

Veterans Memorial Park and Parkway
(Veterans Memorial Park)
Muskegon
Muskegon Vicinity
Michigan

HAER No. MI-115

HAER
MI-115
61-MUSK,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Great Lakes Systems Office
1709 Jackson Street
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**HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK AND PARKWAY
(VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK)**

HAER No MI-115

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: The Veterans Memorial Park is situated between the northbound M-120 bridge (MI. 115-A) and the southbound M-120 bridge (MI. 115-B). The bridges span the Muskegon River (Cedar Creek). The park area north of Cedar Creek is located in North Muskegon, Muskegon County, Michigan. The park area south of Cedar creek is located in Muskegon, Muskegon County, Michigan.

USGS Quad: Twin Lake, Michigan (Revised 1989)

UTM:

Zone: 16	North End	South End
Easting: 561000		561900
Northing: 4790210		4789420

Date of Construction: 1932

Present Owner: That portion of the Memorial Park north of Cedar Creek is owned by the City of North Muskegon. The area south of Cedar Creek is owned by the City of Muskegon.

Present Use: Veterans Memorial Park

Significance: The Veterans Memorial Park and Parkway are significant as early examples of landscape planning and design which gained popularity in the period between the world wars.

Historian: Irene Jackson Henry and William Henry, Henry & Henry Preservation and Architectural Consultants, July 1996.

II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 1925, Muskegon Chamber of Commerce Parks Committee Chairman, Lewis Lunsford, proposed establishing a war memorial causeway along the backwaters of Muskegon Lake.

The area proposed for the bridges and park is located along the backwaters of Muskegon Lake on Cedar Creek. The area was originally associated with Muskegon's early lumber industry as a log storage and processing area. After the decline of the lumber industry in the late 19th century, the land fell into disuse. It soon became a dumping ground and was a rubble and debris covered marsh. So unattractive was the area proposed for Lunsford's park that some state highway officials referred to the project as Muskegon's "Million Dollar Muskrat Farm." [1]

Lunsford's plan called for the construction of a modern twin-span causeway to replace an older, single lane bridge linking Muskegon and North Muskegon, spanning Cedar Creek, a branch of the Muskegon River (See MI-115-A and MI-115-B). The causeway would be incorporated within a landscape memorial park.

The initial concept for the park was as a memorial constructed and dedicated to the citizens of Muskegon and Muskegon County who gave their lives in defense of freedom during the First World War. Today this memorial park rests on a fifty-five acre tract set between the two bridges that help delineate the park. The park is well landscaped, with

two small lagoons. Over the years the park's concept has been expanded to honor not only First World War dead but all those that served in the military, during peacetime as well as wartime. Recent developments in the park have included the planting of new memorial trees, and new shrub and perennial plantings. Currently, a memorial pathway is being constructed through the park. Funding for the pathway is being contributed by individuals and families of servicemen who served the country in both peace and war.

III. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Soon after the signing of the Armistice ending the First World War the Muskegon War Chest Association decided that Muskegon's Merritt Lamb American Legion post would assume responsibility for developing a fitting memorial to the area's war dead. The War Chest Association, a temporary organization comprised of civic and business leaders, was organized shortly after the United States entered the First World War in April, 1917. The group's goal was to raise funds and boost morale for the war effort. [2] First proposed by businessman W. E. Jeanott, the association was directed by an elected board of trustees. At the close of the war, the trustees voted that any funds that remained be used for the establishment of a permanent war memorial. They determined that the American Legion post should recommend the "type and character" of the memorial, and that the War Chest Fund trustees would have final approval of the memorial's design before releasing the funds. [3] By 1925, Lewis Lunford, Parks Committee Chairman, had proposed the idea of a memorial park and causeway.

This local decision to honor the war dead was a common thread of civic thought during the post-war years. Many towns and cities built memorials. A number of American professional architectural and landscape architectural journals published articles discussing topics concerning parks as war memorials. In May 1919, the noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. presented a paper to the American Federation of Arts in New York City on "Parks as War Memorials."

