DeWitt Park: A Cultural Landscape Report

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site History</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing Conditions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Analysis</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cover photo from *Ithaca's Neighborhoods: The Rhine, the Hill, and the Goose Pasture.*
Introduction

DeWitt Park has been a public gathering space for the residents of Ithaca since the beginning of the city. A little less than an acre in size, the park is bounded by the First Presbyterian Church and the County Court House to the north, the First Baptist Church and the Boardman House to the east, East Buffalo Street to the south, and North Cayuga Street to the west. Much of the historic integrity has been lost, and it is a place in need of reexamination.

Site History

DeWitt Park currently sits on a portion of the historic 1,000 acres of land that Simeon DeWitt (Fig. 1) had acquired from the Bloodgood family in 1795. In 1789, Abraham Bloodgood, DeWitt’s father-in-law, requested 1,400 acres of land at the southern end of Cayuga Lake from the state of New York and later transferred the property to his son, Francis Bloodgood. Due to a financial conflict, Francis asked DeWitt to serve as the legal authority, and in return DeWitt receive 1,000 acres of the Bloodgood property.

Simeon DeWitt was the surveyor-general for the state of New York, and he periodically visited Ithaca. He surveyed the land that comprises the downtown area today and was responsible for naming the city. He purchased more land from the Cayuga Indians and later divided the land and sold the lots. In 1810, DeWitt sold half of the present DeWitt Park to the First Presbyterian Church, and the church acquired the remaining portion through an exchange with DeWitt.

It was an early intention to have the present DeWitt Park served as a public open space. In fact, it was referred to as the public square (Fig. 2 and 3). The Deed of 1826, witnessed by Simeon DeWitt, stated that any development was to be confined to the northern part of the property and the southern part shall be “at all times kept as a public walk and promenade, ... that no house or other buildings, except ornamental improvements, be erected ... thereon, and no dead bodies be interred therein.” Buildings faced towards the square thus creating a public green within. Laws were written to ensure the quality of the park; in 1827, it was illegal to dig up or remove turf, gravel, earth, or sod from the site, and in 1827, it was unlawful to drive oxen or cattle on any part of the square except on the gravel walks.

There has been very little documentation on the overall appearance of the public square during this period. A letter from Simeon DeWitt to Francis Bloodgood, dated on October 18, 1827, indicates DeWitt’s intention to have horse chestnut trees planted around the square. He wrote, “The horse chestnuts must be placed as soon as maybe, before they mould or dry. To prevent moulding, the horse chestnuts ought to be immediately taken out of the box and put into or covered with earth. As there is an abundance of them in the box, you may distribute a considerable proportion of them among those who will attend to the raising of them. You may select some of my ground for a nursery in which to plant them. In 3 or 4 years they will be fit to transplant, and if I live I propose to surround the
From Ezra Ames' Portrait of 1826

Fig. 1. Simeon DeWitt. *Simeon DeWitt: Founder of Ithaca*, 1968.
Fig. 2. Public Square. *Map 103 of Ithaca, 1851.*

Fig. 3. Public Square. *New Topographic Atlas of Tompkins County, New York, 1866.*
public square which I have laid out, with the trees which, when full grown, will make a beautiful appearance, especially when in bloom. Interspersed among others along Cayuga and Aurora Avenues, they would produce a pretty effect.” However, it was not known whether these trees were actually planted or how well they thrived on the site.

After Simeon DeWitt’s death in 1834, the public square was named DeWitt Park in honor of his contribution to the city of Ithaca (Fig. 4). In 1856, there was an agreement between the First Presbyterian Church and the Village of Ithaca to maintain the park as was stated in the Deed of 1826 (Fig. 5). The First Presbyterian Church has full ownership of the property, and the Village is responsible for maintaining the park in good condition for the welfare of the general public.

Various bandstands stood in DeWitt Park from the 1860s to the 1920s (Fig. 10 and 11). They served as centers for public gatherings and meetings (Fig 6 and 7). A 1904 Sanborn map shows a bandstand located at the approximate center of the park (Fig. 8).

