

Research Report: Lincoln Park in Chattanooga, Tennessee

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Essentials of Historic Preservation &
Cultural Resource Management
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Table of Contents

Historical Narrative.....	3
Historical Significance.....	7
Bibliography.....	8
Future Research.....	9
Sanborn Maps.....	11
Historic Photographs.....	15
Map Overlay of Park and Features.....	20

Historical Narrative: Lincoln Park

On April 12, 1918, the *Chattanooga Daily Times* (now called the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*) published an article titled “Lincoln Park Opens June 1.”¹ The paper said the park would comprise of ten acres “with fine road, flower beds, fountains and buildings.” Originally, the city and county jointly purchased the land for an isolated wing of Erlanger Hospital (possibly for treating tuberculosis) but they later considered the site unsuited for that purpose. Thus, Ed Herron, Commissioner of Parks, decided to build Chattanooga’s first park for black residents, especially useful for those living in the adjacent neighborhood located at the rear of the hospital. Due to the city’s segregated policies, the city’s popular Warner Park was only open to white residents. Until the development of Lincoln Park, black residents did not have a centrally located recreational space. Early plans for the Lincoln Park included a children’s playground, a dancing pavilion, a carousel, a refreshment stand and restrooms for men and women. The paper beamed that, when completed, the park “will compare favorably with any colored park in the country...and Chattanooga will have reason to feel proud.”

Lincoln Park quickly became a central part of the local black community as it provided a safe and fun space for the surrounding neighborhood. Throughout the decades, the city added features to the site. On August 3, 1937, the city dedicated the construction of a swimming pool in the park. Commissioner R. M. Cooke of the Parks and Playgrounds Department dug the first shovel of dirt while Reverend J.B. Barber of Leonard Street Presbyterian Church gave the charge.² The city commission voted to issue \$29,000 in bonds for the construction, but accounts

¹ “Lincoln Park Opens June 1,” *Chattanooga Times*, April 12, 1918.

² “Negro Swimming Pool Ceremonies Set Today,” *Chattanooga Times*, August 3, 1937.

toward opening day suggest it eventually cost nearly \$60,000.³ Commissioner Cooke said building a pool for black citizens was something he worked on since taking office because it was a “much needed and very desirable thing.”⁴ At the dedication, local leaders gave speeches that hinted at the racial tensions between white and black Chattanooga citizens. Dr. Spencer McCallie, headmaster at the McCallie School, asked for “a united front of colored and white races in making and keeping America a place of equal opportunity for any man.”⁵ The Works Progress Administration helped construct the Olympic-sized swimming pool in Lincoln Park, which opened the following year in 1938. The pool was always a popular place for families on a hot summer afternoon. Cynthia Farrow Hammond told the newspaper that the pool was so packed in the 1950s she wondered how she ever learned to swim there.⁶

In 1946, Lincoln Park continued the expansion with the development of a building called the Lincoln Center. It was a round building with a large front entrance. Research did not clearly identify the function of the building. The park’s carousel appears in a 1929 Sanborn map in the same location as the building, so it is possible that the Lincoln Center later comprised the ride.⁷ In 1947, the *Chattanooga Observer*, a black newspaper, promoted a huge Independence Day celebration at the park with an expected attendance of 15,000 people from all over the South.⁸ Residents of Lincoln Park neighborhood remember busloads of tourists from major cities like

³ “5,000 in Crowd to See Project, Hear Speeches,” newspaper clipping, Parks folder, Historical Collection, Chattanooga Public Library

⁴ “City Votes Bonds for Pool, Grounds,” *Chattanooga Times*, July 28, 1937.

⁵ “First Ground Broken Today for Colored Swimming Pool,” *Chattanooga Free Press*, Historical Collection, Chattanooga Public Library

⁶ “Entertainment Mecca” newspaper clipping, August 2007, Historical Collection, Chattanooga Public Library

⁷ Digital Sanborn Map of Chattanooga, TN, 1929, ProQuest, Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University.

⁸ “All the Roads Leads to Lincoln Park July 4th,” *Chattanooga Observer*, July 4, 1947.

