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Island Park: An Environmental Case Study

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Ecstatic children play on an intricate wooden play set. Drunken college students careen wildly over rushing rapids. Moody adolescents drop into concrete half-pipes. Men and women run after dogs across winding paths. A typical scene found in historic downtown Mt. Pleasant. For over a century, Island Park has been a gathering place for the residents of this growing city. Mt. Pleasant built itself on economic opportunity of various sources, beginning with timber, and expanding rapidly as new resources were discovered, utilized, and exploited. As the city changed, so did its use of land. Despite the rapid economic expansion of Mt. Pleasant, Island Park has remained a center for recreation and relaxing for residents. However, variations in its usage caused permanent change to the land itself. Human interaction with the landscape forever altered the physical presentation of this area, but not to the detriment of the natural system. Instead of destroying the environment with additions and customizations, the residents of Mt. Pleasant used the natural environment mostly to their advantage. Using local historic and current maps, images, and various historical references, my goal is to show that while humans certainly have changed the natural landscape, they have done so while keeping the environment largely intact. Their influences on the land have been made with their own advantages in mind, but they have managed to sustain the natural beauty and ecosystem of the area without too much alteration.

When Mt. Pleasant was founded in 1855 by David Ward, it was a largely wooded area, conveniently located along the Chippewa River. This provided those interested in timber with the ease of transportation so desperately needed at the time. After clearing some of the land and realizing its potential, Ward named the area Mt. Pleasant and began selling plots of land to investors (City of Mt. Pleasant 2012). The land sold quickly; in business applications, location is key. Mount Pleasant's location right on the Chippewa River made transporting logs and timber to other areas for sale and trade much easier and cheaper than transporting on land. In this way, it was the natural environment itself that called out to people; if conditions hadn't been quite right, if the riverways hadn't been as accessible or the land so fruitful with woods, Mt. Pleasant may never have existed .

A man named Isaac Fancher bought the plot of land now known as Island Park in 1862, calling it Fancher Flats. Fancher owned this property for several years, during which time both the public school and the Central Normal School (CMU) rented the area for athletic purposes. Though people had sequestered this land for use, their will over it was not all-powerful. In 1904, residents realized the detriment that came with staging public events on an area of land surrounded by water on 3 sides; the level of the Chippewa River rose so high that it met the grandstand, and the bridge over the river leading to the athletic field was completely washed away (Cumming 1989). This is a prime example of

how people have had to work with the environment in which they live in order to use it advantageously. Because Island Park resides at 744 feet, nearly 30 ft lower than the average elevation of Mount Pleasant (Anyplace America 2012), it stands to reason that flooding is a serious concern. Even in recent years, a typical Mt. Pleasant resident could tell you just how likely the area is to flood, and proof can be had driving by, especially in early spring.

Island Park was not always an island. In fact, several hand drawn maps, and even a hand drawn “birds eye-view” picture depict Fancher Flats with the river on 3 sides, instead of completing the circle (Clarke Historical Library 1884). In September of 1909, the city of Mount Pleasant purchased the area known as Fancher Flats from Isaac Fancher for the sum of \$6000 (Clare Sentinel 1909). Between 1909 and 1912, a trench was dug on the west side of the park, completing the river circuit around the area, and the city changed its name, appropriately, to Island Park (Westbrook 2006). According to various sources, this was done for several reasons. The first and most apparent reason is economic in nature. In 1912, the city hosted its first Isabella County fair in Island Park; without the trench to surround the park on all sides, visitors would have been able to enter the park without regulation and, of course, without paying (Cumming 1989). An additional, practical reason for the trench could have been to help avoid another drastic flood. By digging a trench that would branch out before the park, the river had an additional outlet for the water

should the levels rise dangerously again. Even though the branches met up again on the other side of the park, this allowed an outlet for additional runoff at a critical point. As previously mentioned, Island Park sits at an elevation much lower than the surrounding area, so having precautions in place in case of flooding is a good attempt at being proactive. Looking at Island Park in the present, you can tell that some actions have been taken in order to safe guard the area. While flooding isn't completely avoidable, several steps have been taken to ensure that the rushing river doesn't degrade the natural landscape too much. For example, the concrete debris in the river bed near the shorelines helps protect from erosion due to the swift current. The wooden bridge that made up the entrance to the park was replaced by a steel bridge in 1915 (Westbrook 2010). These additions and modifications protect the area from destruction by natural causes, without too much alteration to the natural landscape.

