

## Know Your City Parks: Morningside Heights

### **Morningside Heights Park**

Morningside Heights Park is a 10.42-acre city park located at the west end of Broad St., behind Edward Smith School in the University section of Syracuse. It is part of a complex of natural areas that also includes the school grounds, a community garden and a hilltop trio of water tanks owned by the city water department.

The main entrance to this hidden park is off Broad St., practically across the street from its intersection with Windsor Place. However, the entrance is gated and no vehicles are allowed into the park. The best place to park to visit Morningside Heights Park and the rest of this varied and interesting natural area is the Smith School parking lot, whose entrance is located on Lancaster Avenue.

### **The Land**

Morningside Heights Park was established in 1938, when the City purchased a piece of land from the adjacent Morningside Cemetery. The property extended from Broad St. on the north to E. Colvin St. on the south. This original Morningside Heights Park included the land that is now the Manley Fieldhouse complex. The land had previously been farmed by the Rose family.

### **The Toboggan Run**

Shortly after the City of Syracuse bought Morningside, it spent some \$85,000 to construct a massive winter sports complex on the property. By 1939, the new Morningside Park boasted a toboggan slide, skiing and coasting hill and skating pond (in the south portion of the park), all lighted for night use. The toboggan run and the stone staircase that climb the hill beside it were built as WPA projects. A photo taken during construction shows no trees growing in the vicinity of the stairs.

By 1948, however, the toboggan run, which had been the scene of many accidents, including one reputedly involving the then-mayor's wife, was removed. Other facilities in the complex, including picnic tables, were abandoned and left to deteriorate over time. Today, all that can be seen of the toboggan run are a number of concrete footings hidden in the brush next to the stairs. Also by 1948, the southern half of the park had been sold to Syracuse University for temporary dormitory construction (called Collendale) to accommodate the post-World War II student boom.

### **The Water Tanks**

The City Bureau of Water owns the access drive to the Morningside hilltop and the three 77-foot deep tanks that hold 10.5 million gallons of city water. Built in 1940, they were derisively called "tin cups" or the "wading pool" because they were thought to be too small to serve the University area's water needs. A larger 50,000,000 gallon reservoir was suggested for nearby Bradford Hills, but was never built. The hilltop, which is described in a 1977 SUNY-ESF silviculture syllabus as a drumlin, is a popular spot for dog-walking and hiking. The summit of Morningside's hilltop is 700 feet above sea level.

A 1956 photo of the road leading to the water towers shows a path lined with hickory, basswood, thorn, maple, butternut, oak, elm, ash-leaf maple, ailanthus, and wild cherry trees. Underbrush in the photo included bush honeysuckle, dogwood, snowberry, choke cherry, with forsythia and privet extending away from the road.

In late 1966, the road winding its way up to and circling the water tanks was closed to vehicular traffic because a man named Ralph Balfourt was shot to death there in August. This followed a number of incidents of rape and robbery reported on this "lovers' lane."

### **Comfort Tyler Park**

From 1941 to 1951, Morningside Heights Park was named Comfort Tyler Park. This honored Comfort Tyler, who was a major figure in the early development of Onondaga County. Tyler was born on February 22, 1764 in Ashford, Connecticut and served in the Revolutionary War as a 14 year-old. Tyler came to Onondaga in 1788, one of the area's first settlers. He was the county's first postmaster; served as sheriff, county clerk, and coroner, and assisted in the first manufacture of salt here. He is even said to have cut down the first tree in Onondaga County. In addition, he was the first Supervisor of the Town of Manlius, and served in the state legislature. He served in the War of 1812, rising to the rank of Colonel. Tyler died 1827.

Today, Comfort Tyler is remembered by a park, formerly known as the Colvin - Comstock playground, which is located at the southwest corner of E. Colvin St. and Comstock Ave. This park, which was established in 1951, can be seen from the top of the water tower hill.

