

# History

## OVERVIEW

The area that is now the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom shares much of the same history as the land that surrounds it. At different times in the past, this part of Minnesota was buried by mile-high glacial ice, enveloped in tallgrass prairie fires, traversed by Native Americans including the Dakota, and farmed by settlers. With all of this shared history, how did this site become an outdoor classroom rather than a farm, a residential neighborhood, institutional grounds, or a parking lot? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine not only the history of the 17.5-acre Classroom, but also the 80 acres of Como Park including and surrounding it. The use and development of the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom site has been influenced by its proximity to Como Lake, its topography and

vegetation, immigration patterns and urban development, economic ups and downs, and world events. As parkland, its use and development was also influenced by progressive ideas about public parks, its position away from the center of park activity, and the features placed within it.

## GLACIERS AND PRE-SETTLEMENT VEGETATION

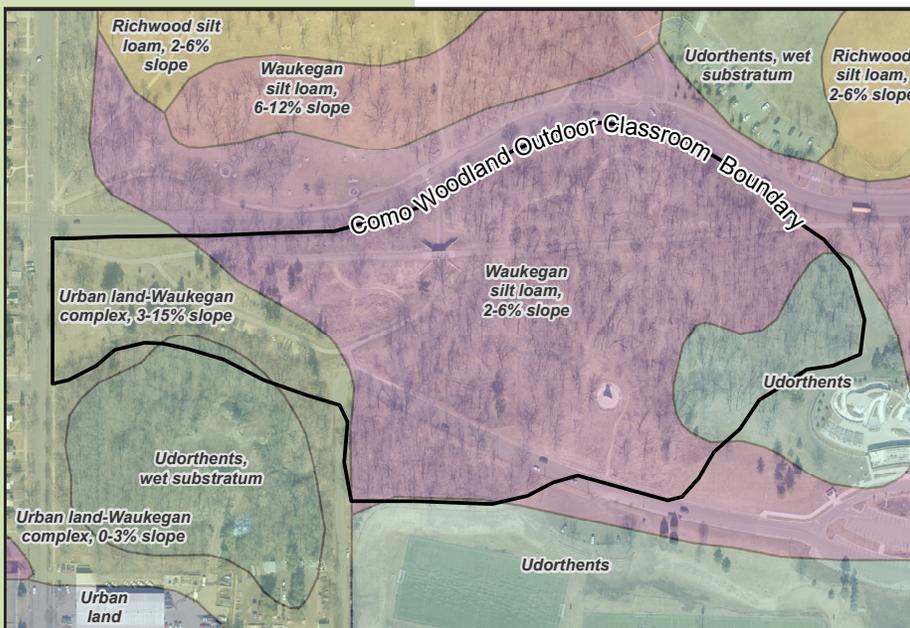
The geologic forces that have shaped the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom site over the millennia formed the local landscape and pre-settlement vegetation. The most recent glaciation in Minnesota occurred during the Great Ice Age. The last period of glaciation, known as the Wisconsin Glaciation, began about 75,000 years ago and covered most of the state, except for small areas in southeast and southwest Minnesota.

The Wisconsin Glacier retreated 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, leaving behind distinct soils and landscapes. The soils we find in the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom are a result of this glacial activity.

There are three soil types found within the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom - Waukegan Silt Loam, Udorthents, and Urban Land. The predominant soil type in the classroom is Waukegan Silt Loam. This is a very deep, well-drained soil that formed from a layer of wind-blown sediment (loess), and underlying sand and glacial outwash. Small areas of Udorthents and Urban Land make up the rest of the site. Both of these soil types are a direct result of disturbance caused by past human activity, and indicate that these

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Soils map of the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom. Image: City of Saint Paul





Big bluestem is a dominant species in a tallgrass prairie.  
Photo: Brett Whaley / CC BY-NC

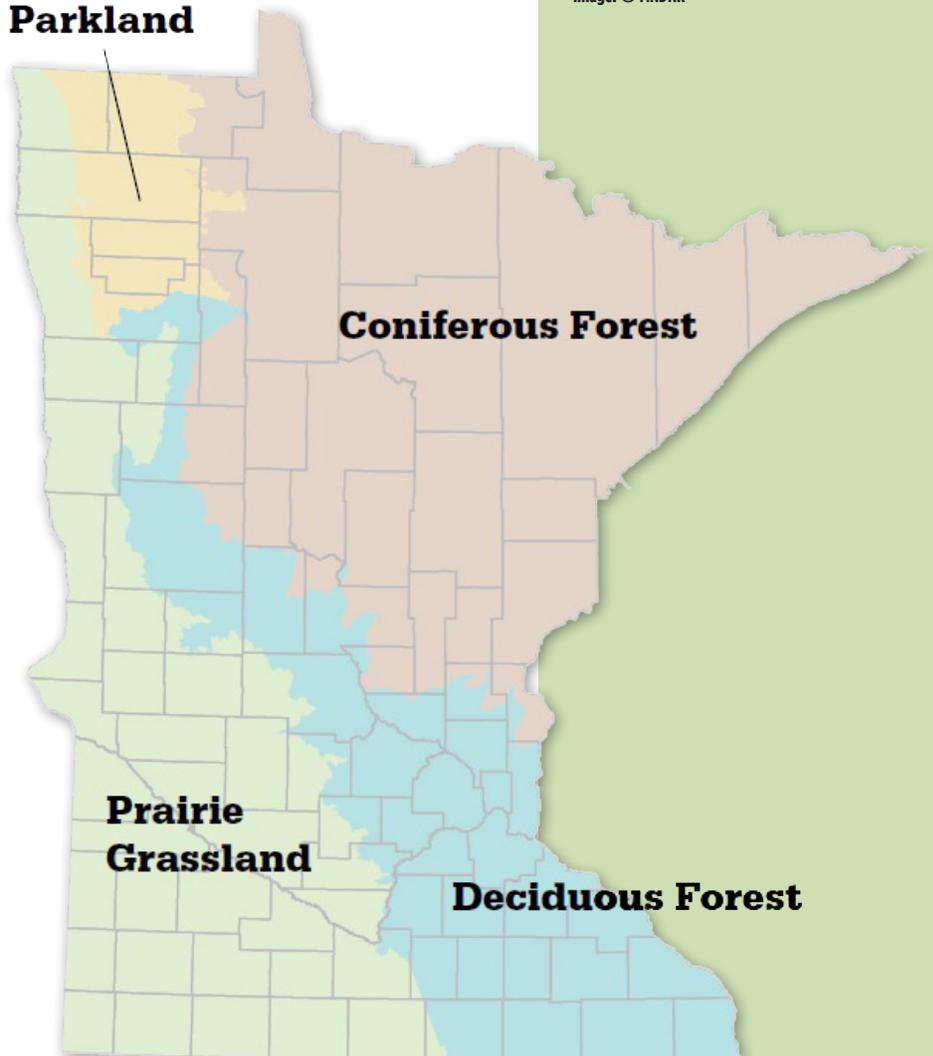
areas were filled with soil from other sites, paved for roadways, or built upon. Udothents soil is present in the oak forest area of the Classroom, which fits with the historical context of this land.

