

WRIGHT PARK AND THE SEYMOUR CONSERVATORY

Caroline Gallacci

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[Editor Notes: The following history of Wright Park and Seymour Conservatory was written in 1976 and submitted to the National Park Service for nomination on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was approved Oct 8, 1976.]

Wright Park



Wright Park is a locally popular urban green space created on a parcel of land which was donated to the City of Tacoma by the Tacoma Land Company in 1886. The Park is bordered on the north and south by Division Avenue and Sixth Avenue, on the east and west by "G" Street and "I" Street. It provides an important link between Tacoma's downtown commercial area to the southeast and the residential Stadium-Seminary area to the northwest. Covering a total of twenty-seven acres, the Park is easily accessible from adjacent neighborhoods.

Topographically, the Park consists of low rolling hills and valleys, in general rising in an easterly direction from "I" Street to "G" Street. Wright Park is a planned arboretum, distinguished by its unusually large variety of trees, shrubs, and flowers, its carefully landscaped vistas, and its assemblage of civic and social memorials and markers.

E. O. Schwacjeral, landscape architect, and Ebenezer R. Roberts, professional gardener with seven years experience at Kew Gardens in England, may be credited with the physical layout and natural features of the Park. Its plan belongs essentially to the picturesque school of landscape design, and was undoubtedly inspired by Frederick Law Olmstead's 1873 plan for the City of Tacoma (never used).



The Park is criss-crossed by meandering gravel paths, but movement occurs chiefly in a north-south direction through a low-lying central valley, following the original extension of Yakima Avenue to Division Avenue on the north. At the south end of the Park, in the vicinity of its original formal entrance are now a bowling green and putting green. A small pond at the northwest corner, an original feature of the Park's design, is a rest stop for migrating ducks and geese.

At present, 111 varieties of trees remain standing, some of which still display original identification tags. In addition to North American species, plantings brought directly from Europe via Kew Gardens enhance the landscape and provide contrast with more familiar, native varieties. A complete listing of extant trees would include the following varieties: English Cherry, Laurel, Norway Spruce, Sassafras, Irish Yew, Monkey Puzzle, Oregon Grape, and Colorado Spruce.

The Park presently encompasses a number of man-made elements continuously added over the years. A majority of these take the form of small and relatively unobtrusive monuments and memorials donated by individuals and by civic and social organizations. Several statues were the gift of Clinton R. Ferry, son of Elisha P. Ferry, first governor of Washington State. These include the "Brussels Lions" which flank the original Park entrance at Yakima and Sixth Avenues, the "Fisherman's Daughter" from Genoa, Italy, and the "Dancing Girls", also cast in Brussels. Other memorials and markers include such diverse elements as a Spanish cannon of 1784 (donor unknown), a flagstaff erected in 1898 in honor of Dewey's victory in Manila, a United States Coast and Geodetic Survey marker, the Marcissa Whitman memorial (donated by the D.A.R. in honor of the pioneer teacher), and "The Leaf" statue of masonry and bronze (commissioned by the City of Tacoma in 1975, created by sculptor Larry Anderson).

A substantial number of early lampposts remain in Wright Park, lining the perimeter and the interior gravel paths. The lamppost shafts are constructed of cast iron sheathing over a poured concrete core. The posts are capped with "Lotus" capitals and urn-shaped globes of milk glass. The lamps were apparently wired for electricity at the time of their installation. Recently constructed features such as horseshoe pits, shuffleboard courts, play equipment, and a paved basketball court contribute to the utility of the Park,

On May 29, 1886 the Tacoma Land Company deeded approximately 27 acres of land to the City of Tacoma exclusively for park purposes. This had followed other gifts to the city, under the auspices of Charles B. Wright, then President of the Company, which were designed to transform the railroad terminus from a village into a bustling, respectable community, and to enhance the land investments of the Northern Pacific Railroad through an anticipated influx of population.

