

Know Your City Parks: James E. Heath Park

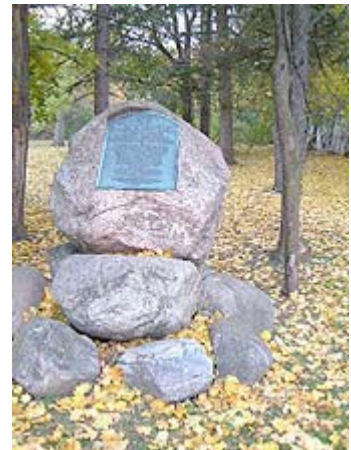
Heath Park is an easy place to miss, but it's a real find if you're looking for a brisk walk in the urban woods. Its 30.629 acres contain rich and varied forest growth, a trout stream, a thriving community garden and a children's play area.

With only a 366-foot frontage on the east side of the 5500 block of South Salina St. in Syracuse, Heath is a long, narrow park that extends east up a fairly steep wooded hill to the right-of-way for Interstate Route 81. It is located just north of Green Hills Plaza and several blocks south of Seneca Turnpike. Heath Park can be distinguished from its surrounding neighborhood of well-kept houses because it contains sizable stands of mature evergreen trees that can be seen from the street.

The park is bounded on the north by Conifer Drive and on the south by the backyards of houses built along Richfield Avenue. Cold Brook, a DEC-protected trout stream, runs north/south through the lower, flat part of the park.

The Stone Plaque

The one man-made object in the park that is visible from S. Salina St. is a small bronze-and-stone plaque. Erected in 1938 by the New York State Public Education Department and other partners, the plaque reads: The Iroquois Trail crossed here, for several centuries the Great Indian Highway east and west. Used by the Dutch in 1634, by the Jesuit Missionaries, by Sir William Johnson, and by Asa Danforth, the Onondaga pioneer, carrying on his back the saw for the first sawmill in Central New York.



This plaque off South Salina St. commemorates the Iroquois Trail that ran east-west through Heath Park.

Some History Heath Park has not always been called Heath Park. At the turn of the last century, what is now the park was part of farmlands owned by I. A. Guillaume and Benjamin Weller. In 1912, the State College of Forestry of Syracuse University bought the two farms (a total of 95 acres) for \$20,000 for use as an experiment station. The land stretched from S. Salina St. east to Lafayette Rd.

Accessibility from the university and the city, the diversity of soils represented in the lowlands and the hills and the combination of wooded and cultivated sections were the determining factors in the purchase of the property, according to a Post-Standard article dated April 19, 1912. Not only will the property be used for demonstration purposes in connection with the College of Forestry curriculum, it is the intention to extend its educational features by making it in the nature of a public park, accessible to all the people of the city.

Forestry Dean Hugh P. Baker declared that the land would be used for experiments showing farmers what they can accomplish. Fully 1/3 of the property was wooded in 1912, primarily with oaks, maples and evergreens. Here, it would be demonstrated that practical forestry and scientific cutting could produce the best results in forest reclamation. On the cleared lower portion of the property, there were to be 100 transplanting beds to test the adaptability of pines and spruces to this climate, and an additional 150 seed beds where hardwood and evergreen trees would be propagated. There was also a plan to use a portion of the property as a basket willow plantation.

The road leading into the park from S. Salina St. up the hill to Lafayette Rd. was reconstructed and surfaced by relief laborers in 1934 - 35. Although now overgrown in many places, it is the best route for a walk through the park. It begins just south of the plaque and extends due east over Cold Brook and up the hill, where it curves first left, then right. Where it climbs the hill, the road is quite steep.

Another relief project in 1935 resulted in the construction of a pump house near Cold Brook (the remains of which can still be seen today), which made possible the use of a sprinkler system for the tree seedling beds. As late as 1941, a house, barn and garage still stood on what is now the Heath Park property.

In 1962, after construction of Interstate Route 81 had cut off what had come to be called Conifer Park from the rest of its Experiment Station, the College of Forestry declared the land to be surplus, stating that the property contained one dwelling and some relatively unimportant tree plantations and a forest tree nursery.

In 1966, SUNY-ESF botany professor E.H. Ketchledge proposed that the abandoned woodland be developed in much the same manner as Elmwood Park. He felt that the property could be developed as a nature center, with appropriate lighting and fencing erected to deter vandalism.

