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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Riverbank Park

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number bounded by Market St., Somme St., Passaic River & Van Buren St. NA  not for publication

city or town Newark  vicinity

state New Jersey code 034 county Essex code 013 zip code 07105

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Assistant Commissioner for Natural & Historic Resources/DSHPO  
State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register  
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Riverbank Park  
Name of Property

Essex County, New Jersey  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2		buildings
1		sites
1		structures
		objects
4	0	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE/Park

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE/Park

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Urban Park

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation N/A

walls

roof

other

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Riverbank Park

Name of Property

Essex County, New Jersey

County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

N/A

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or grave.
D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Community Planning and Development

Landscape Architecture

Period of Significance

1907-1931

Significant Dates

1907

1926

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Olmsted Brothers

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
Other

Name of repository:

Essex County Parks Department

Riverbank Park  
Name of Property

Essex County, New Jersey  
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property 10.77 acres

Elizabeth, NJ Quad

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 | 1, 8 | 5, 7, 1, 4, 6, 0 | 4, 5, 0, 9, 2, 4, 0 |  
Zone Easting Northing  
2 | 1, 8 | 5, 7, 1, 6, 2, 0 | 4, 5, 0, 9, 2, 4, 0 |

3 | 1, 8 | 5, 7, 1, 7, 4, 0 | 4, 5, 0, 9, 2, 0, 0 |  
Zone Easting Northing  
4 | 1, 8 | 5, 7, 1, 6, 8, 0 | 4, 5, 0, 9, 0, 0, 0 |

See continuation sheet

5 1 8 5 7 1 4 0 0 4 5 0 9 0 8 0

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Ulana D. Zakalak, Historic Preservation Specialist

organization Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee date July 22, 1997

street & number P.O. Box 1066 telephone (973) 622-4910

city or town Newark state New Jersey zip code 07101

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Essex County Parks Department

street & number 115 Clifton Avenue telephone (201) 268-3500

city or town Newark state New Jersey zip code 07104

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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### 7. Description

Riverbank Park is a 10.77 acre Essex County park, located in the East Ward of the City of Newark, otherwise known as the Ironbound (Photo 1). The area is the most heavily industrialized and densely populated neighborhood in the City of Newark. General geographic boundaries include Raymond Boulevard on the north, Somme Street on the east, Market Street on the south, and Van Buren Street on the west. A small narrow section of Park, approximately 1000 feet long, is located across Raymond Boulevard along the Passaic River, and includes land which was once crossed by the towpath of the National Register-listed Morris Canal (Photo 4). It is the smallest park in the Essex County Park system, but one of the most intensely utilized and developed. The acreage for this Park was originally acquired in 1907, and expanded in 1926, and the plans for both were designed by the pre-eminent landscape architectural firm, Olmsted Brothers, of Brookline, Massachusetts. The layout of the Park includes formal rows of sycamores encircling the perimeter, with informal planting and complementary curvilinear paths, lined by mature Chinese elms. Designed for both passive and active recreation, the park contains playing fields, grandstand, tennis courts, basketball court, playground and playground shelter, a running track and a fieldhouse. Raymond Boulevard, a major, four-lane road, separates the heavily used main body of the park from the open waterfront section (Photo 3). There the land is left undisturbed and provides a rare stretch of open waterfront amid a largely industrial area, the only such green riverbank in Newark or anywhere along the eastern Passaic River in Essex County (Photo 4).

The park is basically rectangular in plan, except for the northern perimeter which is angled to the northeast to follow Raymond Boulevard, causing the west end of the Park to be narrower than the east end. The entire park is surrounded by a sidewalk and an iron fence, and is lit by modern lightpoles (Photos 1-6). The front of the park, along Market Street, is set back from the street by a strip of grass which provides a buffer between the hard edge of the pavement and the rows of sycamores encircling the park (Photo 1). The main entrance of the park is at Ferguson Street. Here the fence is open, and a small sign on the eastern edge of the gate has a sign with the name of the park. This is also the beginning of the main path through the park, which divides the park roughly in half, from north to south (Photo 8). Consisting of a wide, curvilinear sidewalk, the path extends through a naturalistic area, which contains informal plantings of mature and stately Chinese elm trees and shrubs. The path bisects the park and provides a boulevard to the waterfront section across Raymond Boulevard. To the west of this walkway is the baseball field with its unique grandstand. To the east of the walkway, the park is elevated and is accessed by a set of concrete steps at the southern end, and an inclined path on the northern end (Photo 9). The northeast quadrant of the park contains lit tennis courts, a basketball court, playground, playground shelter and fieldhouse (Photo 12). In the southeast quadrant is the soccer field surrounded by the 1/5 mile long jogging track. Between the northeast and southeast quadrants is a straight, wide promenade leading to Somme Street. This concrete-paved walkway is lined with park benches and separated from the jogging track by a pipe railing, and from the tennis courts by mature trees and shrubs (Photo 12). The promenade is a surviving element of the 1907 plan.

