

***Emeralds in a Silver Sea:  
San Francisco Parks and Playgrounds, 1839 to 2020***

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Seen from the air, San Francisco is a beautiful, white and green cubist composition. Her intricately patched quilt of gridded blocks is densely packed with light-colored buildings that spread across her valleys and step up her precipitous hills. Set atop many of those hills are parks like emeralds in a silver sea. Other parks lie in valleys or are tucked away in secluded canyons. San Francisco's north-pointing peninsula of steep hills and broad valleys is surrounded on three sides by water and continuous parks frame her ocean, Golden Gate and north bay edges and will someday extend along her southeastern bay shore as well. Large parks occupy commanding sites at her wealthy northwestern and middle-class south-western corners (Lincoln and Harding parks), as well as a sizable high ground in her originally working-class southeastern sector (John McLaren Park). Twin Peaks Park commands the geographical center of the city. From there famed Golden Gate Park in her western residential districts looks like an unrolled strip of turf reaching out to the blue Pacific. By 2022, San Francisco had some two hundred and twenty municipal parks, playgrounds and open spaces on 3,400 dispersed acres, many miles of shoreline reservations now within the federal Golden Gate National Recreation Area, a State of California recreation area at Candlestick Point, and many privately-owned but publicly-accessible pocket parks, hidden gems, tucked in and around her downtown skyscrapers as well.

To almost all of her visitors and many of her citizens, San Francisco seems a city with an ideal balance between the man-made and the natural. San Francisco Bay is the great “open space” visible from many vantage points within the city providing a sense of release, natural beauty, changing moods and colors, and regional identity. Many suppose that the city developed around her verdant parks deliberately leaving ample space for nature and recreation. But that is not how it happened. San Francisco's parks are as man-made as her streets and buildings. They are not places San Franciscans purposely left undisturbed but rather contested places over which citizens have fought, which they have laboriously shaped and graded, which they have planned, planted, irrigated, maintained and policed at great expense to generations of taxpayers. San Francisco's parks are complex, dynamic, *political* creations with extremely varied and fascinating individual histories. And they continue to expand and change today.

## A Political and Institutional History

*Emeralds in a Silver Sea: San Francisco Parks and Playgrounds, 1839 to 2020* is an updated version of my dissertation in History accepted by Harvard University in 1992. It is not primarily a landscape or horticultural history, though passing attention is given to changing tastes in landscape architecture and public gardening. Nor is this a complete history of the complicated story of urban recreation and amateur sports, though some attention must, of course, be given to how generations of San Franciscans have used, and sometimes abused, their parks. This study is best described as a *political and institutional history* set within a larger geographical, social, and political context. It seeks to answer how parks and public recreation came to be; how they have changed as the city and its people have changed; what parks have meant at various times to various people; what their distribution across social classes has been; what the patterns of political support for parks has been and how it has changed; and what place parks have had in the overall physical development of the City and County of San Francisco.

My sources have been many. The three most important were the city's annual *Municipal Reports* (1859-1917), Thomas Magee's in-the-know *San Francisco Real Estate Circular* (1867-1920), and the bound volumes of the San Francisco Registrar of Voters Election Results (from 1907 on) on deposit at the Daniel E. Koshland History Center at the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library. By tracing every single bond issue and all other park or public recreation issues brought before the voters, I was able to create a set of maps (based on state assembly districts, which were many in the pre-1940 city) showing how each section or neighborhood in the city voted. Since San Francisco neighborhoods, then as now, are highly stratified by social class, my history reveals how political support for parks and recreation has changed over time among upper class, middle class, and working class constituencies. This is an original and fact-based contribution to the study of the city's public spaces that no other history has attempted.\*

\*[Terrence Young, *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), published with the cooperation of the Center for American Places, cites my park dissertation in numerous places in his notes but does not consider the political (and voting) dimensions central to *Emeralds in a Silver Sea*. Young sees two major park periods: the romantic, which spanned the 1860s to the 1880s, and the rationalistic, which began in the 1880s and continued into the 1920s when his study ends. Young's principal focus is on the elites that created Golden Gate Park (see page

218, note 26) and especially on stressing the role of its designer and first superintendent, William Hammond Hall. My study includes Golden Gate Park but gives equal weight to the longterm creation of San Francisco's far-flung *system* of some two hundred and twenty parks and playgrounds that covered 3,400 acres by 2000.

Galen Crantz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1982), is based on an architectural and sociological study of the park systems of New York City, Chicago and San Francisco. It divides urban park history into four periods: (1) the pleasure ground (1850-1900), (2) the reform park (1900-1930), (3) the recreation facility (1930-1965), and (4) the open-space system (1965 and after). The second part of her study briefly considers the makers of urban parks, park users by social group, the social benefits of parks, social control and park policy, and the functions of parks past and future.]

*Emeralds in a Silver Sea* looks at San Francisco's parks and play-grounds in the context of the economic, technological, social, political, and ideological changes in this complex community. Neither the values nor the constituencies behind parks and public recreation have been static. Almost decade by decade, it seems, parks and public recreation have had to respond to changing urban demands and have done so with greater or lesser degrees of success. Parks and public recreation budgets are highly sensitive to shifts in local, state and national politics.

### **The Four Phases in San Francisco's Park History**

This sweeping history of San Francisco's parks and playgrounds is organized according to their governance by changing city commissions and departments and is organized in four chronological parts.

