

an interpretative tour of

**NEW  
NEW  
HAVEN  
HAVEN  
PARKS  
PARKS**

by ally soong

The aim of this booklet is  
to take you on a tour of New Haven  
through space and through history  
to examine what this cities parks have been,  
are now,  
and can be in the future.  
Thank you for reading.

# TOUR MAP



**EDGEWOOD  
PARK**



**WEST ROCK  
RIDGE STATE  
PARK**



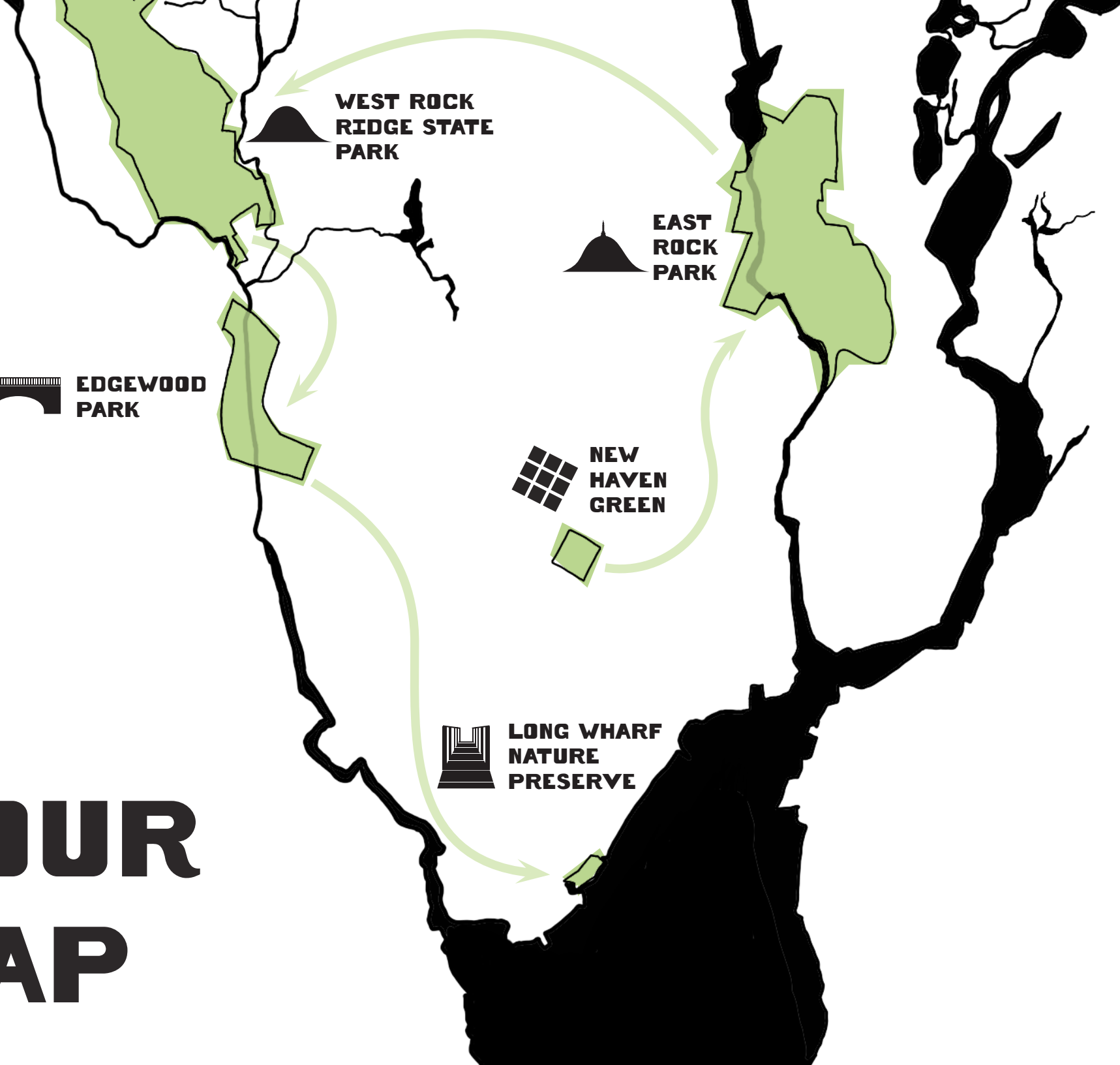
**EAST  
ROCK  
PARK**



**NEW  
HAVEN  
GREEN**



**LONG WHARF  
NATURE  
PRESERVE**



# WHAT IS A PARK?

rest

play

walk

nature

picnic

escape

open space

relax

green

# WHAT DO PARKS MEAN TO YOU?

trees

wildlife

community

public

fresh air

# QUINNIPIAC: LONG WATER LAND

Before “**PARKS**”

there was just **THE LAND**:

Before “parks” there was just the land: the land between two rivers on the coast of an estuary that would later be called the Long Island Sound. The people who lived on this land for centuries prior to European contact called themselves many different names and called this land Quinnipiac, meaning “long water land.”<sup>1</sup> We now refer to the group of decentralized communities who shared this land and the Quiripi dialect of Eastern Algonquian as the Quinnipiac.

