

Stories of Morgan City

From the



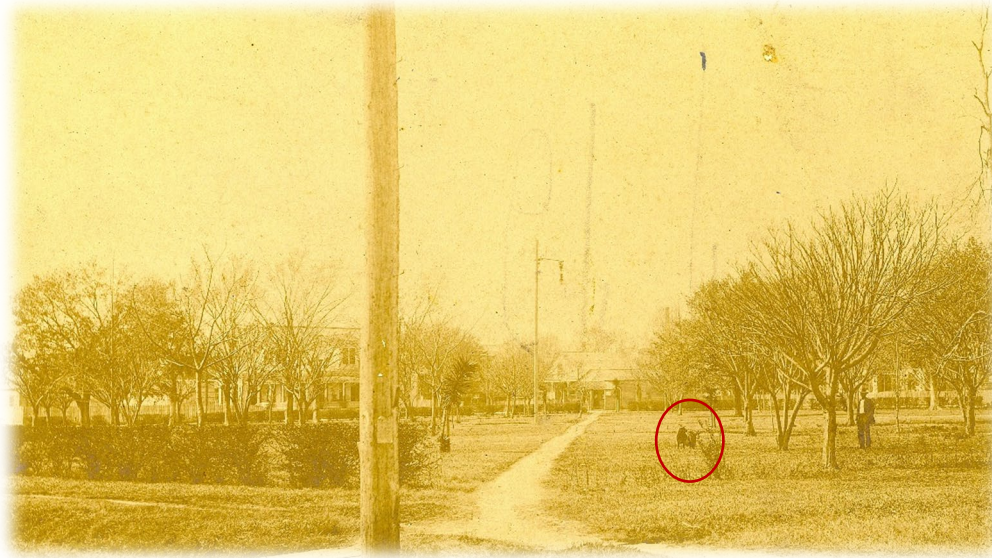
150 YEARS OF LAWRENCE PARK

On May 17, 1876, Mrs. Frances Brashear Lawrence—widow of Henry E. Lawrence and daughter of Dr. Walter Brashear, founder of the town of Brashear—donated one city block to the residents of Morgan City for use as a park.

Just months later, on July 4, 1876, over five hundred citizens celebrated America's 100th birthday in the park. However, it was years before the park developed into what we see today.

Because the property still held war fortifications left over from the Civil War at this time, citizens gathered to level these structures and to plant trees in honor of their relatives, living and dead.

Trees were planted in honor of Martin Croker, Charles Peterson, T.W. Nelson, Pierre Labitt, J. Bourdier, John Seltzner, H.M. Mayo, G. Serville, Gus Drews, Mrs. Capt. George Smith, Mr. O.B. Johnson, Mrs. C.H. St. Clair, Mrs. Jax. Costello, Mrs. William Costello, August Joret, Sr., S. Lanaux, B.F. Winchester, Calvin Peaslee, William H. Gray, William B. Gray, Mrs. K.G. Sutton, E. Bass, Mrs. J.L. Collins, Mrs. W.T. Conklin, O. Ditch, F. Fontaine, L. Gougenheim. E.A. Landry, J. Lehmann, Charles Miller, H. Neuberger, Thomas Shannon, William O'Neil, and others.



In this photo taken before the park was developed, a close look reveals a goat grazing beside the man walking through Lawrence Park. Perhaps in response to that, in 1913, the Civic League organized

by Mrs. A.F. Storm began cutting grass and barbering the outer fringe/hedges that surrounded the park.

The Cotten Bros. and Brownell-Drews Lumber Co. donated lumber, and the Civic League had swings constructed. Two local bands agreed to perform weekly, and the Civic League arranged for construction of a bandstand designed and built by P.B. Ghirardi in 1913.

Mrs. Joseph Dyer donated the park's first fountain in 1916. You can see it pictured in the photo behind little Thomas Lawrence who is riding his tricycle in the park in that year.



A bronze plaque still attached to the fountain dedicates it to her father, Baron Randolph Natiliti, manager of the Morgan City railroad station at the riverfront. In 1908, he built Oneonta Park, a small zoo and park on the station grounds, which featured a fountain like the one in the park today. Vandals later destroyed that original fountain.