"There is a tendency on the part of people here and there in many parts of the county to suggest that the principal war memorial of their locality shall take the form of a park of some kind, and a tendency on the part of many communities to consider the suggestion not unfavorably. On the other hand there is a very sensible tendency in most of the communities to scrutinize the suggestion carefully before adapting it, because it is looked upon as unfamiliar and more or less experimental..."[4]

In an article written in 1920 for Landscape Architecture magazine landscape architect Fletcher Steele offered the following insight regarding the use of public parks as memorials:

"Nothing is more conducive to reflection than a peaceful outlook from untroubled surroundings." He continues: "Glimpses out toward broad valleys and rolling landscapes, or across a pretty stream or meadow, should be the types of outlook preserved...a bridge can be made one of the handsomest of all man's creations and express in its very structural lines, repose, strength and permanence." [5]

Lewis Lunford may have been acquainted with this or popular literature on memorial planning when he first proposed his ideas for a memorial park and causeway in 1925. However, it would not be until 1932 that work on the memorial park would begin in earnest. This was due in large part to the time needed to obtain approval from state and federal authorities for the bridge construction, and the bridges' construction period. Willard B. Gebhart, noted Washington D.C landscape architect, was engaged in that year to develop the preliminary designs. [6]

Willard Gebhart was the son of a Hart, Michigan, fruit farmer, Benton Gebhart. The town of Hart is located within 40 miles of Muskegon, and Gebhart would have been considered a local man. Gebhart was educated at Cornell University, graduating from the School of Architecture and Engineering in 1924. After graduation he settled in Washington D.C. and began his career as a landscape architect. Among his notable works were the British Embassy and the Folger Library. [7] He would later join the Michigan State Highway Department (MSHD).

In early July 1932, Gebhart and MSHD forester Phelps Vogelsang visited Muskegon and prepared preliminary plans, which included the establishment of lagoons, gardens and a lighted fountain, with encircling limestone walls to be erected at the south entrance to the park as a memorial. [8]

Also in July of 1932, the trustees of the Muskegon War Chest Fund appropriated \$26,000.00 for the project. These funds were meant to be used exclusively for the memorial at the south entrance of the park, as the north section of the park fell outside the corporate boundaries of Muskegon.

On July 13, 1932, Tom J.G. Bolt, Muskegon's veteran highway commissioner, announced, "The whole park is a memorial to the boys who served in the World War. The memorial structure at the south end of the park is merely the veteran's own part of this plan." [9] The area situated between the two causeways was deeded to Muskegon County by the State of Michigan.

Additional support was also forthcoming from the Muskegon Welfare Department which donated welfare labor. By early July 1932, a crew of fifty Muskegon welfare workers under the direction of Levi H. Neilsen, county engineer, began the task of clearing the marsh area. According to the Muskegon Chronicle, July 9, 1932:

"The project calls for 88.035 yards of cut and 87.276 yards of fill. The first step will be to remove the surface soil and vegetation placing it in compost heaps to be used later for top dressing and fertilization. This work must be done by manual labor as the deposit is uneven and filled with old logs and other debris that can be removed only by hand. Actual dredging of the lagoons will be done by machinery but will be moved by hand." [10]

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As work progressed on removing the debris from the marsh, Gebhart was busy finalizing the memorial design. On July 25, 1932 the final design was submitted to the American Legion which gave it unanimous approval. The centerpiece of Gebhart's design was to be a 75 foot diameter circular pool with a center column of water rising 30 feet in the area with smaller columns of water around the perimeter. [11] The fountain was to be illuminated with changing colored lights. Beyond the fountain were to be two semi-circular limestone walls flanked with two fifteen foot columns on which were to be hung plaques with the names of Muskegon's war dead. The limestone wall was to be broken in the center to allow approaching motorists an unobstructed view through the wall across the lagoons to the rest of the park to the north. The area was to be landscaped with grassy lawn, and native shrubbery.

The next two years would transform the former debris-ridden marsh, containing forgotten and deteriorated remains of Muskegon's earlier logging era, into a well landscaped park. The marsh was drained, the rubbish and undergrowth removed and the area filled. Cedar Creek was channeled and two small lagoons created to form the centerpiece of the park.

In June 1933, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). The act was designed to help individual states with a variety of programs including new highway construction and improvements to existing roads and bridges. It was also designed to aid the states in providing unemployment relief for the millions out of work [12].