The Quinnipiac understood their homeland in relation to natural landmarks (rivers, mountains, valleys) within a region of overlapping territory connected by a network of footpaths and canoe routes. They used the land to hunt for animals, catch fish, gather plants, make shelter, worship, make community, and enjoy their lives.<sup>2</sup>

The project of public parks and public lands brings us into conversation with the Quinnipiac way of moving through and knowing this land: as a shared resource, a region of overlapping territory where people can meet a number of different needs supported by ecological systems.

However, it is important to recognize who “parks” are public to and for what uses. The original public space project of the New Haven colony, the New Haven Green, was the center of a colonial urbanism that displaced the Quinnipiac in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The colonists remade the landscape in the image of an Old World pastoral community, designing the city in a perfect nine-square grid writing over the shared natural resources that the Quinnipiac relied on. They built dams along the rivers that altered traditional fishing sites. They clear-cut large portions of the forest where the Quinnipiac once gathered food. They fenced off meadows where the Quinnipiac once hunted.<sup>3</sup>

Under pressure, in 1638, the Quinnipiac signed the Momauguin Treaty ceding their land and moving to a reservation on the east shore.<sup>4</sup> Over time, as New Haven grew, many of the Quinnipiac fled and the reservation grew smaller and smaller. In 1769, the Quinnipiac sold their last 30 acres to New Haven, and the remaining Quinnipiac moved to Farmington, Connecticut, completing their displacement and exclusion their homeland.<sup>5</sup>

# NEW HAVEN GREEN

The New Haven Green was the first park of the New Haven colony, laid out in 1638.<sup>6</sup> When Puritan colonists led by John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton came to New Haven, they saw the Quinnipiac land before them as the perfect setting for their goal of creating a biblical state. To the colonists, this fertile valley, framed by wilderness and the soaring cliffs of West and East Rock, was a mirror of the biblical landscape where God ordered the Israelites to build their settlement. The center of this valley is where they built their perfect settlement based on the descriptions of Israelite encampments in the Bible: nine perfect squares with the central square left open as a communal space.<sup>7</sup>

The Green has lived many lives since its original construction. Its religious importance continued with the construction of three churches, Center Church, United Church, and Trinity Church, all built between 1812 and 1816. In its early years it served as a burial ground but was later replaced by the Grove Street cemetery.<sup>8</sup> In 1812, the city began removing monuments from the Green's burial ground, a process that concluded in 1821. The Green also played an important role in the story of the Amistad. In 1839, a group of Mende people abducted as slaves in Sierra Leone revolted onboard the Amistad. The schooner eventually made its way to the Long Island Sound, and upon arrival, the Mende were imprisoned in the New Haven Jail on the east side of the Green and brought out to the Green daily to exercise in front of groups of spectators.<sup>9</sup> The case was eventually brought to the Supreme Court which ruled in favor of the Mende, and in 1941 the 35 still living Mende returned to Sierra Leone.<sup>10</sup>



Today the Green serves many different functions. Every year it is host to live concerts and arts events, especially in the summertime. It also serves as a stage for protest and civic engagement and plays a role in the daily life of the city as a park space, public meeting space, and a place to rest.



