

City Develops Around the Stream

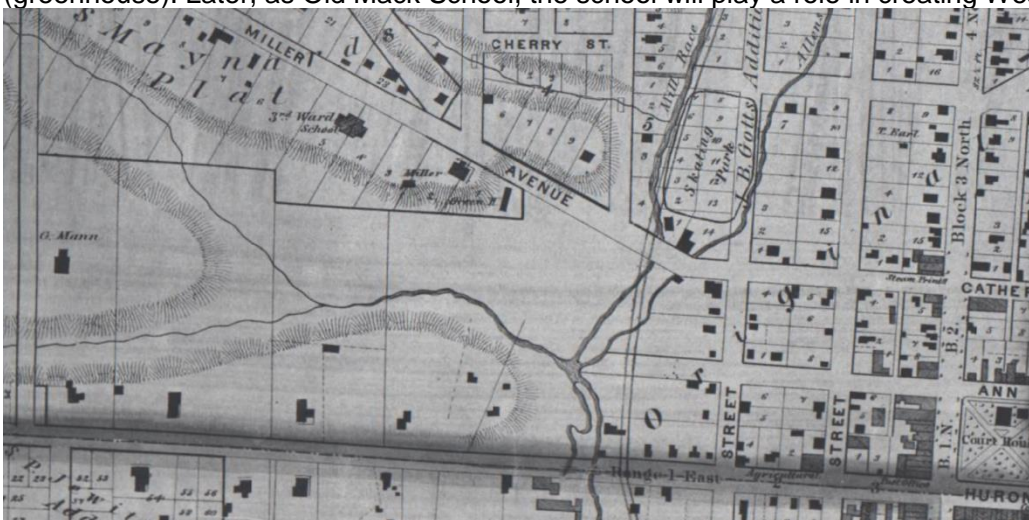
To get a better sense of West Park's stream and the underlying water story we can turn to various historical maps of Ann Arbor. With the maps we can 'see' the landscape and how the stream runs through a valley of sorts with bluffs nearby on either side. A chronology of maps shows us what the stream encounters as the city develops.

- [1854 map](#): Where today's West Park lies is essentially a shallow valley for a stream at the western border of the city of Ann Arbor. It is a big open, low-lying area where two branches of a stream join and then flow eastward surrounded by bluffs. Where the bluffs end on the stream's eastern course, the waters meet up with Allen's Creek and with a mill race (running under Corham Road, today's Miller Avenue) to Ward Flouring Mill on Main Street. The mill race runs parallel to Allen's Creek (also bridged by Corham Road), on a northeasterly course to the



Huron River. There are no roads to impede the stream's course. There are some structures nearby on the bluffs. Some property owners are noted on the map, including D. McIntyre who owns the large rectangular parcel just to the west of where the two branches of the stream join. That lot plays an interesting role in land acquisition.

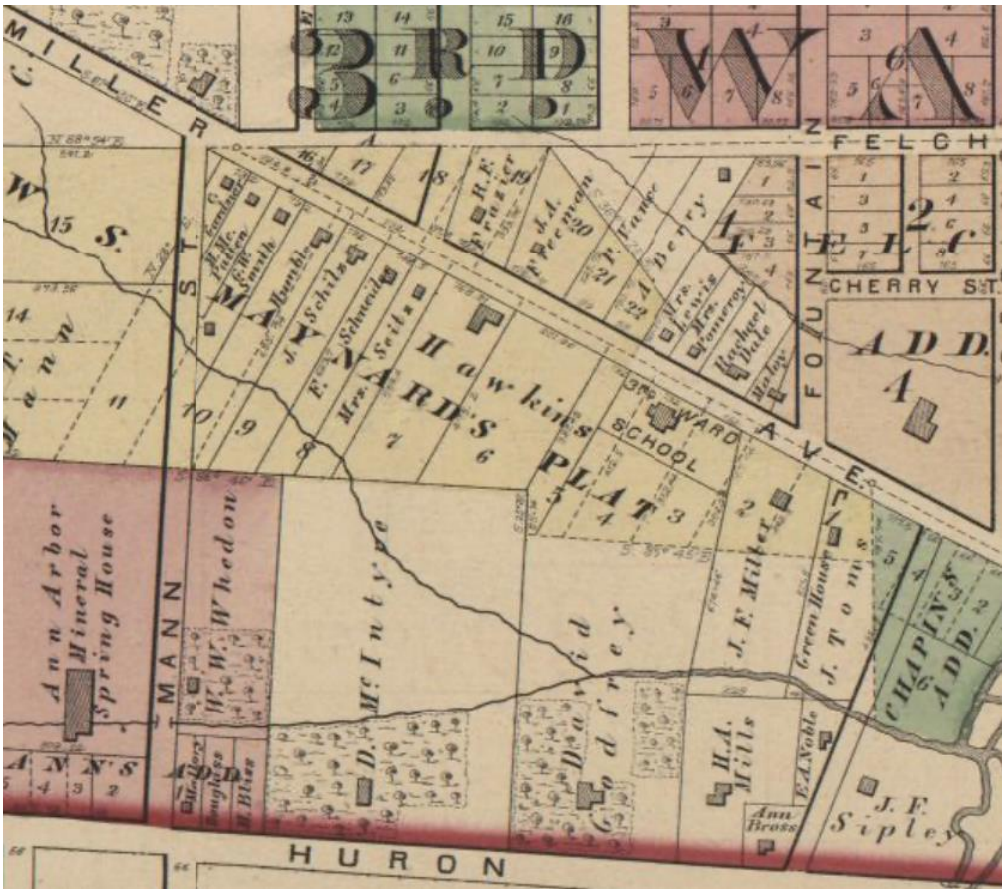
- [1870 map](#): There is modest development of the area of future West Park. 3rd Ward School now appears on the south side of Miller Avenue (earlier called Corham Road) a little northwest of a small structure labeled Green H (greenhouse). Later, as Old Mack School, the school will play a role in creating West Park. Across