Under the NIRA of 1933, individual states were able to obtain additional funds through grant programs, such as the National Recovery Highway Grant. Under this program, the United States Bureau of Public Roads stipulated that portions of the funding should be used for roadside landscaping and to develop shore routes and inland tourist lanes. [13]

Initially, these National Recovery highway enhancement projects were restricted to urban areas and Federal Forest highways. One of the first of these new roadside enhancement projects was the Muskegon Memorial Causeway. Following the success of the Memorial Causeway projects the Michigan State Highway Department (MSHD) undertook additional landscaping enhancement projects; one major project involved roadside landscaping along the principal entrance routes to the state. [14]

The Board of Supervisors initially appropriated three annual allotments of \$25,000 for the project. But only a single allotment was released and additional funding would be required before the main effort on the project could begin.

Additional labor and funding was provided by the Civil Works Administration from November 1933 to March 1934. The Federal Government, under a special appropriation, provided an additional \$30,000 for landscape development. Federal funding was responsible for the planting of evergreens, elms, crabapple and a variety of shrubs along the roadway and around the lagoons.

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The memorial park was formally dedicated on Armistice Day (November 11) 1934 with much fanfare, parades, speeches and a special tribute to the "Gold Star Mothers." The area once dubbed the "Million Dollar Muskrat Farm" was now referred to as "Michigan's Most Beautiful Mile." The dedication was marked by the official representatives of the Republic of France, Monsieur and Madam Rene Weille, as well as veterans, federal, state and local officials.

The fountain, arched columns and limestone walls were dedicated to the World War I dead. Bronze plaques are attached to the columns which read: "In Memory of the Illustrious Dead of Muskegon County Who Died In the World War 1917-1919." Below is a second plaque, "Fleur-De-Lis From the Republic of France A Gift of a Grateful Nation to the World War Dead of Muskegon County 1934."

A smaller monument consisting of a carved stone polar bear is dedicated "In Memory of Veterans of the North Russian Expeditionary Force 1918-1919" is located behind the fountain. At the north park entrance is a second memorial. This consists of three small stone markers with the names of Muskegon's World War Two dead. In front of these markers is a small stone obelisk presented by "United Veterans Council Honors All Korean and Vietnam Veterans presented in November 11, 1974."

IV. OWNERSHIP

The land that comprises the Veterans Memorial Park is unique, ownership of the park is shared by two municipalities. That area north of Cedar Creek, is owned by the city of North Muskegon. The area south of Cedar Creek, is under the jurisdiction of the city of Muskegon. Both municipalities are responsible for the maintenance and development of their portions of the park.

V. FOOTNOTES

1. "\$750,000 Project is Culmination of Decade of Effort." Muskegon Chronicle, November 11, 1934: 1.
2. "War Chest Plan to Rest Until Chaos Clears." Muskegon Chronicle, January 18, 1918: 1.
3. "Plans for Veteran Memorial At Causeway Park Approved." Muskegon Chronicle, July 30, 1932: 1.
4. Olmstead, Frederick Law Jr., "Parks as War Memorials." American Federation of Arts. New York, May 15, 1919. [Reprinted: Landscape Architecture, April, 1945: 104-107.]
5. Steele, Fletcher, "Worthy Memorials of the Great War." Landscape Architecture, February, 1920. [Reprinted: Landscape Architecture, July, 1944: 121-124.]
6. "Plans Discussed for Immediate Development of Causeway Park." Muskegon Chronicle, July 9, 1932: 1.
7. *Ibid.*, 1.
8. "Causeway Park Work Is Begun; War Memorial." Muskegon Chronicle, July 13, 1932: 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 1.
10. "Plans Discussed for Immediate Development of Causeway Park." Muskegon Chronicle, July 9, 1932: 1.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. Michigan State Highway Department. Fifteenth Biennial Report, 1933-1934. Lansing, 1934: 45-46.
13. *Ibid.*, 48.
14. *Ibid.*, 48.

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"North Bridge To Be Erected This Summer." Muskegon Chronicle. February 2, 1928.

"Parade Will Precede Rites at Causeway." Muskegon Chronicle. November 10, 1934.

"Plans Discussed for Immediate Development of Causeway Park." Muskegon Chronicle. July 9, 1932.

"Plans for Veteran Memorial At Causeway Park Approved." Muskegon Chronicle. July 30, 1932.

"Provides \$25,000 Be Applied Toward Memorial Highway." Muskegon Chronicle. November 6, 1926.

