THE RISE and FALL and RISE

W. J. GORDON

Exactly ninety-five years ago the City of Cleveland was in the process of acquiring Gordon Park. The story of Gordon Park and its founder, W. J. Gordon, reflects the story of the changing Cleveland Waterfront.

Born in 1818 in Monmouth County, New Jersey, William J. Gordon was orphaned at the age of 13 and spent the next several years working in New York. In 1839 he settled in Cleveland, after being impressed with the town while on a visit. Here he established a wholesale grocery firm, W. J. Gordon and Company, which was headquartered in the Flats. An astute businessman, his firm eventually became the largest wholesale grocery house west of the Alleghenies.

Gordon was later a pioneer in bringing iron ore for manufacturing into Cleveland; he was also a real estate developer, involved with local politics and raised renowned race horses. He was a wealthy and respected businessman in Cleveland.

FIRST WATERFRONT PROPERTY

In the mid-1850s, Gordon had built a house near the north end of the bluff on West 9th Street, on the west side of the street opposite Lakeside. Here along West 9th were several fine mansions overlooking the waterfront. Gordon could look out the west windows of his house and see the Cuyahoga River, and from the north side of the house he could see the lakefront. He additionally had a very nautical neighbor: on the lot to the north was the main lighthouse of the town, and the lighthouse keeper’s residence.

Business boomed for Gordon in the 1860s, and during this decade he put major efforts into improving his house and lot. He hired one of the best architects in Cleveland, Joseph Ireland, to modernize and expand the house. A full time landscaper put in rare trees and other plants, and a greenhouse was built where unusual ornamentals and fruits were grown. Gordon also went to Italy and purchased a ruined abbey, brought it home, and used it behind his house and this back yard and watch the ships and boats upon the Cuyahoga River.

SECOND WATERFRONT PROPERTY

By the 1870s, commercial establishments were well entrenched -- an spreading -- in the Flats and along West 9th and West 6th Streets. In 1872, Gordon, who had been purchasing land in the Doan Brook area since 1865, moved out of his new property. When he left his West 9th Street house, according to Cleveland historian William Ganson Rose, “the future of downtown Cleveland’s lakefront as a fashionable residential district faded”.

As with his West 9th Street lot, there was a waterfront focus to the new property; in fact, he had purchased not only part of Doan Brook, but also a Lake Erie beach. Gordon eventually acquired 250 acres of land in the upper Doan Brook area, stretching along the lake from present-day East 72nd Street to East 88th Street, and inland along the brook to beyond St. Clair Avenue. There were three main parts to the property: the Gordon Farm portion north of the railroad tracks; additional land to the south between present-day East 82nd Street and East 88th Street; and his horse farm to the east.

What Gordon had done with his West 9th property he did again on a grander scale. For the next 20 years, Gordon and 100 laborers spent their time landscaping the grounds with fine trees, shrubs and flowers. In the 1880s, while these improvements were underway, he opened the Gordon Park section of his property to the public during the summer.

Rustic bridges were built, natural cave were enhanced with rock stairways; even a chapel was erected in memory of Gordon daughter Georgina. A boat house, tool house and miniature lighthouse were built. Mil of scenic, graveled drives wound through the property. Certain areas of the park we designated by quaint names: The Ramble, The Green, Lawn Pastures and Evergreen Law Gordon lived in an unpretentious-looking house at the northeast corner of his property. Though it appeared to be a rustic co
CITY PARK

On November 23rd, 1892, William J. Gordon died, and within a year the city acquired the 122-acre Gordon Park portion of his property. Gordon had placed some restrictions on city acquisition of his property: among them that the lakefront was to be protected and that no fence could be erected to block the lake view; the drives and parks were to be maintained; and, the park was forever to be opened to the public and known as "Gordon Park".

In 1894, an additional 40 acres were purchased from the Gordon estate for picnic grounds; later in the decade Gordon Park was connected to Rockefeller Park (the northernmost portion of which was once Gordon’s land) as part of a 7-mile parkway stretching through Wade Park to the Shaker Lakes. Ironically, about this same time, the Gordon Park and West 9th Street homes were both torn down.