Atlanta coming for the amusement rides, mini-zoo, and Ferris wheel in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ One resident said Lincoln Park “was the place to go in the South.”¹⁰ Many former attendees of the park remember the zoo quite vividly. Although it only had monkeys and a bear, the animals were a popular attraction.¹¹

According to current and former residents of the park’s adjoining neighborhood, one of the major attractions was the lighted baseball field. It was one of the few lighted baseball fields in the region, and Mondays and Thursdays were particularly popular days for black baseball games.¹² Before the construction of Engel Stadium in 1929, two baseball fields regularly hosted black baseball teams—Andrews Field and Lincoln Park. The scholars at the Center for Negro League Research found newspaper articles that suggest Lincoln Park was the home field for the Chattanooga Black Cats during the entire 1929 season.¹³ Researchers found only 27 box scores for the resurrected Negro Southern League, but from those box scores they determined that the Black Cats played at least 12 games with a record of 4 wins and 8 losses.¹⁴ Other sources claim that the Chattanooga Choo Chos also played games at Lincoln Park as well as Engel Stadium.¹⁵ In fact, Baseball Hall of Fame inductee and one of Major League Baseball’s greatest outfielders, Willie Mays, watched the Choo Chos play at Lincoln Park when he was in high school and

⁹ “Entertainment Mecca” newspaper clipping, August 2007, Historical Collection, Chattanooga Public Library

¹⁰ “Lincoln Park Was Place to Go for Black Families Years Ago,” *Chattanooga Times*, October 18, 1998.

¹¹ “The Monkeys at Lincoln Park put on Great Show to a Large Audience,” *Chattanooga Observer*, August 1, 1947.

¹² “Lincoln Park was the Place to Go for Black Families Years Ago,” *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, October 18, 1998.

¹³ “Negro League Ball Parks” and “Negro Southern League Rosters,” Center for Negro League Baseball Research, <http://www.cnlbr.org/>, accessed October 27, 2015.

¹⁴ “Negro Southern League (1920-1951),” Center for Negro League Baseball Research, <http://www.cnlbr.org/>, accessed October 27, 2015.

¹⁵ Stephen Martini, *The Chattanooga Lookouts & 100 Seasons of Scenic City Baseball*, (Lulu.com, 2010).

played with the team in the late 1940s.¹⁶ Several recent newspaper articles mention that Baseball Hall of Fame inductees Jackie Robinson and Satchel Paige also stepped foot onto the diamond at Lincoln Park.¹⁷ Satchel Paige began playing in Chattanooga in 1926 for the Black Lookouts, and more than likely played at Andrews Field and Lincoln Park similar to other black baseball teams in the area. City baseball and softball teams continued to use the ballfield throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The baseball field is one of the few remaining park elements today, along with a concession stand, part of the pool entrance, and two of the stone entrance gates. Other sporting events took place at the park, including football games for the black students of segregated Howard High School.¹⁸ One newspaper account recalled watching local tennis star Wylma McGhee Reid play matches at clay courts in Lincoln Park.¹⁹ In 1947, Reid became Chattanooga's first national champion tennis player.²⁰

With the onset of desegregation in the 1960s, attendance at Lincoln Park waned and the city halted upkeep. The city saw no reason to fund the park anymore once Warner Park desegregated. Hospital expansion and urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s changed some of the surrounding landscape, and displaced much of the adjacent neighborhood. In 1979, the city traded the Lincoln Park property to Erlanger Hospital for land in Glenwood where the children's hospital once sat.²¹ Since the 1980s, Erlanger Hospital and the city have attempted to further

¹⁶ Paul Archambault, "Engel Stadium," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, October 1990.

¹⁷ "Half of Chattanooga's Lincoln Park land swap complete," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, July 9, 2014

¹⁸ "Lincoln Park was the Place to Go for Black Families Years Ago," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, October 18, 1998.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Gay Morgan Moore, *Chattanooga's Forest Hills Cemetery* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), 116; "Lincoln Park was the Place to Go for Black Families Years Ago," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, October 18, 1998.

²¹ "Entertainment Mecca" newspaper clipping, August 2007, Historical Collection, Chattanooga Public Library.

intrude into the remaining space at Lincoln Park and the neighborhood, but the relentless spirit of the community stopped encroachments. The most recent tension between the historic neighborhood and the city is an expansion of Central Avenue that would run straight through the park and destroy the baseball field enjoyed by both the community and baseball legends of the 1940s and 1950s.