The native vegetation associated with Waukegan Silt Loam is tallgrass prairie, including dominant grasses such as big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass. The disturbed Udothents and Urban Land areas likely supported tallgrass prairie prior to human disturbance. During the 1850s settlement period, it is likely that the prairie was first transformed into agricultural land before it became wooded. Since the area became Como Park, a series of different tree plantings have been completed. There are many mature white poplar and black locust trees in the oak forest that do not match the canopy of the rest of the Classroom vegetation. This may indicate these trees were planted. Volunteer box elder and green ash trees have since become established, likely due to soil disturbance and a lack of management.

All of the plant communities currently represented in the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom are found in southern Minnesota. There are four biomes found in Minnesota: Prairie Grassland found in the western part of the state, Deciduous Forest in the central and southeastern parts of the state, Tallgrass Aspen Parkland in the northwestern corner, and Coniferous Forest in the northeast. While this pattern generally holds true, microclimates caused by topography and geology ultimately determine specific

native plant communities within these biomes. The Classroom was designed to represent several different native plant communities in the Deciduous Forest biome, in which the Twin Cities is located.

### Tallgrass Aspen Parkland



Minnesota's four biomes.  
Image: © MNDNR

Wild columbine.  
Photo: Jenni Konrad / CC BY-NC



## NATIVE AMERICAN USE

Minnesota is the homeland of the Dakota, whose creation story centers on Bdote, the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. The Dakota followed a seasonal way of life. In the summer, they lived in bark lodges in larger, permanent villages along the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, where they grew gardens with corn, beans, and squash. The Dakota village of Kaposia was initially located where downtown Saint Paul is now. Later, the village shifted across the Mississippi near present-day South Saint Paul. For generations, the Kaposia residents and other local Dakota collected wild plants for food, medicine, and dyes, and

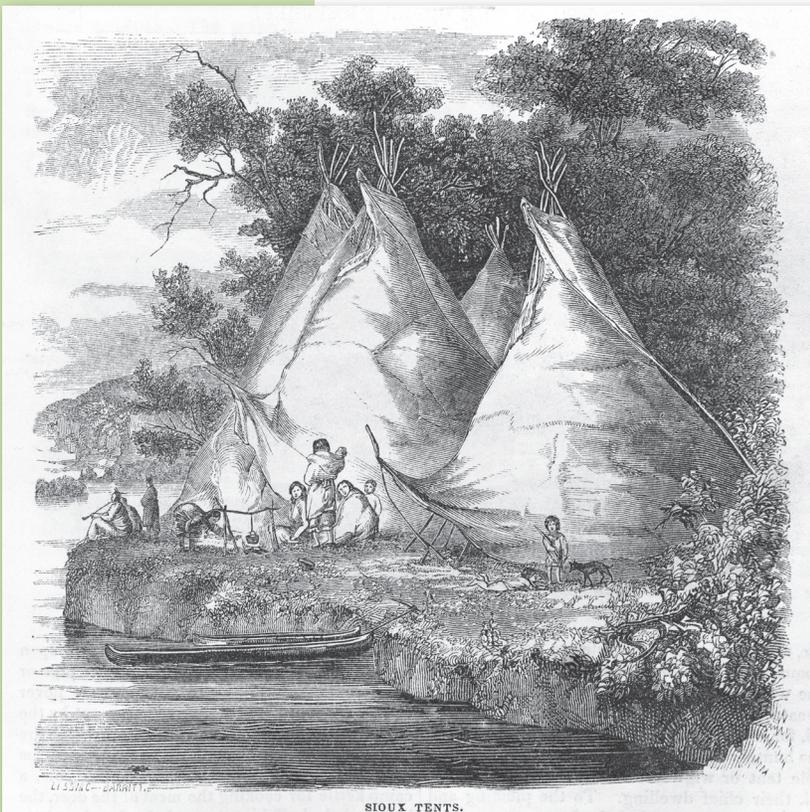
fished in rivers and lakes. Wild rice was harvested from shallow lakes further north in August. In winter, they traveled in smaller family groups into the woods to hunt deer, and in spring, they made maple sugar and hunted muskrats.

For the Dakota, the area around Como Lake offered many plants that would have been used for food and medicine. An 1888 list of plants in the area by Como Park's gardener, Frederick Nussbaumer, includes a wide variety of berries, nuts, forbs, roots, and tubers. Potential food sources include yellow pond-lily, frost grape, Virginia creeper, silverleaf Indian breadroot, American plum, black cherry, choke-cherry, Virginia strawberry, grayleaf red raspberry, eastern prickly gooseberry, bunchberry dogwood, Jerusalem artichoke, bur oak, American hazelnut, broadleaf arrowhead, and wild rice. Potential medicine sources include red columbine, blue cohosh, bloodroot, woodland strawberry, sweet Joe Pye weed, common yarrow, white sagebrush, Indian tobacco, common plantain, swamp verbena, calamus, harlequin blueflag, and smooth Solomon's seal.

The Dakota way of life began to change as the fur trade developed during the mid-1600s. Hunting and traveling patterns shifted as the Dakota and other local tribes began to hunt more animals and vie for control of hunting grounds. First the French, then the British, and finally Americans moved into the area to establish trading posts, missions, forts, and settlements.

Como Lake was located along the corridor that both the Ojibwe and Dakota used to travel between the rivers, Dakota villages, and Fort

1853 illustration of a Dakota camp.  
Image: Harper's New Monthly Magazine,  
Minnesota Historical Society





Wild rice.  
Photo: Eli Sagor / CC BY-NC

Snelling to the south and wild rice lakes, hunting grounds, and Ojibwe villages to the north. Como Lake was a relatively small, shallow lake that covered a larger area than it does today. A much smaller sister lake, Cozy Lake, lay in the crook of Como's northwestern arm, separated by a narrow strip of land. The area around the lakes consisted of rolling hills with scattered oaks. Because the lakes were shallow, fish would have been small and better suited for eating right away, rather than drying. The lakes and plant life surrounding them would likely have served for temporary camping purposes. The written record mentions two trails crossing through the wider Como Lake area.

One of the trails cited passed through the farm of Heman and Jane Gibbs, who settled in 1849 on 160 acres three miles west of Como Lake. Members of Cloud Man's village followed this trail each fall and camped on the farm to visit Jane and rest. Before her marriage, Jane had spent five years living at Lake Harriet near Cloud Man's village at Lake Calhoun and had learned the language and become close friends with the Dakota.

Another trail followed present-day Lexington Parkway past the Northern Pacific Railroad Shops (now known as Bandana Square) and veered northwesterly between Como Park and the Minnesota State Fairgrounds through land owned by Benjamin Hoyt. The Hoyt land was located less than a mile northwest of Como Lake. The Dakota from Kaposia in South Saint Paul frequently followed this trail. A 1901 Saint Paul Globe article details

conflicts that arose in 1850 between the Dakota using the trail and the Hoyts.

A legend recounted by T. M. Newson in 1879 was set on the shore of Como Lake (then called Medewaka according to Newson) and involved the abduction of a young Ojibwe woman, Heleopa, by a group of Dakota. The woman's brother, Nimpewapa, and a group of friends pursued the captors and retrieved an unconscious Heleopa, but her brother was mortally wounded in the fight. According to Newson, Nimpewapa was buried on a hill near the lake and Heleopa visited his grave, marked by stones and flowers, for 50 years.

