

History of The Ponds Park by Karis Crawford, February 2022

Prior to the nineteenth century, the site where The Ponds Park now stands was part of the lands of Indigenous peoples, the Anishinaabeg (including Odawa, Ojibwe and Boodewadomi) and the Wyandot. Read more [acknowledging the history](#) of native lands that the city manages today.

Throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, the area was used for agriculture. Nelson Booth held the small farmstead in 1874, J.T. Jacobs in 1895, and W.J. Straith in 1915. By the mid-to-late twentieth century the acreage, especially the fencerows, was gradually reverting to woodland. Long-time neighbors remember that pheasants and woodcocks nested in these woods.

The area was annexed from Pittsfield Township into the City of Ann Arbor in 1978. In 1979, real estate developers Patricia and Harry Dion of Pinckney purchased a tract of approximately 17 acres from the Straith family in order to build the Hearthstone subdivision of single-family homes.

Residents of the nearby neighborhood of Kimberley Hills worked with city staff to try to secure several acres of the Hearthstone land for a city park. They applied for a conservation grant from the State of Michigan, with the residents offering matching funds. Residents also pursued a lawsuit to try to establish a nature preserve within the proposed subdivision. Both these efforts failed. Houses were built on the west side of Gladstone Avenue in 1987 and 1988; construction along Ember Way also proceeded, from the late 1980s to the late 1990s.

Meanwhile, to the west of the Hearthstone subdivision, fronting on Packard, an apartment complex called The Ponds at Georgetown was built in 1988-89, replacing two farmhouses. At this time, the developers of the apartments, Woodward S. Smith and Robert J. Goodrich, ceded 1.66 acres of their site to the City of Ann Arbor for a nominal sum, to be dedicated as The Ponds Park in perpetuity.

This initial 1.66 acre section of The Ponds Park is an irregularly shaped, wooded area that runs north and south, just to the east of the apartment complex's water features, "the ponds." (Note that these water features belong to the apartment complex, not to the city.)

Ann Arbor's official 1994 plan for Parks, Recreation, and Open Space recommended that the city consider adding about half an acre to the original natural area of The Ponds Park, so that a neighborhood playground could be built adjacent to the woods. An evaluation of the wooded site by staff of the city's Natural Area Preservation program found dense growth of invasive species such as buckthorn, honeysuckle, and garlic mustard. Some larger trees, especially cottonwoods, were along the edges of the plot.

In 1998, city staff began surveying residents of nearby neighborhoods about their preferences for a proposed addition to The Ponds Park. The residents responded with a barrage of heartfelt letters to the city, urging the acquisition of land for a playground. Several potential sites adjacent to the woods were investigated and considered. In the end, the most workable site was deemed to be the undeveloped land on Emerald Avenue, to the west of the intersection of Candlewick Drive and Emerald Avenue. This fairly level land offered good access to the existing wooded area of The Ponds Park and was central to the neighborhood.

The site for the proposed addition to The Ponds Park comprised primarily (a) two of the empty house lots of the Hearthstone subdivision plus (b) a city-controlled right-of-way that had been set aside for a possible extension of Candlewick Drive toward the west. The city agreed to give up the idea of extending Candlewick Drive. City staff then negotiated for purchase of the two empty lots with the owners, the Dions.

This complex process led to the current configuration of The Ponds Park: the 1.66 acre wooded natural area bordering the apartment complex *plus* the connected 0.57 acre playground area, open mowed field, and garden, with frontage along Emerald Avenue.

In the summer and fall of 2002, the city graded and landscaped the 1998 addition to The Ponds Park and installed playground equipment, benches, picnic tables, and a grill, based on neighborhood requests. Special cushioning mulch was spread under the playground equipment.

In 2005, the late neighborhood activist Rosalie Meiland became the first volunteer Park Steward for The Ponds Park, heading a team that maintained the gardens and play areas. When Ms. Meiland passed away in 2015, Karis Crawford and Paul Schwankl took over as Park Stewards for the developed area of the park. Shawn Severance became the Park Steward for the natural area of The Ponds Park.

The tending of the trees in The Ponds Park has long been a key concern of the Park Stewards. Every year, the Park Stewards mulch around the playground and extension trees. They also keep in check the invasive buckthorn trees that tend to encroach on the sidewalk leading up the hill westward, toward the apartments. On a windless afternoon in 2016, a 50-foot cottonwood tree at the south end of the woods toppled onto the edge of the playground area, shaking the earth and damaging two maple trees in its descent. The cottonwood, removed by the city, proved to have been rotted from within. Fortunately, no one was injured, and the damaged maple trees have since recovered.

In 2017 and 2018, volunteer crews, working with the city's Adopt-a-Park and Natural Area Preservation programs, cleared trails in the wooded area of The Ponds Park. One trail now leads from the playground toward the north, exiting the woods at Victoria Avenue and providing access to The Ponds Park playground for residents of the neighborhood that lies between the park and Independence Boulevard. In the middle of the woods, this trail branches off to the west, leading toward the ponds that belong to the nearby apartments. The park trails were featured in Ann Arbor's [Natural Area Preservation newsletter for Winter 2017](#).

In the pandemic years of 2020-2022, The Ponds Park has been busier than ever, serving as a neighborhood hub for visitors seeking outdoor recreation.