Historical Significance

Lincoln Park served an important role in the lives of the black community in Chattanooga. It was the central location for community-wide celebrations and gatherings, including the draw of black citizens from Georgia and Alabama. It was the site where many children learned to swim, played ball, played games and went on rides. It represents a significant part of the South's segregation history as one of the few places Chattanooga's black residents could go for a safe recreational space. It was a place "near and dear" to the heart of Chattanooga's black community, and continues to be a place for annual neighborhood reunions and social gatherings.²² It is also an important part of sports history. Organized black baseball teams were some of the most viable African American enterprises during the 20th century. Lincoln Park helped foster black baseball and black baseball players, such as Willie Mays and Satchel Paige—two of the greatest baseball players of the past 100 years. Lincoln Park represents a significant aspect to the history of the segregated south, urban renewal, recreation and leisure, and sports.

²² "Entertainment Mecca" newspaper clipping, August 2007, Historical Collection, Chattanooga Public Library.

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Chattanooga Observer

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Bessie Smith Cultural Center, Chattanooga, Tennessee

Center for Negro League Baseball Research, Carrollton, Texas

Chattanooga Public Library, Historical Collection, Parks

Walker Library Digital Collection, Middle Tennessee State University

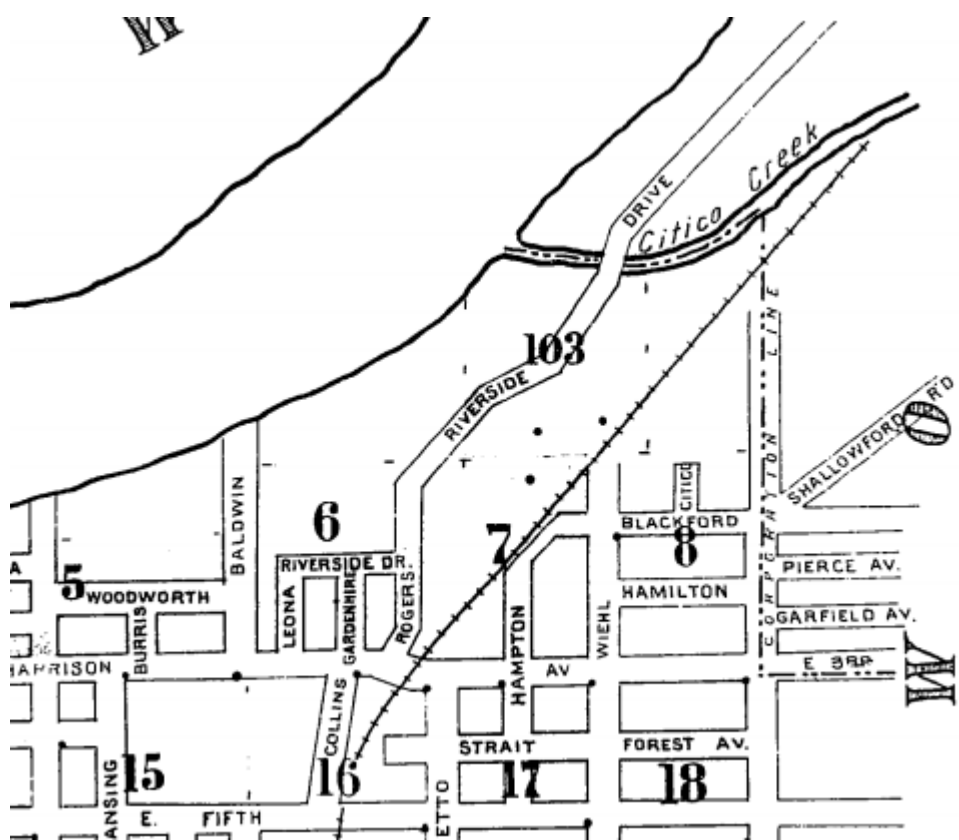
Future Research

For information on the baseball field, most secondary and primary sources have been exhausted, and the researcher reached out to several recognized experts. For this report, the researcher contacted the Bessie Smith Cultural Center in Chattanooga, and came up empty in new material. In fact, the Cultural Center requested that any and all research be shared with them. The researcher also contacted Dr. Layton Revel at the Center for Negro League Baseball Research, but he could not provide anything beyond the brief PDF reports found online and in the book *The Negro Southern League* by William J. Plott. However, the Dr. Revel did provide the phone number of Dan Creed, an expert in black baseball in Chattanooga. As of November 22, 2015, the researcher had not heard back from Mr. Creed. The researcher also emailed highly praised black baseball historian John B. Holway through his website Baseballaces.net, but as of November 22, 2015 the researcher had not received a return email. Holway meticulously researches the box scores and newspaper articles for black baseball games throughout the twentieth century, and recently donated several boxes of his research to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Thus, contacting the archivist at the Hall of Fame about the donation may offer some insight (although this would most likely be a tedious task and require a significant research fee).

