

How Forest Park Came to Be: A Story of Vision, Persistence and Civic Leadership

Despite logging, fires, real estate speculation, and the whims of nature, Forest Park was a good idea that just wouldn't go away.

By Elizabeth Patte

It is true that some people look upon such woods merely as a troublesome encumbrance standing in the way of more profitable use of the land, but future generations will not feel so and will bless the men who were wise enough to get such woods preserved.

– John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
Report of the Park Board, Portland, Oregon 1903

Like many other cities across the United States, Portland was established in a place of extraordinary natural beauty. The list of scenic attributes surrounding the town, laid out in 1845, was an impressive one. The snowy peaks of the Cascades could be clearly seen to the north, east and south; the spectacular Columbia Gorge stretched to the east; two vigorous rivers teeming with salmon converged near downtown, and the ridgelines of hills to the northwest and west, covered in forest and home to an array of wildlife, rose just above the city.

But today, unlike most other cities sited in equally beautiful places – cities that stood by as their surrounding forests disappeared – Portland enjoys the continued existence of a large, diverse native forest within its city limits.

In Portland, one can literally step from gray sidewalks and car-lined streets into a serene forest of green and gold and brown – a native forest, home to old and second growth firs and cedars, pileated woodpeckers and band-tailed pigeons, red columbine and wild ginger, elk, bats and even the occasional bear. To have a native forest so near downtown and densely populated neighborhoods is astounding; it took great vision, beginning more than one hundred years ago, to set the framework for protecting such a place.

Pre-Park Days

Some of the first documented words about the forested hillsides west of the future Portland site were written in 1806, when William Clark, of Lewis and Clark fame, took a side trip down the Willamette River. He noted the steep terrain, large trees and abundant wildlife, and wrote of Douglas fir, western red cedar, western hemlock, big leaf maple, red alder, and most of the numerous other plant and animal species we find in Forest Park today.

After the establishment of the Hudson Bay Company on the Columbia River in 1824, Willamette River travel became more common. Riverside settlements soon appeared, including Linnton in 1843, Springville that same year, and Portland in 1845. The plains west of Tualatin Mountain, as the ridge that separates the Tualatin Valley from the Willamette River was called, had been settled even earlier. Trails and roadways connecting these plains to the river would later be known as Germantown, Springville, Cornell, Newberry and Canyon Roads. Native Americans, of course, had inhabited these lands, but were forced out by the United States government, which then granted the lands to white settlers under a donation land claims program in the early and mid 1850s.

*“A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it
than by the woods and swamps that surround it.”*

– Henry David Thoreau

Early Visionaries

As other cities were virtually cleared of their native forests, Portland was inhabited by, and visited by, a handful of visionary naturalists and planners who understood the importance of such forests beyond that of fuel and building material. One of these residents was both a righteous man and a believer in preserving natural areas. He was Reverend Thomas Lamb Eliot, a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister, who arrived in Portland in 1867 and set about to make his city a more enlightened place than other cities with which he was familiar. A key part of his vision included establishing a city park system, an idea he pushed for many years. In 1899, he began to realize this vision when he led the creation of the Portland Municipal Park Commission. The Commission hired the Olmsted Brothers, the famous Massachusetts landscape firm, to make a park planning study, and in 1903, John C. Olmsted visited Portland to conduct research for a citywide plan.

Reverend Eliot's dream of a park system received powerful support when the Park Commission published its *Report of the Park Board*, based on recommendations of the Olmsted brothers. Of the forested ridge and hillsides that would eventually be known as Forest Park, the Olmsteds said, "no use to which the land could be put would begin to be as sensible or as profitable to the city as that of making it a public park or reservation...."

Four years later, a \$1 Million bond measure was passed to fund the Olmsted plan. But despite growing support for protecting the forested west hills, most of the bond measure money was spent on upgrading existing parks, leaving little for land acquisition.