Between 1805 and 1858, twelve treaties were made between the Dakota and United States government. The treaties dislocated the Dakota from their lands and confined them to a small reservation along the Minnesota River. The Treaty of 1837 applied to the lands east of the Mississippi, including the Como Lake area, and farmers, loggers, and land speculators began to pour into the area. After the U.S.-Dakota War in 1862, most of the Dakota were exiled from Minnesota.



Present-day Gibbs Farm Museum interprets pioneer and Dakota life.  
Photo: Ramsey County Historical Society/Gibbs Farm

## EARLY SETTLEMENT

Early settlers and speculators began to claim land in the area around Como Lake in the late 1840s. Charles Perry, a French-Swiss immigrant, is said to have been the first settler along the shores of Como Lake. He and his family arrived at the Red River Colony in 1823, then settled at

Fort Snelling and dispersed from there. Perry spent only a year raising cattle on Como Lake before he moved around 1849 to Lake Johanna in present-day Arden Hills, when his neighbors became “too thick and interfered with his cattle-raising.”

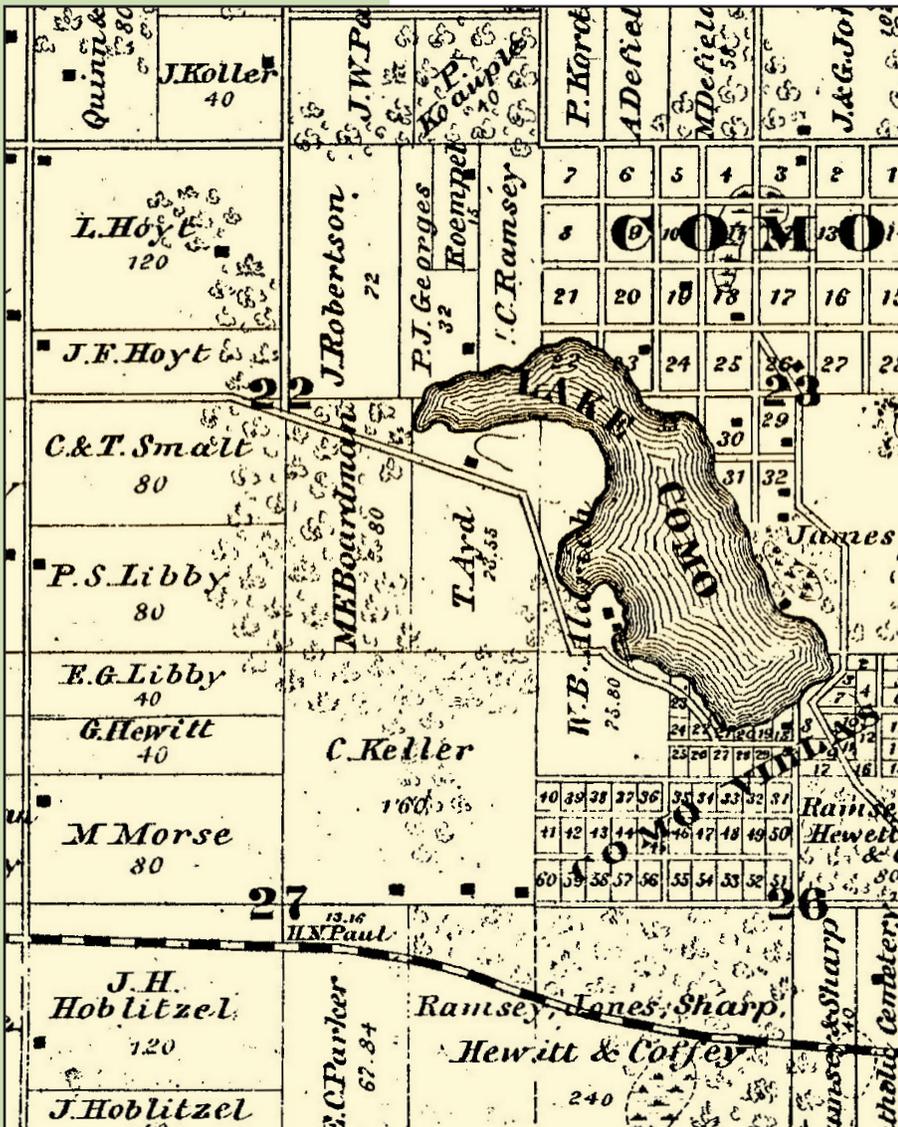
The land in Township 29, Range 23 (Rose Township, which included Como Lake) was surveyed in 1847. This opened it up for sale to settlers at a minimum price of \$1.25 per acre. If they’d pre-empted their claim by squatting on land and building a cabin they could then purchase up to 160 acres with no competitive bidding. The U. S. government also granted military bounty land warrants as a reward for military service that could be assigned (or sold) to others.

The surveyed land was divided into sections, each containing 640 acres. The original land entry for the northeast quarter-section (160 acres) of Section 27 was made on May 25, 1849 by Lewis W. Bryson. He bought a land warrant earned by John Lumley, a 19-year-old private from Iowa who had served in the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848). Bryson’s quarter-section contained the 80 acres of the southwest part of present-day Como Park, as well as the 80 acres immediately south of those.

It was common for land to be rapidly bought and sold at this time, and less than a year later, Bryson sold these 160 acres. The land changed hands twice more before Christopher Keller bought it in 1852.

Christopher and his wife Anna Keller had emigrated from Germany in 1845 with their six children. The family first settled in Wisconsin and later moved

1867 Rose Township map showing Como Lake and Christopher Keller’s 160 acres.  
Image: L.G. Bennett: *Atlas of Ramsey County, 1867*



to Saint Paul. The Kellers farmed the land for 15 years. About a month before Christopher's death in January 1868, the land was split into four 40-acre sections, with ownership transferred to four of their children. The 80 acres that became the southwest part of Como Park was split into two sections. Of these, the west 40 acres (where the Classroom is now located) went to their son John and the east 40 acres, to their daughter Christina Wiemann.

According to 1870 population and agricultural censuses, John Keller and his wife Gertrude lived with their three children, a domestic servant, and six other children with the last name Keller. They had a total of 80 acres of land, 20 of which were woodland. They had a horse, five cows, eight oxen, five cattle, and ten swine; they raised barley, spring wheat, oats, potatoes, and corn; and made butter and hay.

Christina and Theodore Wiemann lived with their four children and an adult male relative. The Wiemanns had a total of 60 acres of land, 25 of which were woodland, and two horses, two cows, two cattle, and fifteen swine. They raised oats, spring wheat, potatoes, corn, and peas and beans; and made butter and hay.

It is unclear how much of the land that is now part of Como Park was used for farming purposes and how much was woodland, since both families had more than 40 acres of land. An 1867 map of Rose Township shows more than half of each family's 40 acres as tree-covered.

While the Kellers and other families in the area were farming, Henry "Broad Acres" McKenty, a high-flying real

estate dealer, came to Saint Paul. He arrived in 1851 and began to buy and sell land in the area, part of a speculative boom. He laid out several plats on the east side of Como Lake and in 1857 built a road from Saint Paul to his resort community. An economic downturn that same year ruined him, but the lake became home to at least three hotels after the Civil War.

Saint Paul's city limits were creeping ever closer by the 1870s. Farming in the area changed to reflect this reality as the area became more urban than rural. Many farmers turned to market gardening and dairying instead of grain production.

