

**A Deep Dive into the Past:
Hunt Park and Its Surroundings
by Martha Hill**

The Neighborhood

Hunt Park and nearby Belize Park sit on what was once known as Buttercup Hill, a name that conjures up open sunny fields that buttercup flowers love. By one account:

“Beginning in the 1820s, Harvey Chubb traveled from his farm into town along the ridge of Buttercup Hill. His route soon began to be called Chubb Road ... but in 1927 it was changed to Sunset Road.... Chubb Road descended treacherously to Main, but that section was discontinued when the Toledo and Ann Arbor Rail Road was built along the escarpment.” [1]

Addition to the City: The name Buttercup Hill has mostly been lost in the fogs of time, being less well documented than other names in the Hunt Park area. The land in and near Hunt Park (and nearby Belize Park) was platted as Hiscock’s Addition to the City of Ann Arbor in 1859. [2] The 1864 Plan of the City of Ann Arbor gives a good idea of how this addition fit into the City at that time. [3] Hiscock’s Addition is in the upper left part of the map (northwest part of the city).

One could make an argument for the name of the addition being Hiscocks’, rather than Hiscock’s, Addition because the names of both Daniel Hiscock and his wife Maria Hiscock appear in the Plat document. Both names are also on subsequent deeds to the lots. Maria Hiscock, a daughter of Eber and Polly White (commemorated today in the names of Eberwhite Nature Area and Eberwhite Elementary School) married Daniel Hiscock on November 10, 1847.

Maria Hiscock was not a legal owner of the land, but she did have a limited right to it. Coverture laws (stemming from English common-law) barred a married woman from, among other things, owning land or making contracts. The land a married woman brought to the marriage became the property of her husband. But the coverture laws granted a married woman ‘dower right’ – as a widow she could during her natural life use 1/3 part of all lands owned by her husband. This right attached to any land her husband owned during the marriage unless she waived her dower right to it.

Maria held dower right to the land in Hiscock’s Addition. She released her dower right to the streets and other public land platted in Hiscock’s Addition with this statement in the 1859 Plat: “And I Maria Hiscock wife of the said Daniel Hiscock do hereby assent to the said Plat and waive and release all right to Dower of in or to the Streets Heighways or public grounds laid down and dedicated through this writeup when after the said Daniel Hiscock and Maria Hiscock have hereunto set our hands and seals at the City of Ann Arbor this tenth day of May AD 1859.” [2]

Michigan was one of many states with coverture laws, and each such state had its own timetable for moving away from them. Statutes supporting coverture and dower in Michigan date back to a 1787 ordinance, and coverture and dower were codified by the Michigan Legislature in 1846. Intermittent acts of the Michigan Legislature subsequently repealed some of the coverture restrictions. The Married Women’s Property Act of 1855, which the courts interpreted narrowly, allowed a married woman to own property she herself brought into a marriage. The Married Women’s Property Act of 1917 allowed a married woman to make and enter into a contract jointly with her husband to the extent of their joint resources. The Rights and Liability of Married Women Act 216 of 1981 allowed a married woman to make and enter into a contract on her own or jointly with other people. Though Michigan

retained dower longer than any other state in the nation, it abolished dower with law 2016 P.A. 489 (effective on April 6, 2017).

Street Names: More mundane than laws changing over time, street names have undergone changes too. When Hiscock's Addition was platted in 1859, what is now Daniel Street (forming the eastern border of Hunt Park) was named Grove Street. In 1843 the St. Thomas Catholic Parish acquired land for a cemetery subsequently named St. Thomas Catholic Cemetery, lying kitty-corner across Sunset Road from today's Hunt Park (see 1864 Plan of the City of Ann Arbor for the cemetery's location). For St. Patrick's Day celebration in times following the parish acquiring the cemetery, the usual picnic was given by the women of the Altar Society of the Church "in the grove adjoining the cemetery; it was, and still is [stated in 1941], one of the most attractive spots in the whole city." [4] So there was a grove worthy of praise on or nearby Grove Street.

As the 1864 Plan of the City of Ann Arbor shows, there were actually two Grove Streets in Ann Arbor, the one just discussed bordering on today's Hunt Park and one that began its course to Ypsilanti at Ann Arbor's oldest park – Hanover Square (created after 1824 but before 1836) in downtown Ann Arbor. Ironically, both streets would lose the name Grove Street:

"Running southward from Chubb Road [Sunset] was one of Ann Arbor's two Grove streets. Later, because of its approximate alignment, it was called North First. Finally, in 1918, it was renamed Daniel Street, after the same farmer and supervisor whose surname, Hiscock, remains with us in a nearby street of that name." [1]

The Grove Street at Hanover Square would merge with Packard Street and take on that name.