# EAST ROCK PARK

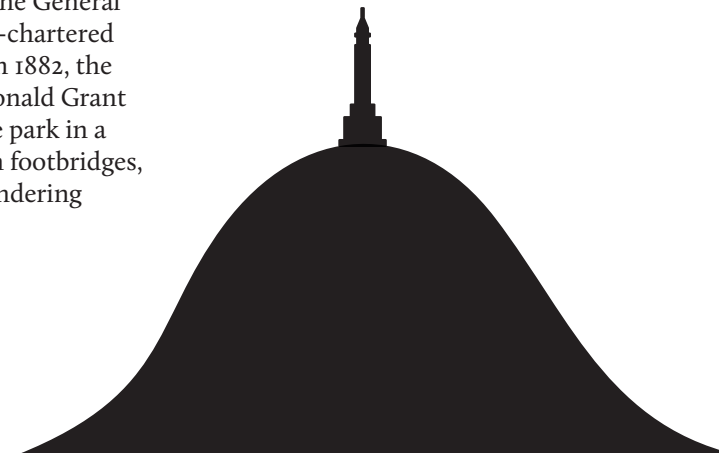


Dramatic and picturesque, East Rock Park is the product of the 19th century parks movement. During this period, across the country, the parks movement gained traction as a reaction to the increasing industrialization, densification, and immigration of America's cities. Beginning in the mid-19th century, New Haven became a manufacturing hub. Between 1880 to 1920, New Haven's population jumped from 62,882 to 162,655 primarily due to immigration were from Ireland, Southern Italy, and Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> As the city became increasingly industrial, dense, poor, and immigrant-dominated, New Haven's elite mourned the loss of the pastoral city and began thinking about the importance of public parks. As part of a greater reform philosophy, urban elites saw parks as social control mechanisms, bastions of health and moral purity that would be a civilizing and moralizing force for the working-class population of the city.<sup>12</sup>



The parks movement in New Haven was ignited May 9th, 1877 at a meeting of the exclusive literary and social club known simply as "The Club." The Club's membership included many of New Haven's most powerful citizens, including President of Yale College, Noah Porter, who, that day, proposed the creation of the East Rock Park Commission to oversee the development of a new public park on the dramatic traprock ridge on the northeastern edge of the city. Over the next few years, the East Rock Park Commission (later called the New Haven Park Commission) collected donations of land and money from the Club and its elite circles. In 1880, the General Assembly of the State-chartered East Rock Park, and in 1882, the Commission hired Donald Grant Mitchell to design the park in a picturesque style with footbridges, sweeping drives, meandering footpaths, and quaint architecture.<sup>13,14</sup>

In 1887, after a decade of planning and fundraising, the Soldiers' and Sailors Monument was added to the summit of East Rock to honor the lives lost in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the War of 1812, and the Mexican-American War. At 110 feet tall, the iconic silhouette is visible from all over the city and beyond, acting as a symbol of New Haven, an orienting landmark, and a navigational beacon for the Long Island Sound.<sup>15</sup>



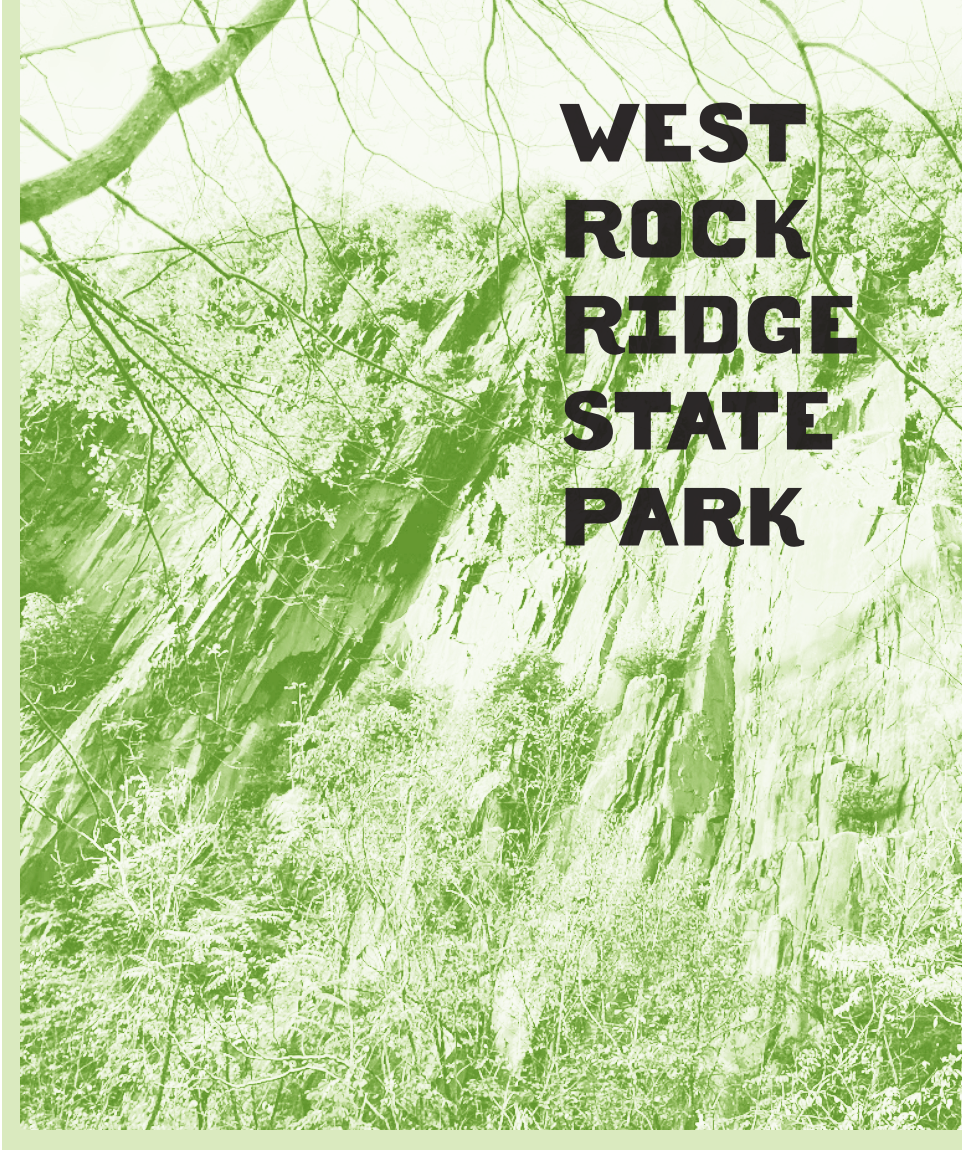
Mirroring East Rock, another traprock formation lies to the northwest of New Haven. Its early history shares many similarities with its twin rock, as another project of the New Haven Park Commission.