The fieldhouse is located parallel with Market Street and contains a large concrete area in front of it (Photo 12). The playground shelter is located northwest to, and on a perpendicular with, the fieldhouse (Photos 14-16). To the west of the playground shelter is a modern playground with recent playground equipment including climbers, slides and swings, as well as benches for sitting. The tennis and basketball courts are located immediately south of the playground and include two tennis courts surrounded by a high, chain link fence, and one open basketball

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court, which was converted from an original, third tennis court (Photo 11). All three are lit by modern overhead lightpoles.

The western side of the park is taken up by the baseball field with its grandstand (Photos 10, 17-19). The baseball field can be accessed directly from Market Street by a sidewalk, leading to a set of four concrete steps with sidewalls, or directly from the path bisecting the park. The baseball field is surrounded by a chain link fence, and has a backstop and homeplate in the southwest corner of the field, in front of the grandstand. The walkway in front of the grandstand meets the main path at a triangular planted area, between the jogging track and the grandstand (Photo 8).

The main, bisecting path is a concrete-paved, wide curvilinear walkway (Photos 7-10). Beginning at Ferguson Street, the path bisects the park, and ends at Raymond Boulevard facing the parkland across Raymond Boulevard with vistas of the Passaic River beyond. The path is at a lower grade than the jogging track and soccer field to its east. This gives the path a sunken effect, especially since it is lined with mature Chinese elm trees, pin oaks and shrubbery, blocking the view of the track and playground above. On the west side of the path, although the land is much more flat, views of the baseball field are also blocked by mature trees. The walkway is lined with benches for seating. At its widest point, the naturalistic area is transversed by an inclined paved path leading to the playground area in the northeast quadrant.

The following is an inventory of all of the buildings and structures within Riverbank Park:

#### Fieldhouse

The fieldhouse is a contributing building located in the northeast quadrant of the Park, and is set on a perpendicular to the playground shelter (Photos 12, 13). It was designed by Frederic Bigelow, a local Newark architect, and built in 1910. It is the only surviving architectural element of the 1907-8 park. It was originally designed to hold bathrooms, showers and dressing rooms for men and boys. The men occupied the east side of the building, and the boys the west side. A small bathroom for women, containing only two stalls, was provided in the northwest corner of the building. In 1929, during the second phase of construction of Riverbank Park, the fieldhouse was remodeled by local architect Arthur Dillon, to accommodate women, children and female teachers.

Approximately 80' by 28' in plan, the single story, five bay, masonry, hip-roofed building was originally built in 1910. The Craftsman-influenced building featured a tile-clad hip roof, stucco finish, bluestone bases and corner wall buttresses. The windows, which were located in the upper third of the building walls were all diamond-paned, leaded windows, as were the sidelights of the paired entrance doors which also contained leaded panes. The massive brick chimney was located in the center of the building and was surmounted by a tiled cap. The piers forming the individual bays were decorated with medallions, in line with the windows. In an effort to decrease maintenance costs, the Essex County Parks Department has filled in some of the window openings, and replaced others with modern aluminum windows. The original wooden and glass doors have also been replaced with steel doors. The tile roof has been replaced with asphalt shingle cladding. Although somewhat altered, the fieldhouse is a significant and defining design element in the park. It is a formal element, set on a parallel to the promenade

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and creating outdoor rooms on either side of it. The concrete area in front of the fieldhouse was originally planted and decorated with a flagpole; its main function was to provide an area for playground drills and flag raising exercises.

