence that they thought would inevitably grow out of integration. Unlike in the 1920s, black community leadership in Louisville was by then more unified and, as important, had white allies. Students, labor unions, and Progressive Party members also fought for the desegregation of the parks. Notably, postwar segregation opponents did not reprise the pastoral rhetoric that informed arguments against park segregation in 1924, suggesting that however much African Americans had defined their views about nature for themselves, leaders recognized that the issue had limited political clout. By confining the expression of the black community's environmentalism to obviously unequal facilities, the segregation of public parks contributed to the framing of access to nature as a white-only concern.²⁵

“WHAT IS THE USE OF PARKS?”

- 1 *The First Report of the Louisville Park and Outdoor Art Association* (Louisville: n.p., 1897), 12, 19-20, Louisville Free Public Library, Louisville, Ky. (hereafter LFPL).
- 2 *Report of the Louisville Park and Outdoor Art Association*, 12, 19-20, LFPL; Richard Kraus, *Recreation and Leisure in Modern Society* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crafts, 1971), 181; James L. Machor, *Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 122; Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- 3 For background on the development of Louisville's parks, see Craig Marshall Heuser, "Remarkable Advances': The Development of the Louisville Park System to 1916," (M.A. thesis, University of Louisville, 1999).
- 4 Important works on the progressive reform movement include Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press); and Daniel Eli Burnstein, *Next to Godliness: Confronting Dirt and Despair in Progressive Era New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006)
- 5 Historians have placed the origins of American environmentalism variously. On the influence of European concepts of nature on American thought, see Leo Marx, *The Machine In The Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). On early-nineteenth century Euro-American science and exploration, see Richard W. Judd, "A 'Wonderful Order and Balance': Natural History and the Beginnings of Forest Conservation in America," *Environmental History* 11 (Jan. 2006), 8-36; and Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006). On mid-nineteenth century transcendentalism, see Robert L. Dorman, *A Word For Nature: Four Pioneering Environmental Activists, 1845-1913* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998). On late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century conservationists, see Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001). One common understanding of the development of modern environmentalism follows the argument that it was the result of middle-class workers' desire to protect the natural world where they spent much of their leisure time; see Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Schwab began complicating this sort of top or middle-down argument in *Deeper Shades of Green: The Rise of Blue-Collar and Minority Environmentalism in America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994). Chad Montrie has made this argument more forcefully in his studies of popular opposition to surface coal mining and the relationship between changes in work and evolving understandings of nature; see *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), and *Making a Living: Work and the Environment in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Studies on the environmental philosophy behind the urban parks movement as well as criticisms of it have both seemed to focus exclusively on white Americans; see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1967); William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, William Cronon, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, 1995), esp. 69-90. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), have brought attention to the historical influence of people of color in American environmentalism.
- 6 Thomas E. Will quoted in Kraus, *Recreation and Leisure*, 184; Wilberforce quoted in Fisher, "Outdoor Recreation," 69. The information on urbanization and number of cities with parks is taken from Kraus, *Recreation and Leisure*, 164, 184, 187.
- 7 L. H. Weir, *Report upon the Properties, Development of Properties, Social Uses of Properties of the Louisville Park and Recreation System and Upon the Organization and Management of the Louisville Park Department* (Louisville: n.p., 1916); City of Louisville, *Annual Report of the Supervisor of Recreation* (Louisville: n.p., 1925); Dorothea Nelson, *Annual Report of Louisville, Ky., Department of Welfare, Division of Recreation* (Louisville: n.p., 1930-31), 2; *Louisville Leader*, May 21, 1921.
- 8 Heuser, "Remarkable Advances," 147; Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners, Nov. 7, 1916, Board of Park Commissioner Papers (hereafter BPC), The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Ky. (hereafter FHS); Weir, "Report upon the Properties."
- 9 Board of Park Commissioners, *1910 Playground Report* (Louisville: n.p., 1910) "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," Apr. 4, Aug. 1, 1916, June 21, 1921, BPC, FHS; Board of Park Commissioners, *Yearbook for the Fiscal Year Ending August 31st, 1918* (Louisville: n.p., 1918), 34, LFPL.
- 10 *Louisville Leader*, June 25, 1921. In an argument that

- foreshadowed the fight to desegregate the parks in the 1940s and 1950s, the petitioners argued that the parks should be open to all who paid to support them, evidence of inclusivist arguments that emanated from the community.
- 11 George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 277; *Louisville Leader*, July 23, 30, 1921; "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," Sept. 9, 1921, BPC, FHS; [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 19, 1922; *Louisville Times*, Feb. 21, 1922.
 - 12 For background on the relationship between black residents and the Republican Party in Louisville, see George Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921," *The Journal of Negro History* 68 (Winter 1983), 8-23.
 - 13 On old and new characterizations of the black middle class, see Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: the Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990); Bart Landry, *The New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Wright, *Life Behind the Veil*.
 - 14 In early Sept., the signs were temporarily taken down by city officials when the National Medical Association held its annual conference in Louisville and its members complained to the city about the signs. The city removed the signs for the duration of the conference, but once the visiting doctors had left town, the park officials put the signs back in place; Wright, "Black Political Insurgency," 8, 10; *Louisville Leader*, Sept. 3, 10, 1921.
 - 15 "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," Sept. 9, 1921, BPC, FHS; *Louisville Leader*, Oct 1, 1921; Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 105-07, 111, 197-98.
 - 16 Ibid., 236-37; *Louisville Leader*, June 21, 1924.
 - 17 *Louisville Times*, June 14, 17, 24, 1924; *Louisville Leader*, June 21, 1924; [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, June 14, 1924.
 - 18 Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 274-75; *Louisville Times*, June 14, 1924; "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," June 17, 1924, BPC, FHS.
 - 19 [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, June 22, 25, 1924; *Louisville Leader*, June 22, 24, 28, July 5, 1924; *Louisville Times*, June 17, 24, 1924; "Minutes of the Louisville Board of Education," July 1, 1924, Jefferson County Board of Education Archives, Louisville Ky.
 - 20 *Louisville Leader*, June 21, 1924; Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 275.
 - 21 [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, July 4, 1924.
 - 22 Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 244, 275-79; I. Willis Cole to Robert S. Abbott, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1929, Papers of the NAACP: Series A, microfilm reel 12, Frame 185.
 - 23 "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," Apr. 17, 1928, June 20, 1933, Apr. 17, 1934, Oct. 15, 1935, May 24, 1938, June 6, 1939, July 3, 1939, May 21, 1940, Apr. 4, 1941, BPC, FHS; [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, Apr. 5, 1939.
 - 24 "Minutes of the Board of Park Commissioners," July 21, 1924, Jan. 2, Feb. 17, 1925, Apr. 2, 24, 1928, BPC, FHS; Board of Park Commissioners, *Annual Report, 1925* (Louisville: n.p., 1925) 4, 30, LFPL.
 - 25 Park desegregation was one of the first and longest desegregation efforts of Louisville's postwar civil rights movement. Even after eight years of NAACP court challenges and public demonstrations, a 1955 U.S. Supreme Court decision rather than any local effort ruled segregation of recreation facilities unconstitutional and opened Louisville's parks. For more on park desegregation in Louisville, see Jonathon Free, "A Gate in the Wall: The Struggle to Desegregate Louisville's Parks, 1947-1955," unpublished paper, Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, University of Louisville.