

INTERIM HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

SECTION I. NAME

Historic: Gordon Park Bathhouse

Common Name: Gordon Park Bathhouse

SECTION II. LOCATION

1321 E. Locust Street

6th Aldermanic District
Alderwoman Marlene E. Johnson-Odom

Legal description: Tax Key No.: 315-0501-000

GORDON PLACE OF LOTS 26 27 & 28 IN NE 1/4 SEC 16-7-22
BLOCK 1 TO 6 GORDON PLACE & TRI PART LOT 27 W OF
CMSTP&P RR ROW & (GOV'T LOT 24 EXC S 18' of N 27.09' FOR
UNPAVED E CENTER ST & GOV'T 25) E OF CMSTP&P RR ROW

SECTION III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

SECTION IV. OWNER

Milwaukee County
County Park Department
9480 Watertown Plank Road
Wauwatosa, WI 53226

SECTION V. YEAR BUILT: 1940

ARCHITECT: George F. Spinti Jr.

SECTION VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Gordon Park Bathhouse is located in Milwaukee's Riverwest neighborhood approximately 2.25 miles from the heart of the Central Business District. Gordon Park is situated on high ground at the southeast corner of Humboldt Boulevard and East Locust Street and contains over 13 acres. The park extends down the bluffs to the Milwaukee River and borders the west bank of the Milwaukee River south to North Avenue. Structures at Gordon Park included a bathhouse at the river's edge (razed), a swimming pool (razed in early September, 1998), a restroom facility and the current bathhouse.

The bathhouse is located at the east end of the grounds near the edge of the bluff and its main elevation faces east/southeast and is approached by a broad walkway and overlook that are flanked by low limestone walls. The building consists of a one story hip roofed limestone clad structure built in 1940 in the Colonial Revival style and designed by Milwaukee architect George F. Spinti Jr. The present standing seam metal roof features dormers on its north, south and west slopes and a cupola at its apex. Limestone wings extend from both sides of the main block of the building and house the dressing/changing/shower rooms for men and women. Beyond the limestone walls are enclosures of metal that extend to the rear or pool side portion of the structure. Small hip roofs are located over a portion of each of these wings. Another rectangular wing extends from the rear or west portion of the building and features a broad windowed bay. Beyond this rear wing extends a low, wide terrace which, at its lower level, provides direct access to the swimming pool. A smaller stone clad wing and tall stone clad chimney are situated at the north end of the building. The pool was oriented east/west with the deeper diving end located at the west end. This pool has just recently been razed.

The extensive use of rock-faced limestone, from the county's Currie Park quarry, and the Colonial Revival details give this building significant character. The main facade of the bathhouse is symmetrically designed with a center portico flanked by two tall windows. Entry doors are located on the north and south elevations. Doors are also located in the side wings near the main block of the building and there are also turnstile entrances as well. Colonial Revival details are characteristic of the late 1930's-early 1940's and are more inventive and less archaeological in spirit than in earlier decades. These include a copper-roofed, louvered cupola at the apex of the roof; a 5-sided portico supported by four free-standing and two engaged thin, attenuated columns; a windowed concession area framed with an entablature which is surmounted by a broken pediment; windows, where not boarded up, are 8-over-8 sash..

Alterations to the building are not documented in the building permit files but the one historic photo found to date indicates that the metal panels of the side wings either replaced or are covering walls that were originally stone or stuccoed. The roof itself appears to be of fairly recent vintage. Repointing is needed on the building and the stone walls of the walkway in front of the building.

SECTION VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Gordon Park Bathhouse is significant as one of six major pool and bathhouse projects constructed in the County parks with Works Projects Administrative money in the period 1935 to 1941. These included Gordon Park, Hoyt Park, Jackson Park, Kosciuszko Park, Lapham Park, and Sheridan Park. Of these, only four are located in the City of Milwaukee and of these only two survive today, the Gordon Park Bathhouse and the Carver/Lapham Park Bathhouse. WPA-sponsored projects from art to buildings have long been recognized as a significant body of work, produced at a unique period in American history where the efforts of large numbers of unemployed workers were channeled into grand public works projects made possible by new Federally funded programs. The projects in Milwaukee constitute a high point in park development and structures like the Gordon Park Bathhouse were built with high quality, long lasting materials and designed in a number of attractive styles. The Gordon Park Bathhouse is an important reminder of a by-gone era when large scale public sector projects were still an important component of civic government.

