

Arboretum Nature Area

The story begins with an 1899 visit to Ann Arbor by Ossian Cole Simonds ([Bentley Historical Library photograph](#)), prominent landscape gardener who set the initial design for Cedar Bend Park. O. C. Simonds was no less in stature than Fredrick Law Olmsted, both leaders in the country in landscape gardening. O.C. Simonds' visit included evaluating possible locations for a university botanical garden, as what had been serving for one was proving inadequate. U-M botany professor Frederick C. Newcombe was instrumental in the search. He and U-M botany professor George P. Burns were to orchestrate the joint venture between the university and the city.

Throughout the country park building was rising in prominence as industrialization brought with it a greater need for open space where nature could be experienced. An outgrowth of this was the creation of local park commissions. Ann Arbor's first Board of Park Commissioners was appointed in May 1905, with professor George Burns a leading member.

A year later, on July 16, 1906, the park commission unanimously passed two key resolutions. The first was to purchase, on land contract, about 22 acres of land from Arthur J. Mummery and wife Elizabeth Mummery. The land contained the eastern bank of the rill in what was called School Girls' Glen (also referred to as School Girl's Glen or Schoolgirls' Glen). According to a U-M Heritage Project article [tracing the glen through time](#), its name possibly originated from Miss Mary Clark, the principal of an 1850s private school for girls, leading the girls "to the verdant little valley to press and collect wildflowers."

The second key resolution authorized the park commission to enter into an agreement with the U-M regents for the joint use and improvement of the Mummery property and adjacent land under the university's control. A landscape gardener was to be employed to lay out the plot, supervised by park commissioners and the university, who equally shared the expense. The city would cover the expense of constructing roads laid out by the landscape gardener, and the roads would be public roads. The university would provide "general directorship of the whole garden", and the city would police the entire plot. With these resolutions the city was on the path to an agreement with the university to jointly form what in later times would affectionately be known as 'the Arb' and to bring in a landscape gardener to help it take shape. The agreement between the city and the university would initially be set for a period not exceeding three years but ultimately it would be extended, with some alterations, indefinitely. [A history writing from Park Department files](#) provides details of the changing arrangements and of city road-building activities.

Within a few days, the park commission wrote a deed for acquiring the Mummery property. A few days later, a neighbor to the Mummery property, Nathan Woodmansee, wrote a deed gifting the city 2 acres of land along the Huron River at the easterly end of the Mummery property.

As pointed out by Bob Grese in his 1993 investigation into O. C. Simonds' involvement with the Ann Arbor Parks/Arboretum, on August 17, 1906 the Ann Arbor Daily Times reported:

“[Ann Arbor is to be congratulated on acquiring such a beautiful park](#) as can be made out of the Arboretum and Mummery tracts,' said O. C. Simonds, the well-known Chicago landscape gardener to a Times reporter today. Mr. Simonds is here for the purpose of platting the University's and the city's recently acquired property, and is also looking after a number of private yards on Oxford road, where beautiful homes are to be built by Profs. Jones, Markey [Markley] and Newcomb [Newcombe] and Drs. Copeland and Burns.”

Then, on November 9, 1906, a deed was written by Esther 'Ettie' Connor Nichols and her husband Walter H. Nichols offering to the university as a gift 27 acres of land lying adjacent to the city's Mummery parcel. The land was part of Nichols Farm, and the Nichols had moved to Boulder, Colorado. The deed stipulated that the land be used "as a botanical garden and arboretum for the University of Michigan and for the schools of the City of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and shall be under the exclusive management and control of the Botanical Department of said university.”

A week later the city wrote a deed purchasing from William M. Clark a one-acre parcel of land running the length of the western bank of School Girls' Glen adjacent to the Mummery parcel and with considerable

frontage on the Huron River. With this, the city came to own the sizable Mummery property, all of School Girls' Glen, and extensive riverfront, and this completed the properties comprising what is today called Arboretum Nature Area. Though the original rough estimates of acreage for the three parcels totaled 25 acres, a 2013 survey of the land would find the total to be somewhat larger, at 29 acres.

In January 1907 the university officially accepted the gift of land from the Nichols. The Botanical Garden and Arboretum was established, and the agreement with the city brought the city-owned properties now known as Arboretum Nature Area under its management. An administrative arrangement no doubt key to the successful launching of the joint venture was embodying one person, botany professor George Burns, both park commission membership and directorship of the Botanical Garden (as it was often called at the beginning).