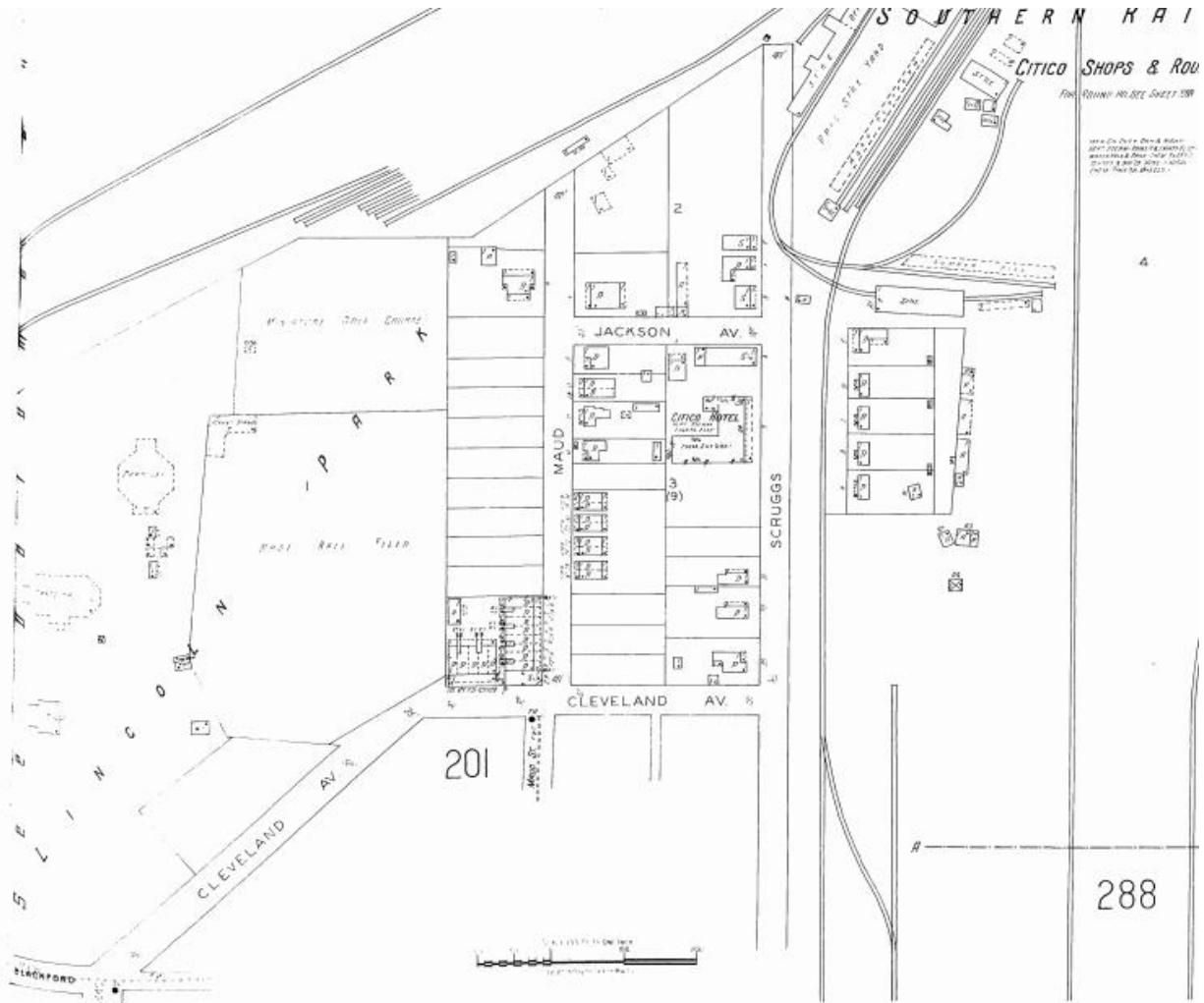
For more information on the baseball field and Lincoln Park in general, the researcher urges others to pursue oral histories with current and former residents of the neighborhood. Additionally, these residents may have kept news articles or personal photographs related to Lincoln Park that they may be willing to share or donate to an archive. A good place to start for finding potential interviewees would be the highly active Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association, the organization currently fighting the city against the expansion of Central Avenue

through their beloved park. The association is headed by a woman named Ms. Vannice Hughley. Ms. Hughley and her daughter, Tiffany Rankins, are president and secretary of the association respectively. The association has partnered with Chattanooga Organized for Action in order to combat the current attempt at urban renewal by the city. The recent events of this struggle can be found here: <http://chattaction.org/theirs-forever-lincoln-park>