All four of the Keller children sold their land in Section 27 in 1871 and 1872. John and Gertrude Keller sold their 40 acres to Frank E. Clark. Christina and Theodore Wiemann sold their 40 acres to William R. Marshall (a well-known businessman and former Minnesota Governor).



Aldrich's Hotel on Como Lake, circa 1870.  
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society

## COMO PARK

In the 1870s, well-respected landscape architect Horace W. S. Cleveland urged growing cities to set aside land for public parks before land prices skyrocketed. Pleasure grounds, large parks at the edge of a city, were considered desirable assets for the health and enjoyment of urban dwellers. At Saint Paul's request, Cleveland identified many natural features in the city worthy of preservation as parkland, including the land around Como Lake.

After its purchase, an economic downturn caused the park to lay dormant for 14 years. Some called for its sale, but the City held onto the parcel. By 1887, funds were available, a park board was created, and Cleveland was hired to design Saint Paul's parks and parkways.

Cleveland envisioned a landscape park that brought out the "innate grandeur and beauty" of the natural features within it. He designed curving roads to bring carriages past points of beauty. By the end of his brief tenure, a start had been made on his grand plans.

The construction and layout of the park was completed during Frederick Nussbaumer's 30-year superintendency (1891-1922). Nussbaumer embraced the popular idea at the time that parks should offer playgrounds for organized, active recreation as well as natural beauty. In addition to many ornamental features, such as floral display gardens, lily and lotus ponds, a Japanese garden, and a spectacular glass-domed conservatory, ball fields and tennis courts were added. An unplanned zoo grew haphazardly.

Nussbaumer believed parks should be available to both the "nature-loving enthusiast and frugal workman." More people were able to visit the park once a streetcar line extended to and through the park in the 1890s. The park system kept growing — by 1910 the City owned 68 park properties and the system of parkways was nearly complete.

George Nason (1924-1932) succeeded Nussbaumer and began to pave park drives and create lots for automobile use. He believed parks should be educational and "distinctly beautiful in character."

A park plan from a 1889-1890 park board annual report.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul



An 1872 bond issue of \$100,000 allowed Saint Paul in 1873 to purchase nearly 260 acres of land near Como Lake, then located just outside city boundaries, for a major public park. The City bought 40 acres of land from Frank E. Clark, 193.55 acres from William R. Marshall, and 26.4 acres from William B. Aldrich (who owned a hotel at the lake for a while).



Marjorie McNeely Conservatory at Como Park.  
Photo: Linda Owen / CC BY-NC

Activities in the park included skating, tennis, horseshoes, soccer, ball games, pavement dances, toboggan slides, horse and dog races, and picnicking. During his tenure, the leaky northern arm of Como Lake was dammed and filled and Cozy Lake dried up, leaving room for an 18-hole golf course.

W. LaMont Kaufman served as park superintendent for 33 years (1932-1965). He held the park together through the Great Depression and World War II, and the periods of insufficient budgets afterwards. He used makeshift methods to keep the conservatory from falling into total disrepair, opposing those who deemed it an unnecessary “luxury.” During the war, he and the zookeeper would take their own cars to collect food from stores and hotels for the zoo animals.

Though the main focus and expense during this period became the maintenance of the park, Kaufman was able to take advantage of Works Progress Administration (WPA) crews to complete many projects during the 1930s and early 1940s.

City officials recommended closing the zoo in 1955 but a citizen’s volunteer committee fought to keep it open.

Two superintendents, Bernard Edmonds (1965-1972) and Robert Piram (1973-1998) oversaw the development of long-range plans for the park system, prompted by the 1968 initiation of the Saint Paul Capital Improvement Budget (CIB) process. By 1991, the city had 4,000 acres of parks (over three times that of the early 1900s).

Initially, Como Park was the “central nexus” of Saint Paul’s park system, and large amounts of money were invested in it by both the City and Twin City Rapid Transit Company, the private streetcar company serving Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

As the park system and demand for services grew, funds often did not keep pace. World events and economic downturns limited further development and high-maintenance features were removed or faded away. Vandalism became a problem. The long period of stagnation and decline began to slowly and steadily improve after the completion of a master plan for the zoo in the mid-1970s and a Como Park Master Plan in 1981.

The period following the creation of the master plans has been one of improvement and renewal. Many roads have been removed to reduce traffic congestion while adding green space. With more funds available through private donations, federal sources, and two state constitutional amendments, many of the neglected ornamental features have been restored or rebuilt. Considerable improvements have been made throughout the park, including shoreline restoration, major upgrades to zoo and conservatory exhibits, and significant new building projects.

The development of the southwest 80 acres of the park was influenced by these larger events and trends, by its position away from the center of park activity (the lake, conservatory, and zoo), and by its landscape and the features placed within it, including the Saint Paul Workhouse, park nursery, and streetcar line.



Flamingos at the Como Zoo.  
Photo: Alfonso Sintjago / CC BY-SA

The workhouse in its later years.  
Photo: Ramsey County Historical Society



## SAINT PAUL WORKHOUSE

In 1881, when the development of Como Park was delayed by economic conditions and before a park board was in place to protect park interests, Saint Paul granted 40 acres of parkland to the workhouse board for the construction of a new workhouse on land east of the Classroom. Locating a workhouse on unused parkland on the rural outskirts of the city seemed a prudent idea at the time.

The red brick three-story building opened in 1883 with 30 cells. Its first occupant, David Hoar, a repeat offender described as “a good-natured unfortunate whose appetite has proved his ruin,” was admitted on January 3, sentenced to ten days for drunkenness.

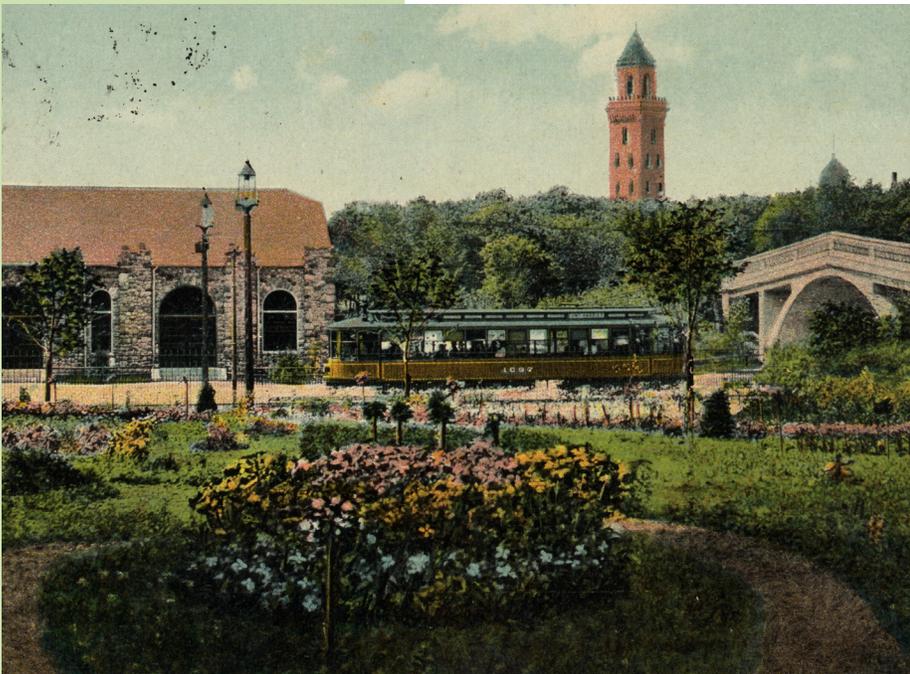
It was a self-sustaining institution. Soon after it opened, inmates helped build

an on-site residence for the workhouse superintendent and two additions to the already-too-small workhouse. Twenty acres of woodland were promptly cleared for a farm and garden. Inmates cultivated hay, oats, corn, potatoes, and other vegetables for sale and use in workhouse operations. A broom factory, and knitting, tailor, and shoe shops operated in various years. Female inmates worked in the laundry and made prison garments. Male inmates also labored in the park, clearing brush and grubbing stumps, building fences, thinning out the woods, and making roads. When inmates were not at work, they were confined to their dark cells.