Two other streets near Hunt Park recall the Hiscock family. Charles and Edward were Daniel and Maria's two sons, and streets near and to the southeast of Hunt Park bare their names. The Hiscocks also had one daughter, Mary, but no street in the area is named for her name. Somewhat more curiously, though, no street in the area bares Maria's name despite her relinquishing her dower right to the streets and public grounds laid down for Hiscock's Addition.

A rather mysterious street originally bordered on part of what is now Hunt Park and even crossed through what is now park land. It is nowhere to be seen today, though some hints of its one-time existence appear in partially buried curb cuts on Spring Street. The mysterious street was called Walnut Street. An 1870 City of Ann Arbor map shows Walnut Street running between Spring Street and Grove Street (now Daniel). [5] Walnut Street "changed in 1940 to Pardon Street, that name lasting until 1974 without a resident. It lies buried now under the grass and trees of lower Hunt Park." [1]

Neighborhood Names: The name Buttercup Hill apparently slipped from memory as more and more houses grew in what were once farmers' fields and groves. By the time Hunt Park came into being (the land was donated in 1943) the name seems to have disappeared into the fogs of time.

The neighborhood grew in many ways, one being that families in Ann Arbor's Black community came to call the neighborhood near Hunt Park and Belize Park home. As of the early 1990s city officials were reported to consider the neighborhood a model of economic and racial integration and one of the few pools of affordable housing in a town where many working here were forced to live elsewhere. At the time the city was moving to rezone a section of the neighborhood to bar apartment complexes and condominiums in order to protect the neighborhood from such development, preserve the character of the neighborhood, and in the long-term protect the vitality of the downtown area. Realtor Edward Surovell said of the neighborhood and the possible threat of development: "They may be modest

homes, but they are a high-quality living environment with a stable ethnically, economically and racially diverse population. There is absolutely a risk of future redevelopment, and then Ann Arbor would lose and the citizens least able to take the loss would lose.”[6] At the time the neighborhood’s location more than any name seemed to be how it was identified. But even reported location varied – near northwest side, near north side, north-central neighborhood. It was also known as the West Side.

Here, in 2021 the neighborhood is comprised not quite as much of modest houses but also not of apartment or condominium complexes. It still has a diverse population. A turn of events a few years ago brought attention back to the hill upon which the neighborhood rests. When Paul and Claire Tinkerhess, residents who moved their 19th century house across town to an empty lot in the neighborhood, created and began organizing a music festival for the area, they went imaginatively searching for a name. The festival was to be rooted in the neighborhood, which contains resident musicians of all types. It was to be the first weekend in May, with musicians playing on front porches, lawns, driveways, patios, decks, garage roofs throughout the neighborhood. It was to be free and open to the public, with no commercial endeavors allowed. It was open to a band of any size, including a sole performer, as long as one person in the band resided in the neighborhood. In their search for a name for this festival they were struck by the many water-related street names – Spring, Fountain, Brooks. From this they landed on the name ‘Water Hill Music Festival’. The music festival ran each spring from 2011 to 2018.

It must have been far from their wildest imaginings that the name ‘Water Hill’ would subsequently be taken up by the real estate world as the going name for the neighborhood. But that is exactly what happened, and Water Hill is what realtors and many others call the neighborhood today. Buttercup Hill – as well as near northwest side, near north side, north-central neighborhood, and West Side became, in effect, Water Hill, at least for now.

A Taste of Hunt Park in Past Times

A 1964 Ann Arbor News article about Ann Arbor’s park system describes Hunt Park and perceptions about parks in the mid-1960s:

“Streets, alleys and parking lots are for motor vehicles.

In some cities, both large and small they are also used for baseball, tag or other games children play. Because natural laws prohibit the occupancy of a single space by two solid objects, this practice can and has, proven dangerous to children.

This danger need not exist in Ann Arbor. A great majority of the city’s children are within easy walking distance of a major park, a neighborhood park or playground and playlots which are a part of the city’s park system.

In these latter two groups the city has some 21 areas of varying size and developed in varying degrees which are mainly for use by children. This does not include areas set aside for children’s activities in major and neighborhood parks, which are designed to meet the needs of all age levels....

The city has 16 areas classified as “playgrounds’ and five designated as ‘playlots’

A ‘playground’ not typical is Hunt Park. [Parks Department Superintendent] Sproull said the land fits the category of a neighborhood park and may in the future, be developed into such a park. The land, seven acres in size, is located at the corner of Daniel and Sunset.