Though the name given to the joint tract in 1907 by the parks commission was 'the Glen', ultimately the name became 'Nichols Arboretum', the botanical garden having relocated to another home. Administratively, the botanical garden would reunite with Nichols Arboretum in 2004, just in time for celebrating in 2007 the 100th year anniversary of the establishment of the Botanical Garden and Arboretum. The [overall history of those 100 years](#) and the twists and turns of getting from separation to reuniting are well described in a publication for the occasion.

There were several key individuals who were driving forces in the creation process of blending city-owned land and university-owned land into a botanical garden and arboretum. They included city park commissioner and botany professor George Burns and botany professor Fredrick Newcombe. They included the Nichols, especially Esther Connor Nichols, who ahead of her husband Walter H. Nichols signed the deed granting the Nichols' land to the university. Legal and social conventions of the time would have placed the husband's name first on the deed.

In addition, there was the chosen landscape gardener, Ossian Cole Simonds (a native of Michigan based in Chicago), who wisely saw and preserved the natural beauty of the land in a single plan blending the whole tract of land as one, unimpeded by any need to distinguish city-owned land from university-owned land.



Collectively these key individuals were visionaries in drawing together a sizable tract of land that encourages diversity and ecological integrity and appreciation of nature's beauty. A sense of what they saw in the land is conveyed by a [1903-1908 study of the bird life](#) throughout what apparently is the Nichols Arboretum tract (referred to in the study as the School Girl's Glen Region). It provides a look into the rich liveliness of nature there, describing the land and documenting 138 species of birds, 100 of them regular occurrences.

Plat of Grounds of Botanical Garden, Ann Arbor, Michigan, O.C. Simonds & Co., 1906

[O.C. Simonds subtly emphasized and enhanced the land's natural beauty](#) and made it more accessible. He designed the roads and the initial paths, following the natural contours of the land. He was a master of

the "long view", with plantings purposefully selected and placed to frame an opening into the distant countryside, and he brought mystery and surprise into the mix. A series of changing scenes would greet visitors, and outdoor 'rooms' would be created for them to explore. His approach developed in response to local features and was an attempt to encourage people to appreciate natural beauty. A [biographical sketch of him](#) says he seems also to have innately understood what scientific research has only recently documented – that nature has amazing restorative power. Ahead of his time, he was a strong advocate of native plantings and ecology, a term not even in the vocabulary of his time.

The city-owned portion of 'the Arb' brought to the Arb most of its frontage along the Huron River and what has been developed as Heathdale. The city-owned portion would also become host to the Peony Garden. Begun

in the 1920s, the Peony Garden was destined to become one of the public's most perused parts of the Arb. Each year when in bloom it has been enjoyed by crowds of people. The Peony Garden has also served well as the backdrop for performances, [providing as they say "the most beautiful stage in the world"](#). U-M Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum websites describe the past and present of the [Peony Garden](#) and the composition of [Heathdale](#).



[Peony Garden postcard](#) 1930-1935 (ca.) courtesy Bentley Historical Library

Tucked away mostly out of sight in the city-owned part of the Arb is School Girls' Glen. The banks of the glen were saved from the plow by being too steep for agriculture. But as the university and city developed around it, another form of intrusion wreaked havoc on the glen. No doubt, in their wildest dreams of the future the early twentieth-century creators of the Arb did not imagine the amount of development that would take place at the upper reaches of the glen with its little stream, its rill, or sewer pipes crossing at the rill's mouth.

A hospital complex that grew ever bigger, dorms for students, research and classroom buildings, paved streets and parking lots increasingly appeared. All with construction decisions out of the Arb's control. With so much pavement and roofs blocking the ground and not allowing stormwater to soak into the ground, the little stream, the rill, became increasingly inundated with rushing stormwater runoff. Rich topsoil in the glen washed down into the Huron River. The plants growing in the glen lost their diversity, with greater loss of native plants than non-native ones. The rill became 'flashy', which led to banks caving in.

Fortunately, by the early 2000s the sad state of the glen was recognized, and [innovative erosion control measures began being taken](#). Concern for the glen and revitalizing it as well as the need for supporting

ecological integrity throughout the Arb have grown. When sanitary sewer drains in the Arb were to be cleared in 2022, the city created an interim road for the crew of the company to use [to avoid damaging protected landscape](#), and care was taken in the cleaning process... an example of the city-university agreement in action along with care for the landscape.

The [location of School Girls' Glen, the Peony Garden, Heathdale, and the riverfront](#) can be seen in the Visitor Guide & Map made available for Nichols Arboretum



Intended to serve the Arb's educational mission through its diversity and beauty, the School Girls' Glen and other parts of the Arb have, in recent years, served as classrooms for remedial work seeking to restore or protect diversity and beauty. This is learning and skills development that will, no doubt, be of broad benefit to those seeking to restore our natural world.