

The Pergola: West Park's First Architectural Structure

Since it was erected in 1925, West Park's Pergola has served as a passageway, a gateway, into West Park from the north. Although it stands in place, the pergola is a world and time traveler. It doesn't really speak much of it, but its roots stretch as far as Egypt in 1400 B.C. What it does speak of is traveling to ancient Greece and Rome and to the Italian Renaissance where it helped define outdoor spaces. Even its name 'pergola' has traveled across countries, making its way directly from Italian into English.

With four Greek-style columns, the pergola speaks of the classics with what seems a lofty hint of history, of education, of gardens. It is said that the Greek columns not only support the roof but also give a feeling of order, strength, and balance. Its open-framework roof could either provide deep shade when plants are trained to flow over it (desirable in hot dry climates such as the Mediterranean) or light shade from the framework alone (desirable in northern countries with wet climates).

With persistence (and a little help from Parks Department renovations) the Entrance Pergola has stood the test time -- of ravaging winters, winds, and rain— to garner the award of being listed on the Ann Arbor Register of Historic Places. Parks Department files contain a letter dated February 14, 1995 (effectively a Valentine for West Park) informing them that the West Park Entrance Pergola, along with the West Park Band Shell and the Island Park Shelter, were designated as Individual Historic Properties by the Ann Arbor City Council on November 7, 1994.

Finding any early photograph of West Park's Pergola proved a daunting quest, as did locating information about its creation. Two snippets in Board of Parks minutes did reveal themselves:

June 16, 1925

"Moved and Carried that a vote of thanks be extended Commissioner M. J. Fritz for securing marble pillars for West Park Entrance."

October 23, 1925

"Motion made and seconded that Superintendent of Parks erect a pergola at West Park, following generally the plan made by Mr. O'Dell changing dimension to 8 x 14 feet."

– Board of Parks minutes



The Pergola in West Park (in 2022)

Not knowing Mr. O'Dell or his plan or any record of what inspired it, we can only speculate on what inspired West Park's Pergola. We do know a little bit about the Pergola's location. It was built on the grounds of the 3rd Ward School, which underwent a name change to Mack School in 1901. The school stood from 1866 until it was torn down in the early 1920s and a new Mack School building was constructed on property a little to the west and on the other side of Miller Avenue. The Pergola's site is also just up the bluff from one of the first parcels of land obtained for West Park –a part of the land for James Toms' greenhouse on Chapin St. 1858-1890s, the greenhouse business continuing under other owners until 1955.

Along with the greenhouse, James Toms had a formal garden, and in that garden was a pergola. Evan Pratt kindly shared the 1882 photograph below of Toms' formal garden with the future West Park in the background. He also pointed out the structure there that may have inspired West Park's Pergola, mentioning that he had heard that the Pergola was a nod to an "old one". Note the dark structure back of the picket fence and tree in the circled area. Might that structure in James Toms' formal garden have planted the seed for the Pergola in West Park?



Photo 1882 courtesy Evan Pratt, Washtenaw Water Resources Commissioner.

The photo might also be showing us the 3rd Ward School (later called Mack School) at the left edge on top of a bluff, if the photo was taken facing northwesterly from Chapin Street. Hard to say if that is indeed the building or the proper orientation of the photo. What is clear is that a 1924 citizen's petition prompted the purchase of the grounds of the old school building as an addition to West Park. There must have been in Ann Arbor at that time many a graduate with vivid memories of the old school building. Did ancient history, perhaps learned at the school, inspire West Park's Pergola? Is the Pergola, perhaps, a nod to education and the 3rd Ward/Mack School?

Did perhaps the availability of materials –the marble pillars Park Commissioner Fritz secured-- suggest the pergola design? Where did those marble pillars come from? Although it has been said that the Pergola pillars were salvaged by Superintendent of Parks Eli Gallup from the Farmers and Mechanics Bank when it was demolished by an interurban in 1927, the pillars most likely came from some other source given the construction date of 1925 for the Pergola. That the pillars were salvaged from a building demolished somewhere in the Ann Arbor area does, however, fit with Park Commissioner Fritz's interest in repurposing materials. According to Commissioner Fritz's heirs, after his death his wishes included salvaging materials from his homestead for use in building a shelter on parkland they donated to the city. Together with Commissioner Fritz, Superintendent Eli Gallup might well have scouted out reclaimed materials all around Ann Arbor for the parks.

Maybe one, maybe all of these suppositions about what inspired the Pergola played a role. What do you think?

Ravages of roughly a hundred winters of ice, frequent rain, and moisture from high-humidity summer days all exact their toll on open outdoor structures. (Those conditions can be hard enough on buildings with solid roofs!) Vandalism has also been a real threat. While preservation is a goal, practicalities of cost can force

some changes. The marble pillars apparently were replaced by concrete pillars some time prior to 2010. Plaques on the Pergola have been known to disappear.

Yet the Pergola lives on. It is a gateway with connection. By using columns on the sides joined by beams and topped with open rafters, it creates a sense of connection between two spaces. Between the surrounding neighborhood and the park. Between privately held property and public land with open access to everyone. Between the earth (the tile base grounding us) and sky above (the open roof offering a sense of freedom). Erected at the Miller Avenue entrance --now in 2022 going on almost one hundred years ago-- the Pergola remains a distinctive feature of West Park, sitting as a gateway high on the northern bluff.