Miller Avenue to the northeast of future West Park lies a Skating Park located between the mill race and Allen's Creek. There is a suggestion in city records that the area of future West Park was a skating park early in Ann Arbor's history. However, this map is part of what Lela Duff, a local historian, discussed as evidence

refuting that.

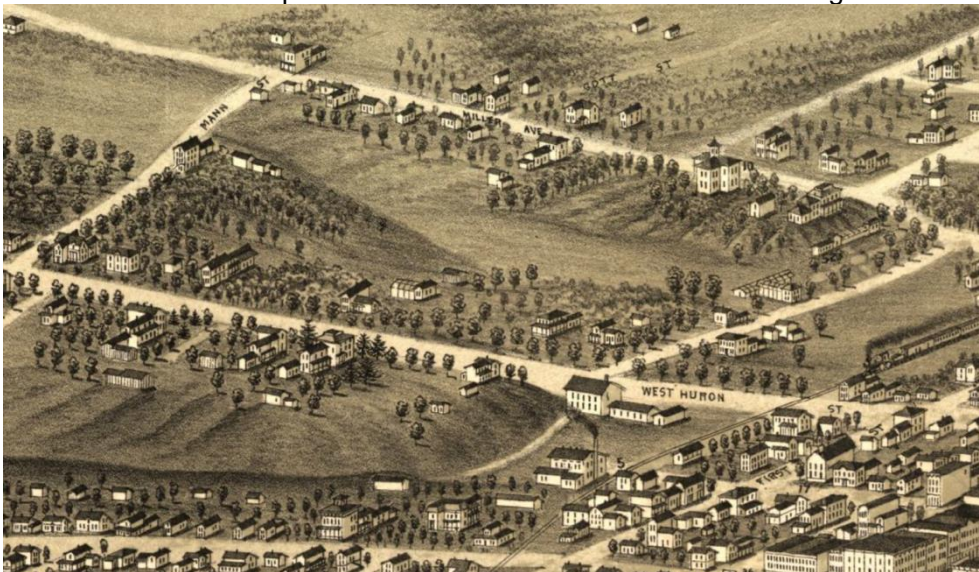
- [1874 map](#): There are not many new structures in the area of future West Park but now, at the borders of future West Park, the stream is encountering streets, sometimes going under them and sometimes crossing over them. New streets appear as Mann Street (now Seventh Street and destined to form the northern border of West Park) and an unlabeled street that partially sits in Chapin's Addition to the City and is to acquire the name



Chapin Street (and will within 35 years form the eastern border of West Park). The south branch of the stream hosts a spring house, and that branch runs under Mann Street (Seventh Street). The north branch of the stream runs over Mann Street. The stream widens after the north and south branch join, and this wider stream runs over (unlabeled) Chapin Street. The greenhouse is now labeled as J. Toms ' green house, and it now fronts on two streets -- Miller Avenue and (unlabeled) Chapin Street.