Early historic cartography shows diagonal paths traversing the park. In Bird’s Eye View of Ithaca, N.Y., 1873 (Fig. 9), one diagonal path runs from the southwest to the northeast corner of the site and another from the southeast to the northwest corner (Fig. 10). In addition, a narrower path is located from the intersection of the diagonals to the First Presbyterian Church. In Ithaca, N.Y., 1882 (Fig. 11), there is an additional path from the intersection of the diagonals to the First Baptist Church, as well as another running through the northern corners of the diagonals (Fig. 12). More paths were installed in the 1900s to facilitate access (Fig. 13 and 14).

From 1911 to the 1960s, DeWitt Park became part of the Ithaca College campus (Fig. 15). The college purchased Judge Boardman’s mansion, which bordered the eastern edge of the park, and converted it to the conservatory of music. Consequently, the Boardman House was the center for the college (Fig. 16), and DeWitt Park served as the open green for many collegiate activities (Fig. 17 and 18).

With the relocation of Ithaca College on South Hill, downtown Ithaca suffered from a lack of commerce. Students no longer ate and shopped in downtown as frequently before. DeWitt Park became a desolate piece of village green. Many of the original elm trees had to be cut down as a result of the Dutch elm disease. On October 24, 1966, a group of citizens met at the Upstairs Gallery (121 Buffalo Street, Downing Building) to form the DeWitt Park Improvement Committee to bring back the vitality that the park once offered. The committee strove to designate the park as the historical core of the city.

Robert Mann, a landscape architect from the Cornell Office of Regional Development, offered to draw up a new plan for DeWitt Park in 1967 (Fig. 19). The committee accepted the plan, but due to lack of funds, only a portion of it was realized. A fountain was built south of the war memorials to draw visitors to the center of the park. The committee hired Warren White Landscape Service to plant 34 trees and 11 shrubs in the
Agreement made this 25th day of April 1850, between the Trustees of the First Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, party of the first part and the Trustees of the Village of Ithaca, party of the second part, WITNESSETH:

That whereas Simon De Witt by said Deed, dated October 25th, 1826, conveyed to Tompkins County Clerk's Office on said day, in Book C of Deeds, Page 162 & c, conveyed to said party of the first part certain lots now known as the Public Square; and whereas it is deemed important for the interest of the Public, and the reputation of the Village, that said square should at all times, be kept in good and presentable condition for such purposes, and also to the end that the intention of said Simon De Witt, as mentioned and provided in the Deed aforesaid, may be fully carried out:

It is mutually agreed upon by the respective parties hereto, that said Trustees, of the Village of Ithaca and their successors shall have full care, charge, control and government of said Public Square. Said Trustees of the Village of Ithaca in consideration thereof, being on their part to build, and maintain at all times hereafter, a suitable and proper fence around all of said Public Hall and Promenade lying touch of said Presbyterian Church to keep the Walk in good and proper condition, and to preserve the same in good repair, and to enornan good, by placing therein such other trees and shrubbery as may be necessary, and also to do all other acts and things required, to keep said premises in condition suitable for a Public Hall and Promenade, and to restrain by law trespassing therein, or any other act a thing which would be a nuisance, or tend in any way to deprive the citizens of Ithaca of any of their rights or privileges granted by said Simon De Witt in conveying and dedicating said premises as a Public Hall and Promenade.

Provided, that nothing herein contained shall be construed to invalidate the Deed of said De Witt, or render imperative any rights said Church Society may have under the provisions of said Deed, as building and maintaining said House of Worship and Session House, as they have theretofore used and enjoyed said.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Said Parties have hereon affixed their hands and the Seals of their respective Corporations. In Witness whereof, we deposit one copy hereof for record.
Fig. 6. Gathering in DeWitt Park, circa 1900. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.

Fig. 7. Bandstand in DeWitt Park. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.
Fig. 8. Location of bandstand in DeWitt Park. 1904 Sanborn map.
Fig. 9. Diagonal paths in DeWitt Park. Bird's Eye View of New York
N.Y., 1873.

Fig. 10. Plan drawn from Bird's Eye View of New York, N.Y., 1873.
Fig. 13. Aerial view of the paths in DeWitt Park. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.

Fig. 14. Aerial photo of DeWitt Park. *Aerial Map of the City of Ithaca*, 1938.
Fig. 15. DeWitt Park became part of Ithaca College. *City of Ithaca, New York*, 1937.

