

Elmwood Park

Why It's Special:

Elmwood Park has been called "Syracuse's most bewitching and least developed city park."

This statement remains as true today as it did in 1927, when the park's core 26.5 acres were acquired by the city. Elmwood Park is a beautiful wooded glen that stretches for nearly one-half mile along the banks of Furnace Brook on the city's southwest side. The park features a remarkable diversity of birds, trees, wildlife and wildflowers, as well as an historic stone mill building and several Depression-era stone staircases, walls and bridges. Indeed, it's a quiet, green oasis, rich in both natural and human history.



Where It's Located: Elmwood Park lies in a glacial meltwater valley between Glenwood Avenue to the north and Elmwood and Hutchinson Avenues to the south.

How To Get There:

You can get to Elmwood Park from the south by taking either South Ave. or Valley Drive north from Rte. 173 until you come to the intersection where the two streets meet. At this intersection you'll find a Wilson Farms store and the Elmwood Beer Garden. Take Glenwood Ave. west.

If you are coming from the Syracuse University area, take Colvin St. west to South Ave., and then take a left. In a few blocks, you'll take a right onto Glenwood Ave. From I-81, get off at the Brighton Ave. exit and travel west to South Ave., where you take a left and then a quick right onto Glenwood Ave.

Parking:

Parking is available just inside the park entrance, in a dirt lot next to the old stone mill. Or you can drive farther into the park via Park Drive, which extends westward from Craddock St. Parking for a half-dozen cars is available near the loop of Park Drive; this is more convenient for picnickers who wish to use the park's covered pavilion, which features two picnic tables.

A Self-Guided Walk Through the History and Natural Features of Elmwood Park:

- Start at the Stone Mill:

Stone Mill - In 1806, a man named Nicholas Mickles took advantage of the water power of Furnace Brook and built a foundry near where the stone mill building now sits. This foundry produced shot and shells used by the U.S. Army and Navy in the War of 1812. Furnace Brook takes its name from the furnace in that foundry. The foundry was conveniently located



near the important intersection of the main roads that ran from Syracuse to Onondaga Hill (now South Ave.) and from Onondaga Valley to Geddes (now Valley Drive/Glenwood). In 1848, the current stone mill building was constructed, according to local legend, for use as a distillery. The mill building has since been used as a plaster mill, a stable, a private house and since 1943, as clubhouse for the Elmwood Fish and Game Club. In 2000, the Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs acquired the mill, with the goal of converting it into an interpretive center for the study of nature.

- **Follow the stone dust trail** that runs westward between the Valley Little League field and the mill. You will see a concrete dam to your left. This was constructed in 1929, shortly after the city purchased the park land in 1927. But it is not the first dam on this site.

Following the ownership of Elmwood land by such notables as Comfort Tyler, Joshua Forman (the "Father of Syracuse") and Mickles, the eastern section of the current park was bought by William F. Pardee in 1889. While the parkland had long been used for Sunday school picnics, Pardee was the first to actively develop the site as "the only First Class Temperance Pleasure Resort in Central New York." He spent four years developing the 17-acre site, damming Furnace Brook to create two artificial lakes, adding a swan boat for lake excursions, building a merry-go-round, restaurant, dance pavilion and other attractions. There was a cigar stand, ice cream parlor, rifle range and picnic shelters. Strolling paths and carriage drives took advantage of the natural beauty of the valley bluffs, stream and wildflowers. Pardee's park opened to the public in 1893. At this point in time, the village of Elmwood, which wrapped around the park's eastern end, was experiencing rapid residential growth. Electrified trolleys could bring Syracuse residents from the center of the city to Elmwood and the park in twenty-five minutes for a five-cent fare. The park thus became a very popular recreational destination. (The city would eventually annex the village of Elmwood in 1899.)

The park changed hands several times after Pardee's ownership, and in 1895, a fire destroyed the park's cigar stand, ice cream parlor and restaurant, sparing only the dance pavilion. In 1896, Billy McGlory, a former Bowery saloon owner from New York City, called the "wickedest man in New York," bought the property and spent thousands of dollars developing a "Coney Island type of amusement place." He succeeded in building a large theater, but neighborhood opposition to his other plans was so great that he was denied a liquor license.