### **Edward Smith School**

Edward Smith School was originally built in 1918, with an addition constructed in 1938, and a new wing, gym and library added in 1982. It is named for Edward Smith, who began as a teacher in Syracuse schools in 1848, when the city was originally incorporated. Smith served in the Syracuse school system for a total of 51 years as a teacher, principal and superintendent before retiring in 1896. He died in 1909 and is buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

Edward Smith School has been described as a racially-balanced school, and its administrators initiated a program to integrate retarded children into mainstream education there in 1972 - the first such program in Syracuse.

### **A Nature Trail**

Originally created in 1973 by Ed Smith School parents, SUNY-ESF faculty (particularly professor Norman Richards), the Southeast University Neighborhood Association and neighborhood volunteers, a nature trail begins at the very back of the school grounds, loops up through the field, shrub and wooded areas east of the park road, and then follows the stone steps in its return. The trail is located south and west of the Morningside Community Garden.

A walk on the Morningside Trail offers a splendid view of Syracuse from the water towers at the top of the trail. This view includes the new Comfort Tyler Park, Oakwood cemetery and Skytop, as well as the Carrier Dome, the MONY towers and even Onondaga Lake, which has been called the most polluted lake in the United States.

Between 1992 and 1994, trail markers were added to the trail and attractive brochures were developed so that teachers, parents and students from Ed Smith could use the trail as a nature education resource. The trail has even been used during the winter for igloo building, weather observation and identifying animal tracks.

Unfortunately, today the trail markers have been badly burned and vandalized, and broken glass litters the stone steps.

During the spring of 2002, students at Ed Smith Elementary explored nature with Centers for Nature Education (CNE) at Baltimore Woods as part of the school's After Hours program. Students from kindergarten through second grade learned about animal tracks and traces with CNE Director Patty Weisse and Syracuse University intern Alex Noe. For six consecutive weeks, the class made plaster casts of tracks, studied tracks and scats on the Morningside Trail, and learned about animals and their habitats in the neighborhood.

On the sixth and last week of the program, students hiked the Morningside Trail and took note of all the different animal tracks and traces. They found a lot of dog and deer tracks and scats, and even some cotton tail rabbit scats. What they found most often, however, were ugly traces of human habitation called litter. Ed Smith student Ian Montgomery made an important discovery that "Humans are animals too!" Ben Jackson asked, "Why do people litter more than other animals?"

After a discussion on the decomposition rates of plastic, paper, and poop, the students decided to make posters for viewing along the Morningside Trail. The colorful laminated posters contain heartfelt messages from the youngsters such as "Don't Litter, it is bad for the dirt!" and "Stop Litter!"

### **Morningside Community Garden**

The Morningside Community Garden, hidden from view from Broad St., stretches from the edge of the Ed Smith School property to the edge of the water tower access road. In existence for some three decades, it is home to 56 gardeners who plant a wide variety of vegetables and flowers in the plot.

### **Oakwood Cemetery**

Oakwood Cemetery can be seen from the water tower hill as stretching west and north from the northwest corner of E. Colvin St. and Comstock Ave. Founded in 1859 on 160 acres of land, it was at the time located just outside the city. It preceded Syracuse's first park by 27 years.

Oakwood Cemetery represents the Romantic landscape architecture ideal of a public place developed in accordance with the rhythms of the land, a cemetery intended to be "picturesque to the living, respectful to the dead." Its hilly natural scenery, including a wide variety of tree species, was thought to nourish the mind, and even now is a favorite place for Syracuse University and SUNY-ESF students to stroll, sketch and relax.

Names prominent in local history like Green, Sumner, Slocum, Crouse and Yates adorn the gravestones and mausoleums of Oakwood. A total of 231 Civil War soldiers and sailors are buried there. Oakwood Cemetery is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

### **Skytop**

The large concrete-slab housing complex that can be seen from the hilltop spreading south from East Colvin St. is the Syracuse University Skytop complex, which comprises a total of 444 acres. Skytop housing phase one was completed in 1948 to alleviate the housing shortage caused by students coming to Syracuse University on the GI Bill. The housing and roadways that we see there today were completed in 1973.