Fig. 16. Boardman House. *Ithaca and Its Past*, 1982.
Fig. 17. Commencement at DeWitt Park. *The Ithaca College Story*, 1983.

Fig. 18. Grecian dancers in DeWitt Park. *The Ithaca College Story*, 1983.
park in the spring of 1969 (Fig. 20). On September 30, 1969, the fountain dedication ceremony brought crowds to the park again (Fig. 21).

DeWitt Park was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 and became part of the DeWitt Park Historic District.

Various trees and shrubs were planted in the park after the dedication (Fig. 22), and Professor Laurence MacDaniels donated four boxwoods to the park in 1973 (Fig. 23). In the spring of 1973, DeWitt Park suffered from vandalism and maintenance problems. Vandalism stuffed the nozzle outlets of the fountain, overheating the pump thus burning out the mechanism. Rocks around the fountain were thrown around the park. Existing paths were in desperate repair, and lawn areas remained muddy due to the lack of grass cover. Visitors complained the lack of benches in the park. The committee attempted to solve the problems by redesigning the fountain, reseeding the muddy areas, and providing more by benches (Fig. 24). With continuous maintenance problems, the fountain was removed in the late 70s.

In 1981, there was interest to rebuild a bandstand in the center of DeWitt Park to draw visitors into the park (Fig. 25). The First Presbyterian Church Official Board supported the idea initially but had to turn it down as a result of numerous vandalism incidents around the church in the park (Fig. 26).

Today, vitality and activity have once again left DeWitt Park. Lack of funding and the issues of vandalism seem to impede the park from further development.

Existing Conditions

Today DeWitt Park is used mainly as a thoroughfare and a dog walk. Large public gatherings occur on Memorial Day and Veterans Day besides the war memorials built in the early 20th century to honor local residents who fought for the country (Fig. 27). Occasionally, the park may serve as the background for wedding photos after the church ceremony.

The existing plants were remnants from the 1970s when the DeWitt Improvement Committee planted new trees and shrubs to replace the dying elms (Fig. 28 and 29). A yew hedge runs along the southern edge of the park to screen the traffic on East Buffalo Street (Fig. 30). A Japanese maple, complemented by the cranberry cotoneaster, sits in the planter that was once the fountain (Fig. 31).

Site furniture consists of eleven park benches located sporadically in the park, two trash collectors, four pole lamps around the war memorials, and six pole lamps along the southern and western sidewalks (Fig. 32). A memorial to Ithaca College is found upon the southeast entry to the park from Buffalo Street (Fig. 33). A low seating wall surrounds the fountain plaza (Fig. 31).
Jan. 30, 1963

Deficit Improvement Committee Fund
Presbyterian Church
31 North Cayuga St.
Ithaca, N.Y.

Attention: J. I. Dohse

Statement for supplies, planting, grading, etc. the
following trees and shrubs at Dewitt Park, Ithaca, N.Y.

Plant list and location as per plans supplied by Mr.
Robert Dunn, and approved and supervised by Prof. E. W. Cross,
Department of Horticulture.

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<td>May 10</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>75.00</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cornus Canadensis (dogwood)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tulip trees - planted</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dogwood</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labor digging and planting</td>
<td>2 Hemlocks and 1 Golden Rain tree from Prof. Mechanic's property.</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 13</td>
<td>Pinus strobus (white pine)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>80.00</td>
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Total due 505.00

Tax exempt

Received amount in last writing 775.00 and checks for planting 25.00. Please return check for planting 25.00 which is enclosed.

Agreed price tax except 1145.00

Fig. 20. Statements from Warren White Landscape Service. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.
DeWitt Park's new fountain began functioning early this afternoon in dedication ceremonies. Chairman of the DeWitt Park Improvement Committee, Mrs. Harold Simpson, is at center.

Fig. 21. Fountain dedication, 1969. Historic Ithaca Archives.
### Statement

**Warren White Landscape Service**

Lawns | Plants | Stone Work
---|---|---

R. D. E. Newfield, N. Y. 1867
Telephone LEV-3847

**December 22, 1971**

To: DeWitt Park Improvement Committee

First Presbyterian Church

Ithaca, N.Y.

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The following plants were installed May 7, 1971 at the DeWitt Park Fountain, Ithaca, N.Y.