Following the philosophy of Frederick Law Olmstead, who had designed an unused plan for the city in 1873, Tacoma's residential areas were to be encased in a park-like atmosphere, and this deeded property was to become the focal point - The Park - for the residential properties which, with time, would encircle it. And it was befitting to memorialize the generosity of Charles B. Wright by naming the park in his honor. Wright never lived in Tacoma, but in Pennsylvania; nevertheless, it was he who was instrumental in choosing Tacoma as the terminus. It was he who, throughout his later life, encouraged investment in the potential future of the Pacific Northwest.

When the land for the Park was acquired, it was covered by fallen trees, stumps, and under- brush. That portion in the vicinity of the duck pond was a gulch which required thousands of yards of dirt to fill. The early work on the park must have been shaky, for at one point, when the city was in danger of losing Wright Park for failure to comply with the conditions of the deed, Nelson Bennett, architect of the famous Stampede Tunnel through the Cascades, advanced his personal funds for improvement work in the park.

Nelson Bennett was only one man among the many whose interest contributed to the creation and design of Wright Park. Three who should be singled out are E.O.Schwageral, George Browne, and Ebenezer R. Roberts, for it was this trio which was responsible for the original design and plantings. This work did not really begin until 1890 when Schwageral prepared the plans. In the same year Ebenezer Roberts, later to be called the "Father of Wright Park", was employed by the Tacoma Park Board. Roberts was a professional gardener who had immigrated to Tacoma from England in 1888. Before coming to this country he spent seven years apprenticeship at Kew Gardens on the Thames. It was this experience, plus his association with George Browne, which resulted in the eventual acquisition and planting of 111 different varieties of trees. Browne was Treasurer of the St. Paul and Tacoma Lumber Company (now St. Regis), later President of the Board of Park Commissioners and was instrumental in instituting the present park system.

The seedlings were acquired by Browne while on a trip to England. Roberts had detailed a listing of needed species which was presented to the park officials Roberts had known in England, and it has been said that Browne returned with a freight car full of trees, many purchased by himself. While it cannot be said with certainty that Roberts planted every tree himself, we can be sure he supervised the planting, selecting every spot for the seedlings and spacing each with a view towards growth in the future, although they are not particularly compatible in a visual sense with the natural surroundings.

The most intrusive additions are service buildings of various kinds: a brick faced, one-story structure located near the Park entrance (housing park shops and a Senior Citizens' Center), two brick restroom facilities (one constructed several decades ago), and a small, frame, park equipment storage shed to the rear of the Senior Citizens' Center.

Seymour Conservatory

Facing "G" Street on the east side of the Park is the Seymour Conservatory. W.W.Seymour donated funds for its construction in 1907. The structure is of modest proportions, and its asymmetrical floor plan and unusual massing contribute to its picturesque quality. The conservatory consists of a central twelve-sided rotunda. The steel-ribbed, glazed, wall structure rises to meet a twelve-sided domical vault of faceted copper. The drum upon which the copper vault rests is comprised of a continuous series of hinged, three- light wooden sash. Two major wings, each 20 feet by 48 feet, and a central entry wing, 20 feet by 22 feet, have gabled roof surfaces which meet the vertical walks in a slight curve, thus giving the appearance of a Tudor arch configuration. The major side wings extend from the rotunda at an angle approximately 60 degrees from the center axis of the entry wing.

The structure rests on a poured concrete foundation which rises three feet above grade. Framing consists of four-inch steel webs, between which narrow steel mullions anchor the panes themselves vertically, at twelve-inch intervals. The panes vary from 12 inches by 12 inches to 12 inches by 18 inches, and are horizontally overlapped and sealed to one another. Portions of the structure, notably the base of the rotunda to the rear, and the hinged vents at the ridge of each wing, are formed of glazed wooden sash.