According to historic maps of the area, the populated portion of Mount Pleasant lies outside of the boundary created by the Chippewa River. To those that ran the fair, this was a wonderful thing; they could control who accessed the area by restricting access to a single bridge that crossed the river. While this may have been a good idea to begin, its downfall was made clear in a clip from a short article that John Cumming included in his novel, stating that a pedestrian had nearly been hit by an automobile while crossing the bridge. The

very next month, the county committee introduced the idea of placing a second bridge across another point in the river, connecting to West Broadway. As time moved on, and automobiles became increasingly faster and more powerful, this second bridge was partitioned off, intended to be used only as a pedestrian walkway. Even today, this bridge that sits behind the historic Borden building is divided in half by concrete half-walls, which prohibit vehicular access to that particular bridge.

As new resources were discovered in the Central Michigan area over time, the usage of Island Park began to grow and diversify. Eventually, the Isabella County Fair outgrew the 35 acre park and sold the area to Dow Chemical, moving the Fairgrounds North of town. In September of 1935, to celebrate the discovery of oil in the area, the first annual Michigan Oil and Gas Exposition was held in Island Park; this event drew more than 25,000 people to the park to view demonstrations of drilling and automobile processions. Small “shows” or wells of oil had been found in the area since before 1900, but only around 1925 did the area begin to successfully drill and refine the resource. Economically, finding oil in mid-Michigan during this time helped protect the city from much of the devastation of the Great Depression. Nature had again come to the rescue of those fortunate enough to settle in Mount Pleasant. First, the access to the timber trade, and now, the wealth of oil and natural gas hidden under the surface of the earth gave hints of hope and possibility to an

otherwise unremarkable area. Natural resources proved to keep the town afloat throughout the depression, and even provide the residents with the means to celebrate. Unfortunately, these celebrations dwindled and disappeared by 1939 with the onset of the Second World War.