Most workhouse inmates were first-time offenders convicted of drunkenness, vagrancy, larceny, or disorderly conduct. Workhouse inmates were put to work for sentences that ranged from five days to a year, with shorter sentences being much more common. The primary purpose of the workhouse was to punish convicts through confinement and work, not to offer rehabilitation. The idea of rehabilitation did not come into fashion until the late 1910s and early 1920s, when reforms such as treatment and halfway shelters were instituted.

Four years later, funds finally became available for park development and a park board was established. Almost immediately the park board decried the placement of the workhouse in the park and called for its removal. Though park board president J. A. Wheelock praised the workhouse in 1895 as “exceptionally well managed” and an important factor in the work of park improvements

The workhouse tower is visible in the background of this Como Streetcar Station postcard.  
Image: Minnesota Streetcar Museum



from 1883-1894, he described workhouse inmates as “not the best kind of labor.”

Despite repeated, vehement cries for the workhouse’s removal, the City couldn’t afford to move it elsewhere. While the workhouse was “temporarily” located in the park, the park board wanted to at least hide its “uncouth and forbidding aspect” behind trees.

In 1898, the park board asserted its authority and took possession of 24.5 acres of workhouse grounds consisting of most of the farm fields. When the workhouse board took the matter to court, the court decided that one city board could not sue another. The park board control of the land was maintained. They began to plant trees.

In 1903, the workhouse added a 150-foot tower to the front of the building. Park superintendent Frederick Nussbaumer declared that the workhouse board, “through an uncontrollable spirit for improvement and electrified by a magic touch of art, built a sentinel ... in the shape of a galvanized spire, proclaiming in silent protest, its unpleasant prominence in the surroundings.” The workhouse board replied that the park board had trespassed and spoiled a productive farm, and the tower, while perhaps taller than necessary and architecturally out of proportion, was added for fire safety.

After this, the park board refused to use workhouse labor, calling the benefit of such labor an “old fiction which sought to justify” the workhouse’s “illegal location” in the park. William Pitt Murray, a workhouse board member, defended the workhouse in a 1904 article and observed, perhaps with no small satisfaction, that

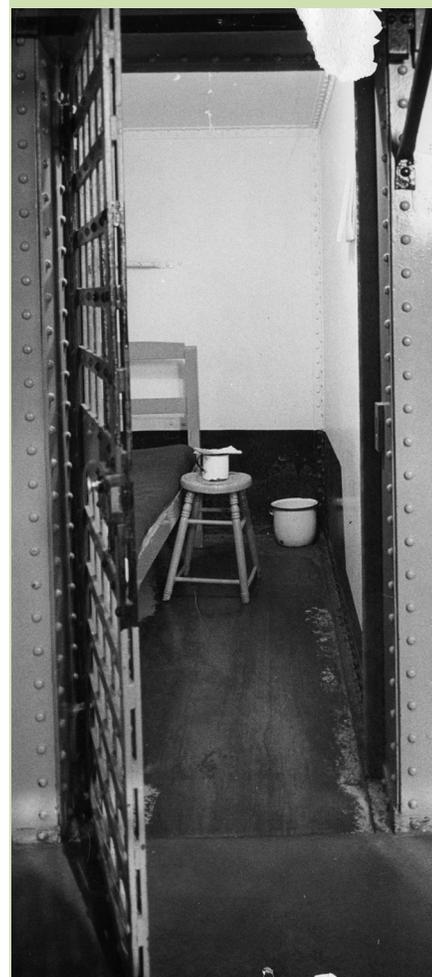
the tower “throws members of the park board into spasms every time they look at it.”

Economic conditions and world events conspired to keep the workhouse in the park and the rhetoric died down. By 1918, the workhouse was already old and obsolete. Its cells had no running water or toilets, it was too small and cost too much to operate, the building wasn’t fireproof (even with the tower), the grounds were too small, and inmates had to walk to work through residential neighborhoods. The building was repeatedly condemned. Each time, makeshift repairs were made to keep it going. Finally in 1960, the “ancient, unloved, and unlovely” old workhouse was torn down after a new facility opened in Maplewood.

The placement of the workhouse in Como Park had a significant impact on the development of the southwest 80 acres of the park. Because its placement was viewed as temporary by park officials, early park plans envisioned these 80 acres as a whole, to be fully developed only after the removal of the workhouse. Because the workhouse remained in the park for over 70 years, those early plans never came to fruition.

In 1962, a swimming pool was built on two acres of the former site. Remnants of the old workhouse resurfaced in 2011, when old bricks and debris were found more than 30 feet deep during excavation for the new Como Regional Park Pool.

Workhouse cell circa 1950. Note the slop bucket in the corner.  
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society



Como Park nursery.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul



## NURSERY

In 1888, a park nursery was created at the southwest corner of the park. Trees and shrubs from an old (non-park) nursery and from city lots to be sold were transplanted into the new nursery at Como Park. Native plants from adjoining woods were transplanted directly to barren borders along new park drives.

A year later, the nursery contained 2,179 trees, shrubs, and vines. Specimens included spruce, white pine, and arborvitae; soft maple, box elder, elm, and honey locust; ash, mountain ash, catalpa, butternut, and golden willow; lilacs, barberry, honeysuckle, and roses; viburnum, spirea, and weigela; and Virginia creeper and wild grape vines.

Initially, mostly native plants were grown and planted in the park, but by 1892, non-native trees and shrubs, such as rhododendron, azalea, forsythia, red bud, and magnolia, had been tried and were doing well.

By 1892, the nursery had grown to include 15,556 trees, shrubs, and vines, most of which were very young. After the expansion of the park's irrigation system the nursery grew to over eight acres in 1903. Its stock rose to a peak for this era: 40,053, including 11,684 elms ranging from seedlings to 2.5 inches in diameter, and, unfortunately for future generations, 2,172 *Rhamnus cathartica*—invasive buckthorn. By 1946, the nursery reached its greatest extent of 10-12 acres.

The location of the nursery at the park's southwest corner led to the placement of park maintenance buildings in the area. In the early 1900s, a stable and a blacksmith shop were built. This corner now holds the park system's Central Service Facility/Park Permit Office, as well as buildings for Saint Paul Animal Control and the Animal Humane Society.

In its early days, the nursery supplied plants for all city parks, parkways, and street boulevards. Between 1920 and 1945, the City owned and operated three nurseries: a municipal forest, used for street plantings; a nursery at Hidden Falls; and the nursery at Como Park, the largest of the three. The Como Park nursery was completely renovated in 1925 after a five-year lull in its use. It operated until 1946, when a lack of labor caused by World War II led to its abandonment.