SECTION VIII. HISTORY

Gordon Park was once the property of the Gordon family who occupied an octagon house on the premises. On February 2, 1902, the property was subdivided as Gordon Place, a proposed development of six blocks separated by winding roadways named Oakwood Drive, Linden Place, Bluff Way, Ravine Court and The Incline. The Milwaukee Park Commission, then a part of city, not county government, acquired the land in 1907. Park reports indicate that a number of residences were sold off and removed from the grounds but that the Gordon's octagon house was retained and later converted into a children's restroom in 1911. A large bathhouse was first built at the foot of the bluff along the Milwaukee River in 1913 at a cost of just over \$14,000. With the decline of water quality in the Milwaukee River due to industrial and sewage pollution, the City Health Department ordered the riverfront beach closed. A new bathhouse and pool were then planned for the upper portion of the park.

Permits for the new structure, designed by George F. Spinti Jr., were taken out January 31, 1940. The new bathhouse was located just slightly south of the old octagon structure which was razed for the construction of the new facility. The new pool was built behind the bathhouse, oriented east-west, with diving located at the far west end. The pool held approximately 3/4 million gallons of water and was about 3/4 the size of pools previously constructed at McGovern and Hoyt Parks. Opening ceremonies were held on June 20, 1941 and speakers included County Board Chairman Lawrence Timmerman, members of the Common Council and members of the Park Commission Board. The old bathhouse at the river was remodeled for use by ice skaters, boaters and for general recreation purposes. It was later razed. The new pool averaged over 100,000 patrons each year during its heyday. Costs amounted to approximately \$51,966 for the pool and bathhouse.

The construction of pools and bathhouses at the various parks was very much a product of the Great Depression and resulting WPA funding. Park usage reached an all time high during the early 1930's as thousands of jobless individuals headed for the parks to occupy their time. The need to provide relief to bolster the morale of the unemployed was acutely felt by 1931 and the first major parks projects were sponsored by Milwaukee County. Relief work funding was channeled primarily to the parks due to the fact that their planning department had development projects ready to implement as part of their long range planning process. This preparedness was also a benefit when Federal funding became available.

More work was done on the park system between 1931 and 1941 that at any comparable time in park history, due to the availability of relief labor and public funding. On April 14, 1931 the first \$100,000 was authorized by the County Board of Supervisors to employ those on relief. This was followed by an additional \$100,000 in June of 1931 and \$102,000 in 1932. Federal relief programs started soon after and included: Civil Works Administration (November, 1933); Federal Emergency Relief Administration (1934); Works Progress Administration (1935-1942); National Youth Administration (in Milwaukee County June, 1935 to December, 1937).

During the eleven year period (1931-1942) some \$22,000,000 was spent in the County park system of which the County's share was approximately \$3,000,000. Early monies (1931-1933) were channeled into labor costs rather than materials and work included such activities as grading picnic, athletic areas and golf courses; constructing trails, walks and roads; preparing planting beds; developing lagoons.

Funding for materials as well as labor was made available when the first Federal program, the Civil Works Administration, went into effect on November 20, 1933. The Park Commission was able to mobilize 4,000 men in the various parks within a brief 48 hour notice. Work undertaken included the installation of sprinkler systems, electrical distribution systems, and sewers. The County-owned Currie Park supplied stone for buildings and bridges and the funding allowed the employment of stone cutters, artists, and sculptors who produced ornamental work and statues for the various parks. This funding was also used to relocate the flood-prone Milwaukee River at Lincoln Park and to build swimming pools at Greenfield and McGovern parks.