Recreational facilities continued to be added to Gordon Park, including a large bathhouse and pavilion in 1901. The bathhouse, which cost $12,000 to build and had room for 120 bathers, burned down in 1918 and was not rebuilt; only a smaller bathhouse then remained. Elaborate tennis courts were also constructed.

Concerts were a feature at Gordon Park, and the first Sunday one was given in May, 1897. By the late 1920s, visitors to the park could enjoy occasional concerts by the Cleveland Orchestra. In 1913 the Perry Monument (see Waterfront News Mar/Apr '87) was moved here from Wade Park near University Circle. Originally located on Public Square (from 1860 to 1892), this statue commemorates Oliver Hazard Perry’s victory at the Battle of Lake Erie. In 1939, baseball diamonds were put in and other improvements were made. In 1943, an early version of the Cleveland Aquarium, another noteworthy attraction, opened in the park. Swimming, boating, fishing, picnicking, concerts and an aquarium — Gordon Park was a fine place for waterfront recreation.

DECLINE

Due to changing conditions, by 1950, Gordon Park had begun a slight decline. But the most disastrous event took place in the early 1950s, when I-90, was cut through the middle of the park. In effect, two parks would be made: a lakefront one, north of the freeway; and another to the south, which also continues along what is now Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (formerly Liberty Boulevard). First to arrive were the "vandals" to dig up Gordon’s rare plants; then the bulldozers moved in and "complete the massacre." While the freeway was under construction, Gordon Park looked like a strip-mined area. Though rebuilt in 1954, the park was "unrecognizable."

Almost equally disastrous was the plan to create a landfill in the lake at Gordon Park, which was intended to become a recreational land. By the late 1960s, the view at Gordon Park was of a landfill comprised of "used cars, old appliances, building parts and old pavement". Photographs from the 1970s show people still attempting to utilize this waterfront park which appears to be a cement-boulder beach, the grounds strewn with litter. In 1985, because of structural problems, the Aquarium was closed and the exhibits moved to the Metroparks Zoo.

COMEBACK

Beginning in the 1970s, there was a greater awareness of the value of Cleveland’s Waterfront. Individual and group efforts finally yielded significant results. In 1978, the State of Ohio, through an agreement with the City of Cleveland, established the Cleveland Lakefront State Park System, which included the northern portion of Gordon Park.

In the last ten years, improvements have been made to Gordon Park; again there are facilities for fishing, boating and picnicking. Groups such as the Cleveland Waterfront Coalition have been organized and are vigilant to prevent a repeat of what happened to Gordon Park in the '50s and '60s from ever happening again. Further improvements to Gordon Park are planned, and more and more visitors are expected to enjoy the park. And that is a development that would make W. J.
The CWC recently submitted comments and suggestions regarding the City of Cleveland's "Civic Vision 2000 -- Downtown Plan" to the City Planning Commission, which had requested comments on its plan. We limited our comments to the Downtown Lakefront and the Bluffs area near East 9th Street due to time constraints. The CWC is currently preparing comprehensive planning guidelines for lakefront development that will more thoroughly state the CWC's expectations in ALL waterfront areas.

This is an edited version of the CWC's comments (a complete copy can be obtained at the CWC office):

I. GENERAL COMMENTS AND PRIORITIES

A. It is vital to define the "waterfront" for all future planning, zoning and development purposes. It is the area of the city along the lake and river, from the water's edge to a distance beyond the top of the bluffs.

B. Goals and priorities for the waterfront:

1. A specific setback for public use along the lake and river should be enacted into law for all new or future development, and, where possible, for existing uses.

2. Green and/or landscaped areas should be included wherever possible.

3. A continuous "greenway", including a bikeway, should be a high priority along the lake and river.

4. Beautification and naturalization along the Shoreway, access ramps, and roads (such as East Ninth Street) should be a high priority.

5. Pedestrian connectors linking the city with the waterfront should be a high priority.

6. Waterfront development should emphasize water-related, public-orientated activities and facilities. Mixed-use development should include visitor attractions, housing and commercial/retail facilities; and ALWAYS invite public access. These facilities should never be primarily "upscale" or exclusive in nature and appeal.

should consider the views of other buildings and the view from ground level and the bluffs.