### Playground Shelter

The playground shelter is a contributing structure, located in the northeast quadrant of the park, immediately east of the playground and north of the tennis courts (Photos 14-16). One of three large buildings in the park, the playground shelter was designed in 1930 by Arthur Dillon, a local architect, who maintained offices in South Orange and in New York City. The purpose of the shelter is to provide an open-air enclosure next to the children's playground. Approximately 64' long and 24' wide, the eclectic, Prairie-influenced, shelter is a five bay, single story, hip-roofed, open structure, built on brick piers. Although the building is approximately two stories in height, the length of the building and the extreme horizontality of the massive, Roman tile-clad hipped roof, give the building a ground-hugging quality. Additional characteristic horizontal decorative emphasis is achieved by the use of a stretcher-only bond in the tapestry brick piers as well as deeply grooved joints.

The most dominant feature of the playground shelter is its massive, hip roof with overhanging open eaves. The wooden plank roof is clad with cement, Roman tile. The roof is supported by massive wooden beams, or plates, on which sit rafters with scrolled ends. Above each of the brick piers is a tie rod which spans the width of the building ending in a cast iron decorative boss at each plate. The tie rods are also hung from the ceiling by horizontal rods. The plates, in turn, sit on the limestone, classicizing capitals of the brick piers.

The square brick piers are set on cast stone bases. The corner and entrance piers are large and squat, and are accompanied by a slender brick pier. A single slender brick pier is located between these forming the first and second as well as the fourth and fifth bays of the length of the shelter. The width of the shelter contains only three bays, with two slender piers forming the opening. The outer piers are further ornamented with detailed, galvanized cast iron downspouts with ornamental straps and hoods. A galvanized iron pipe railing connects the piers except for the entrance bays. At each of the piers, the horizontal members of the pipe railing are connected to the brickwork by highly decorative wrought iron escutcheon washers.

The floor of the playground shelter is paved with asphalt. Originally, it was poured concrete covered with a wood floor. At the southern end of the playground shelter is a small children's sand court bounded by a low concrete wall.

### Grandstand

The grandstand is a contributing building, located in the southwestern quadrant of Riverbank Park, near the intersection of Market Street and Ferguson Street (Photos 10, 17-19). It was designed by Arthur Dillon, a local architect, and built in 1930. The grandstand is located behind the homeplate of the baseball field, and has its back to Market Street. The design of the grandstand echoes the angles of the baseball field in its canted walls. The

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main, center wall of the grandstand is set on a perpendicular to homeplate and the pitcher's mound, with the wing walls set at approximately 135 degree angles to the center wall. The two story, open, brick and stone grandstand is more than 24 feet high and was designed to seat 546 people. The exterior walls are brick with classicizing limestone piers creating four bays in each of the wing walls and five bays in the center wall. Between the center wall and the wing walls are tile-lined, arched, open underpasses leading to the seating area. Most of the second floor bays have infilled, segmentally-arched windows with limestone keystones, above which are wrought iron railings. The wing wall bays have steel doors on the first floor, leading to various rooms beneath the bleachers. In the center section are field rooms and a boiler room. The western wing contains public toilets and storage space. The eastern wing contains police and emergency facilities, an instrument room and storage space. The capitals of the piers support elaborate iron truss work which in turn supports the concrete roof. The interior of the grandstand consists of concrete steps for seating with wrought iron railings around the openings (Photo 19).

Although very poorly maintained, Riverbank Park is nearly completely intact, and retains elements of both the original 1907-8 plan, such as the fieldhouse and promenade, and the 1926-1931 expansion, including the grandstand and playground shelter. The park also contains mature plantings, specimen trees such as Chinese elms and pin oaks, and is bordered by handsome rows of mature sycamores. The current layout and appearance of the park are from the 1926-1931 period. The original 1907-1910 park was much smaller and is described in the following section.

