Chickasaw: An Olmsted Park Built for African Americans

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Chickasaw Park serves an important role in the history of both the African-American community and the parks culture in Louisville, Kentucky. Composed of 61 acres in west Louisville, along the Ohio River, Chickasaw Park is currently part of the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy. The Conservancy was formed in 1989 to improve parks designed by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and his successor firm, Olmsted Brothers. Chickasaw, along with sixteen other parks and three parkways had fallen into disrepair over many years of use. A more important issue associated with Chickasaw, however, is how it came into existence in the first place.

The concept of a parks and parkway system for the city of Louisville began in the late 1880s, when Frederick Law Olmsted presented the concept to city leaders. Once work began on the three flagship parks (Cherokee, Iroquois, and Shawnee) and associated parkways (Eastern, Southern, and Algonquin/Southwestern) linking the parks, the projects formed the foundation for today’s city system of 123 parks comprising more than 14,000 acres (see Figure 2).

When the flagship parks launched in the 1890s, each was officially open to all citizens and visitors until the early twentieth century. African-American residents of West Louisville were
within a reasonable proximity to Shawnee Park, but by 1911, they were limited to areas of the park designated “for colored people.” Anticipating an official segregation policy, the city procured the property for Chickasaw from the former estate of local politician John Whelan. Formal dedication of the park designated specifically for use by African Americans occurred in 1922. One year later, the Parks Board commissioned Olmsted Brothers to prepare a master plan for Chickasaw Park. In 1924, the Parks Board passed a resolution making the larger city parks for whites only, designating a few small parks for African Americans. Although the Master Plan was completed in 1923, the park was constructed in segments, reaching completion in the early 1930s. Chickasaw contained nearly half of the total acreage of park areas available to African Americans throughout the city. In 1939, African American citizen groups requested access to the entire system of city parks, as well as additional recreation
facilities in 1941. Both requests were denied. Segregation led to overcrowding in the five parks used by African Americans, resulting in one-way traffic circulation on Chickasaw’s park road and more requests for additional facilities.

The desegregation of the Louisville Parks occurred in 1955, under the administration of Mayor Andrew Broaddus. Three Louisville residents teamed with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a civil rights organization formed in 1909 to advance justice for African Americans. The group took the city to court over the inequalities experienced by blacks in the Louisville Parks. Their actions were influenced in part by the then recent Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), a landmark case in which the justices unanimously ruled that racial segregation of children attending public schools was unconstitutional.

Chickasaw Park declined over time due to lack of maintenance, as did other Olmsted parks. A renovation plan for the major parks and parkways was completed in 1994; attention then focused on smaller Olmsted parks. Pollutants in the Ohio River precluded swimming and fishing in several of the parks, including Chickasaw. In 1995, concerns arose from
environmental contaminants found in Chickasaw’s fishing pond. The pond was subsequently drained. After the pond was refilled and stocked with fresh fish, smaller concentrations of the same contaminants were found in the pond. Environmental concerns and deterioration of park facilities led to an updated master plan for renewal and maintenance in 2001. Funds toward proposed improvements were awarded in 2018.

Chickasaw Park holds a unique role in West Louisville’s history and culture. It provided the only improved park facilities for African Americans during an extended period of racial segregation. As a component in the Olmsted Parks and Parkway System, its legacy continues, providing recreational opportunities and a sense of place for the residents of West Louisville.

REFERENCES


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