It was in commemoration of America's Bicentennial in 1976 that a new bronze and copper section of the fountain resembling the Oneonta Park fountain of Baron Natili was installed.

Over the years, the park has also housed numerous animals, and in 1923, Morgan City's local newspaper, The Daily Review, was soliciting donations from the public to equalize living arrangements among Morgan City's *ZOO FOLK!*

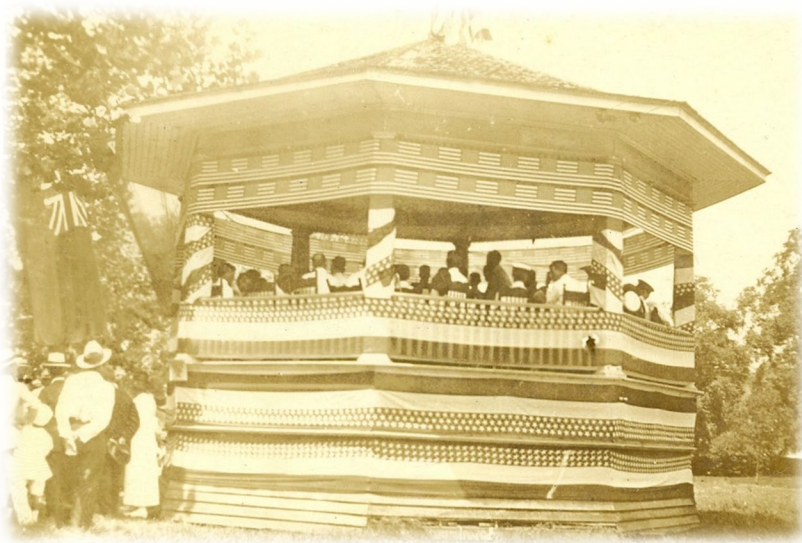
Resident monkey, Jocko de Monk, was said to possess a finer home than his three racoon neighbors. His bachelor pad included a comfortable, private bedroom apart from his living room while the Squirrel family of eleven was scandalously housed in only one room.

Shell the turtle, Allie Gator with his family, Madame Teal the duck, a large white rat, and a family of rabbits shared the park zoo with Bruin, the bear. Bruin was the city's oldest pet when he died in 1927 and was buried next to his cage in the park.

Enorky, Polly, and Hootie, the parrots, lived under the bandstand and were taken out daily on a large stick. Finding one of their feathers was a treasure for the children who visited the park.

Lawrence Park has hosted many celebrations over the years. In 1917, Elmo Lincoln, Hollywood's first Tarzan of the Apes, performed handstands on the handrails located on the second floor of the Berry Hotel across the street, and in 1918, the park was the site of Armistice Day commemorations.

Check out the photos of politicians and Hollywood actors who have utilized the park bandstand for events. Louisiana's own "Kingfish" Huey P. Long spoke for hours in his own colorful manner, and Jimmy Stewart and Jo Anne Dru were introduced to the locals following their production of the movie, "Thunder Bay," in the area.



During World War II, war widows strolled their babies through the park, and following the war, 30-minute-long fire truck *Street Showers* for children were a popular event in parks around the city.

In 1952, newspaper headlines announced, “Over 1,000 Children Participate in Lawrence Park Activities!” These summer activities for children included Hopscotch, Marble, and Wheelbarrow Contests, Ugliest Doll and Bubble Blowing Contests, a *Slow Bike Race*, Suitcase Relay, and Steal-the-Bacon Tournaments, among others.

During Morgan City’s Centennial in 1960, Lawrence Park was the site of Beard Judging Contests, Kangaroo Courts, Barber Shop Concerts, and a Time Capsule Ceremony.

We also recognize that, despite the peaceful atmosphere many of our residents have enjoyed over the past 150 years, Lawrence Park was for many decades a place of exclusion, where children of color in our city were confined to the sidewalks of Block 27.

Seeing Lawrence Park today, it is wonderful to acknowledge that the park is open to all and stands as the pleasant, peaceful, picnic-worthy heart of the Historic District of Morgan City. It is here that we gather to commemorate and celebrate our heritage and legacy with music and masses in the park during La. Shrimp & Petroleum Festival; skating and Lighting of the Oaks during Christmas Festival; parades and pictures in the park during Mardi Gras as well as during local high school homecoming and prom seasons.