The park has facilities for softball and basketball, is equipped with a shelter and has a large playground. Present plans for the park include rearranging the play equipment and moving it closer to the shelter area and also planting more trees....” [7]

Memories

Merri Walters, resident of Spring Street dating back to childhood, recounted the following three memories of Hunt Park:

Hunt Park has a long tall hill that is great for sledding in Winter, as many in the city know. One year, many years ago, her second oldest son in his teens took his youngest sister age 4 or 5 up to Hunt Park to sled. He put his little sister on the sled, paused briefly intending to get on the sled with her and steer, and the sled simply took off with his little sister all by herself... and her not knowing how to steer. The sled was heading for a ski jump someone had built up in the snow. Merri's son took off running down the sledding hill as fast as he could... and managed to reach the ski jump just in time to catch his little sister in his arms, mid-air right below the ski jump.

Merri remembers as a girl being up at Hunt Park and getting snow shoved into her face by neighborhood bullies. When she got home afterwards, her mother's reaction was to tell her to take the dog with her next time.

She also remembers a time a tornado came through town. There was a big crash up the hill from her house. Turned out the tornado took down a huge tree at the northwest corner of Hunt Park... it was a twisted mass. But somehow the rest of the neighborhood was undamaged.

Marlene Ross, resident of Edward Street since the early 1990s, recounted the following memories:

She remembers the Arnold family who lived just down the street at the corner of Summit and Edward. Irvn Arnold, who worked for the University, and his wife Helen Arnold were well known in the community for their volunteer work and church activities. They were quite elderly when Marlene and her husband John moved to Edward Street.

On and facing Edward Street is one of the older houses around. Two sisters lived there for many years, and one was still living there – in her 80s and mostly house bound -- when Marlene and her husband John were building their house across the street. She moved to be cared for elsewhere before they completed and moved into their house. Marlene recollects being told by neighbors that both sisters taught in Ann Arbor schools and that they were prominent members of the Black community. Marlene also recalls one particular conversation. This elderly woman in the house across the street mentioned to Marlene that she urgently needed to get to Kroger's but had no means of getting there. Marlene responded with an offer to drive her there, and then was amused when the elderly woman told her what she urgently needed to get – cigarettes and ice cream.

Martha Hill, author of this piece and resident of Spring Street since 2008 recalls:

My dog Lily, rescued at age 6, was sweet but a little wild when she first became a family member and resident of the neighborhood. Now age 12, still sweet but much calmer, she has logged many walks in Hunt Park and the surrounding neighborhood. I am sure she enjoys the grass under her feet and the wide open view of Hunt Park, as do I. A great joy for us both is when a small puddle develops at a spot in the field after a big rainstorm. It was love at first sight when Lily spotted a puddle there and enthusiastically plopped right down in that puddle. And I really love watching that happen even if it means toweling off at home afterwards. Hunt Park is also a great place to view sunrises. Before getting Lily, I would get up early, fix a cup of coffee or tea, and carry it up the hill to Hunt Park just to catch the sunrise.

Author's Musings

It has been such a pleasure to have a good excuse to delve into the history of my neighborhood and see my great appreciation for Hunt Park grow even more. A musing I carry in my mind from this research concerns that mysterious Walnut Street and the granting of streets as public streets by Daniel and Maria Hiscock in the 1859 Hiscock's Addition to the city. I wonder... Does, perhaps, Walnut Street -- no longer visible but a part of Hunt Park nonetheless -- constitute, in a sense, a small grant by Daniel and Maria Hiscock to Hunt Park? Though a grant to a park was not the intention behind Walnut Street, that small strip of land does now rest "under the grass and trees of lower Hunt Park". Somehow that continues to intrigue me.

Sources

1. 'The Lost Street Names of Ann Arbor' by Don Callard, Ann Arbor Observer, July 2002, pp. 27-31. <https://aadl.org/aaobserver/19282>
2. Hiscock's Addition (1859), Washtenaw County, Michigan Clerk, Register of Deeds, Liber 45, Page 160. ssclerk.ewashtenaw.org.
3. 'Plan of the City of Ann Arbor: Washtenaw Co. Michigan' by John F. Geil; 1864; University of Michigan Clark Library Maps. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/clark1ic>
4. Louis Wm. Doll, The History of Saint Thomas Parish, Ann Arbor, 1941, p. 52-53.
5. 'City of Ann Arbor, Washtenaw County, Michigan / surveyed & published by S. Pettibone', 1870 (Sheet 1, which shows 3rd Ward); University of Michigan Clark Library Maps. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/clark1ic>
6. 'Rezoning: Boon or Doom for Neighborhoods?', Ann Arbor News, October 1993. Ann Arbor District Library holding under 'Belize Park'. <https://aadl.org/taxonomy/term/19494>
7. 'City Playgrounds and Playlots Developed Mainly For Children' by Roy Cordray, Ann Arbor News, August 24, 1964,; <https://aadl.org/taxonomy/term/43376>