- [1880 map](#): This map is a better visual for the lay of

the land. This panoramic picture, interestingly enough, is void of streams and creeks, including Allen's Creek and the stream in today's West Park. Is that a hint that streams and creeks are being seen as less valuable than in the past? Railroads are featured here.[1] Railroads run along the Huron River and along Allen's Creek, and their road beds impede the natural flow of water into and through

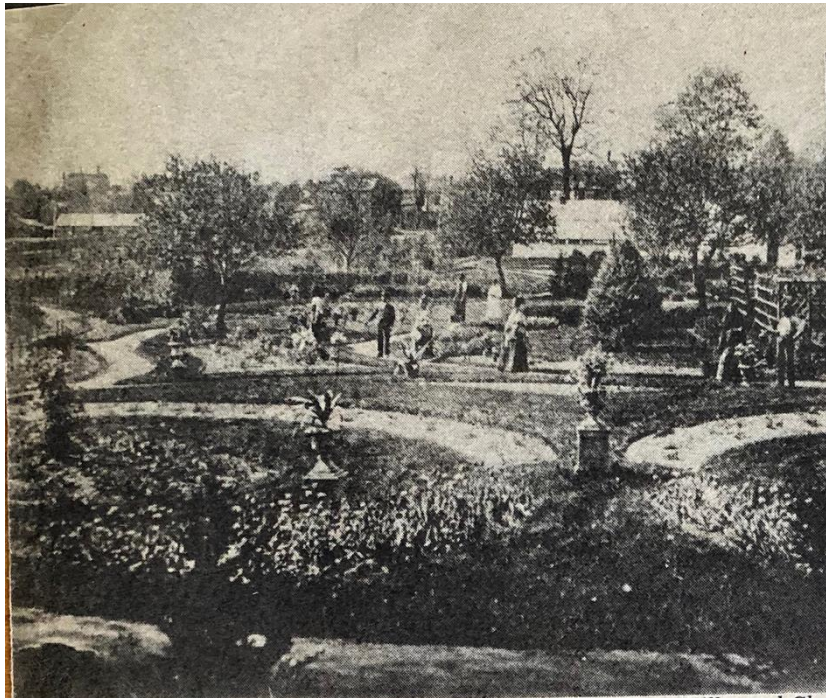


the water courses. The future West Park area is open, mostly low-lying with rolling parts and steep surrounds. We see that the structures skirting around the future West Park are almost entirely houses, and almost entirely on the bluffs. The 3rd Ward School sits on the high ground on Miller Ave. A greenhouse sits at the corner of Miller Avenue and an unlabeled street (today's Chapin Street), extending to the middle of that street.

A formal Victorian garden was established by James Toms, an Englishman, on the land containing his greenhouse. The garden became the subject of photographs that offer views into the area destined to become West Park.

The photograph below, reproduced in a news article, was apparently taken in May in the 1880s. As was the style of such gardens symmetrical, curvilinear forms (the paths in the photo) shaped flower panels (flower

beds) filled with bedding plants (favorites were cannas, caladiums, fuchsias, coleus, geraniums, mignonette, moss roses,



in Parks Department file for West Park.



verbena, and pansies). The panels were often edged with low plants like alyssum and ageratum. Urns containing exotic plants added drama to the garden. The view is from the hill to the south of what is now West Park, with Chapin Street to the right, just outside the frame. Buildings on the skyline are on Miller Avenue, with the one to the far left in the distance being the old Third Ward School that would be demolished in the 1920s and West Park's Pergola would be erected there.

From news article 'A Formal Pleasure Garden on Chapin Street',

The Parks Department news article on J. Toms' greenhouse and formal gardens includes a faint copy of the photograph to below, with words: "James Toms' greenhouse at Miller and Chapin in 1882. Future West Park in



background". This photograph also appeared in 'Old Ann Arbor Town', Second Edition, prepared for City of Ann Arbor by Great Lakes Federal Savings 1981. The sharp image here comes to us with thanks to Evan Pratt, who was given a copy when he lived on Chapin Street. Might this photo show us a structure that inspired West Park's Pergola?

Photo courtesy Evan Pratt, Washtenaw Water Resources Commissioner.