Even before becoming a park, West Rock was a de facto public resource. Local residents gathered timber, berries, nuts, and herbs and hunted for game in the forested area.

In 1826, Elijah Thompson donated the first 50 acres of this privately-owned land to the city. By 1891, the Park Commission had acquired a total of 165 acres of land at West Rock and began construction on a footpath to Judges Cave.<sup>16</sup> This monument honored Edward Whalley and William Goffe, two of the three New Haven “regicides judges” who sentenced King Charles I to death and under the rule of Charles II had to flee England hide in West Rock.

Development and donation to the park continued into the 20th century, when in the 20s and 30s when progress accelerated after Governor Simeon Baldwin donated over \$100,000 to acquire a large portion of the ridge and construct Baldwin Drive.<sup>17</sup>

With its scenic drive and breathtaking views, West Rock seemed poised to be another picturesque city park, but it also had a different relationship to the city than East Rock. The West Rock region was significantly less urbanized adjacent to the Village of Westville, which was not yet incorporated into New Haven. Both factors led to West Rock being a less manicured and designed park experience. Instead, it was characterized by its wildness, and in 1975, the state of Connecticut created West Rock Ridge State Park as part of a larger open spaces preservation objective. The State has continued to add land to this conservation area and the park now contains over 1700 acres spanning New Haven, Hamden, Bethany, and Woodbridge.<sup>18</sup>



# WEST ROCK RIDGE STATE PARK

It provides important habitat for many native New England species, with unique ecosystems on the summit and slopes. It hosts an abundant 230 species of bird, with the second-highest concentration of rare species of any Connecticut state park.<sup>19</sup>



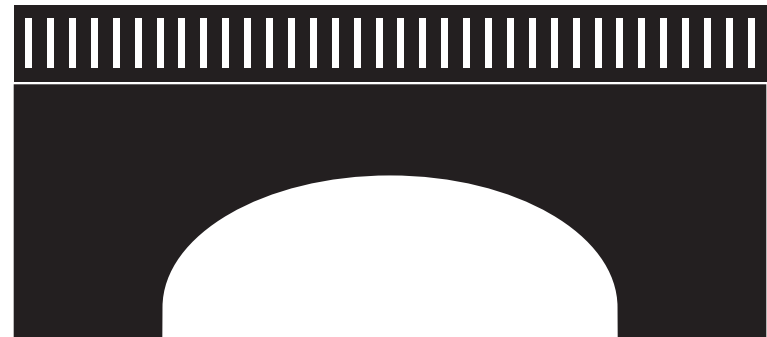
# EDGEWOOD PARK

Like the other parks, Edgewood Park was influenced by the parks movement, but it was also part of a larger vision for the city: the City Beautiful Movement. For the majority of the 19th century, the Edgewood area was sparsely populated and home to the Old Alms House Farm complex, a workhouse and shelter for the poor. However as the city developed, there was increasing pressure for housing and in 1889 the almshouse relocated to West Rock, opening up the area to become what the Parks Commission would later call “one of the showpieces of New Haven,” an exemplary piece of modern urban planning.<sup>20, 21</sup>