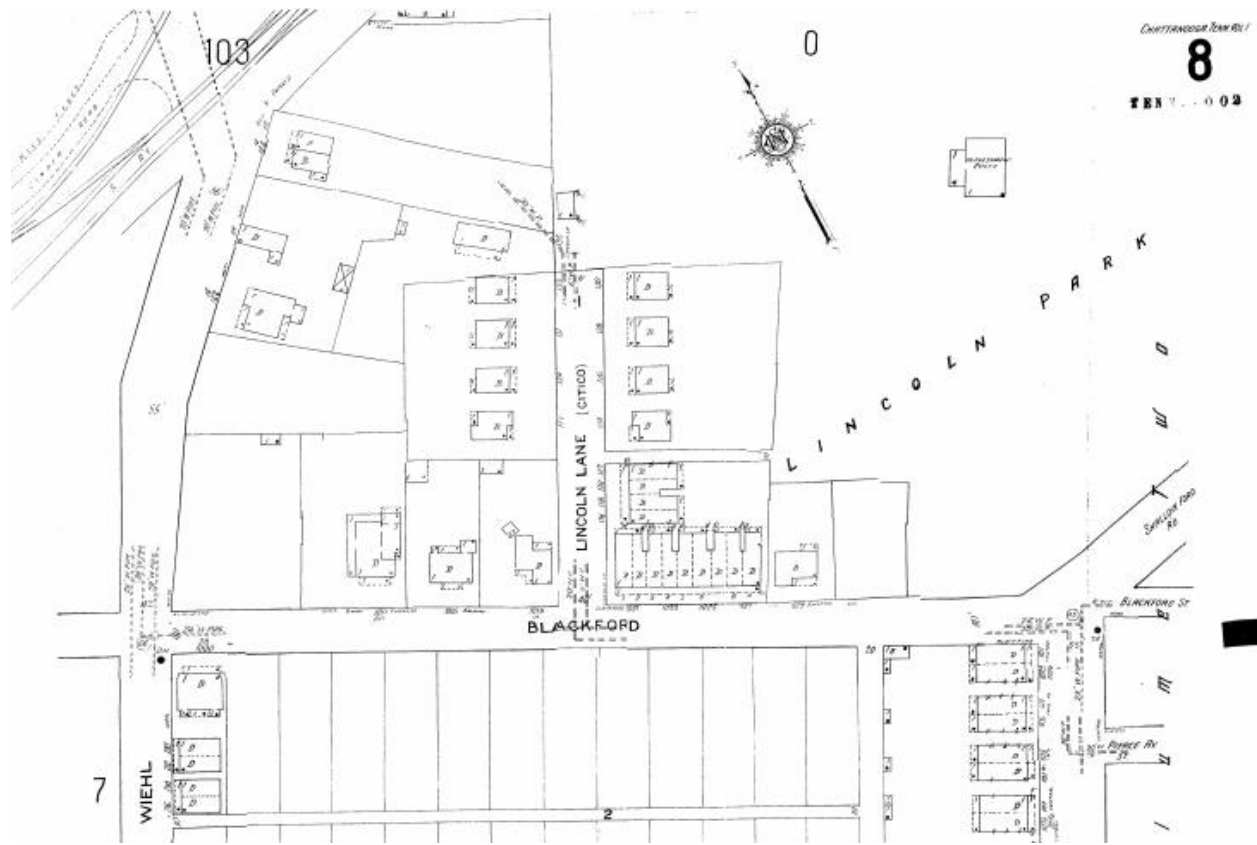
Sanborn Maps



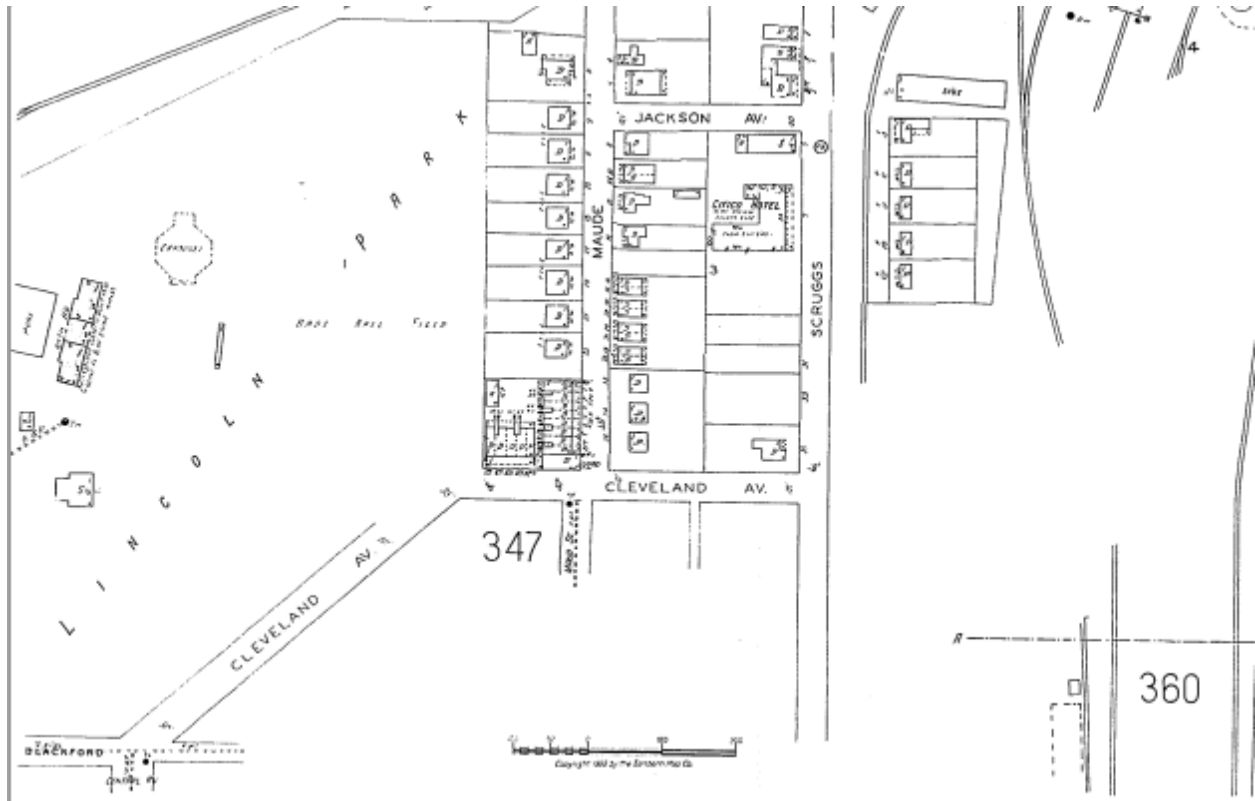
1917 – Before the Construction of Lincoln Park where Shallowford Road extends from Blackford



1929 – This map shows drawings of several buildings and recreational spaces in Lincoln Park, including a carousel, golf course, and baseball field. 1929 was the year that the Black Cats black baseball team called Lincoln Park home.