**Riverbank Park: 1907-1910**

The Essex County Park Commission began purchasing land for the creation of a small urban park in the densely populated and industrial Ironbound neighborhood beginning in 1907. The original park was bounded by Raymond Boulevard (then called Passaic Avenue, Somme Street (then called Frederick Street), Market Street and Ferguson Street. Construction of the park, under the direction of the Olmsted Brothers, began in October of 1909 and completed in the summer of 1910. The park was approximately six acres and occupied all of the land the current park consists of, without the waterfront area and the land west of Ferguson Street. (Ferguson Street was vacated to become the main path in the 1929 park expansion.) The original park was divided into six components: the hard gravel playground; "Little Folk's Lawn" with wading pool; men's outdoor gymnasium; fieldhouse, swimming tank and women's outdoor gymnasium; lawn; and planted area. All of the individual areas were separated from each other by informal plantings of trees, shrubs and walkways, as well as changes in elevation (Olmsted Brothers, General Plan for Riverbank Park, 1912).

The main entrance to the original park was at Chambers Street, with a series of steps leading to a playground which occupied the southern third of the park. This playground was elevated from the surrounding planted area, which encircled the entire park, and was separated from the rest of the park by the promenade which still exists today. Where the tennis courts are now, was a "little folk's lawn" with a circular wading pool flanked by play areas containing scups, swings and seesaws. At the western edge of the lawn were sand courts, covered seating and toilets. To the east of the "little folk's lawn," where the concrete area in front of the fieldhouse is today, was the men's outdoor gymnasium surrounded by a running track. The outdoor gymnasium was a hard gravel-covered oval and contained areas for quoits and shotputting, jumping and pole vaulting, parallel bars, horizontal bars,



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balancing beams and an iron framework for ropes, poles, ladders, rings and bars. An area known as the terrace, a straight wide elevated walkway, separated the men's gymnasium from the fieldhouse. On the north side of the fieldhouse was a swimming tank, women's locker rooms, a women's outdoor gymnasium (no equipment specified), a public shelter and a formal flower garden. This entire complex, north of the fieldhouse, was also elevated from the rest of the park, and was approached by steps at either end of the terrace or near the formal flower garden.

The remainder of the park was given over to naturalistic areas. Immediately north of the "little folk's lawn" was a grass area known as the "lawn." Along the entire length of the park at Passaic Avenue was a heavily planted area, which blocked the view of the street and the Morris Canal beyond. The main path through the park was a curvilinear walkway, running north to south, between the active recreation areas of the park on the east side, and the passive recreational areas on the west side. Each active recreational area was surrounded by heavily planted areas to create privacy, and to inspire the athletes. In the 1910 Report of the Park Commission, the Commissioners stated:

The Park Commission has endeavored in locating and developing its playgrounds to surround them with sufficient landscape beauty to permit various athletic exercises to proceed amid attractive natural settings. This will permit those who cannot join in the games to find rest and enjoyment in a contemplation of the open and the green, and the boys and girls themselves will derive more pleasure from their sports if they play on fine turf, under or near attractive plantations of trees and shrubbery and flowers, than if the cinder of the running track and the soft dirt of the gymnasium were all the park offered.

A pedestrian bridge over the Morris Canal leading to an overlook on the waterfront section was designed but never built. Plans were drawn for an extension of the park on the other side of the Canal, with a lawn flanked by public shelters and crossed by paths.

(The description of the 1907-1019 Riverbank Park is based on original Olmsted Brothers drawings in the collection of the Essex County Parks Department as well as the Olmsted Brothers Archives at the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Massachusetts.)

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## Riverbank Park remediation plan

A project to remediate the soil contamination of Riverbank Park is currently underway. The Essex County Improvement Authority hired EcolSciences, Inc. to prepare (and later to revise) a Remedial Action Workplan to mitigate potential environmental threats posed by the contamination. Testing of the property revealed that while modest levels of some organic contaminants (several so-called "BN+15" compounds) are present, they occur at levels that do not pose a threat of groundwater contamination. However, seven "Priority Pollutant Metals" (antimony, arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, mercury, and zinc), probably associated with the pre-1907 industrial use of the property by the Balbach Smelting & Refining Company, were found at concentrations exceeding NJDEP Residential Criteria. Under the plan currently being carried out, a "separation filter fabric" is being installed over the playing fields (high-traffic areas) which have been topped with a 12-inch "cap" of clean soil. Other, low-traffic areas of the park inside the perimeter fence will receive a six-inch cap. All shrubs and a small number of diseased trees were removed, but the large majority of mature trees will be remediated in-place, by placing around them 12-inch deep "mulch wells." The perimeter fence is being removed and reinstalled following the construction of a new concrete curb designed to raise the fence eight inches. Existing walks are being retained, but curbs will be added to accommodate the soil cap.