McGlory sold the property to William Dwyer in 1900, who tore down the theater and dance hall for their lumber. In 1908, Jack Boone leased the property and developed a resort called Dreamland Park. However, a summer flood resulting from a break in the dam washed out the season, and a fire in 1909 finally put an end to the resort era at Elmwood Park. For the next two decades, the "Yellowstone of Syracuse" was left to revert to nature.

- **Furnace Brook Goes Underground:**

Immediately downstream from the dam, Furnace Brook goes underground, eventually flowing beneath Onondaga Ave. to a point of connection with Onondaga Creek near Kirk Park. Behind the dam is a cattail marsh that used to be one of the two ponds in the park. There are currently plans to dredge the marsh from the dam to the first stone bridge in order to re-create the pond.

• **Stonework Courtesy of TERA and WPA:**

Continue to walk west along the trail until you come to the first of two stone bridges that cross Furnace Brook to your left. (Originally, three stone bridges had been constructed across Furnace Brook, but the westernmost one no longer exists.) This bridge, as well as the bulk of the stonework in Elmwood Park, dates from the early 1930's. Following the Stock Market Crash of 1929, which preceded the Great Depression, severe unemployment gripped New York, as it did elsewhere in the nation. New York State responded in 1931 by setting up the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) to disburse state and federal relief funds to localities such as Syracuse. These funds were used to complete public works projects, including roads, public buildings and park improvements. Between 1931 and 1935, TERA funded some \$48,000 worth of Elmwood Park projects. The bulk of the park's improvements were paid for through the state TERA, rather than the better known federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), which ran from 1935 to 1941.

• **Furnace Brook:**



Do not cross the bridge, stay on the trail. You will notice that Furnace Brook flows in a channel of stones. This man-made channel, constructed during the Depression, extends along the entire length of the brook as it flows through Elmwood Park. There are several places along Furnace Brook where you can hear the gurgle of water as it flows through small weirs, or rapids designed to slow and control the flow of the brook. Furnace Brook is a remarkably clean waterway, which contains, among other aquatic life, trout and freshwater shrimp. Furnace Brook, stocked each year by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, has a

reputation among anglers as an excellent trout stream. Project Watershed volunteers from Corcoran High School test it regularly for water quality. Water quality data from Furnace Brook can be viewed at the Project Watershed website at <http://watershed.syr.edu/>.



• **Bridges and Birds:**

Farther down the trail to your right are two swing sets and a picnic pavilion with two tables; Elmwood Park once featured eight rustic wooden picnic shelters and six stone fireplaces. To the left is a wooden bridge. On a quiet morning, you may be able to see a great blue heron, belted kingfisher or mallard feeding in Furnace Brook. Other birds that either make their home in or migrate over the park include cedar waxwings, white-throated sparrows and northern cardinals. Continuing along the trail, you will come to another stone bridge. Cross the bridge and take the right fork in the path. The left fork leads back toward the mill.

• **Forestation and Erosion:**

Looking from the fork, to your left, you will see a stone staircase. It is one of thirteen, built in the early 1930s that exist



in the park. For a short diversion from your walk around the park, climb these stairs to discover a quaint stone seat built into the staircase. Farther up the stairs is an overgrown terrace surrounded by trees and stone walls. Another set of stairs leads from this terrace up to an expanse of young saplings. Historic photos from the 1890s show that Elmwood Park was much less forested than it is today. On a 1935 project map of the park, the upper plateau appears as a largely open area with individual trees of mixed species. Returning from this side trip to the stone bridge, notice how the trees to your left (south of Furnace Brook) grip the hillside with long thick roots to remain upright. Slopes in the park range from 2% to 40%. This factor, combined with the coarse, shallow soil of the valley walls, makes soil erosion a major problem in the park.

• **The Furnace Brook Floodplain:**

The trail in front of you now opens into a large expanse of pavement. The most interesting feature of this area of the park is probably Furnace Brook to your right. Here it is wider and shallower and splits to flow around a small island with an overgrown fountain on it. Do not wade onto this island, for it is literally crawling with poison ivy. To the left of the pavement, a set of stairs climbs the hillside. At this point, you can walk west along the stone dust trail, or walk on the grass along the brook. Trees that you can see along the brook floodplain include yew, Flowering Dogwood, maples, Northern White Cedar, larch and Black Cherry, among others. Near the west end of this relatively large open area, Furnace Brook is joined by another small brook.

