



LANDMARKS
ILLINOIS

2022 MOST ENDANGERED HISTORIC PLACES IN ILLINOIS



Credit: Julia Bachrach

Gillson Park

Wilmette

"The park is so beloved and well used by many people, not just Wilmette residents, and shows that the naturalistic character of its design has stood the test of time."

- MARY SHEA

Neighborhood representative and Co-Founder of Keep Gillson Green



QUICK STATS

LOCATION

Lake Michigan Lakefront
Wilmette, Cook County

Bordered by the North Shore Channel to the south, Michigan Avenue to the west and Lake Avenue (park section) and Forest Avenue (beach section) to the north.

YEAR BUILT

1915

Expanded and improved 1937

ARCHITECT

Benjamin E. Gage

Later phase: C.D. Wagstaff & Robert E. Everly



CURRENT OWNER

Wilmette Park District

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

The Prairie-style park has naturalistic features and historic landscape integrity.

WHY IT IS ENDANGERED

The Wilmette Park District Board is considering changes to the park that would alter its passive design by adding more roads and parking.

TAKE ACTION

Reach out to Wilmette Park District Board to encourage a comprehensive plan that has the least impact on the park's historic landscape.

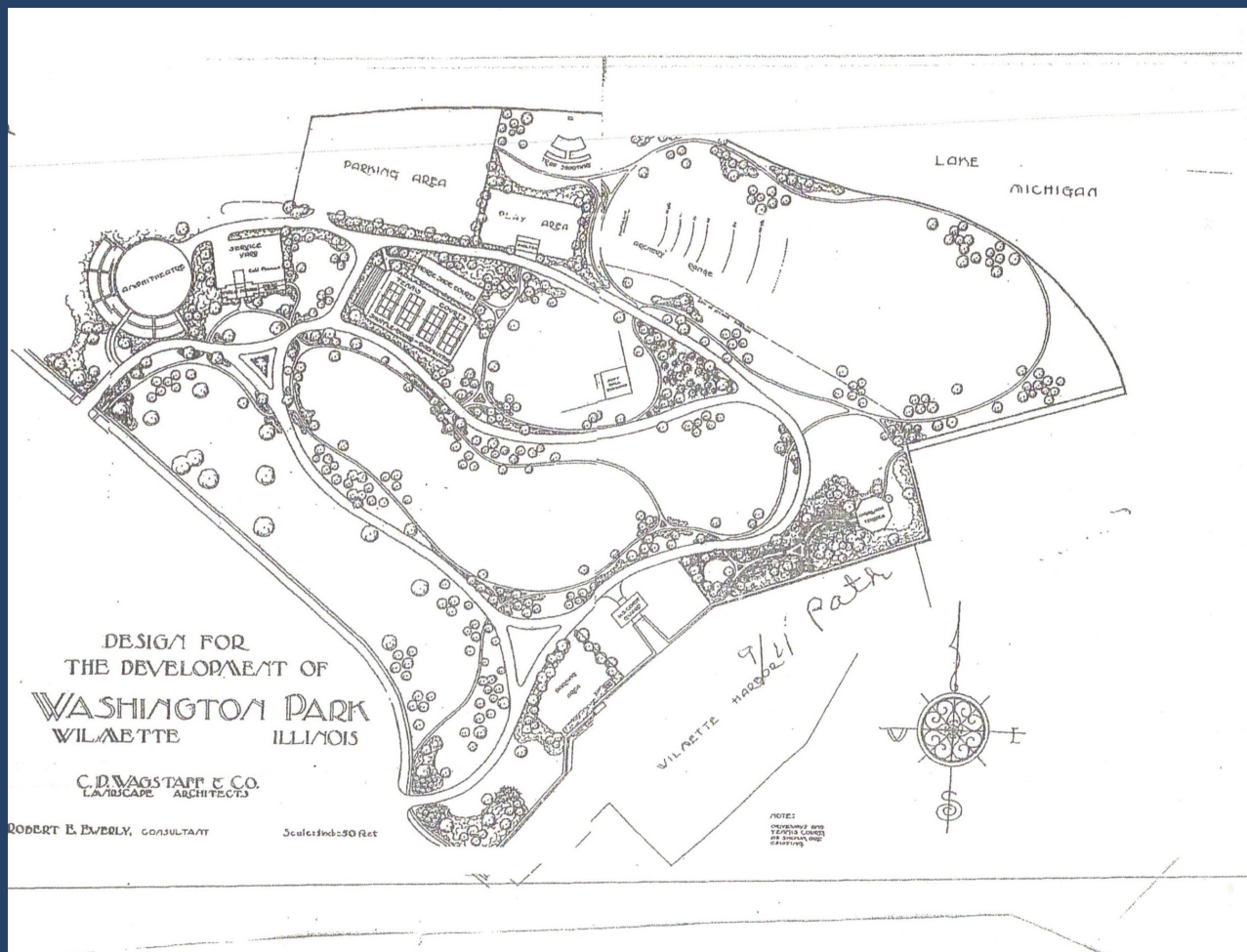


BACKGROUND

Gillson Park is a 60-acre, Prairie-style park on Lake Michigan. In 1905, Colonel Robert R. McCormick led the Chicago Sanitary District and began planning the North Shore Channel to reverse the course of the Chicago River and protect the region's Lake Michigan drinking water. In 1907, McCormick suggested that the fill from the channel be dumped into the lake north of the channel along the Wilmette shore.

This fill created 22 acres of "made land." In 1908, Wilmette residents successfully petitioned to organize a park district. The new district acquired the "made land" and, in 1915, it began to develop Washington Park, originally designed by Benjamin E. Gage, one of the earliest Wilmette Park superintendents.

In 1937, the park was renamed Gillson, in honor of Louis Gillson who served as president of the Wilmette Park District Board from 1908 until 1934. The park was expanded and improved at this time as well. C.D. Wagstaff and Robert E. Everly, two of the region's most talented landscape architects of the mid-20th century, designed the expanded park in a style inspired by noted Prairie School landscape architect Jens Jensen.





BACKGROUND cont.