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Newark, Essex County, NJSection number 8 Page 1**8. Statement of Significance**

Riverbank Park in the City of Newark, Essex County, New Jersey, is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C. The Park is eligible under Criterion A because it is significant in the area of Community Planning and Development, as part of the Essex County Park System, the oldest county park system in the United States, and the embodiment of the City Beautiful movement. It is also eligible under Criterion C for Landscape Architecture. The Park represents the work of the Olmsted Brothers, the pre-eminent landscape architectural firm in the United States at the beginning and first quarter of the twentieth century. It is an excellent and well-preserved example of a small, urban park, one of the three types of green spaces advocated by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (the others being scenic parks and reservations).

Although Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the designers of Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park, had proposed a "Central Park for Newark" as early as 1868, the leaders of Newark and Essex County did not engage the master landscape design firm until after the influential World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the source for the City Beautiful Movement. Newark city fathers were not going to be limited by the political boundaries of the City; they envisioned a grand plan for the county as well as the city. Led by Franklin Murphy, a Newark industrialist, and later New Jersey governor, they persuaded the New Jersey State Legislature to pass enabling legislation in 1894, creating the county park commission for Essex County, the first of its kind in the country. The very first park, the jewel in the system's crown, was Branch Brook Park, located along the old Morris Canal in the North Ward.

The master plan for the Essex County Park System, which includes Riverbank Park, was developed in 1894, with the assistance of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. The actual design for Branch Brook Park and for the succeeding parks was by John Charles Olmsted, stepson of Frederick Sr., who had joined the firm in 1875, and Frederick Law Jr., son of Frederick Sr., who joined in 1895. Both sons were trained from an early age to be landscape architects, and their success was extraordinary. Until John Charles' death in 1920, the number of their landscape commissions amounted to over a thousand public and private, of which 250 were for parks. Of these, the Essex County Park System commission, was one of the more extensive, with twenty parks attributed to the Olmsted family. The Essex County Park System is one of the most diverse systems, ranging from the smallest park, Riverbank Park, with its 10.77 acres, to the largest, South Mountain Reservation with over 2,000 acres and a zoo. The size and diversity of the system make it comparable to the Olmsted firm's work in Boston and Chicago.

**The City Beautiful Movement in Newark**

Spurred on by the powerful vision embodied in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (the landscape design of which was carried out by the Olmsted firm), cities across the United States embarked on large-scale urban planning and rebuilding projects. Progressive reformers made a concerted effort to call public attention to the problems of urban America (Reps 1965: 170-186). The Newark city fathers took part in this movement, by establishing the Essex County Parks Commission in 1894 and the City Planning Commission in 1911. Beginning in the late 19th century, the basic approach taken by Newark leader's toward the city's development began to shift. Rather than continuing to allow the city to develop according to the uncoordinated activities of individual developers, Newark's urban reformers now

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developers, Newark's urban reformers now attempted to establish an overall design for the future growth of the city. The development of Newark, according to a 1913 report, would now proceed according to the "scientific arrangement of the physical aspects of the city" (City Planning for Newark 1913:4). At the same time, the Essex County Park Commission realized that the relatively small area of Newark and its surrounding municipalities made comprehensive and large-scale planning difficult. Therefore, a county-wide approach was found to be more workable. Consistent with the comprehensive vision of the City Beautiful Movement, the Park System was designed as a master plan encompassing small urban parks, larger scenic parks within the city, and suburban reservations, all linked by county parkways. Riverbank Park is an outstanding example of the small, urban park, an important and under-recognized component of the Essex County Park System.

The Newark City Beautiful Movement, an alliance of Newark city planners, politicians, and business leaders, worked diligently throughout these years to improve their city's public image and appearance. A 1913 planning report bemoaned the fact the Newark "does not present a good front" to visitors; "let us make the picture Newark presents," it continued, "solid, broad, dignified, clean, and interesting" (City Planning for Newark 1913: 50). Similarly, a 1915 planning report argued that "the complete city must be beautiful," and that Newarkers must consider "beauty...as well as utility in everything that goes into the physical improvement of the city" (Comprehensive Plan of Newark 1915: 99-100).