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<td>3.50</td>
<td>7.00</td>
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<td>1- Spreading Yew 26&quot;</td>
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<td>7.50</td>
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<td>3- Mahogany Vase, 11&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3- Labrador Crimson Pinks</td>
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<td>0.95</td>
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<td>1/2 hr. labor planting</td>
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<td>5.50</td>
<td>5.50</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>20.00</strong></td>
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*10/8/1 Cycle credit of 60% of work on job.*

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**Fig. 22.** Statement from Warren White Landscape Service. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.
English Box Moved

Prof. Laurence H. MacDaniels stands next to two of four English Box bushes he is giving to the City of Ithaca for use in DeWitt Park. Prof. MacDaniels says people never expected these plants to last through the bitter Ithaca winter but he's had them growing in his yard for about 30 years. Photo by Michael Parkhurst.

Fig. 23. Laurence MacDaniels donates four boxwoods to DeWitt Park. Historic Ithaca Archives.
Our proposal, drawing subject to architect approval, is a high-backed bench 26" wide and 93" long of Redwood slats spaced 3/8" apart, bolted together with three 3/8" threaded rods and secured to three metal frames of 1/2" X 2" steel, which will be bolted to the concrete wall (3" apart). Eight sections (removal for storage) to be installed along the 62' length of wall in Dewitt Park.

Each section to be constructed and installed for $125.00 per section.

Signed,

John Seacord
President
Seacord - Lane Builders Inc.

Fig. 24. John Seacord's bench proposal. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.
At left, the bandstand that stood in DeWitt Park in the late 1800s; at right, a sketch of the new bandstand proposed for the park.

Victorian bandstand could stage a comeback at DeWitt Park

By JANE MARCHAM
Journal Staff

Speedsville rebuilt one for the Bicentennial. Drydenites raised $4,600 to restore theirs to the village green and Horseheads has one big enough for a big brass band.

Not to be outdone, some Ithacans are thinking about building a bandstand in DeWitt Park in true Victorian gazebo style.

"Traditionally the park had a bandstand," Sarah Hector told the city landmarks commission Wednesday. "This would make a nice focal point for the park, which needs a lift right now."

"And it could bring back concerts to the park, where there'll probably be more activity now that the Commons is being closed in by the construction of Center Ithaca."

The commission gave its blessing to the bandstand project. Its sponsors intend to talk with public works officials and consider ways of raising some $5,000 in cash or donate materials.

Many Upstate towns have picturesque bandstands, sometimes called pagodas or gazebos and often sporting curved tin roofs and Victorian curlicues.

DeWitt Park is believed to have had a series of two or three at various times between 1860 and the 1920s, when the last was demolished. Hector said. Some photographs were found at the DeWitt Historical Society Archives.

The oldest is a photo by Joseph C. Burritt dating from about 1885, which shows a small raised bandstand with fancy railings and a hipped roof.

Hector, who works with the preservation firm of V. Romanoff & Associates, said reconstruction of the bandstand was suggested by a local sculptor, Mary Shelley.

Shelley made the carved wooden plaques now installed on city landmarks. Recently she won a $1,150 grant from the American Made Beautiful foundation for doing similar carvings for the bandstand, which would have color friezes under the roofline representing Ithaca scenes and history.

The Romanoff firm sketched a tentative design for an eight-sided bandstand, with echoes of the 19th century original.

"The cost will depend on how it's done," Hector said. "We could recycle some porch posts, and I already have my eye on eight matching ones from an old building that's falling apart."

Lumber yards might be willing to donate materials, and volunteer labor could keep the costs down, she said.

Hector said an ideal location would be the flower bed in the middle of the park, which is surrounded by stone that could serve as the bandstand's foundation. The fountain installed there several years ago was removed because of maintenance problems.

DeWitt Park is owned by the First Presbyterian Church, whose trustees have endorsed the bandstand plan, but is maintained by the city.

Fig. 25. Interest to rebuild a bandstand in DeWitt Park. Historic Ithaca Archives.
May 10, 1983

Mr. Mary Shelley
Box 94
West Danby, New York 14896

Dear Mr. Shelley,

You asked for the position of the Presbyterian Church in regard to a bandstand or gazebo in DeWitt Park, to be in writing. I am therefore submitting the following information.