The park includes many Prairie-style elements, including a stone council ring, stratified stone walls and steps, curvilinear roadways and walking paths, and informal tree plantings and open space. Noted architectural and landscape historian Julia Bachrach said, “Wagstaff and Everly created a thoughtful scheme that incorporated an array of recreational features as well as the existing circuit drive and lawn areas into a lovely naturalistic landscape.”

C.D. Wagstaff and Robert E. Everly’s intact naturalistic landscape is beloved by locals. Wagstaff was known for his landscape designs for the Century of Progress 1933 Chicago World’s Fair. Everly, who knew Jensen and was mentored by him, designed many parks in Glencoe and served as its park superintendent. Several architectural historians, including Bachrach, believe Gillson Park is likely eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The north area of Gillson includes swimming and sailing beaches, a native bird habitat, a wildflower garden and two council rings. It also includes the 8,900-square-foot Lakeview Center, built in 1989, which houses offices, a shelter for summer camps and space for small community events. Adjacent to Lakeview Center is Wallace Bowl, an outdoor venue with lawn and bleacher seating built in 1939 by the [Works Progress Administration](#).



*Gillson Park Wallace Bowl, 1945.
Courtesy of Wilmette Historical Museum*

Gillson’s 1937 design included four tennis courts, walking paths, a public beach, large open lawns, picnic and play areas as well as two harbor walks in addition to its vast open space. In the winter, part of the lawn is flooded for an ice skating rink.

Parking is sufficient for today’s park needs, with 327 parking spaces in a lot adjacent to the existing beach house and 99 parking spaces along the roads that traverse the park’s south end. Visitors can still travel the curvilinear roads, stroll the wide lawns, view the expansive lake vistas and rest on the native stonework — hallmarks of this important Prairie-style landscape design.



CURRENT THREAT

In 2021, the Wilmette Park District [began a comprehensive planning process](#) with community input regarding future improvements to the park. After a series of design options were shared, public surveys and meetings confirmed a majority of residents preferred “Concept 1” of five plans presented, as it was the least intrusive and maintained the park’s historic landscape while making many long-needed improvements. Gillson Park is a remarkably intact historic park and is treasured by Wilmette residents and visitors alike.