The conservatory is heated by a forced hot water system. The original coal-burning furnace, located in the basement below the north wing, is still intact, although oil is the fuel which is currently in use. Approximately 20 feet from the rear of the conservatory is the original concrete chimney, connected to the furnace by a flue below grade. In the greenhouse itself, hot water coils extend around the perimeters of the concrete base. Other features which contribute to effective climate control are: 1) adjustable hinged vents in the drum of the rotunda, operated from below by an umbrella mechanism, 2) hinged vents along the ridge of each wing, operated by a rack and pinion mechanism, and 3) synthetic green netting recently attached to the exterior to regulate the radiation of strong sunlight.



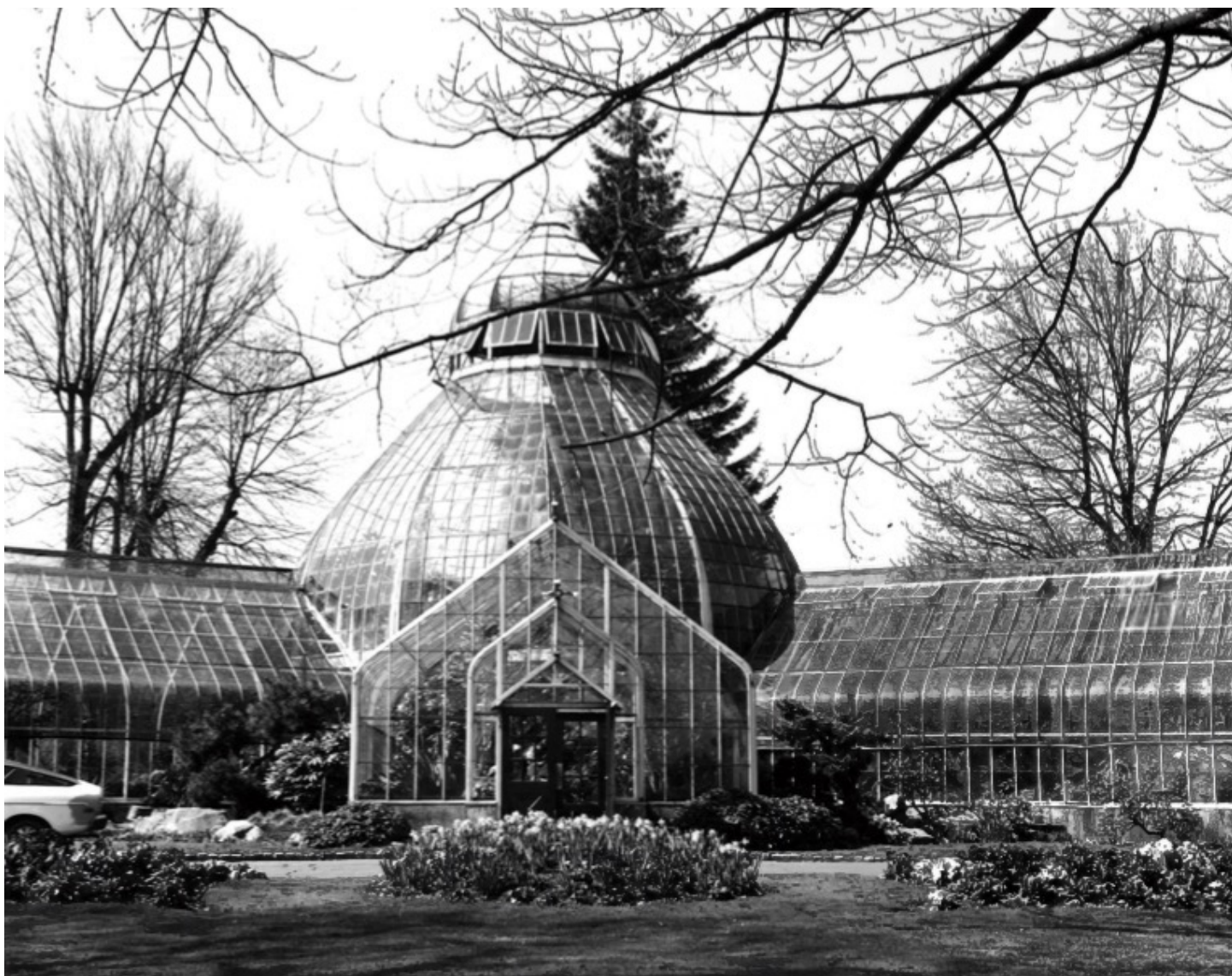
The conservatory has undergone a certain amount of alteration over the years. An early photograph, apparently taken shortly after construction, shows an original lantern of glass and steel rather than copper. At that time, each wing extension featured geometrically-

