



HISTORY OF THE CAPITAL AREA GREENBELT

by Norman L. Lacasse
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The Capital Area Greenbelt is a 20-mile greenway encircling the City of Harrisburg in Dauphin County. It traverses five municipalities, some county land and state land. The remarkable thing about this greenway was started in 1900 as part of the City Beautiful Movement. (Space limitations in this article preclude a history of the original City Beautiful accomplishments, however the history of its origin is available in *An Essay of the Professional Life of Mira Lloyd Dock* published by the Pennsylvania Forest Fire Museum Association. Acquisition instructions are located in a footnote at the end of this article.) The original greenway was gated off and abandoned after the Agnes Flood in 1972 partly because of some flood damage, but mostly because much of it lay outside the city limits and the City of Harrisburg, its owner, was responsible for maintenance and liability. The City could no longer afford the burden.

The author discovered the Paxtang Parkway accidentally while doing a street-tree inventory for that borough. This mile-long section had fallen into considerable disrepair and youth gang activity precluded public use of it. Paxtang Borough officials were adamant about avoiding taking over its maintenance because of costs. The author and a Bureau of Forestry co-worker, Ellen Roane, undertook the challenge of organizing and leading a group of volunteers in cooperation with the City of Harrisburg to rehabilitate



Riverfront in Harrisburg in 1900 showing discarded trash and kitchen waste prior to City Beautiful improvements.



Section of present-day Capital Area Greenbelt along the Susquehanna River in South Harrisburg.

this section, as well as another section, the Cameron Parkway. By fortunate coincidence the U.S. Forest Service was urging the state forestry agencies to consider other activities besides planting street trees in their urban forestry programs and was offering grants to fund good projects. A grant application was submitted through the Pennsylvania Forestry Association for \$33,000, the maximum amount allowed, and

was fully funded. This grant gave the fledgling organization the push it needed to get going.

A meeting with Mayor Stephen Reed of Harrisburg was held to enlist his support. Initially he was adamantly against supporting this effort because the City could not afford the maintenance. He was quick to point out that he was not about to spend Harrisburg tax monies for the enjoyment



Annual tree planting by Tri-County Blind Association support group in memorial tree grove in south Harrisburg section of the greenbelt.

of others, a reference to the fact that a large part of the parkway system lay outside the city limits. However, after pointing out that promoting good environmental stewardship also reaps rewards at the election box and a promise that our association's volunteers would do much of the maintenance, he then volunteered the services of the Harrisburg Authority who had money and were in the process of upgrading the sewer tributary along the Cameron Parkway. He would direct it to restore the parkway while they were working there. And they did!

The necessary paperwork to become a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization was soon filed and brochures printed promoting its vision and mission. Ellen organized a contest in the local public schools to develop a

logo with U.S. savings bonds as prizes. The assistance of Tina Manoogian King, the director of the City of Harrisburg Parks and Recreation Department, was most valuable. She provided a meeting place for our fledgling organization and much needed counsel and encouragement in our formative years. She also insisted that a master plan be developed and obtained a grant to fund that project and our organization agreed to contribute a small amount. We now had a credible project with a professional plan to present to the public, and a successful, well-attended public meeting was held at the high school.

Slowly the cleanup work progressed, more volunteers joined the clean-up effort, and tangible results became noticeable. Coincidentally, Shirley Disend had

organized a group of youths and started cleaning up the Paxtang Parkway. We joined forces and Shirley has been a key player from the beginning. She later created a monumental project on a section of the greenbelt, which has become a destination unto itself (see below.) Earth Day projects became very popular and attracted large groups of volunteers largely due to Mike Krempaski, Assistant Director of the Office of Policy in the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR.) Mike was most influential getting the first Secretary of DCNR involved with the greenbelt and that opened many doors in getting assistance and heavy equipment from the Bureau of Forestry. Also, his keen ability to network with local municipal officials was most instrumental in getting permission to establish incomplete sections of the greenbelt.

Mira Lloyd Dock

Shortly after the restoration of the parkways was started, the editor



Mira Lloyd Dock. Advocate for the City Beautiful Movement initiative in Harrisburg.



Tree planting at Dock Woods. Left to Right: Douglas Reynolds, CAGA President at the time, sisters Maia Dock and Mira Dock, great-grandnieces of Mira Lloyd Dock.

of the Patriot News contacted the author informing him of a new book that had just been published entitled *City Beautiful Movement* by William H. Wilson, a movement started in the early 20th century to beautify American cities. The editor pointed out that there was an entire chapter about the improvements made in Harrisburg under that umbrella and that the parkway system was a major part of the improvements. Furthermore, a woman by the name of Mira Lloyd Dock was the major force behind this effort in Harrisburg. Needless to say, Mira Lloyd Dock became our patron saint and the more we learned about her the more her esteem grew.