A large portion of the nursery remains in the wooded section of the park between the maintenance buildings and the Classroom. North-south rows of hackberry, ash, and elm are still visible.

Excerpt of Como Park nursery stock list, 1903.  
Image: City of Saint Paul

### NURSERY STOCK

<i>Pinus devaricata</i> , Jack Pine, including 50 large.....	89
<i>Pinus ponderosa scopulorum</i> , Bull Pine, including 100 large.....	131
<i>Pinus strobus</i> , White Pine.....	9
<i>Abies concolor</i> , Rocky Mountain Spruce.....	100
<i>Abies excelsa</i> , Norway Spruce, including 60 large.....	291
<i>Abies pungess</i> , Colorado Blue Spruce, including 40 large..	77
<i>Pseudotsuga taxifolio</i> , Douglass Spruce, including 35 large..	59
<i>Thuja occidentalis</i> , American Arborvitae.....	77
<i>Juniperus Virginiana</i> , Red Cedar.....	25
<i>Tilia Americana</i> , American Linden, 2½ inch.....	102
<i>Ulmus Americana</i> , American Elm, 2½ inch.....	929
<i>Ulmus Americana</i> , American Elm, 2 inch.....	1,080
<i>Ulmus Americana</i> , American Elm, 1 inch.....	4,560
<i>Ulmus Americana</i> , American Elm, ½ inch.....	350



Red-winged blackbird.  
Photo: USFWS / CC BY

## BIRD SANCTUARY

The former nursery became a bird sanctuary in 1952, when the Saint Paul Audubon Society approached Bernard T. Holland, Saint Paul's Commissioner of Parks and Playgrounds, about potential sanctuary sites. The effort was led by Pearl M. Jewell, a local school principal and Audubon member. Audubon Societies around the country were developing bird sanctuaries and nature centers at this time as part of their conservation efforts.

The former nursery site had both open and wooded areas, with plenty of habitat, seeds, berries, and nuts to attract birds. The Joyce Kilmer Cascade and Pool, a water feature built in 1936, across Como Avenue provided a nearby source of water.

Saint Paul Audubon members had high hopes for the sanctuary. A sanctuary board was created to oversee its care and development. Members erected birdhouses and feeders, made trails through the area, and planted seeds for cosmos and sunflowers. They held clean-up events with a local Boy Scout troop and field trips that often ended with picnics at the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Fireplace, further east up the road. Up to 40 species of birds were seen in and around the sanctuary during visits and field trips, including pheasants. They expected that the sanctuary would also be a place teachers could bring their students to study birds and their habitats.



Unfortunately, the secluded site of the sanctuary was a magnet for vandals, who repeatedly damaged or destroyed the feeders and birdhouses, once even setting fire to a grassy area. By 1960, after eight years of excitement and disappointment, Audubon members had had enough. They stopped replacing the feeders and birdhouses and stopped mentioning the sanctuary in newsletters. By 1968, members had thrown their efforts into a new Audubon Center near Sandstone, Minnesota. A sign proclaiming that the tract is dedicated to the Audubon Society remains along the walking path of former Como Avenue.

Pioneer Press article circa 1952. Lower center photo shows W. LaMont Kaufman and Pearl Jewell at the Joyce Kilmer Cascade.  
Image: Pioneer Press, Minnesota Historical Society

## COMO-HARRIET STREETCAR LINE

The Como-Harriet Streetcar Line had a great impact on Como Park with its physical presence in the park, its ability to bring many visitors to the park inexpensively, and the investments in the park made by the private operator of the line, Twin City Rapid Transit Company (TCRT).

Before electric streetcars reached Como Park, park visitors had no convenient, affordable method of public transportation to the park. Horsecar and cable car lines did not extend to the park. An expensive omnibus ran to the lake only three times a week in warm weather.

More efficient electric streetcars replaced horsecars and cable cars as early as 1890 in Saint Paul. When streetcars reached Como Park in 1893, the park became easily accessible to visitors. A ride to the park from downtown Saint Paul took half an hour and cost an affordable five cents.

Visitors arrived via a single loop track at a small waiting station near Lexington and Horton.

In 1898, the park board agreed to allow the streetcar line to be built through the park, despite their strong misgivings about its negative aesthetic impact on the park. In the end, they determined that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages and the Como-Harriet line became the second of four interurban lines that operated between Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

The new intercity line greatly increased park attendance. More than one million people visited Como Park in 1898, with up to 40,000 in the park at one time.

TCRT agreed to build bridges over road intersections, gave money for the grading of Midway Parkway, and installed electric arc lights in the park. They built a new wooden waiting station and contributed money to expand seating at the lakeside pavilion and build a music float for the nightly concerts they sponsored.



Streetcar crossing Beulah Lane bridge in the Classroom.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul

The Como-Harriet line was the longest line, connecting Lake Harriet, Lake Calhoun, downtown Minneapolis, Como Park, and downtown Saint Paul. Between 1906 and 1932 the line extended to Hopkins, Excelsior, Deephaven, and Tonka Bay.

Tracks in the park were designed to be as aesthetically pleasing as possible, with no cuts or embankments, and were to be hidden by trees. The bridges would be made into ornamental features of the park.

The park board wanted to improve the southwest part of the park, where the line ran. One of the problems in the development of the area was its distance from the rest of the park. The park board hoped a stop and platform near the picnic grounds would ease access to this area, but no stop was ever added between the station and the stop at the corner of Hamline and Como.

A bridge was built over Beulah Lane in 1898. In 1904, when double tracks replaced the single loop at the station, TCRT built two more bridges — an automobile bridge to bring Lexington Avenue over the tracks and a footbridge to carry people safely over the tracks. They also built a new stone station and contributed \$30,000 used to construct a new lakeside pavilion.

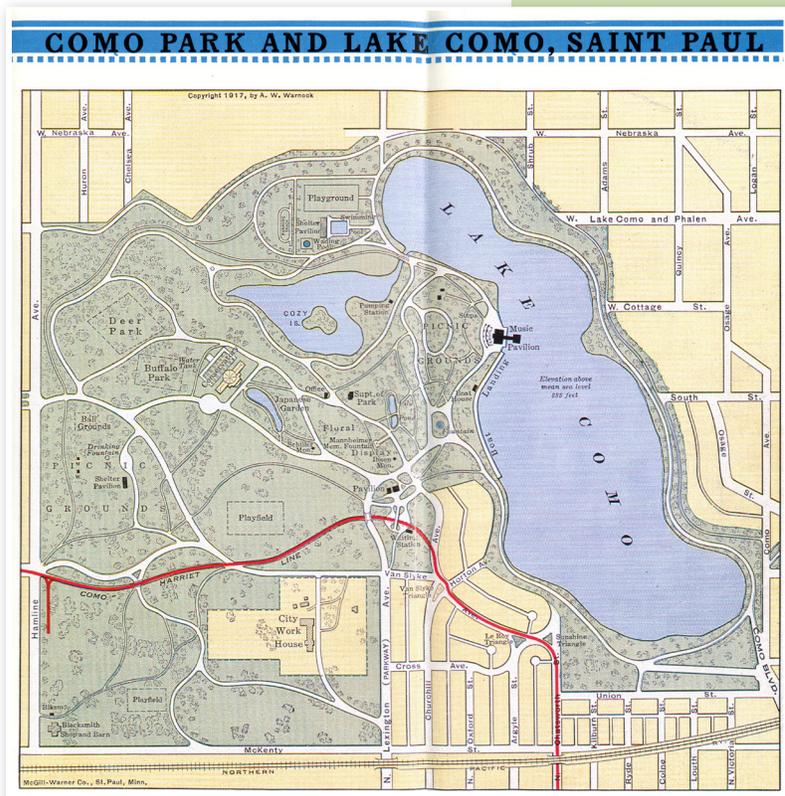
A “Como Park” streetcar operated between downtown Saint Paul and a **wye** (triangular junction) and storage track at Hamline (likely added in 1904). Both the storage track and wye were removed by 1924, when Como Avenue was cut through the park from Hamline to Lexington.