• **Elmwood Park Extension:**

At the end of the stone dust trail, you are faced with three choices. For one, you can cross the narrow wood bridge in front of you (carefully!), and end up at the Corcoran High School athletic fields. In 1963, this 41-acre parcel of land was purchased by the City of Syracuse and annexed as the Elmwood Park Extension for use as a public recreation area. South of the athletic fields, an unchannelized Furnace Brook meanders through a steep and breathtaking forested ravine. From the southwest heights above the Corcoran athletic fields, you can enjoy a marvelous view of Syracuse on a clear day.

• **Upper Tree Trail:**

You can also take one of two routes to your left - a gradually sloping trail upward or a set of stone steps - to get to Elmwood Park's upper tree trail. This trail leads back in the direction of the stone mill. Walking along the upper tree trail, you'll soon come to a small clearing. To the left, a set of stone steps leads down to the open, grassy space below. You'll come to a fork in the trail. Going left, the trail runs along the ridge, and you can get a view of Furnace Brook and the trail that you walked along coming west. Taking the right fork is more interesting, as this trail takes you a little deeper into Elmwood Park's urban forest. In 1966, Professor E. H. Ketchledge from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry noted that "the diversity of woody plants in the park...is greater than that found in any natural forest area of comparable size anywhere within the county." His inventory of woody plants in Elmwood Park found 17 species of conifers, 36 hardwoods, 28 shrubs and 6 vines. Trees currently found along the upper trail include Sugar Maple (our state tree), American Beech, Northern White-Cedar, Eastern Hophornbeam, Norway Maple, Yellow Birch, Black Cherry, Shagbark and Bitternut hickories, and Northern Red Oak, among others. This forest (and other varied habitat in the park) provides cover for a variety of wildlife including red and gray squirrels, opossum, raccoon, woodchuck,

striped skunk, eastern cottontail and even white-tailed deer. In early spring, woodland wildflowers such as trout lily, bellwort, cut leaf toothwort, yellow violets and bloodroot adorn the understory of the wooded plateau, and impressive patches of vinca can be found at the western end of the upper tree trail.

• **Nature and Man:**

As you enter another clearing, you'll come upon a gently sloping gully. Trails split off and follow the gully on both sides, but the most interesting and beautiful walk is down through the gully itself. Enjoy the trees towering above you and the surprisingly serene quiet of the place. Here you can imagine walking through a forest in the country, but you are actually still in the midst of urban Syracuse. The gully trail leads you back to the paved area in the middle of the park. To your right as you walk east back to the mill, you'll come to the stone staircase with the seat. Take this up to the terrace, then take the gravel trail east. To your left, heading down to Park Drive is a set of stone steps that divides. Don't take these; keep going along the trail until you come to a long set of stairs ahead of you. Follow these down to the road below. On your right as you walk along Park Drive is a gently curving retaining wall of varying heights that extends for hundreds of feet along the road. This is one of many striking reminders in Elmwood Park of how humans can and do put their lasting stamps on the environment. John Weeks, renowned local naturalist and the voice behind "The Nature of Things" on WRVO-FM, notes that "the human element is almost as significant as the natural element" in Elmwood Park. When you come to the spot in the road where Park Drive begins its loop, take a left back toward the dam and the mill.

Elmwood Park Neighbors Association:

The Elmwood Park Neighbors Association (EPNA) began in late 1994, with organizational help from the youth employment program Year-Round Syracuse. EPNA President Larry Rutledge has been actively working with his neighbors to try to improve Elmwood Park since moving into a house overlooking the hidden green gem. He would like to see deteriorated stonework in the park restored, roads and signage improved, and such amenities as picnic tables and restrooms installed. "We'd like to see the park restored to its original 1935 condition." EPNA sponsors frequent clean-ups of the park, as well as walking tours. If you would like to become a member of EPNA, contact Rutledge at 471-4780 for more information.