The City Beautiful Movement succeeded in a variety of ways in enhancing the overall appearance of much of the downtown area. For example, reformers successfully worked to do away with many billboards, overhanging signs, and overhead utility poles and wires in the Central Business District. Supporters of the City Beautiful Movement also called for more public artwork in the city, and, as a result of their efforts, Newark's older downtown parks were adorned with many statues and monuments in these years.

The City Beautiful Movement also advocated the use of the most modern and scientific methods to address the social needs of city dwellers, particularly those in dense urban centers. Reform, whether of the progressive or conservative variety, was an integral element of most City Beautiful campaigns. The photographs of Jacob Riis showing the degrading conditions and filth that many men, women and children lived in appeared in popular magazines and books and spurred many reformers to concentrate on cleanliness and beauty. Although social consciousness varied with the individual and the organizations involved, a cleaner and more moral environment certainly existed as a goal of most City Beautiful activities (The Brooklyn Museum 1979: 88).

On a local level, Franklin Murphy is an emblematic representative of the successful late nineteenth century industrialist who became increasingly concerned with issues of social welfare, and was a major force behind the establishment of Riverbank Park. Murphy's prominence and fortune came from his varnish factory in the Ironbound, the largest varnish factory in the City, and one of Newark's major industries of the period. Contrary to general nineteenth century practice, Murphy built a research laboratory and hired a chemist in an attempt to supply customers with "nothing short of the best." The company's insurance and pension plans for employees were also progressive (Karschner 1985: 33). In 1901, Murphy was elected Governor of the State of New Jersey, after serving many years in the Newark City Council and the New Jersey Legislature. He was also founding member of the Essex County Park Commission, its first permanent Commissioner, its vice-president from 1906 to 1911, and President from 1911 until his death in 1920.

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Murphy took a particular interest in Riverbank Park, which was located in the Ironbound, where many of his factory's employees lived. In the 1910 Essex County Park Commission Annual Report he states:

Although it is the smallest of the twelve parks, even in its unfinished state, one of the most largely used and is an excellent example of the wisdom and importance of locating breathing spaces in thickly settled portions of the community.

According to attendance records kept by the Park Commission, Riverbank Park was one of the most heavily used parks in the Essex County System. With attendance reaching over 20,000 children per summer month, the playground teachers were kept extremely busy. Children were fully supervised by the instructors and were taught proper use of gymnastic equipment, as well as playground exercises and dances. The area in front of the fieldhouse was used for flag raising and patriotic exercises. Children were taught civic responsibility, sportsmanship, and healthful living. Immigrant children were provided a means of easy integration into American society. Teams were sponsored by the parks which would then participate in inter-park competitions and pennant races. Winning teams got to fly their pennants at the flagpoles. Parties and dances were also sponsored by the parks.

#### The Design of Riverbank Park

Riverbank Park was designed by the Olmsted Brothers, heirs to the firm of Olmsted and Vaux, the designers of Central Park and Prospect Park, Brooklyn. The Olmsted brothers were formally and continuously associated with the Essex County Park System from 1894 to at least the early 1950s; thus, the parks designed and built during this period, virtually the entire system, exhibit an unusual degree of coherent planning and continuity of vision. In the context of the entire Essex County Park System, the history of Riverbank Park takes on added significance. The Olmsted firm responded to the growing role of active recreation in a small urban park at the same time that scenic parks were designed for more suburban settings, and land still remote from development was being set aside in the form of reservations. It represents the stated desire its designers had for a variety of park lands to meet the varied needs of the park users. Thus, Riverbank Park provides an important addition to the work of the Olmsted Brothers firm, and challenges the widely held, popular notion of the Olmstedian tradition as strictly naturalistic.

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. basic philosophy of landscape design, which was followed by his sons, and by the Essex County Park Commission, was to provide settings for people of all classes. Towards this end, Olmsted developed three different kinds of green spaces: the small urban park (such as Riverbank Park), the scenic park (Branch Brook) and the suburban reservation (South Mountain Reservation). The size, the activities, and the treatment of nature distinguish the three types. The smallest green spaces contain traditional outdoor activities and sites for newly developed recreations such as field games, athletic exercises, playgrounds, parades, open-air concerts, etc. He proposed that every neighborhood have several of these small parks, and that their recreational facilities be placed in formalized natural settings (NYC Landmarks Commission 198: 133). In the second annual report of the Essex County Parks Commission, published in 1897, the Commissioners discuss the importance of the small urban park:

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First, the neighborhood parks, located near the centres of dense population and intended for those who desire, at no great distance, a glimpse of more natural and agreeable surroundings. They have been very happily called the lungs of a great city, and are now everywhere recognized as the most important part of an extended park plan...The young find in them places for wholesome recreation, and are thus removed from other sources of amusement harmful physically and morally. In a word, they tend more strongly than any other factor in urban life toward the development and perpetuation of desirable types of humanity.