Streetcars reached their peak in the 1920s. TCRT then had 523 miles of track, no public subsidy, and 200 million passengers a year. Most lines ran every ten minutes.

The increase in automobiles, freeways, and suburbs ultimately led to the demise of the streetcar. Buses, which could be operated with less expense and greater flexibility, took over the route in Saint Paul in 1953. The Como-Harriet line, the last line in operation, was completely abandoned in 1954 and its tracks were removed from the park four years later.

The stone bridge abutments at Beulah Lane remained and in 2008 were incorporated into a reconstructed bridge, part of a bicycle and pedestrian path following the route of the former streetcar line through the Classroom.

1917 McGill-Warner Co. map of Como-Harriet streetcar line through Como Park. Note the wye at Hamline. Image: Minnesota Streetcar Museum



## MCMURRAY FIELD

As early as 1890, the high plateau on the western end of present-day McMurray Field was identified as suitable for playgrounds due to its broad, level land. The eastern part of the field, down a hill from the plateau, was still part of the workhouse grounds. Plans were made for baseball diamonds, tennis courts, and other playgrounds on the high plateau, while park drives would crisscross the eastern end and trees and shrubs would be planted to replace the plowed fields of the workhouse farm.

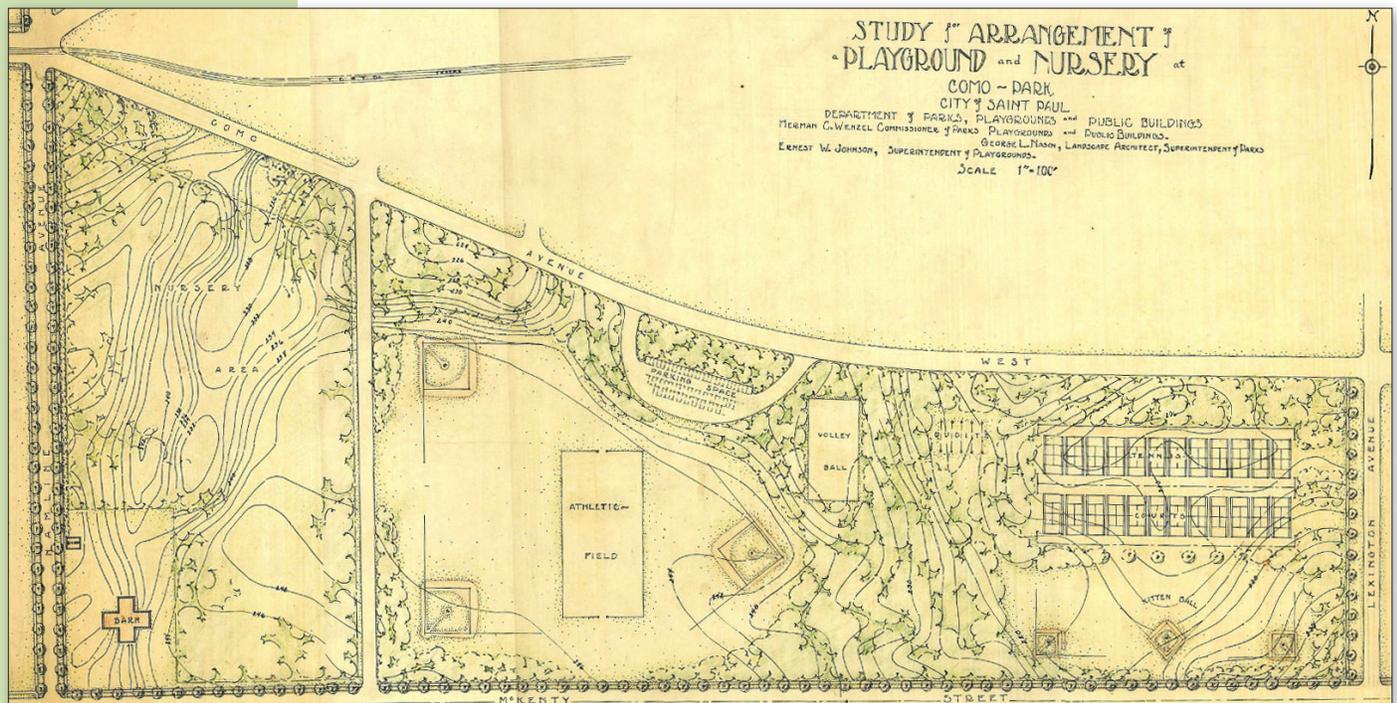
In 1898, the streetcar line brought more attention to this “large and attractive” but until then “neglected and unimproved” part of the park. After the park board took control of the bulk of the workhouse grounds that same

year, they began to implement their playground and beautification plans.

Railroad tracks ran parallel to the park’s southern boundary. When a bridge carrying the tracks over Lexington was completed in 1907, the park board felt a renewed sense of urgency to improve this part of the park as a grand entranceway. The workhouse, coupled with a lack of funds, stalled any progress.

Attention turned to a different part of the park in 1905. Eleven acres of swampy land (once part of Como Lake) had been recently acquired. A plan was proposed for extensive playgrounds on the new site, as the high plateau was rejected as too isolated. A start was made on the new playground at the swampy location in 1919, but it never progressed.

Plan for two-level athletic field, circa 1924. Note the park nursery on the left. Image: City of Saint Paul



In 1924, Como Avenue was cut through the southwest part of the park from Hamline to Lexington. It became the northern border of the two-level field, separating it from the workhouse. At the same time, plans were made to develop both levels as play fields and this time plans stuck. The field was partially graded in 1925. Further grading was done in 1929, the same year it was named for Saint Paul businessman William McMurray.

McMurray was a successful tea merchant and park advisory board member. He was also an extremely generous man, to the financial detriment of himself and his company. In 1922 he donated 25 acres of land (bought with borrowed money) to Saint Paul, which became part of Battle Creek Regional Park. By 1944, he'd lost everything but lived quite happily. In an interview with the Pioneer Press he said, "Where is the money? I haven't the slightest idea, but I hope it did some people some good."

Aerial views of the field from the 1940s show several kitten ball (an early version of softball) fields in the lower eastern end, tennis courts in the middle along the southern edge, and a few baseball fields on the western upper end.

In 1953, the higher, western end of the field was excavated to create one level. The land occupied by Como Park consists of deposits of sand and gravel from Glacial Lake Hamline. McMurray Field has often been referred to as a "former gravel pit," but this was only true in 1953. The transition from two levels to one added two badly needed baseball fields, according to a former municipal athletics employee.

