

LILY POND PLATEAU DEDICATION

FREDERICK T. PROCTOR PARK
UTICA, NEW YORK



SEPTEMBER 16, 2023

THE LILY POND: A SHORT HISTORY

The iconic Lily Pond—or “Lily Pool,” as it was first called—is the most prominent surviving aspect of the plans renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., created for Utica’s Frederick T. Proctor Park in 1912-14.

The idea of a reflecting pool did not originate, though, with Olmsted. Thomas R. Proctor originally commissioned the respected Buffalo firm of Townsend and Fleming in 1911 to design the park. Their pool would have been located on the east side of the Lily Pond plateau, facing in the direction of the later bathhouses. However, Proctor did not like Townsend and Fleming’s general design for the park and thought that they were working too slowly. In the fall of 1912, he therefore turned the park project over to Olmsted, with whom he had collaborated periodically since 1906.

Olmsted’s plan moved the pool to the southwest, to the base of the hill that slopes down from the park’s main “upper loop.” He also designed a backdrop of shrubs and trees to frame the pond.

The Olmsted blueprint for the Lily Pond, dated March 21, 1913, is somewhat short on details—in fact, it and an accompanying planting guide tell us more about the backdrop of trees and shrubs Olmsted devised for the Lily Pond than it does about the design of the pool itself. It nevertheless helps to flesh out the Lily Pond’s original appearance, along with some photographic evidence from its construction, early postcards, and archaeological evidence discovered during its reconstruction in 2023.

Olmsted’s plan included the stone staircase still located to the northwest of the Lily Pond. However, early photographs show that the wall behind the Lily Pond was faced with stacked slate, rather than the fieldstone facing we see today.

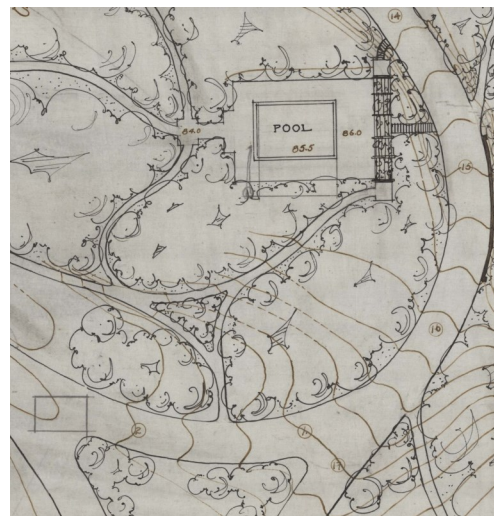
The original plan also specified that the edges of the Lily Pond were to have a “turf slope,” and an early postcard depicts the surrounding ground graded downward toward the Lily Pond and planted with grass. The 2023 restoration also revealed 14 circular holes in the Lily Pond’s floor for aquatic plants, and it is likely that the original design included provisions for neither drainage nor circulation of the water.

All of this suggests that Olmsted gave the Lily Pond a naturalized feel even though it was basically a formal concrete reflecting pool. This was consistent with the Olmsted family style, which tried to disguise the work of the human hand as much as possible.