B. No overbuilding or excessive "urbanization".

9. Plans should be made part of zoning laws and regulations.

II. THE DOWNTOWN LAKEFRONT

A. MALL C -- The redevelopment of this park should be a high priority, and its use for parking should be ended. Mall C should remain an open passive park without buildings.

B. CONNECTOR LINK -- The connector linking Mall C and the Harbor is key to waterfront development and public access, and should be a high priority. The major part of the connector should be a wide, open-air, landscaped link which gradually descends to the Harbor, with continuous vistas.

C. Between the Bluff (Mall C) and the Shoreway:

1. We agree with parking garages between the bluff and the Shoreway, if NOT obtrusive, and if used as a platform for other development such as connector bridges.

2. Any massive office, commercial and/or hotel development between the bluff and Shoreway must carefully consider the vistas from the bluff and the scale of buildings...
Such development is not water-related. It should ascend gradually from the area nearest the Harbor and must not block the connector linking the Mall and Harbor.

D. Between the Shoreway and the Lake (including the entire Harbor area):
1. The connector linking the Mall and the Harbor should step or ramp straight down to the ground level of the Harbor area, without any structure in its way.
2. The Wintergarden, an important part of the Harbor plan, has apparently been deleted or deemphasized in the Civic Vision Plan. It must be restored as an integral and high-priority part of the Harbor plan.
3. We strongly agree with the wide boardwalk around the edge of the Harbor, Aquarium and Marine Museum and Educational Center concepts and locations, and the Festival Marketplace.
4. A hotel should not be the centerpiece of the Harbor. Any hotel should be small, must not block the public access route, nor displace any other public development such as the Wintergarden.
5. We approve of the promenade park plaza on the southeast corner of the Harbor.
6. We agree that the "flag" area, the northeast quadrant of the Harbor, should be a large passive park and recreation area. No parking should be allowed and we prefer that no restaurant be built there.
7. The Donald Grey Gardens should be preserved and restored to their original state, and expanded if possible.

E. Davenport Avenue/Bluffs north of Lakeside Avenue, between East 13th Street and East 18th Street:
1. The Civic Vision "Bluffs" proposal is particularly appropriate. The "terraced" effect of the 3-story townhouses at the bluffs edge rising to the 8-story buildings on Lakeside Avenue is a good one. 8-stories should be a maximum.
2. The area should be zoned solely for residential development, with the exception of retail along Lakeside Avenue.
3. The "continuous promenade" along the bluff is applauded and should be a priority. A pedestrian bridge over the Shoreway near East 13th Street is encouraged.
4. The proposal for an East 18th Street interchange at the Shoreway could ruin the neighborhood quality unless great sensitivity is given to its design.

III. CONCLUSION

Public participation must be a prime factor in the continuing planning and implementation process. Groups such as the Cleveland Waterfront Coalition should be consulted and included at each stage of the process.

The CWC has requested serious consideration of these comments and a response from the city at an appropriate time and place to allow open and honest discussion and full participation.

Please send your comments and opinions about these Proposed Development Guidelines to the CWC — we want to know what our members think! Also, if you are concerned about our waterfront development, write a personal letter to the Editor of the Plain Dealer or any other local newspaper and express your opinion. GET INVOLVED!
Dateline Cleveland. While the rest of the Cleveland media continue to wait for the "Grand Opening" of the North Coast Harbor in September, the WATERFRONT NEWS has exclusive coverage of the REAL opening, which took place one sunny June day.

The photo at the left shows the dry harbor basin as seen through the bollards on the west basin wall (note the brick pavers in the foreground which form a 30-foot wide promenade around the basin). The center photo shows the lake beginning to flow into the harbor as the earthen dam is slowly removed. The right photo shows the lake gushing into the basin as the harbor is filled for the first time and made a part of Lake Erie.

You may wonder why there is no photograph of the filled basin to complete this sequence; actually, we felt it was only fair to leave something for THE PLAIN DEALER to cover, especially as this was one "Opening" that Mary, Mary didn't get to attend.
Starting in Cleveland's earliest days, the downtown waterfront was developed for commercial use. Only recently -- for the most part -- has the downtown waterfront begun to be developed for recreational purposes. The history of the waterfront encompasses many interesting sites, structures and events. In this issue of WATERFRONT NEWS, the old lighthouses are highlighted; but first, a brief history of the waterfront's commercial development is necessary.