The 32-acre field has since been used for a variety of sports, including baseball, soccer, football, and hockey. For many years, it has also been the site of the Hmong Freedom Celebration, a multi-day sports festival drawing crowds in the tens of thousands from all over the world.

**The Hmong Freedom Celebration's main draw is soccer but features traditional sports brought from Southeast Asia. Takraw, or kato, is a kick volleyball game involving a rattan ball. Tuj lub, or top spinning, involves knocking down a rapidly spinning, grapefruit-sized top by flinging another top from a distance.**



1953 excavation of McMurray Field.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul

## JOYCE KILMER ARBORETUM

The Joyce Kilmer Arboretum was located west of the workhouse (where the Classroom is today). It was established in 1935 and contained paths, a rustic entrance gate, a large stone fireplace, and a limestone-edged cascade and pool.

Park superintendent W. LaMont Kaufman identified the site as suitable for the development of an arboretum given its fine trees, rolling hills and valleys, and a natural lagoon. He designed both the fireplace and the cascade and pool. He planned to plant and label all of the family groups of plants, trees, and shrubs native to this part of Minnesota.

In 1935, when construction in the arboretum was already underway, Kaufman approached the Joyce Kilmer Post of the American Legion, of which he was a charter member, to ask for

funds for its development. The patriotic veterans' organization obliged.

The Kilmer Post was named after poet Alfred Joyce Kilmer, who died while serving in France in 1918 during World War I. He wrote the well-known poem "Trees" in 1913, which begins, "I think that I shall never see/a poem lovely as a tree." Kaufman, who also fought and was injured in the war, was fond of quoting "Trees" in his work as a landscape architect. He had the poem engraved on a wooden plaque that was hung from an oak tree near the fireplace.

WPA crews completed construction of the fireplace and the limestone cascade and pool in 1936. The fireplace design incorporated an old three-arched drinking fountain from the nearby streetcar station and stones from a home on Summit Avenue. Many evergreens were planted around the cascade.



W. LaMont Kaufman at fireplace entrance gate, circa 1936.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul



Joyce Kilmer Cascade and Pool, 1936.  
W. LaMont Kaufman, second from right.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul

Initial planting for the “proposed” arboretum was to begin in the spring of 1943. Kaufman noted that this wooded area, “located in the heart of the city, should be of great scenic and educational value to all nature groups and lovers of wild life.” It is likely that the economic conditions of the late 1930s and World War II greatly influenced the development (or lack thereof) of the arboretum.

The area became more secluded when streetcars stopped running through in 1953. Vandalism became a problem, with graffiti and out-of-control fires at the fireplace. Locals used the area for late-night parties. By 1968 the fireplace had sustained enough damage to require extensive structural repairs.

In 1966, the western end of the arboretum was reduced in size when

roads were realigned. A wooded section was lost and a small triangular island of land was created. The sections of roads that cut through the arboretum were removed in 1985. While better integrating the park and greatly reducing automobile traffic, this caused even more seclusion in the area.

In the years that followed, the cascade stopped running and became completely overgrown. The fireplace, nicknamed the “Dutch Ovens” by locals, sat covered in graffiti and crumbling inside a low chain-link fence. The arboretum became overrun by buckthorn and other invasive plants. Vagrants and dirt-bikers were frequent users until 2003, when community volunteers began to clean up the area and explore the idea of an outdoor classroom.



W. LaMont Kaufman (left) and Fred Truax, Parks Commissioner (right) at Joyce Kilmer Fireplace, 1936.  
Their initials can be seen at the top of the fireplace.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul

A woodchuck (also known as a groundhog) photographed by a trail camera in the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom. Photo: City of Saint Paul



## COMO WOODLAND OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

The idea for the outdoor classroom initially came from a community resident, Deb Robinson, who researched outdoor education as a student for a grant-writing and project development class. Robinson brought her idea to the Como Community Council's Environment Committee for support in 2005. She was a member of the committee, which had organized buckthorn busts and trash removal events in the woodland since 2003.

At the time of her initial idea, Robinson noted that "rumors had been circulating that the woodland site was being considered as a possible parking lot or dog park." She and others felt it should remain a woodland and could be of educational value.

In 2006, a project advisory committee was formed. That committee, along with Saint Paul Parks and Recreation staff, and students and teachers from local schools, began to seek grants to develop the outdoor classroom.

Small grants from local foundations and nonprofit organizations funded environmental education projects, bird habitat research, buckthorn busts, and high school student field days.

A comprehensive master plan, funded by Saint Paul's Capital Improvement Budget (CIB), was completed in 2008. It divided the Classroom into eight study areas: oak woodland, transitional woodland, oak savanna, ephemeral wetland, coniferous forest, tallgrass prairie, display gardens, and sedge meadow. It also broke the project into five development phases.

Large grants were received for the first three phases of the project. Phase 1, the restoration of the Joyce Kilmer Fireplace, received \$242,100 from the Legacy Amendment's Parks and Trails Fund, allotted by the Metropolitan Council. Phases 2 and 3, which included the development of trails and signage, the restoration and installation of outdoor study areas, and teacher training and student involvement, received \$218,000 from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

The restoration of the fireplace was completed in 2011. Classes from two local elementary schools participated in poetry workshops and walking field trips to the fireplace before the restoration. After the restoration, the same students attended a rededication ceremony and read their poems.

Phases 2 and 3 were completed in 2014. Invasive species such as buckthorn, Tartarian honeysuckle, garlic mustard, and common burdock were removed from the whole site by Conservation Corps Minnesota crews and volunteers. The study areas installed or restored included the oak woodland, pine-oak woodland, oak savanna, tallgrass prairie, shortgrass prairie, oak forest, and terrace forest. In addition, a propagation garden area, where native plants can be grown, was constructed. These study areas reflect some changes that were made to the initial master plan. Accessible gravel trails and four entry signs were installed. Grants from the Minnesota Historical Society funded the content for 27 interpretive posts and the development of this guidebook. Cedar split-rail fencing was added to

protect prairie areas after several acts of vandalism.

Two local schools designated the Classroom as their Minnesota DNR School Forest — Great River School and Crossroads Elementary — and nearly 200 educators attended training sessions. Over 1,900 youth were engaged in education and restoration activities.

In the years to come, the ongoing efforts of parks staff and community and student volunteers will be required for site maintenance and the continued development of the Classroom's plant communities.

## CONCLUSION

The Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom site has been used in different ways by different groups of people. For generations, the site offered natural resources to Dakota and Ojibwe who lived near or passed through the area. For a short 24 years, it was bought and sold by speculators and settlers. For over 140 years, it has been a part of Saint Paul's Como Regional Park.

As parkland, the area has served many purposes. For more than 70 years, workhouse inmates toiled and passed their sentences in an uncomfortable old building. When the building was finally removed, people came to swim in a new pool. One corner of the site was dedicated to the work of the park, home to a nursery and maintenance buildings. Level fields were used for recreational sports. People passed through the site in carriages, streetcars, and automobiles, as well as on bicycles and on foot. Wooded areas became an arboretum, bird sanctuary, and outdoor

classroom, preserving nature for people and wildlife. Today the site continues to be used for many of the same purposes.

Volunteers remove invasive garlic mustard plants from the Classroom.  
Photo: City of Saint Paul