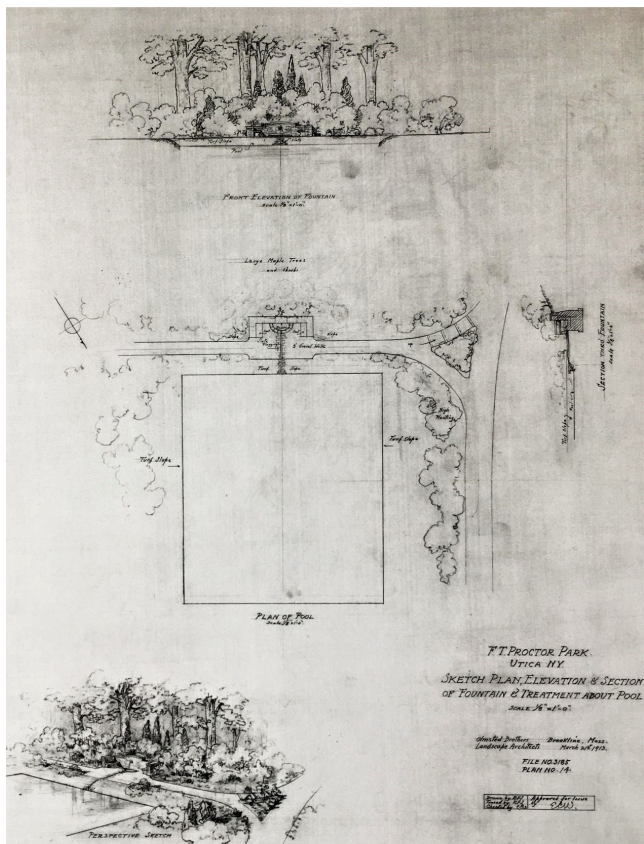
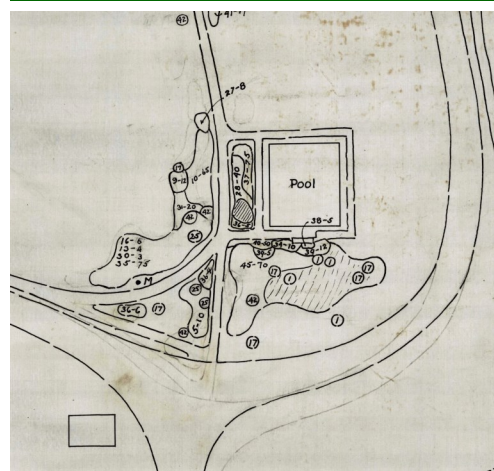
Change began soon for various reasons. In August 1913, Olmsted expressed concern that children were wading in the pond, which was understandable given the way its banks sloped naturally down toward the water—it was almost like an invitation to jump in. It is also likely that the grass-covered slope down toward the pond was a maintenance headache—keeping lawn clippings from flying into the water was challenging.

All of this perhaps explains why a later postcard (likely from the 1920s) depicts a rather different Lily Pond. Its banks no longer sloped toward the water, and the Lily Pond’s perimeter was instead defined more formally by the sort of gently peaked curb that Olmsted City of Greater Utica decided to use as its model in reconstructing the Lily Pond a century later.

Another problem also surfaced: the stacked slate used for the wall in the hill behind the Lily Pond (not to mention on other features of the park) had degraded by the 1930s as a result of decades of water freezing in, heaving, and cracking the stonework.



Above, the “pool” in the 1911 Townsend and Fleming plan for the park, which Proctor rejected; below, the 1913 Olmsted plan, which rotated the pool—the Lily Pond—to the southwest.



Above left, the 1913 Olmsted blueprint for the Lily Pond—note the backdrop landscape design of shrubs and trees at top and bottom; right, the wall behind the Lily Pond, from which spring water emanates, with its original facing of stacked slate. The slate was replaced in the 1930s with fieldstone, which is consistent with the general Olmsted family style and more durable.

During the 1930s, the City of Utica asked the Works Progress Administration (or “WPA,” a federal program created to put the unemployed to work) to improve Utica’s parks. At F.T. Proctor Park, the WPA built the two stone “bathhouses” at the far end of the Lily Pond plateau and more stone staircases (notably the large staircase near the bathhouses, the base of which Olmsted City repaired in 2022). They also replaced the deteriorated slate facing on various structures, including the wall behind the Lily Pond, with fieldstone, which is more durable but also consistent with the general Olmsted style.

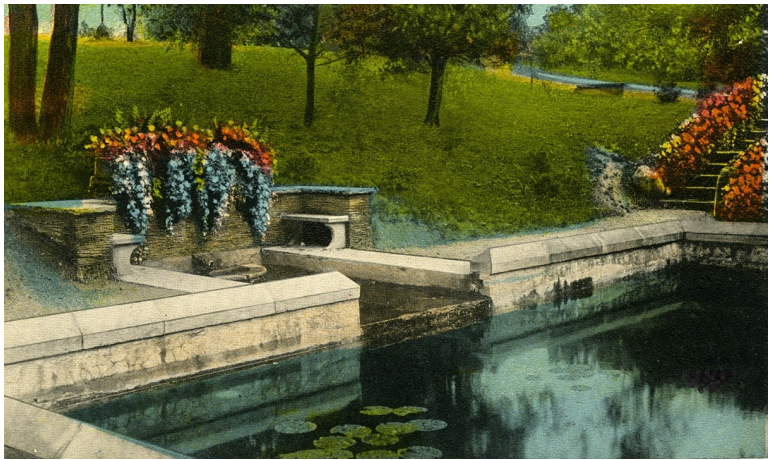
To our knowledge, the Lily Pond then remained unchanged until the 1960s and 70s, at which point this park—like historic urban parks across the country, even Manhattan’s famed Central Park—fell victim to budget cuts, neglect, and decline. Eventually, like much of the original design, the Lily Pond was abandoned and fell into acute disrepair.

