

## Know Your City Parks: Schiller Park

### Schiller: One Park, Many Uses

Schiller Park is many parks in one. It's a nature park of 37 green acres, dominated by a drumlin with a panoramic view of Syracuse, Onondaga Lake and the surrounding countryside. It's an historical park that celebrates, among other things, the city's turn-of-the-century German citizens, who erected the Goethe-Schiller statue that stands guard over a pedestrian entrance to the park. The park is also very popular with youngsters of all ages because of its Olympic-sized swimming pool, softball fields, playground and recreation center.

### Where It Is, How To Get There

Schiller Park is located on the north side of Syracuse, generally north of James St., east of Butternut St. and south of Grant Ave. Specifically, the park is bounded by Farmer St., Highland St., and a series of residential lots on its north and east sides. The Goethe-Schiller Monument is located off Highland St. and 3rd Ave. The most direct route to the swimming pool is a park road beginning at the intersection of Rugby Road and Oak St. The ball fields and Bova Recreation Center are located off Farmer St., which intersects Oak St.



*Schiller Park's Round top provides a panoramic view of Syracuse and the surrounding area.*

### History of the Round Top

The large northern portion of Schiller Park, about half its area, consists of a drumlin whose round top is girdled by elliptical walking paths and park roads. Writer Dick Case of the Syracuse Newspapers states in a 1991 column that ...this drumlin...used to be a Native American burial ground. A newsletter of the Friends of Schiller Park group speculates that the park summit could have been a lookout point over Onondaga Lake during the French and Indian War. The same newsletter says that the drumlin top (often referred to as Round Top) may have been used as a

burial ground for victims of influenza and cholera epidemics in the early 1800s. (As a point of reference, Syracuse was incorporated as a city in 1848.)

Round Top was purchased around 1850 by a group of men for use as a Protestant burial ground. This idea, however, was abandoned when the present site of Oakwood Cemetery was deemed a better site for such a use.

In 1863, the Rev. Dr. James A. O'Hara of St. Mary's Church bought 40 acres of land including Round Top for \$8,000. The first burial in the new Round Top, or St. Cecelia's Catholic Cemetery - of a Mr. P.C. Pendergast of Phoenix - took place on Aug. 13, 1863. However, because of a dispute between O'Hara and a Bishop Conroy of Albany, the land was never officially consecrated. Conroy forbade the burial of anyone who had not already purchased a plot. As a consequence, Round Top ceased being used as a cemetery in 1877.

Following the death of Rev. O'Hara, a burial plot owner named Michael McCarthy sued the priest's heirs in 1881 because he had paid O'Hara \$200 in 1865 for a burial plot that O'Hara had insisted was consecrated. The contentious cemetery case was settled in favor of McCarthy in 1899, after nearly two decades of legal wrangling, bankruptcies and receiverships.

At one point, O'Hara's heirs had wanted to run streets and Avenues through the cemetery site and develop it as a housing subdivision, but owners of plots in the cemetery objected strongly.

### **Schiller Becomes A Park**

On May 27, 1901, the Syracuse Common Council approved spending \$25,000 to buy 23.479 acres of Round Top for park purposes, and thus the City purchased St. Cecilia's Cemetery. Bodies that had been buried there were removed in 1901 to prepare the site for use as a park. The name was changed from Round Top Park to Schiller Park on July 3, 1905. Additional land was added in 1907, and the tract was formally laid out as a park in 1910.

David Campbell, former head gardener for the Thornden estate and at the time Superintendent of Parks for the city, designed Schiller Park in 1911, influenced by the prevailing Arts & Crafts Movement. The loop drives in Schiller Park complemented and emphasized the park's drumlin landform. Schiller Park today has nearly 3 miles of roads. The loop drives were closed to vehicular traffic in 1976.

A significant stand of oaks still survives along the slopes of the drumlin from the early days of the park.

### **Arbor Day 2001 Poetry Reading**

In April, 2001, Schiller Park hosted the city's second annual Arbor Day Celebration. During this event, Centers For Nature Education (thanks to support from the Lila Wallace Readers Digest Poets and Writers Fund) sponsored a poetry scavenger hunt led by well-known local poet Georgia Popoff. Participants searched for pieces of two Popoff poems that were hidden in trees on the park's round top. This program was a part of the Know Your City Parks series.

## **Schiller Park Field House**

Schiller Park's field house was originally built in 1938 at the lower, flatter south end of the park. It was designed in an Arts and Crafts style with stucco walls, hipped roof and brick details. (A number of brick stairs and paths throughout the park are from the same period.) The building was used for recreation and community purposes, but primarily as a bath house for the original Schiller Park pool. It is not known exactly when the original pool was constructed, but the first Syracuse Parks Department annual report of 1918 mentions the problem of overcrowding at the popular pool in Schiller Park.