The McDonald's Battle

The Cameron Parkway extended from Cameron Street up to the Dauphin County Poor Farm in Swatara Township, a distance of 1.5 miles. In 1913 the City of

Harrisburg passed an ordinance condemning a strip of land on both sides of Spring Creek to extend the parkway through the County Poor Farm and connect it to the Paxtang Park. This section too was gated off and abandoned after the Agnes Flood. When Stephen Reed became mayor of Harrisburg, he sold that land to a developer. While its narrow size precluded its development, the developer traded some of the land with the County next to a prison that had been built on part of the former County Poor Farm. The developer then proceeded to develop the land adjacent to the now County-owned land. The County subdivided its newly reacquired land into four commercial lots and put them up for sale. Unfortunately for us, the land had been zoned for commercial use after the parkway had been abandoned. The County sold one lot to the McDonald's

Corporation and was negotiating the sale of two more lots to Pep Boys. Undaunted, we went to battle, first with the Swatara Township Planning Commission, then with the Township's Board of Commissioners, to no avail. We then filed suit in court and succeeded in stalling development. Needless to say, our volunteers spent many hours protesting and fundraising for the next two years. It was a bruising battle because a large corporation like McDonald's could not let a small, rag-tag organization like ours win and set a precedent. The issue was eventually resolved out of court because two newly elected Dauphin County commissioners had promised to complete the greenbelt during their campaign for office. Our organization had promised one of the commissioners that our organization would quickly clean up the site and plant it to trees and name it Dock Woods if the County sided with us. The issue was resolved when the County Commissioners offered a better site to the developer in a nearby location just off the parkway. The bruising experience had a maturing effect on the volunteers but gained us much publicity.

Notable Accomplishments

Bridge over Amtrak lines

One of our noteworthy accomplishments was the re-decking of an old bridge over the Amtrak and Conrail lines in south Harrisburg. This bridge had been built by the Central Iron and Steel Company to transport their slag

to a dumping site on the other side of the rail lines. The decking consisted of steel plates over long ago-rotted railroad ties over two three-foot tall I-beams that were welded to 12-foot high steel walls. The steel floor and walls were to prevent hot slag from falling on the tracks and trains below. This crossing was very important to us in establishing the trail in that section and getting the greenbelt users safely across the railroad lines. Getting permission from Amtrak was indeed challenging because when you work above of active rail lines, you work by their rules! It took a lot of negotiating and patience, but finally, with some help from the Bureau of Forestry and a lot of persistence, we managed to get the job done and, in the end, we had the chief Amtrak engineer from Baltimore helping us nail down the wooden deck.

Northern corridor section

The next major accomplishment was the establishment of the trail through the former Harrisburg State Hospital. Warren Manning, the landscape architect who designed the parkway system in 1901, did not venture there even though there was a beautiful stream, Asylum Run, that would have provided a nice setting for a parkway. The author believes he avoided the area because the mental hospital at the time was fully populated with nearly three thousand patients, and, because of the way the public felt at the time about the mentally ill, he chose to avoid that corridor. First we had to convince the Department



CAGA volunteers re-decking bridge over Amtrak/Norfolk Southern rail lines.



Amtrak/Norfolk Southern bridge project completion celebration. Former Harrisburg Mayor, Stephen Reed, front row far right, Tina Manoogian King, Parks & Recreation Director, second row far right, and CAGA volunteers.



Section of greenbelt through the former Harrisburg State Hospital sporting trees planted by court-adjudicated youths from the Diakon Wilderness Center.



Section of greenbelt through the Five Senses Gardens sporting a new turfstone path installed by greenbelt volunteers to prevent storm water erosion damage.

of General Services (DGS) that this was a worthy undertaking, one which would benefit the general public for generations to come and we had to show that we were able to accomplish this feat of establishing a two and a half mile-long trail. The greatest impediment, however, was LIABILITY! Fortunately, DCNR Secretary John Oliver stepped up to the plate and sent a letter to the DGS Chief Council stating that DCNR would accept liability for the greenbelt, just as any other trail on state land. Then, again with the help of the Bureau of Forestry which provided a D7H dozer, backhoe and grader, we proceeded to establish this section of the greenbelt. This section is now paved, thanks to an ICETEA grant, which Mike Krempaski helped Susquehanna Township obtain for that purpose. It is a beautiful addition as it runs on the periphery of the land the hospital farmed in its early days. The hospital complex itself

features an arboretum containing many exotic trees. Before the advent of psychotropic drugs the only treatment available for the mentally ill was to create a beautiful setting to calm them, thus, a beautiful campus with many trees and shrubs. A student intern was recruited to locate, identify and label these trees.