In the 1901 Report to the Commission, the Olmsted firm refers to establishing this same type of small local park as part of the Essex County Park System. Riverbank Park is an outstanding example of this type, with all the qualities Olmsted describes, as well as characteristics that are typical of the work of the firm. In a very small area, Riverbank park contains a baseball field and grandstand, a football/soccer field and 1/5 mile track, tennis courts, playground, shelter and fieldhouse, as well as naturalistic paths and plantings. Formal rows of sycamores border the park, and provide a transition from the regular geometry of the street grid to the green space. A naturalistically designed area with curvilinear paths and informal plantings of mature, specimen trees and shrubs in the middle of the park screen both the sights and sound of the major recreational spaces from each other, as well as providing parkland along the Passaic River. Changes in grade, and more formal plantings further subdivide the recreational areas. Riverbank Park also contains notable architecture: the brick and stone grandstand has elaborate iron truss work which skillfully meets both functional and decorative requirements; the shelter is a handsome and well-proportioned structure with a massive clay tile roof and lead downspouts; and the fieldhouse provides a defining architectural element in a formalized landscape.

## **The Building of Riverbank Park**

In 1906, the New Jersey State Legislature passed an act directing the issuance of county bonds for park lands purchases in the amount of \$300,000. The Legislature recognized the need for more neighborhood parks in thickly settled parts of the community "where the young people can enjoy healthy exercise afforded by properly conducted playgrounds, under the supervision of competent instructors." (Report of the Park Commission of Essex County, NJ 1907: 9). Two-thirds of the money was set aside for the acquirement of two blocks in the City of Newark adjacent to the Morris Canal, between Ferguson, Frederick and Market Street and Passaic Avenue. It was the only tract of land in that section which was not entirely covered with buildings. As soon as the purchase was completed, the Park Commission placed a temporary playground with open air gymnastic apparatus on the site, which was utilized by almost 20,000 children in the summer months. The land had been purchased from the Balbach family as well as from other private landowners.

By early 1908, the commissioned landscape design firm, Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts, had drawn up a topographical map, and by the spring of 1908, a plan for the buildings, grading and details. The park was assigned Job Number 2138 by the Olmsted firm. In October of 1909, the contract for the improvement of Riverbank Park was awarded at a cost of \$7,107.75. This included the filling in of Chambers Street between Passaic Avenue and Market Street, thus joining two city blocks into one tract, and giving the park approximately six acres. The improvement consisted of the usual playground features, a running track, an outdoor gym for the

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men and boys, and a wading pool and sand courts for the children (Report of the Park Commission of Essex County, NJ 1909: 12). Work was completed in the summer of 1910, including the construction of the fieldhouse. In its annual report of 1911, the Park Commission was well-satisfied with the completion of the park:

It is situated in one of the most congested sections of the City of Newark and it is greatly needed as a playground and breathing space for the surrounding tenement house district. The park has been greatly improved along playground lines with sand courts and playfields and a field house with the usual athletic accommodations, a full equipment of playground apparatus has been installed and competent instructors placed in charge.

The 1924 Report of the Park Commission noted the establishment of the Passaic Valley Sewer and the subsequent elimination of house waste, and ultimately factory waste, from the sewage which was pouring directly into the Passaic River. With high hopes, the Commissioners stated that "when the River clears itself, the people of Essex County should have access to the river for recreational purposes through publicly owned lands" (Report 1924: 23-30). The following year, the Report of the Park Commission records the issuing of \$400,000 in county bonds to acquire additional parkland and facilities in Riverbank Park, "where undeveloped vacant spaces can be utilized before appropriation to dwelling and commercial purposes." The Park Commissioners decided that the best solution was in the extension of Riverbank Park to Van Buren Street by the acquisition of land belonging to the Balbach Company and others. "One feature of this park extension," they stated "is the acquisition of 750 feet bordering the Passaic River in front of the park, thus insuring to the people of the neighborhood access to the River, with all the pleasures that a waterfront location can assure."