The neighborhood was designed based on principles of the City Beautiful Movement, a movement in urban planning that reached its peak between 1890 and 1920. Proponents of the movement thought that design could make cities more livable and orderly, and in turn bolster civic pride. It looked towards Europe for design inspiration and was especially influenced by Beaux-Arts aesthetics. The design for Edgewood park and the adjoining Edgewood Mall aimed to create harmony between the natural and built environment, drawing on the grand boulevards and linear gardens of Haussman’s Paris.<sup>22</sup> For the design of the Park, the city hired Fredrick Law Olmsted, Jr., the son Fredrick Law Olmsted, the famous architect of New York’s Central Park, who designed a picturesque park to support the new community in Edgewood. Olmsted saw the public outdoor recreation space as a right and an essential component of just and democratic urban planning.<sup>23</sup> But in reality, was this park was not developed for everyone. Restrictive covenants were put in place such that each house built in the Edgewood subdivision was required to cost at least \$3,000 dollars to construct and contain no more than two families, excluding many the city’s poor.<sup>24</sup>



Over the years, Edgewood has changed a lot as a neighborhood and as a park. The park now includes a playground and a skate park in addition to Olmsted’s quaint design. The skate park was established in 2000 on the site of an abandoned ice rink and is now a destination of skaters from far and wide.<sup>25</sup> The additions of different types of recreation may actually allow it to better meet Olmsted’s vision of being a democratic outdoors space accessible to a greater number of people, even though a skate park likely was not part of Olmsted’s design vision. At Edgewood it is interesting to see how 19<sup>th</sup> century picturesque landscape design meets modern skate culture, with echoes of Olmsted’s stone bridges in the curves of the ramps and the continuity of graffiti between the skate park and the bridge underpasses.



The story of the Long Wharf Nature Preserve lies at the intersection of urbanization, mid-century urban politics, ecological succession processes, environmental advocacy and management, and nature-based community building.

This land was once underwater in the Long Island Sound. In 1949 the US Army Corps of Engineers dredged the New Haven harbor and dumped the dredged material on the shore to create new land. In 1950, the city built the Connecticut Turnpike (I-95) on the land.<sup>26</sup> I-95 was part of a burgeoning urban renewal movement in New Haven that would peak under the next mayor, Richard C. Lee. This movement sought to make New Haven into a “Model City” by revitalizing the downtown and channeling in suburban commuters and shoppers with added automobile infrastructure, including I-95. It was not catered to the needs of New Haven’s working-class residents, many of whom were displaced when their neighborhoods were deemed

“blighted” by the Redevelopment Agency.<sup>27</sup> And it was certainly not interested in providing the city’s residents with access to New Haven’s shoreline. The highway was placed right along the shoreline completely blocking the Hill neighborhood and New Haven overall from any potential connections to the water and coastal ecologies.

However, in the decades to come a coastal ecosystem began to gain footing on this new land. In 1950, the artificial fill was a highly disturbed site, but in just 50 years, it became a critical habitat. By 1991, it was an important resting and feeding area for migratory birds.<sup>28</sup>



# LONG WHARF NATURE PRESERVE

By 1994 enough ecological succession had undergone that the New Haven Land Trust (now Gather New Haven) and the Garden Club of New Haven created the Long Wharf Nature Preserve on land donated by the City of New Haven. With careful stewardship and guided ecological succession, several different coastal habitats have established, including mud flats, dunes, salt marshes, and upland habitat.<sup>29</sup> It now hosts a rich assortment of species including threatened species such as the Atlantic horseshoe crab and the yellow-crowned night-heron.<sup>30</sup> In partnership with Audubon Connecticut, the Urban Resources Initiative, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Coastal Program, the New Haven Land Trust continues to monitor and remove invasive species.<sup>31</sup>

The ecology in turn supports human uses, allowing for environmental education, public programming including bird walks and stargazing, and an educational summer camp called the Schooner Camp.<sup>32</sup> Restoring the land that was created by a disregard for the coastal ecosystem has allowed the city to regain the recreational and educational benefits of having an active and living shoreline while continuing to work towards a healthier ecosystem. Parks are often used to preserve or enhance existing natural features. In a world where we’ve paved over or altered many of these natural habitats, does the future of parks lie in the creation of new natures? If this land that did not even exist 60 years ago is now a vibrant park, just imagine how many more unexpected possibilities there are for future parks!



# THE PARKS OF THE FUTURE

This tour has not covered all of New Haven's parks, by a long shot.

There are big parks and small parks, city parks and community gardens, vacant lots with public uses, plazas and graveyards and other park-like areas.

But none of these spaces are static. As we have seen, just as new parks can spring up from previously worthless land, parks can also change as the peoples' needs change.

What do you need from your parks? What do you hope to see in the future of this city and its parks? Let's make it happen.

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