While the "forest park" plan was dormant for the time being, this setback did not stop advocates from continuing to call for preservation of the Tualatin Mountain forest. Among the most influential were Portlander Emanuel Mische, who later headed the Bureau of Park and Recreation, and Chicago City Planner E.H. Bennett, who formulated the Greater Portland Plan in 1912. In that report, Bennett advocated a forested park in the northwest hills, saying, "great woodland areas are the great life-giving elements of the city."

Park Prospects Fade

Despite the momentum created by the passage of the 1907 bond measure, and the advocacy of prominent and respected planners, all did not go smoothly in those early days of planning for a "forest park." A second attempt at funding park land acquisition, a \$2 million bond issue, was defeated by the voters in 1913.

With the bond measure defeat, prospects for the creation of the park began to fade. In 1914, to add insult to injury for those who had so strongly advocated for forest preservation, the City of Portland set up a wood-cutting operation on the hillsides of the area that is now Forest Park to provide work for the unemployed and to supply fuel wood to the poor.

That same year, expectations of a land boom in the Portland area began to grow, with building lots platted throughout the proposed park. One particularly avid real estate developer was Richard Shepherd, a member of the Linnton Town Council. Shepherd promoted a scenic drive running from the end of N.W. Thurman Street to N.W. Germantown Road, and surveyor C.U. Nelson was hired to engineer it. Hillside Drive, as it was known then (today's Leif Erikson Drive), cost somewhere around \$150,000 to construct -- twice as much as engineers had estimated. To pay for the road, the thousands of lots platted along it were assessed.

The assessments outraged many property owners, who deemed them too high for a road that had cost too much, and that did not adequately benefit their properties. Only about one third of the assessments was ever paid. Then, the landslides of 1915-16 closed the road to most travel. Over the next few years, the City of Portland acquired almost 1,400 acres by forfeiture, primarily due to assessment liens. The Hillside Drive real estate disaster was complete.

Logging, Fires, Drilling

Obstacles to preservation of the forests on Tualatin Mountain, however, continued to arise. In 1937, the city again set up a logging camp for the needy, this one west of Leif Erikson between Springville and Saltzman Roads.

Fires, often caused by careless slash burning, swept the hillsides as well. Of particular note were fires in 1940 and 1951, each devastating more than 1,000 acres of forest in and surrounding what would become Forest Park.

One of the last threats to the creation of the park was the 1945 rumor of oil beneath the proposed park's slopes. Oil leases were granted on 5,000 acres of city and county land in 1945. Soon, three wells had been drilled west of Portland. One, drilled by the Richfield Oil Company just east of Skyline Blvd, produced no oil. It and the other wells were abandoned, with all city and county oil leases terminated in 1946.

*The wooded hillsides west of the City are as important to
Portland as the Palisades of the Hudson are to the city of
New York.*

– Robert Moses, 1943

Despite these roadblocks, support for the park continued to increase. Nationally known city planner Robert Moses visited Portland in 1943 and called for public ownership and protection of the city's western wooded slopes. Portland citizens began to take a more active role advocating for the park. One such citizen was Fred Cleator, a regional forester with the U.S. Forest Service, who led groups, including the Mazamas, the Trail's Club and the Boy Scouts, on outings to replant trees on the burned and logged slopes. During this period, creation of the park gained support of C. Paul Keyser, superintendent of the Bureau of Parks, as well as City Commissioner Kenneth Cooper.

City Club Steps Up

In 1944, the City Club of Portland responded to the increasing calls for the forest park. The Club, spurred by a request from member Garnett "Ding" Cannon, appointed a committee of five to study the physical and economic feasibility of such a project. On this committee were Cannon, of Standard Insurance Co., as chairman, John D. Carter, manager with IBM, Dr. David Charlton, of Charlton Laboratories, Allan A. Smith, attorney with Laing, Gray & Smith, and Sinclair Wilson, forest economist with the U.S. Forest Service.