In March 1938, the Session, which is the official board, wrote a letter to the City supporting the concept of allowing the Gazeo to be built in DeWitt Park. Since that time, I am sorry to say, our church has experienced a great amount of vandalism around the church, on the park side. On April 29, 1983, Session voted to rescind the action of 1981. Therefore the church no longer supports the installation of a bandstand.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Theron D. Johnson
Chairperson of Buildings & Properties Committee

March 17, 1981

Miss Mary Shelley
Box 94
West Danby, N.Y., 14896

Dear Miss Shelley,

After due consideration of the proposal for the historical reconstruction of the gazebo/bandstand in DeWitt Park, the Session of the First Presbyterian Church approved the following motion: "Moved that the Session endorse the historical reconstruction of the gazebo/bandstand in DeWitt Park, with the understanding that there be no cost or other obligation or liability on the part of the First Presbyterian Church."

We commend you on this project.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

James Tucker, Chairman
Buildings & Properties Committee

Fig. 26. Correspondence regarding the construction of a bandstand in DeWitt Park. Historic Ithaca Archives.
Fig. 27. War memorials in the center of DeWitt Park. 2000.
Fig. 28. Existing conditions of DeWitt Park in December 1972. DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives.
Fig. 29. Current planting plan drawn from the city's GIS website. 2000.
Fig. 30. Yew hedge along southern edge of DeWitt Park. 2000.

Fig. 31. Planting in the old fountain bed. 2000.

Fig. 32. Site furniture. 2000.
Fig. 33. Ithaca College memorial. 2000.
Site Analysis

Not a single horse chestnut tree is found in and around DeWitt Park even thought Simeon DeWitt had mentioned planting them around the park. Oaks, maples, lindens, and tulip trees have replaced the historic elms, but they do not offer the cathedral ceiling that elms once provided.

Because of the visitors’ demand for more benches in DeWitt Park in the 70s, I decided to analyze the nine benches (excluding the two benches in the memorial plaza) in the park. The benches were donated to the park by various residents. Their locations do not support the original intention of creating a central focus for the park (Fig. 34). Rather, they seem to have been just dropped onto the park and are isolated items for the purpose of sitting only. For example, bench #3 looks onto the back of the war memorial (Fig. 35). The view from bench #8 is block by the oak tree just five feet away. Benches #6 and #9 offer views of traffic; it is less likely that visitors come to sit in DeWitt Park to see traffic. However, it can be argued that benches #8 and #9 could serve as waiting areas for the bus or a ride. It is highly recommended that some benches be moved to a more suitable location.

Treatment

DeWitt Park has lost much of its historic integrity. So much of its components have been altered without references to history. For example, maples and tulip trees do not share similar forms of the elms. And a Japanese maple does not imply any relationship to the fountain that was removed. The horse chestnut trees that Simeon DeWitt had intended to plant around the park do not exist. The bandstand that was once a strong focus is no longer in the park.

The best treatment would be to rehabilitate the site and create a space that welcomes large public gathering with a central focus. Thus, the original intention is still intact but without the original components. However, with the lack of funding and the amount of vandalism the park has experienced, the city has to be strongly convinced before investing money to the site. And the plan to rehabilitate would take years to execute. Therefore, it is more likely that the city chooses to preserve what is existing and provide the appropriate maintenance. Hopefully, DeWitt Park will receive the attention it deserves in the midst of the revitalizing downtown.
Fig. 35. Views from benches of DeWitt Park. 2000.
Fig. 35. Views from benches of DeWitt Park. 2000.
Bibliography

From DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County Archives

*Aerial Map of the City of Ithaca.* May 1938.

*Copy of Deed for DeWitt Park-Presbyterian Church-PF-772.* 1967.


Historic photos

DeWitt Improvement Committee minutes

From Historic Ithaca Archives


From Cornell University

John Bevan Civil Engineer and Surveyor. *Map 103 of Ithaca, Tompkins County, NY.* 1851.


*Bird's Eye View of Ithaca, N. Y.* 1873. (map)

*Ithaca, N.Y.* 1882. (map)


Eustance, Harry W., City Engr. *City of Ithaca New York.* Ithaca Chamber of Commerce: June 1937. (map)


From Professor Daniel Krall