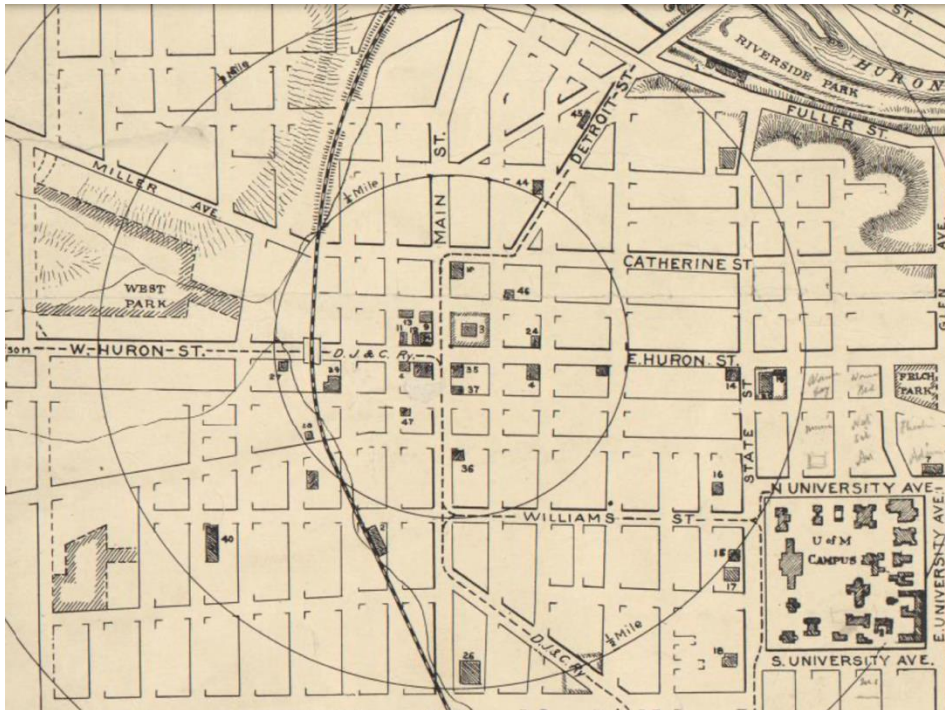
testament to water being nearby, as the plants would have required regular watering to thrive. And thrive they apparently did. James Toms operated the greenhouse and formal gardens from 1858 on into the early 1890s, after which George Marsden took over for a few years. George Bischoff bought the greenhouse property in 1897. The city acquired an acre from Bischoff in 1908 as one of the first parcels of land to become a part of West Park. In the deed the city "agrees to maintain a tile of sufficient size not less that 12" to carry off the surface water. In case of necessity the Grantor (George Bischoff) is allowed to lay a pipe in the ditch now dug to tap the creek for water for their greenhouse." So the creek was an important source of water for the

greenhouse, and surface water was a concern. Bischoff continued to operate a main greenhouse situated across the street at 220 Chapin (where the New Hope Baptist Church is here in 2022) until 1955.

-[1890 map](#): No West Park still. The mill race has disappeared, and the entirety of the West Park stream joins with (unlabeled) Allen's Creek. The stream is depicted as running under Seventh Street (both north and south branch) and Chapin Street. What will be West Park is classified as rural/unoccupied. Residential areas border along Huron Street, the north part of North Seventh Street, Miller Avenue, and Chapin Street, with the exception of the area that earlier maps indicated was J. Toms' greenhouse (an area that is here classified as rural/unoccupied)

- [1907 map](#): Still no West Park. Streams and creeks are not represented on this map, but we find the 3rd Ward School has become Christian Mack School. We also find that Ann Arbor has several parks. In addition to Hanover Park and Felch Park, there are three more parks --Cedar Bend Park, The Glen (City owned portion) and Botanical Gardens (the Arboretum), and Riverside Park. There is also the Fair Grounds (not purchased by the City in 1910 and named Burns park). And there is Relief Park (operated by the Relief Park Association, not the City).

- [1911 map](#): West Park is on a map! The map is a somewhat fanciful rendition of Ann Arbor published by the Board of Commerce. The broader map that the segment below comes from emphasizes parks in sweeping ways throughout the city, indicating a growing interest in parks. The map shows West Park in a vague way that



suggests it extends from Chapin Street to a proposed road that will become N. Seventh Street. In 1911 this expansive West Park was a glimmer in the eyes of the Board of Commerce but quite possibly the goal the Board of Parks was working toward. The stream shown in West Park is the park's prominent feature. It appears much as it has for many years, with two branches meeting and the joint stream flowing on to (unlabeled) Allen's Creek.

As we know, West Park did become a reality much like what is shown in the 1911 map. However, the creation of the park to that expansive size

would take many years and many pieces of acquired land. And, West Park's stream would flow openly through the park for only two decades before it then disappeared from sight.

Note

1. The Michigan Central Railroad --running east-west and coming in from Detroit on the south side of the Huron River-- reached Ann Arbor in 1839. The "Annie" --the Ann Arbor Railroad-- running north-south and coming from Toledo, Ohio-- came later, reaching Ann Arbor in 1878 and running west of downtown along Allen's Creek to take advantage of relatively flat ground.