The report of the committee of five, released in 1945 and printed in the August 31 issue of the City Club Bulletin, recommended the creation of a 6,000-acre municipal forest park. As stated in the report, "the committee is convinced that the area should be preserved for public forest-park use.... Such development should be of a primitive nature rather than a park in the ordinary sense."

Under its bylaws, the City Club could not take action on its own recommendations. Thus, the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs, with Ding Cannon as president, called a public meeting of citizens to discuss formulating an action plan for creation of the park. During this meeting, Thornton Munger, recently retired forest researcher with the U.S. Forest Service, was chosen to organize a permanent committee of citizens that would undertake action. This group would later be known as the Committee of Fifty. *

In 1947, after garnering strong public support, the Committee petitioned City Council to dedicate all public lands in the area for park land, to ask Multnomah County to convey its land holdings to the city, and to adopt a policy of acquiring private land for the park. In July, Council unanimously adopted the resolution.

Multnomah County transferred 1,100 acres of land to the Portland Park Bureau without cost in 1948, and the city soon followed with the transfer of 1,400 acres from the Assessment Collection Division to the Park Bureau.

With the addition of other tax-delinquent properties and lands given to the city, the park became a 4,200-acre physical place and legal entity with its dedication as "Forest Park" on September 25, 1948.

Modern Forest Park

Since that dedication, Forest Park has continued to grow in acreage, thanks to gifts of private land, and land acquisition efforts by Friends of Forest Park, the City of Portland and Metro. Today, Forest Park covers more than 5,000 acres. Although development at its edges continues to threaten the native diversity and health of the forest, pockets of undisturbed habitat remain to this day.

Managed by Portland Department of Parks and Recreation Natural Resources Program, with help from Friends of Forest Park and many, many volunteers, Forest Park has undergone significant trail-building projects. The Wildwood Trail now extends 30 miles. Many other trails cross the park, as do firelanes, which were developed following the 1951 fire. The fire burned more than 1,000 acres many of which were reforested. Habitat restoration is ongoing through the Forest Park Ivy Removal Project. The project works to protect native wildlife by removing invasive species, most of them introduced by way of developed properties on the park's borders. Guiding the city in these projects are the "Forest Park Natural Resources Management Plan," and the "Balch Creek Watershed Protection Plan."

While Forest Park has survived fires and logging, mudslides and windstorms, perhaps its biggest threat today is development in its buffer areas and watersheds, and the assault of non-native species from these adjacent lands and from the international cargo vessels received by the Port of Portland. One recent controversy facing Forest Park caretakers was the discovery of an Asian gypsy moth, believed to have arrived by ship. After much debate on the real risks of an outbreak of the moth, and the potential damage that moth control might do to the park's native wildlife, the decision was made to aerielly spray one square mile of parkland with the biological insecticide B.t.k.

Fortunately for the most part, Forest Park remains wooded and wild, a resource for the plants and animals that live there – and for the humans who visit there. As John Muir wrote, "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike." Forest Park is just such a place.

* The Committee of Fifty later became the Forest Park Association. In 1989 it gained 501(c)(3) non-profit status and became the membership organization Friends of Forest Park.

** Talk of naming the "forest park" went on for years. In 1957, the Committee of Fifty's executive committee canvassed for name suggestions, and sifted through 48 submissions before narrowing the field to "Portland," "Skyline," "Tualatin," and "Tualatin Mountain." After a vote by the Committee of Fifty, none of the four received overwhelming preference, no action was taken, and so "Forest Park" it remains.

To read further, please call the Friends of Forest Park to purchase your copies of the following publications, from which most of the information found here was obtained.

* *History of Portland's Forest-Park*, by Thornton T. Munger and C. Paul Keyser -- This 1960 history, re-published and annotated in 1998, contains detailed history of pre-park days, as well as updated park information, maps, anecdotes and cultural history.

* *One City's Wilderness*, by Marcy Cottrell Houle -- The definitive guide to Forest Park, with trail map, detailed lists of flora and fauna, trail descriptions, history and geology.