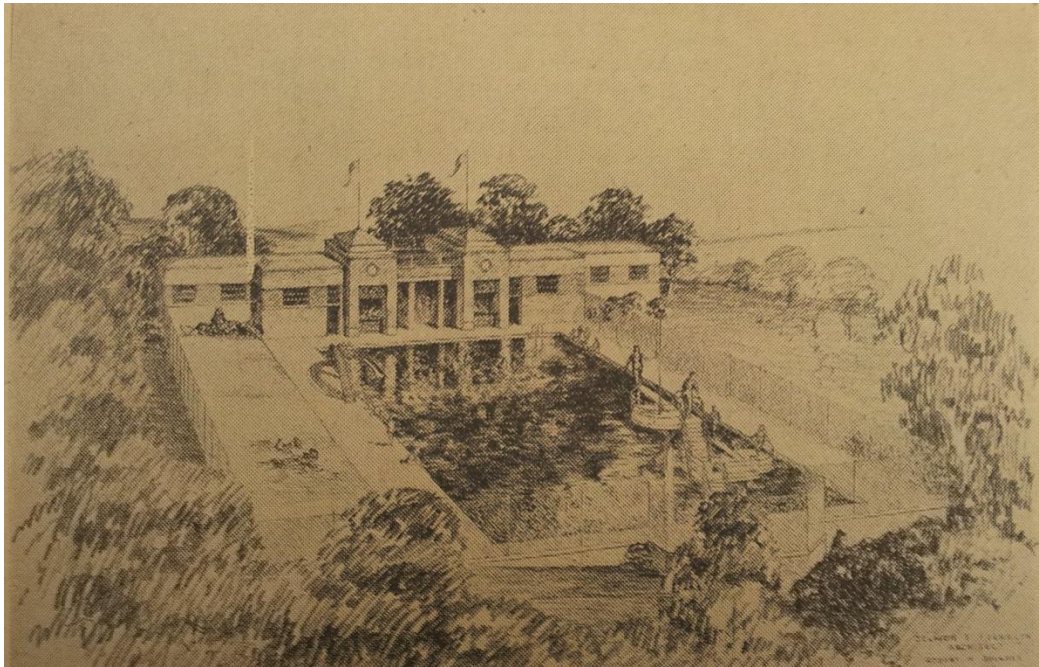


1951 – Showing the left side of the park that backed up to Lincoln Lane. Today these houses do not exist. Erlanger Hospital sits where Lincoln Lane used to be.

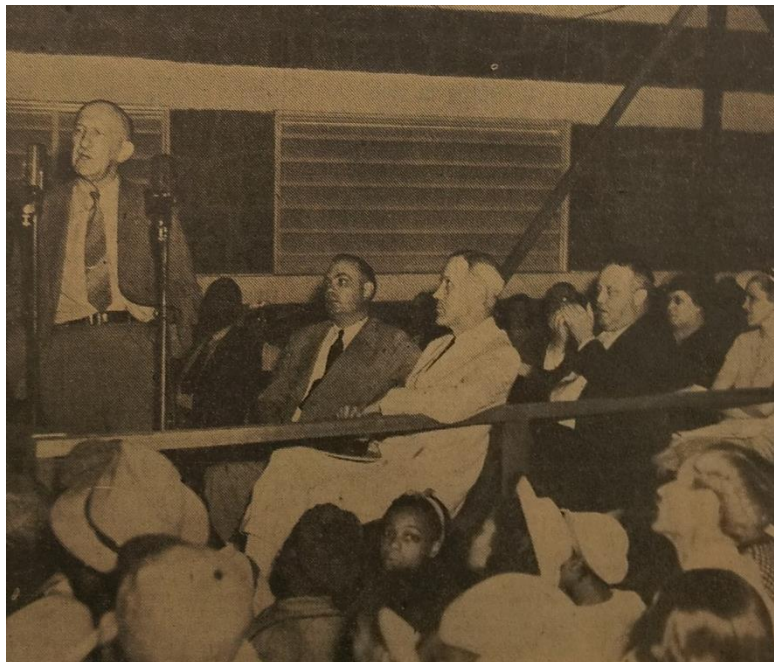


1955 – This map shows the pool building, along with the carousel and baseball field. The park probably did not change much from this until its waning popularity in the 1960s.

Historic Photographs and Clippings



An artist's rendering of what the swimming pool would like when completed. From the *Chattanooga Times*, July 28, 1939.



Dr. Spencer McCallie speaking at the opening of the swimming pool. From the *Chattanooga Times*, July 2, 1938.



The Olympic-sized swimming pool in the 1950s. The Lincoln Center is visible in the left corner. Found in the September 1939 issue of the *Chattanooga Times*.



The Lincoln Center building in 1946 from the *Chattanooga Times*. It is difficult to decipher in the background, but the roofed structure behind the Lincoln Center could possibly be the grandstand for the baseball field. According to Sanborn maps, this would be a reasonable conclusion.



Carol Lynne Brinkley standing in front of Ferris wheel and carousel at Lincoln Park.
Date unknown. From "Coalition to Save Chattanooga's Lincoln Park" Facebook page.



1964 – Aerial photograph of Erlanger Hospital with numbered sites. Number 18 in right middle is Lincoln Park. From Paul A. Hiener Collection, Digital Collections, Chattanooga Public Library.

Map Overlay of Space and Features

Margaret Slater, AICP, URS Corporation and Jessica Burr, TRC created the following two overlay maps for their historical and architectural assessment of Lincoln Park in 2014.



1951 – Lincoln Park Features



2014 – Lincoln Park Features

The park is substantially smaller than in 1951 due to encroachment from the Erlanger Hospital and urban renewal.