Ketchledge noted that it could be a fine place to bring botany students because the land has many fine species of trees and shrubs. It is our hope that the city will be given title to the land, and would develop the property along the lines of a nature center.

The college did transfer ownership of the property to the City of Syracuse in March 1967 for \$1. The deed of conveyance contains a clause that no road shall be built through the park to Rt. 81. SUNY-ESF still uses the remainder of its original property between I-81 and Lafayette Rd. as an experiment station.

James Heath, then Commissioner of the Syracuse Department of Parks & Recreation, thought that the property could become something special - limited only by imagination and planning ability.

At a March, 1968 public meeting about potential use of the park, Professor Ketchledge came out in favor of preserving the park in its natural state for use by nature lovers and students. He stated that the park contains over 50 years plantation growth with a variety of species. A local resident said that the park lends itself to use as a bird sanctuary and botanical garden. However, some parents suggested constructing child play areas in the portion of the park west of Cold Brook,

including bicycle trails, a playground, skating rink and tennis courts, while leaving wild the wooded growth in the hilly eastern portion.

On Dec. 22, 1969, the property was dedicated as James E. Heath Park, in memory of the late Parks & Recreation commissioner who had been killed that year in an airline crash.

Physiography and Soils Heath Park is located on the eastern slope of the Onondaga Creek valley. The lake which occupied this valley during the retreat of the last glacier determined much of the character of the soils. The former Experiment Station nursery beds are located on sandy soils deposited on the former lake shore. In other places, on the slope, rock ledges are exposed where washing has removed the soil cover. The floor of the valley has a deep deposit of coarse gravel and stony loam resulting from erosion and silting of the original gravelly lake bottom.



These fascinating rock outcroppings can be seen as you hike up the hillside trail.

Natural Forest The steep valley slope of the park was never cleared of its forest cover. The original forest on the property was oak, hickory and chestnut with considerable white pine on the dry sites. Where there was more moisture, due to deeper soils and seepage, maple, hemlock, red oak and white ash occurred. The same species still occupy the site except for the chestnut which was cut when threatened with blight.

Planted Forest On a thin strip of land just south of the line of Conifer Dr. and just east of the bottom of the hill, jack pine and osage orange were planted in 1913. The pines eventually overwhelmed or distorted the orange, and Norway spruce and Scotch pine were planted in their place.

The area just west of Cold Brook and extending some 300 feet toward S. Salina St. was cleared of its original forest growth sometime after the property was acquired by the forestry college. It was then used for growing transplants. A section of this area closest to Conifer Dr. was at one time used for experiments in growing several species of basket willow. In 1917, during the World War, the market price for willow rods reached its maximum of \$30 per ton, because importers could not obtain supplies from abroad. After the war, the local market price dropped and local demand decreased. By 1932, the willow bolt was cleaned out, and only a limited amount of each species saved for cuttings.



Conifers were planted in rows by the College of Forestry to test various spacing, pruning and thinning techniques.

From the cleared area to S. Salina St., a number of different trees were planted in several experimental plots. These plots demonstrated the effects of various spacing, pruning and thinning techniques. White pine, eastern hemlock, arborvitae, Scotch pine, Colorado blue spruce and red pine were among the trees planted in this area.

Community Garden The Heath Park Community Garden is located east of Cold Brook, on the north side of the park trail. Founded by park neighbor Harriet Rohner in the mid-1970s, the garden now is used by a dozen gardeners who grow a wide variety of flowers (including lilies, gladiolas, asters, dahlias, etc.) and a wide variety of vegetables (including tomatoes, cucumbers, broccoli, greens, beans, eggplant, etc.). Rohner says that, in addition to providing vegetables and flowers for the gardeners, the garden also provides an activity for shut-ins, a spiritual uplift for walkers along the trail and an educational opportunity for children who attend local schools.

Parking The north boundary of Heath Park is Conifer Drive. This is the best place to park your car as you explore the lower park property. If you park close to S. Salina St., walk along S. Salina south to the plaque, then take the park road east. If you park further east along Conifer Dr., there is a path that runs along Cold Brook southward toward the park road.

On the south side of Heath Park is Richfield Ave. If you go two blocks east along this dead-end street, you will cross over Cold Brook and pass the Heath Park Community Garden to your left. This is a good place to park if you want to climb the park trail to I-81 or visit the community garden.