patterned cresting at its ridge, as well as a classically inspired, balustraded, false facade. These elements, removed in the late 1920's - early 1930's added an aura of elegance to the original structure which is no longer quite so formally stated.

Restoration work, necessitated by the deterioration of joints between mullions and glazing, was initiated in 1975. Specifically, rusting of the steel mullions and subsequent failure of the putty bond are responsible for the faulty joints. Glazing in the wings has been largely removed, cleaned, and/or replaced, as have a number of rusted steel elements.

Restoration work of this nature is to continue in the rotunda area in the summer of 1976. A new heating system is tentatively planned for the future, although the present system has operated adequately to date.

The sensory effect of the conservatory's interior in terms of sound, sight, and smell is most dramatic. Since the time of its construction, it has housed an unusual assemblage of rare plants and flowers. Over 2000 plantings are currently on display within this small green house. Tropical fruit trees, palms, slipperwort, Bird-of-Paradise, rubber, tapioca, and coffee plants are successfully grown here. Bulbs and plantings for distribution to other Tacoma Parks are grown here, and the facility is used as an educational tool by local schools.



Roberts later became Superintendent of Tacoma Parks, and the Metropolitan Park District history states that it was due to him that the conservatory was erected by William W. Seymour. Before this, however, other events of note occurred. The original grant of property excluded the southwest corner at the intersection of South I and 6th Avenue, and a small triangular lot at the intersection of Division Avenue and "G" Street. In 1902 the purchase of these two parcels of land squared the park to its present configuration. In 1905 both the houses of the state legislature passed a referendum bill to move the state capitol from Olympia to Tacoma. This was a time when much of Tacoma's economy was being threatened by migration of business and industry to Seattle. It was probably assumed that utilizing Wright Park as the nucleus of a state capitol complex would enhance the prestige of the city, but in the end it was only a dream, for Governor Albert M. Mead vetoed the proposal.

Wright Park early acquired recognition as one of the most artistic artificial nature creations in the Pacific Northwest. The conservatory, a gift of W.W. Seymour who donated \$10,000 for its construction, enhanced its reputation even more. Seymour came to Tacoma in 1890 and established a successful business in loans and land investments. He owned the Tacoma Gas Company in 1907 when the conservatory donation was made, and along with ownership in other public utility companies, was President of the Metropolitan Park Board from 1909 to 1911, when he was elected Mayor. Apart from growing plantings for use in other parks in the city, it has over 2000 plants, some rather rare, on display.

The park has, in the course of its history, evolved into one of the most heavily used community centers in Tacoma, and it early became the home of memorials donated by assorted political and social organizations within the city. A bandstand, a large cedar stump no longer there, once provided a stage for musical entertainment, and notables such as Theodore Roosevelt and Marshall Foch visited. After Tacoma's Stadium, important visitors were shown the park, either to speak, or to plant a memorial tree. The significance of Wright Park is related to this factor of continuous community service - that all those who contributed to its uniqueness as a well-planned arboretum and conservatory did so with an eye towards creating a city neighborhood park which would enliven and educate its citizenry. Tacoma promoters early emphasized the park-like atmosphere of the residential portions of the city as a selling point. While some original plantings were destroyed in the 1962 Columbus Day storm, most of the seedlings originally planted by Ebenezer Roberts still remain to enhance this living, growing, educational and recreational master- piece.

City of Tacoma. Metropolitan Park District History Book. Compiled 1938.

Tacoma News Tribune. Clipping Files.

Interview with Steven Brtghtman, Botanist, Metropolitan Park District, April 2, 1976.