Five Senses Gardens

Shirley Disend proposed the establishment of a butterfly garden very early on in the rehabilitation of the parkway system. She selected an area along Spring Creek on the former Dauphin County Poor Farm section of the greenbelt which was overgrown with trees, brush and strewn with trash, enlisted the help of women prisoners, and proceeded to turn that patch of wilderness into the most beautiful and restful place in all of the 20-mile-long greenbelt. She spent many hours planning the garden and soon the butterfly garden evolved into a complex

of gardens, each with plants that would please one of the senses, thus the Five Senses Gardens. A landscape architect developed a layout plan and paths were constructed as a donation by a major local construction company. Words cannot describe the amount of sweat and blood and toil that went into developing that emerald in the greenbelt necklace. Part of the facility lies in the flood plain and flood it did on many occasions, wreaking havoc with newly planted flowers and shrubs and the freshly mulched gardens. This was most discouraging, but Shirley never gave up. The worst tragedy occurred when a tornado went through one evening and uprooted many trees and shrubs. But even that did not discourage Shirley. She and her able co-worker, Al Saxton, quickly restored the gardens and made them more beautiful than ever. It has become a destination unto itself on the greenbelt and has already been the setting for many weddings.

Pedestrian bridge

Another ambitious project was the construction of an 89-foot-long pedestrian bridge under Interstate 83 over Spring Creek. This bridge was necessary to take the trail off a dangerous section of a heavily traveled road. Those who have constructed a bridge understand how complicated the regulatory process is for constructing a bridge over state waters. This project had an additional hurdle to jump over since it was directly under an I-83 bridge! However, everything went incredibly smoothly. Utility



Springhouse bridge constructed by greenbelt volunteers. Mira Dock, left, and Lora Hirshhorn, greenbelt member.

poles were donated by the PPL Electric Company, twelve steel railroad rails were donated by a local steel mill and the DCNR Bureau of Facilities Design and Construction agreed to design it. The project got underway on a September Day of Caring with PPL installing utility poles as piers

under the I-83 bridge. From that point on, all work done was by greenbelt volunteers, including many court-adjudicated youths from the Diakon Wilderness Center near Boiling Springs. The United Water Company donated many loads of fill for the abutments and trail sections

leading to and from the bridge. PA DOT donated used cable and steel posts for guard railing along the trail south of the bridge. The bridge was named Spring House Bridge after the Spring House next to the bridge. The Spring House, a small limestone building, was constructed by the Rutherfords, the original settlers in the region. The limestone was quarried from a quarry across the road and the building was located directly over springs to keep the Indians away from their water source.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Memorial

The most recent project undertaken is a memorial to Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King along the Cameron Parkway. It was constructed partly because of the absence of any other memorial to Dr. King in the Harrisburg area, but mostly to give the court-adjudicated Diakon youths a lifetime experience. The central feature is the 11-foot tall



Dedication of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Memorial on the Cameron Parkway built and maintained by Diakon Youths.



Section of greenbelt along Amtrak lines with welcome sign painted by volunteers.

jet-black granite obelisk in the center of the memorial garden. A kiosk next to it features the “I HAVE A DREAM” speech. The backdrop is a line of Arborvitae and there are six flower beds laid out in arcs across site. Granite markers are presently being installed commemorating Dr. King’s twelve campaigns. Most of the work was and continues to be done by court-adjudicated youths from the Diakon Wilderness Center under the supervision of greenbelt adult volunteers. A time capsule is under development. It consists of a hand-made miniature coffin that will be buried in the concrete base of the twelfth and last campaign granite marker and will contain a pledge made by the

Diakon youths to never again use the “N” word.

The annual Tour de Belt

For the past ten years the Capital Area greenbelt Association has sponsored the Tour de Belt. This is a family-oriented bike ride covering the entire 20-mile greenway. Police are stationed at every street intersection, refreshments are served at three locations and a sag wagon picks up bicyclists in distress. Last year 420 participants enjoyed this event.

The “greenbelt” is now an institution in Harrisburg. People refer to it now as if it has always been there, not knowing its

City Beautiful origins nor its somewhat erratic natural and political history. However, more and more, as they see greenbelt volunteers working on it year-round, they realize that it is a special gift and not just another public works project.

*More information on the Capital Area Greenbelt is available of the website, www.caga.org. A complete history of the original parkway system is available in *An Essay on the Professional Life of Mira Lloyd Dock*, a 45-page 5.5 x 6.5 book authored by Norman L. Lacasse, available for \$10 from: PA Forest Fire Museum Association, P.O. Box 126531, Harrisburg, PA 17112-6531*