**Part I, Forgotten Beginnings: 1835 - 1868**, starts with Mexican law and the reservation of the central plaza of the pueblo of Yerba Buena (today Portsmouth Square in Chinatown) and the town commons (later the Outside Lands), and continues through the U.S. conquest and the various early American grid surveys that reserved -- or fatefully did *not* reserve -- land for parks. Inequality of park distribution was present from the earliest American surveys of 1847 and 1855. It continues today despite more than a century of conscious effort to mitigate the originally unequal distribution of parks in the early city surveys. The two key institutions in this period were the City Surveyor's Office and the little-studied, overburdened Department of Streets, Sewers and Squares.

**Part II, Elites and the City: 1868 - 1899**, examines Mayor Frank McCoppin's secret settlement of the contentious Outside Lands issue and the State of California's establishment of famed Golden Gate Park under a new Park Commission in 1870. While plutocratic in its genesis and early management, the creation of a "natural" environment on the edge of the sandy, treeless, vigorously expanding city found great and enduring favor with San Franciscans. Even today, to say "the park" is usually understood as Golden Gate Park by most San Franciscans. The Park Commission itself has undergone significant change becoming more democratic over time. While Golden Gate Park's basic landscape design has remained the same since its inception, the park has gone through at least five stages with a complex history. In this study, Golden Gate Park is covered in Chapter 13 (1871 to 1876); (1876-1889); (1890-1920), Chapter 26 (1920s to 1960s), and Chapters 31 and 36 (1960s to 2020).

**Part III, Two Constituencies, Two Spheres: 1900 - 1949**, begins with "home rule" when the City of San Francisco assumed control over Golden Gate Park from the State of California. The progressive Democratic reform administration of Mayor Jame Duval Phelan modernized the city's finances through the acceptance of bonded indebtedness (rather than the previous pay-as-you-go financing). Phelan's administration initiated the improvement of the city's neglected smaller parks and squares. Part III also analyzes the creation of the separate Playground (later Recreation) Commission spearheaded by public health officials and women reformers in the Progressive Era. Both park and playground commissions and departments had their own distinct missions and suitably selected personnel. Great advances were made in both passive parks and active playgrounds (in intimate cooperation with the public schools) during this half century of separate development. During the booming 1920s, there was a major expansion of large parks citywide under Mayor "Sunny" Jim Rolph's elite-dominated Park Commission. The recreational ambitions of this period were extraordinary. The municipal government was determined to provide the highest level of public services including large golf courses and an outdoor salt-water swimming pool that could accommodate 10,000 swimmers. The depressed 1930s saw the first federal investment in parks through the WPA and other New Deal programs. (The Federal Art Project commissioned the city's finest art work on urban recreation: Lucian Labaudt's 1936-37 fresco cycle in the Beach Chalet at the ocean end of Golden Gate Park.) Paradoxically, during the war-time 1940s, public recreation blossomed under the brilliant leadership of Superintendent of Recreation Josephine Randall.

**Part IV, "Efficiency" and Consolidation: 1950 - 2020**, analyzes the results of the consolidation of the Park Commission and the Recreation Commission into the present-day Recreation and Park Commission in 1950. "Park people" and "recreation people" tend to be different kinds of people. In the merged Recreation and Park Department "park people" have dominated; the General Manager has always been a "park person." There has also been a general shift away from once meticulously maintained, flagship Golden Gate Park and towards the ever-expanding network of neighborhood parks and playgrounds (and to a lesser degree, neighborhood recreation centers). In the 1970s, the City Planning Department assumed the initiative and created an Urban Design Plan that included parks and plans for open space acquisition. The role of the federal government expanded dramatically with the creation of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) which took over excess military reservations including the Presidio (10 percent of the city's land area) and the city's Ocean Beach and bay front Aquatic Park. After 1978, in the post-proposition 13 tax revolt squeeze, municipal park funding was cut drastically and San Francisco's parks and playgrounds entered a period of decline at the same time that its even-aged forests became over-mature.

### **Parks and Recreation Today**

San Francisco continues to build, and now carefully restore, parks and to add a few recreation centers through bond issues and dedicated open space moneys while cutting funding the recreation and park staff paid for through ordinary municipal taxation. Rec and Park budgets seem bulimic expanding and contracting with good and bad times more than any other part of the basic municipal budget. And public recreation, which is actually a form of civic engagement across the generations, is minimally funded and backward-looking (mostly team sports, swimming, tennis and golf). There are, for example, very few computer graphic programs for youngsters in the few municipal art studios in this, the capital of high-tech. Today, San Franciscans join private gyms and pay steep monthly membership fees rather than depend on municipal recreation as they would have in the expansive 1920s. In costly, over-mature and over-grown Golden Gate Park, in particular, well-funded institutions like the de Young (Art) Museum and the California Academy of Sciences have expended enormous amounts of privately-raised money on huge, new facilities that have major negative impacts on their park setting. In 1972, the city gave over its historic Ocean Beach and bay side Aquatic Park to the federal Golden Gate National Recreation Area knowing that it would care for them better than their creator and chief beneficiary would.

While San Francisco voters usually support bond issues for capital improvements in parks, the regular municipal budget that pays for staffing, operation and maintenance is shrinking and failing to keep up with its responsibilities. Golden Gate Park entered a period of crisis. The many smaller parks sprinkled around the city now increasingly depend on neighborhood volunteers for clean-up and some landscape maintenance. While this can be a valuable community-building opportunity, it is not a substitute for adequate city funding and staffing.

The funding crisis led park supporters to organize in support of the endangered parks. SPUR (San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association) led the way with a series of conferences and reports. The San Francisco Parks Trust merged with the grassroots Neighborhood Parks Council (formed in 1996 by several neighborhood parks groups) to create the San Francisco Parks Alliance in 2011. The Alliance gives activist citizens a united voice to advance park and recreation interests and values.