The waterfront that the pioneers of Cleveland saw was very different from the one we see today. Then, as now, downtown was on a plateau. However, most of the land that now comprises the lakefront was reclaimed from the lake, a process that began around 1850. What the early settlers saw, instead, were fairly steep bluffs (which occasionally slid into the lake), a narrow beach and trees and shrubs growing practically up to the lake shore.

In the 1820s, the first improvements were made to the Cuyahoga River which was very shallow (the mouth was frequently filled with sandbars, the sides with mosquito-breeding marshes). In the 1830s, the Ohio and Erie Canal was completed. The canal linked the Ohio River to Lake Erie and made Cleveland an important trade center. In 1849, John G. Stockley built the first permanent pier in the lake. All of these improvements were done for one basic reason; the economy of the fledgling city relied on water transportation.

In 1849-51, the first railroad line was built into Cleveland. To avoid having the tracks climb the plateau which the city is on, the tracks were run through the Flats and along the lakefront -- right on the beach! At the same time, land was quickly being reclaimed from the lake; working from west to east and beginning at the river mouth. This new, enlarged lakefront was soon overtaken by shipping piers and railroad depots; this was the area where rail and water traffic met.

By 1853 (this process moved very quickly) the waterfront of Cleveland consisted of six commercial-use piers, railroad depots and train tracks. Commercial interests had taken the lakefront.

One of the most prominent features of the downtown waterfront for much of the 19th century must have been the they indicate several of the changes that occurred in the area. As a bonus, a remnant of one lighthouse exists today.

From 1831 to 1892, the main lighthouse of Cleveland was located at the southwest corner of West 9th Street (then called Water Street) and Main Avenue (then called, appropriately enough, Lighthouse Street). A local newspaper from 1872 provided some details about this first lighthouse:

In the year 1831, Levi Johnson, Esq., deceased, built the first lighthouse in the port ... There was considerable discussion at the time as to the location, on account of the lake encroaching on the land. The working of the waters caused the embankment to cave in along the shore of the city; and it was feared that land would recede as far back as Superior Street. This was the reason for departing from the usual custom; placing the first lighthouse so far inland. Its cost was between 6 & 7 thousand dollars ...

Johnson, a pioneer builder in Cleveland (he later put up the Johnson Block on West 6th
LAND'S WATERFRONT by DREW ROLIK

... a very ornamental and commodious house to be fitted up with every appliance for the comfort of the light-keeper. The roof is graceful Gothic, and covered with colored slate disposed in ornamental figures. The caps and sills of the window are of the finest quality stone, and are beautiful with elaborate tracery. The interior is to be handsomely furnished, and will make a very comfortable abode for its inmates.

This lighthouse was used until a new lighthouse was put up at the end of the breakwall in 1892 (which still stands). In 1897, the 1872 lighthouse tower was torn down. The attached dwelling stood until the 1930s when it was demolished during construction of the Main Avenue Bridge. Today, all that remains are the stairs that once led up to the lighthouse, a small remnant of the old waterfront. Take a look at the steps, at the corner of West 9th and Main, a reminder of the waterfront's past.

The changes that are taking place along the waterfront today are as significant as any that have taken place in the past. This change, from commercial to recreational use, was one of the topics of the CWC Conference held in May. A report on this conference appears elsewhere in this issue of WATERFRONT NEWS.

ome with a waterfront view; it stood on the northeast corner of West Ninth Street and akeside Avenue.

By 1870 this lighthouse was obsolete; a new and more elaborate structure was put up in 1872 on the site of the 1831 structure. The new lighthouse had, in addition to the tower, an attached two-family dwelling. The tower itself stood 118' high (but was 150' above the lake due to being located on the bluff) and its white light was visible for 19 and 1/2 miles.

Excerpts from the same 1872 article detail the nearly-completed structure:
The new lighthouse is a very imposing looking edifice and may be considered one of the ornaments of the city. The tower is octagon in shape and is constructed of brick with stone trimming. It is 22 feet in diameter. An 8 foot copper painted dome overtops the section which contains the glass front. This front looks out towards the lake, and through it shines the light. There are 7 flights of stairs, in spiral form, taking in all 118 steps.