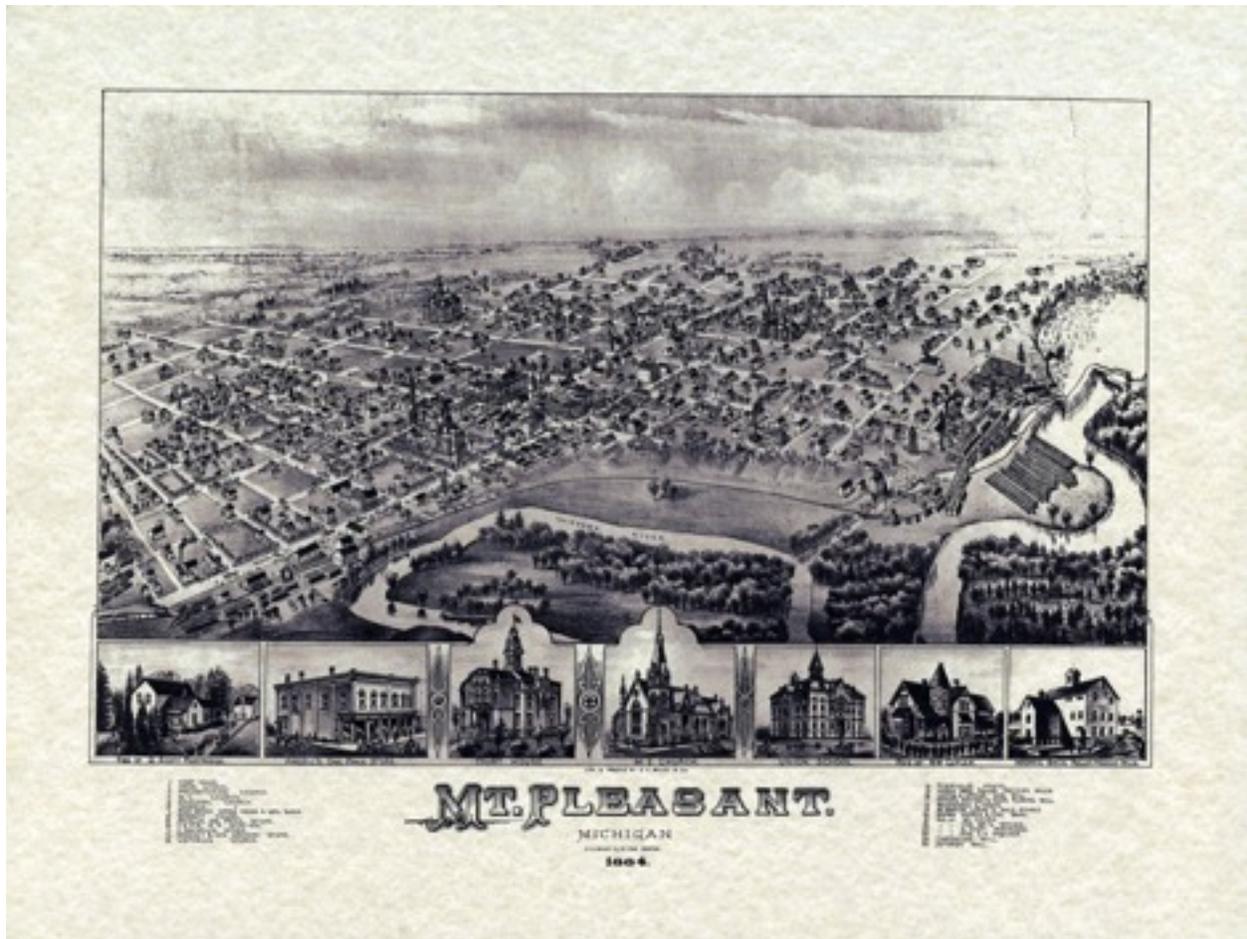
The addition of a new bridge was not the only part of Island Park that changed over time. In 1938, the city funded the addition of a public swimming pool in the southern quadrant of the park. By this time, the park also offered a horse and auto race track, several baseball fields, and farm animal exhibit buildings. This beautiful park remained a social center for the residents of Mt. Pleasant and remained largely unchanged up until the 1980's. In 1983, due to budget cuts, the pool was closed and filled in. Shortly thereafter, the grandstand was removed. In September 1986, Mt. Pleasant experienced an extreme flood that put Island Park under water for days. After this flood, it took weeks to clean the park and put it back to normal. The flooding of the park had a large impact on the residents of the city; according to one interview, the public school in town was closed for a week. Again, because of its low elevation, Island Park was the center of the destruction. Everything that people had put there, all the intentions the citizens of the town had for the space, none of it mattered as nature reasserted her control over the area.

To this day, Island Park still stands as a testimony to the balance of human will and natural design. The park is a relaxing place to spend time with

the family with its collection of baseball and volleyball courts where the grandstand used to be, the play set aptly named “Timber town” built in 1991, the skate park that sits on the public pool’s old foundation, and the newest addition, the Splash Park, that entertains children for hours in the heat of summer. All this is set against the peaceful backdrop of the mighty Chip River, surrounding the park on all sides, its banks ripe with trees and brush, the waters and banks teeming with fish and other wildlife. Historically, humans have made some interesting and sometimes despicable decisions when it comes to the environment within which they place themselves; Island Park is an example of the beauty we are able to nurture as well. The historic city park is a wonderful blend of the human need to control and nature’s beauty; it is an example for others to draw inspiration from.

Appendix: Images

Image 1:



Clarke Historical Library; Information and Exhibits: Bird's Eyeview of Mount Pleasant

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