## **New Pool, Bathhouse and Rec Facilities**

A new \$225,000 Olympic-sized pool and bathhouse was dedicated on June 24, 1961. Prominent Olympic swimmers, divers, synchronized swimmers and clown divers performed at the elaborate dedication ceremony. At that time, the new Schiller Park Pool was the largest outdoor pool in Central New York.

In 1966, two new handball courts were constructed in the park; in 1968 maples, crabapples, ash and linden trees were planted around the new lower parking lot. Softball fields now occupy the lower field formerly occupied by a running track. In 1976, a massive wood-and-steel play structure was constructed just up the hill from the parking lot.

## **Field House Renovations and Gazebo**

The Schiller Park field house was renovated in 1981 for \$250,000. Its first floor now features a recreation/meeting room, office and storage space, a concession area and rest rooms accessible from both inside and outside. The second floor features a gym with a half-size basketball court, as well as kitchen, office and storage space. The field house was dedicated as the Lou Bova Recreation Center in August, 1987. Bova had worked for the Syracuse Department of Parks & Recreation for 34 years when he died in 1980. He began as a laborer and worked his way up to Deputy Commissioner, Superintendent of Parks.

For a time beginning in 1996, Southeast Asian immigrants who lived in the neighborhood cultivated some 160 community garden plots in the northwest corner of the park.

In 2000, the City constructed a wooden gazebo near the field house and softball fields. It is used as an outdoor pavilion and staging area for musical events.

## **Schiller Recreation**

Recreational facilities in the park currently include the outdoor inground 50-meter swimming pool, a water slide, 2 softball fields, 6 tennis courts, one basketball court and 2 handball courts. The Bova Recreation Center is open from noon to 8 p.m. weekdays, offering an educational computer lab and a Homework Habits program in which volunteer tutors help children with their homework assignments. The center is located off Farmer St. and Whitwell Drive, at the far end

of the parking lot. Contact Pat Torio at (315) 473-4780 for further details about Bova Rec Center programs and hours.

### **Advocates For Schiller Park**

The Friends of Schiller Park group was founded in June, 1991 by a group of park neighbors. The Friends, which counted more than 25 members at its height, was concerned about improving the upkeep of Schiller's grounds, controlling trash and brush, road repairs and security. The group had high hopes of turning Schiller Park into a venue for concerts and winter events. However, these dreams never materialized, and the group eventually broke up.

Following the dissolution of that group, Neighborhood Watch activist Judy Rudd founded the Schiller Park Association in April, 1996. She and her husband Jack have since led activities in the park as diverse as planting flowers, mulching trees near the lower parking lot, restoring brick pathways on the drumlin, and holding Easter egg hunts for neighborhood children. For more information about the Schiller Park Association or to help improve the park, contact Judy Rudd at 471-6043.

### **The Goethe-Schiller Monument**

The big, bronze monument at the northern end of the park honors a long friendship between two German writers prominent in the late 18th century. Johann von Goethe (1749-1832) was a poet, dramatist and novelist whose most famous work is Faust, an epic dramatic poem about a learned German doctor who traveled widely, performed magic - and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for youth, knowledge, and magical power. Poet and dramatist Johann von Schiller (1759-1805) is best known for his works Don Carlos and William Tell.

More importantly, Goethe and Schiller were champions of the humanistic ideals of freedom and political liberty that stirred German desires for national unification and liberal reform during the early 19th century. However, as rebellions against authoritarian rulers and kings were crushed in places like Prussia, Austria, Bavaria and Hanover, German immigrants fled to America. A sizable number settled to the south and west of the future park, creating a neighborhood of primarily working-class German inhabitants.

Goethe and Schiller were so admired that the Deutscher Bund of Onondaga County - a society of prominent German residents of Syracuse - raised \$10,000 to erect a monument to the two friends. On October 15, 1911, the statue was dedicated to Syracusans of German ancestry. Thousands of people attended the unveiling ceremony. The Syracuse Goethe-Schiller statue was



*Goethe-Schiller monument dedicated in 1911 to Syracusans of German ancestry.*

only the fourth constructed in the United States to honor the two German literary giants, following the lead of San Francisco, Cleveland and Milwaukee.

The Syracuse statue is bronze on a black marble pedestal on a granite base. The bronze grouping was cast in Germany. Schiller is 11 feet high, Goethe, 10 feet, 10 inches.