The other four concept designs presented to the public, all of which greatly increased roads and parking lots to accommodate a planned expansion of the 1989-built Lakeview Center, would severely alter the naturalistic historic character of the park. The Wilmette Park District Board has discussed changes to Gillson Park that could add up to 108 new parking spaces and the loss of up to 96 mature trees. The plan would move roads and entrances, create two-way traffic and add more structures and concrete. At the park district’s November 2021 board meeting, consultants and residents made clear Concept 1 of the five concepts presented was the public’s preferred choice.

The board has delayed selecting an option, seeking further cost estimates for all five options, including those that would be most destructive to the park’s passive and naturalistic design.

Gillson is identified as one of residents’ favorite parks. In previous years the park district board has pushed for a new beach house, more structures and the addition of concrete parking areas.



CURRENT THREAT cont.

In 2015, residents overwhelmingly defeated a proposed referendum that would have funded a new beach house and a \$1.5 million expansion of the existing Lakeview Center.

An independent survey conducted in 2016 found that over 83 percent of residents were satisfied with Gillson as it is. Several surveys in recent years, including in July 2021, have consistently shown that residents want to preserve Gillson's open space.

When the park district board presented its first concepts for a Comprehensive Plan in May 2021, which included options for additional roads and parking lots, residents formed [Keep Gillson Green](#). The local group worked to educate the public about the proposed plans, urging the park district board to make only minimal changes necessary to repair existing infrastructure and to adopt a master landscaping plan.

In October 2021, despite resident objections, the park district board voted to expand Lakeview Center with a \$1 million budget, which residents believe will continue the park district's effort to expand roads and parking.





CURRENT THREAT cont.

As a result, Keep Gillson Green distributed hundreds of yard signs and more than 850 people signed an online petition advocating limited change to the historic park.

Local organization [Bike Walk Wilmette](#) is also urging improvement to walking and biking paths that will not damage trees.



Preserving Gillson Park will enable visitors to continue to enjoy the park as it was intended—a peaceful place with expansive natural areas to explore at one's own pace.

It appears that the park district board's desire to commercialize the park with revenue-generating spaces for private use is behind the plan to redirect and add roads, add parking and cut mature trees to accommodate an increase in cars.

With such changes, future visitors would experience more traffic congestion, air and noise pollution, less cooling shade and park areas closed for large-scale private events — all to the detriment of the park's historic landscape design and reputation as a place of peaceful escape.

Residents favor the park's preservation and long-delayed infrastructure improvements, such as repairing broken sewers, existing roads and drainage, as well as improving bike and pedestrian access within the park and creating a comprehensive landscaping plan to address tree loss.

Neighborhood representative and co-founder of Keep Gillson Green Mary Shea said, "The park is so beloved and well used by many people, not just Wilmette residents, and shows that the naturalistic character of its design has stood the test of time. The original architects had an understanding and appreciation of the land and its unique location. The original design reflects how people today continue to use and enjoy the park for walking, swimming, bird watching and simply being in nature. The features that give the park its great appeal have so far been retained with an optimum traffic flow. While it is important to maintain the park, significant design changes are not needed, especially those that would alter its natural character with its majestic trees and open green space."



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Speak at Wilmette Park District Board meetings & contact board members asking them to support Concept 1 of five potential design concepts for Gillson Park. Advocate for the preservation of the park's historic landscape design that includes natural space and heritage trees and push to limit the intrusion of more hard surfaces with unnecessary new roads and parking lots. Concept 1 of five concepts presented by consultants would be the least intrusive and maintain the park's historic landscape while making many long-needed improvements.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Park District Board President Michael Murdock

Email: mmurdock@wilpark.org

Submit a public comment for Wilmette Park District Board meetings

Email: swilson@wilpark.org in advance. Comments will be read during the meeting and put into the record.

Keep Gillson Green

[Take Action webpage](#)