

# Manhattan City Park: Well-planned then and now

Pat Conkwright and Mary Stamey  
Contributing writers

Just imagine, looking out over the valley of the Kansas River 160 years ago and being able to envision a thriving city, bustling with action and industry — and in the very middle of that space, an oasis of shade, green grass, and recreation. That is exactly the vision and foresight shown by the intrepid pioneers who founded Manhattan, Kansas.

The trustees of the newly formed Manhattan Town Association met on July 13, 1855. Their task was to approve a town plat which would guide the future development of the emerging town. The plat would provide for the required streets and avenues, as well as public buildings, market squares, a burying ground, and a city park of 45 acres. Parks were very important to those early citizens. In fact, the city park is the centerpiece of that first map, platted in 1855. The unique vision of Abram Barry, who presented the plat to the governing body, ultimately caused the city of Manhattan to be designated as a “City of Trees”.

Barry believed that the time would come when wider traffic-ways would be needed to accommodate increased population and commerce. He proposed that every seventh street, going north-south would be designated as an avenue (Juliette, Manhattan, etc.), and every seventh street going east-west would be a boulevard (Fort Riley, Bluemont, etc.) The streets would be planted with a single row of trees along each side, but the avenues and boulevards would be planted with a double row. As future traffic



called for wider streets, the outer row of trees could be removed and the inner row would continue to provide shade.

Whether in 1865, 1965 or 2015, Manhattan City Park certainly bears out the label, “City of Trees”. The shaded lanes and spaces for quiet contemplation, countered by the cheerful voices of children on the playground, and the more sports-minded folks engaged in recreational activities provide a variety of options for anyone seeking appreciation of the natural environment.

During its 163 years, the park has been a center for family and community events. From a half-mile race track at the north end for sulky races (horse trotting or pacing races) to a birthday party for Johnny Kaw, Manhattanites congregate to celebrate on the park’s greens. From 1869 until 1887, the county’s annual fair was held in the park. Floral Hall was built to showcase fauna and flora during the fair.

“At a large outlay of money and time, the old Floral Hall, which was blown down over a year ago, has been replaced by a substantial stone octagonal building fifty feet in diameter.” (from The Nationalist, 1875) Today, that same building is on the state’s historical register and is on its way to being placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Early city trustees established a parks commission in 1889.

In 1909, five acres of the park were designated as the location for Chautauquas. Residents enjoyed popular education courses and



A view of City Park Pool in 1950.

Photos courtesy Riley County Historical Society and Museum.

entertainment while sitting on wooden planks. Arbor Day was another celebration begun at the beginning of the 20th century. By 1940 a pavilion was added for such celebrations as the city’s municipal band concerts, church services and reunions. Forty years later, the pavilion was enclosed and a skating rink was added. Lowell Jack sought the city’s approval in 1998 to raise \$200,000 through donations to build an outdoor band shell in honor of Larry Norvell, the high school and municipal band director. Six years later the vision was a reality. With further updates, a new pavilion was dedicated in 2009 as the Wefald Pavilion and GTM Family Center.

Visible reminders that honor the past, that celebrate partnerships or that create a folklore dot the landscape of the park today. The Riley County Historical Society built a log cabin in 1916 to showcase a typical home of Manhattan’s pioneers and serve as its first museum. An obelisk monument to commemorate Coronado’s expedition to Quivira in 1541 was erected in 1904. In 1927, a rose garden was established and then re-done in 1941 after a severe drought wiped it out. A flowing fountain, complete with gargoyles,

was built in 1895 with a basin added in 1908. A move and renovation was completed in 1985. The Harry Wareham family donated funds for a rest stop at the park’s south entrance, while a flag plaza honoring the city’s partnership with the city of Dobrichovice, Czech Republic stands at the southwest entrance of the park. During World War II, K-State’s 100th college training detachment donated a statue of an air crew cadet. It was later damaged and removed. The tallest monument belongs to Johnny Kaw. Erected in 1966, he recently celebrated his 52nd birthday with the announcement of a plaza to be built around him including a walkway to the sunken garden.

