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Historic Summary of South Park Blocks

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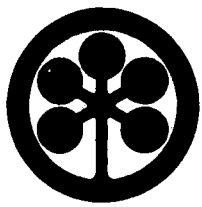
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Portland Parks
and Recreation

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

RECEIVED

DATE: June 14, 1979

JUN 14 1979

BUREAU OF PARKS &
PUBLIC RECREATIONS

TO: Doug Bridges

FROM: Lana Danaher

SUBJECT: Historic study of South Park Blocks

Attached is a historic summary of the physical character of the South Park Blocks. Substantial research has been done in this area including a detailed inventory of the individual structures within the area. This more comprehensive information is available if you would like it. Also, this inventory is the initial step of attaining historic or conservation district designation.

Also attached is an explanation of these districts and the process of achieving designation.

As is evident from the furor over the King's Hill conservation district possibility, this issue has become controversial. This has inhibiting effect on future designations. Especially unfortunate is that many of the objections are based on a misunderstanding of what such designation is. Conservation designation does not remove property from the tax base nor does it prohibit change. The attached information sheets make this clear.

Finally, the Historic Landmarks Commission and its staff are strongly in favor of district designation for the South Park Blocks area and will be very supportive. City Council has mixed emotions regarding the program. In particular Commissioner Schwab is concerned that these districts will lead to an increased number of National Landmarks being declared, thereby potentially lowering the city's tax base.

I would recommend that in light of the political nature of this issue the Parks Bureau refrain from initiating a proposal for historic district designation for the South Park Blocks. However, should the community initiate the proposal I feel strongly that the Bureau should support it.

The South Park Blocks, as one of the earliest residential communities for the prominent and a center of turn of the century churches, is a district of historic and architectural importance to the city. The Park Blocks themselves are of landmark significance, typical of a style of parks common to the late 19th century.

LMD:kd

THE SOUTH PARKBLOCKS

The South Park Blocks (between Jackson on the south and Salmon on the north) were donated to the city of Portland by original land claim owners Daniel Lownsdale, William W. Chapman, and Coffin in 1852. In spite of several legal disputes in the following decades, the majority of the property remained in possession of the city to use as a park.

Known as "The Boulevard" the conditions of the park blocks and their streets were hardly so fancy as the early nickname implies. The majority of the streets were still mud with occasional planks.

Early photos (1878) and drawings from the West Shore magazine (1882) show a stately street lined with three-foot wooden fences protecting rows of young, newly planted trees in symmetrical rows. Fashionable carriages and horses pass through the streets along with farmers carrying their produce in and out of the city on the Great Plank Road (now Jefferson Street). The blocks surrounding the Park Blocks were largely residential; many residences were the imposing Italianate mansions of the wealthy in Portland's high society.

After 1900 and before WWI show park pathways with no particular design; pathways seem to curve and meander rather than run in one straight walkway like we know today. These casual paths were edged with low-lying flower beds and rose bushes. In one photo, the trees are bedecked with strings of lights for an early Rose Festival decor.

During this period, apartments and rooming houses began to appear in the neighboring blocks. Mansions were reconverted into apartments. The trend continued on into the Forties and early Fifties when many of the mansions were razed for apartment buildings.

New additions for the Park Blocks during the 1920's were the statues of Roosevelt and Lincoln in addition to fountains and other monuments (unknown).

The greatest change for the South Park Blocks came when Portland State University moved to the park area in 1956. The blocks across from the university were remodeled with the wide walkways we presently know. This so-called "unlandscaping" continued through all the park blocks north to Salmon during the rest of the Fifties.

An oval-shaped World War II memorial was removed and shrubs were uprooted and transplanted to other parks.

The university blended in with other cultural institutions such as the art museum, Oregon Historical Society and the area's notable churches, making the area less residential but still not commercially oriented.

During 1971 and 1972, PSU initiated further changes to the Park Blocks. The PSU blocks eliminated grassy areas and rose bushes with a sloping, slightly terraced brick mall. Trees were saved, circled by concrete.

However, the six park blocks from Market north to Salmon still maintain their wide middle walkway, rose bushes, and park benches.

Today the Park Blocks is host to four structures on the National Register of Historic Places and ~~to~~ others (including a tree) on the list of city landmarks.

The Park Blocks continue to be a source of "gladness and health" for all Portlanders.