In the early 21st century, the rehabilitation of the Lily Pond began. The collapsed west side was replaced with a simple concrete wall, and a similar new wall was dropped in front of the buckling one on the east—for years, the Lily Pond’s east side therefore had two walls, one in front of the other. Still, the Lily Pond overall remained in poor condition despite such efforts. The floor was pockmarked, as was the northern wall, which was patched and repatched for years, and a fountain placed seasonally in the Lily Pond to circulate the water while also serving a decorative purpose ceased to function in 2021.

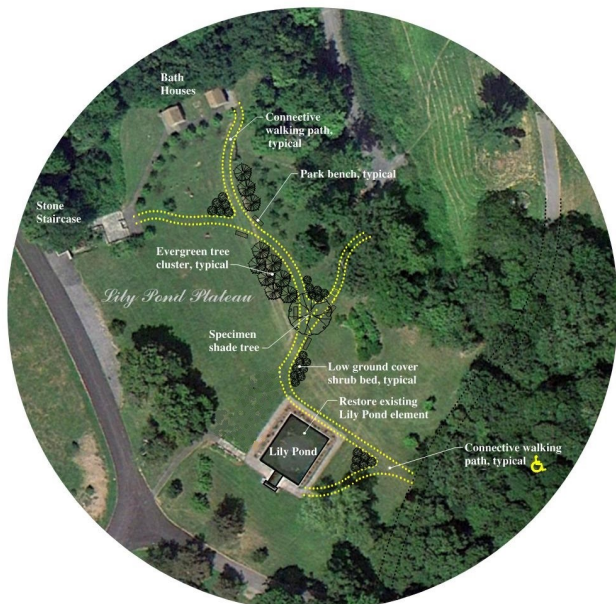
In 2022, Olmsted City of Greater Utica commissioned the firm of Klepper, Hahn & Hyatt to create plans for the reconstruction of the Lily Pond, which remained, as battered as it was, a very beloved feature of the park. The reconstruction employs reinforced concrete that will help the Lily Pond’s walls and floor withstand winter better than the simple concrete used in 1913. The drainage system was also greatly improved, and the design involved the installation of a conduit to safely conceal the electrical cable that powers the new fountain. The installation of a ring of boulders to partly conceal the fountain, which was not part of earlier designs for the Lily Pond, is an innovation, but it is one consistent with the general Olmsted aesthetic.

Following a successful 5-month fundraising effort in 2022, Olmsted City commissioned Utica’s Beebe Construction to implement this plan. To complement the reconstructed Lily Pond, the City of Utica built an Olmsted-inspired winding pathway across the plateau. This pathway links previously unconnected plateau features (the Lily Pond and nearby road, the bathhouses, several trails, and two historic stone staircases), improves connectivity generally within the park, and creates new walking loops to entice visitors to engage in healthful exercise.

Olmsted City also installed benches and landscaping along this pathway to complement these improvements and create a series of mini-destinations on the Lily Pond plateau where visitors will be able to relax and enjoy views of this beautifully revitalized part of F.T. Proctor Park for generations to come.



Top, a postcard depicting the original Olmsted design, with the sloping, grassy edges; middle, as redesigned with curbing, likely some time in the 1920s; bottom, the Lily Pond during the June 2023 reconstruction.



Above, right and center, the condition of the Lily Pond before 2023 reconstruction, including the double east wall at right (note the cracked original 1913 wall on the lower part of the photo); left, an aerial view of the Olmsted-inspired winding path built by the City of Utica to complement this project and enhance the functionality and appeal of the Lily Pond Plateau.

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