One of the most visible and popular uses of the park has been for recreation. Horseshoe competitions attract patrons to this day. A playground has been a part of the park since 1910, with swings and climbing apparatus being constants. Slides, teeter-totters, the unique rocket slides, merry-go-rounds, and a variety of other structures have come and gone throughout the years. Ball diamonds and tennis courts were added in the 1930s. Current plans even call for pickleball courts to be added. Walking paths

and improved lighting were made permanent around the perimeter in 2010.

In the 1920s, community members volunteered their time and shovels to hand dig a swimming hole in the park. The round structure was asphalted at the bottom with concrete sidewalls. WPA funds helped pay for a new pool completed in 1939. By 1950, the park included seven tennis courts, a playground, sunken garden filled and frozen in winter, three ball diamonds, croquet courts, an archery range, a horse-shoe pit, a miniature steam train and a pavilion. Recently, the pool was completely replaced with a series of pools and a splash park.

Whether for the Riley County Fair, a Chautauqua, the FolkLife Festival, Purple Power Play in the Park, Juneteenth, or Johnny Kaw’s birthday, Manhattan citizens gather to celebrate and the City Park has been the place to make it happen. As the city of Manhattan continues to move into the future, the thoughtful planning

of those early founders becomes even more significant. The recent proposals for further park improvements are an example of the continuing efforts of our city leaders to ensure that adequate provision for green space and recreation remain a vital part of our community. The evolving nature of community resources, including outdoor spaces, reflects the historically traditional response of city leaders to the growing and changing needs of our community. Further information on the park’s future can be seen at: [cityofmnhk.com/21/Parks-and-Recreation/](http://cityofmnhk.com/21/Parks-and-Recreation/). More historical information on Riley County’s history is on the Riley County museum’s website: <http://www.rileycountytks.gov/328/Historical-Museum>.

Pat Conkwright and Mary Stamey are retired educators from USD383 and board members of the Riley County Historical Society. This is one of a series of articles written by RCHS members. Photos courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society and Museum.



The City Park fountain as seen in 1895.

## In ambassador’s job, Brownback more relaxed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sam Brownback appears relaxed, looser and more convivial as he settles into his ambassador’s job, miles both geographically and emotionally from where he was during his final, difficult months as Kansas’ governor.

When Brownback left the governor’s office in January, the two-term conservative Republican left behind low approval ratings, ire from fellow Republicans over the state’s fiscal problems and an order from the Kansas Supreme Court to increase spending on public schools.

Five months later, a visibly relaxed Brownback was back in his element. The Kansas City Star reports. He was making jokey sports analogies, ribbing former aide and U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan, boasting about his anti-abortion record in Kansas and asking the faithful for their prayers.

He spoke at the recent National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., his new home. As soon as he’d been introduced in his new role as U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, he wasted no time in drawing laugh-

ter from the audience. “She forgot to mention my favorite title, though: Grandpa!” he said. “We have three grandchildren; five children, we’re expecting 25 grandchildren and my favorite child will be whoever has the most grandchildren.”

He said in an interview after the speech that he hasn’t been following political developments in Kansas very closely. That includes the governor’s race, where Republican Gov. Jeff Colyer, his former lieutenant governor, is in tough contest to keep the office.

Brownback said

his wife had moved to Washington to be with him. That’s a change from when he served 16 years in Congress before being elected governor in 2010 and he commuted between Washington and Kan-

sas. The couple doesn’t return to Kansas a lot, he said.

“I hear from friends,” Brownback said, “but I’m focused here.”

Brownback’s new job has sent him all over the world.

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### Raise your hand if you had Mrs Green for math.



(Estimated at 20% of Manhattanites for the past 37 years of teaching)

Marie Green graduated from Kansas State, taught high school math in Kansas City and Salina then settled in at Manhattan Middle School, and transitioned to Anthony Middle School after it was constructed. She taught 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math, Algebra and Geometry. Mrs Green earned her Masters’ Degree from KSU while taking classes in the summertime and raising 3 young children. Outside of the school day, she volunteered with Math Counts, a competitive mathematics program that promotes mathematics achievement and with her students has won regionals 10 years in a row and recently placed 5<sup>th</sup> at state in 2018. In 2014 she was the USD 383 nominee for 2014 Kansas Teach of the Year. Mrs Green passionately dedicated her time and talents towards tutored students through the Extended Learning Time program and taught night school for many years. After 43 years of teaching, she is retiring in May 2018.

**Thank you for the many years of teaching and service dedicated to educating Kansas children!**