The park was nearly doubled in size both to the west and to the north, including land bordering the Passaic River in front of the park. Once again, the Olmsted Brothers were called to design an enlarged Riverbank Park. Local architect Arthur Dillon, of South Orange and Manhattan, was hired to design a new playground shelter and grandstand, and renovate the old 1910 fieldhouse.

By 1927, the Commissioner could report:

The riverfront development, as planned, will form an attractive addition to the park. It will provide access to the River and facilities that will enable the people of the district to enjoy all the pleasure that a riverside park can offer. In addition, a touch of landscape beauty will be added to one of the main highways leading into the city of Newark.

By the following year, three-quarter of the improvements were complete, while plans for the grandstand and renovated fieldhouse were in preparation. The newly expanded park also included a boys' baseball field, football field, tennis courts, children's playground, running track, promenade and naturalistic areas and was completed by the spring of 1930.

During World War II, Riverbank Park was appropriated by the military for its own use. It was one of two parks in Newark taken over by the Army, the other being Weequahic. From December 1941 to February 1944, Riverbank Park was the home of an air defense contingent of the Coast Artillery. This was an anti-aircraft observation post,

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operated by a searchlight battalion of the United States Army. They occupied the ballfield and the grandstand, building barracks and an earth revetment. In February 1944, the Army vacated the Park and demolished their structures. The United States government paid for the restoration of the ballfield (Report of the Park Commission 1942-1945).

Although under maintained, Riverbank park is nearly completely intact from this period, and retains features from both of the major building phases. The first phase, 1907-1910, included the initial purchase of approximately six acres, and the development of the park design by the Olmsted Brothers. The field house, the promenade, and the fieldhouse as the defining element in the separation of play spaces in the east half of the park, remain from the original plan. The remainder of the park, including the layout, plantings and remaining buildings are from the second campaign (1926-1931), which almost doubled the park's size to its present 10.77 acres. Riverbank Park is an excellent example of a small urban Olmsted park. It is part of the visionary master plan, known as the Essex County Park System, and encompasses the full range of uses within this system.

### The Architects of the Riverbank Park Buildings

#### Frederic Bigelow: Fieldhouse

Frederic Bigelow was born in Newark on February 17, 1882, son of Moses Bigelow of the paint and varnish business. His grandfather, also Moses, was mayor of Newark from 1857 to 1864. After attending local schools, Bigelow studied for three years at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Upon his return Bigelow was named secretary of the new Newark City Planning Commission. He was responsible for hiring the engineering consultants who drafted the city's first master plan, and later he served on the Board of Police Commissioners. In April 1922, he was appointed Superintendent of Buildings. Initially, he supervised a construction boom that by 1926 had lifted Newark to tenth place among the nation's cities. Although hampered by the Depression and World War II, Bigelow persevered in his mission to eliminate illegal and hazardous conditions in Newark's buildings and to revise Newark's building code. He proposed the creation of a municipal planning body, which was created in 1943, as the Central Planning Board (Winters 1984: n.p.). Bigelow designed the Health Department Building at Plane (University) and William Streets, and the Brewster Aeronautical hangar at Newark Airport. He was also responsible for the firehouse at Avon Avenue and 14th Street, and a number of private homes (Star Ledger 1942: n.p.). Bigelow died in his Newark home on Mt. Prospect Avenue on March 2, 1952.

#### Arthur Dillon: Grandstand and Playground Shelter

Arthur Dillon was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1871, son of John A. Dillon, editor of the old New York World. He studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and later at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. In 1896, he opened an office in New York, and was head of the firm Dillon, McLellan and Bladel with offices at 149 Broadway. After a period of associations with other architects, Dillon went into private practice, and maintained his independence until his death in 1937. Among his most important works were the Public Library at South Orange, New Jersey, the War Memorial at Lake Champlain, New York, and various other buildings in the metropolitan area. Dillon died on June 5, 1939 at his home in South Orange. (New York Times 6/6/37; Withey 1956: 173).



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