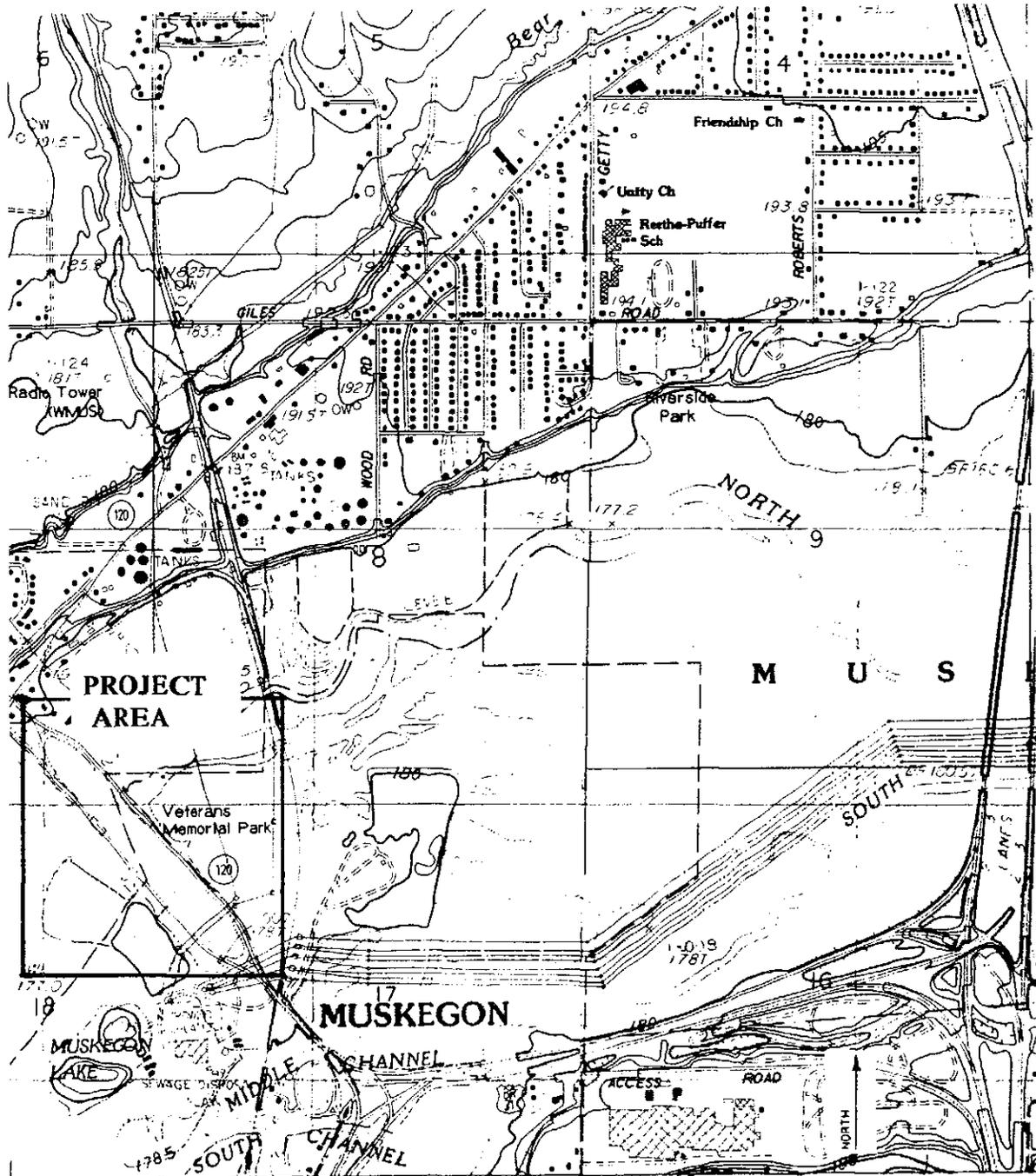
"W.B. Gebhart to Execute Memorial." Muskegon Chronicle. August 5, 1932.

"War Chest Plan to Rest Until Chaos Clears." Muskegon Chronicle, January 18, 1918.

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"\$750,000 Project is Culmination of Decade of Effort." Muskegon Chronicle. November 11, 1934.

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LOCATION MAP
Veterans Memorial Park and Causeway
Muskegon County, Michigan