Numerous accomplishments mark the era of Works Progress Administration (WPA), in effect from 1935 to 1942, and virtually every park in the system benefitted from the WPA funding. Six swimming pools and bathhouses, including the one at Gordon Park, were built as well as pavilions in Brown Deer and Red Arrow Parks, an administration building and golf club house at Whitnall Park, service buildings at Jackson, Jacobus and Whitnall Parks, a curling rink at Riverside Park, a bathhouse at Doctor's Park and a new elephant house at the Washington Park zoo. Existing buildings were

rehabilitated and preventative work was done to avoid future major repairs. Heating systems were also overhauled, roads were constructed, Lincoln Memorial Drive was repaved. Numerous other projects were undertaken as well. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) from 1933-1938 and the National Youth Administration (NYA) from 1935-1937 likewise employed young men and boys in horticultural work and development of the various parkways throughout the county.

Interestingly, the Gordon Park Bathhouse was one of the later WPA projects, funding being spent on parks within the Milwaukee city limits only at the end of the program. This was the result of there having been two parallel park commissions, the first, established by the City of Milwaukee in 1889, and the second established by the County in 1907 when the need to acquire reasonably priced, desirable park and parkway property outside the city limits became important to the expanding metropolitan area. Along with efforts to merge city and county governments (which did not happen), there were also efforts to merge the two park systems. City parks such as Gordon, Kosciuszko, Washington and Lake had received only minimal maintenance during the Depression although the bridges, buildings and other structures were significantly older than in the County parks with rehabilitation more urgent. The merger of the two systems was authorized by public referendum in 1936 with Milwaukee County taking over the operations of the former city parks in 1937. Work began soon after for a pool at Lapham (now Carver) Park (opened in 1940), Kosciuszko Park and Gordon Park. In 1940, the year that the Gordon Park Bathhouse was constructed, some 3,000 WPA workers were employed and efforts were concentrated on bringing up standards and rehabilitating buildings in parks within the city limits.

The park buildings constructed during the Great Depression show an evolution in style from the earlier structures. Early Classicists like Alfred C. Clas created colonnaded pavilions at Lake and Mitchell Parks. Later buildings displayed Mediterranean features as at South Shore Park or Tudor styling as in Brown Deer Park. With the availability of stone from the County-owned quarry, the buildings of the 1930's like the Gordon Park and Carver/Lapham Park Bathhouses, the service building at Humboldt Park, and the Clubhouse at Whitnall Park took on Colonial Revival characteristics and were more residential in scale. This preference for colonial design reflected interest in the style in private sector housing and perhaps was a nod in recognition of the Federal funding and associations with the country's colonial past. The new pools and bathhouses likewise reflected a trend toward more active recreational facilities in the parks and proved the second most popular park feature after the zoo. All the latest technology of the time went into the construction of these pools and bathhouses and they met stringent State Board of Health requirements and even had their own filtration plants. Over a million persons made use of the pools in the park system during each of 1941 and 1942 alone. Of the Milwaukee parks with bathhouses, only Gordon Park and Carver/Lapham Parks retain their WPA buildings. The \$110,000 Carver/Lapham Park Bathhouse, also designed by George F. Spinti Jr., still stands but has had its wings removed since the original swimming pool was replaced with a water splash area in the last couple of years. The Moderne style bathhouse at Kosciuszko Park, which originally cost \$193,000 in 1941, was razed a few years ago when the pool was removed. The Jackson Park Bathhouse, remodeled in 1940, was replaced by a new facility in 1961.

The Architect

Milwaukee architect George F. Spinti Jr. was the son of Agnes and George Spinti, a cloth cutter for the Adler clothing company. The family lived for decades in the Brewers Hill neighborhood at 2119 N. 2nd Street and included Alfred C., Elsie and Lillian in addition to George and his parents. George Jr. first appeared in the 1909 city directory as a student. He began his architectural career in 1912 as a draftsman for the prestigious firm of Alexander C. Eschweiler. George also dabbled from time to time as a florist in his brother's floral shop. He also pursued his work as an artist. An undated article about Spinti indicates that his desire to become an artist was formed while he was just a young boy. In high school he designed covers for the high school monthly as well as posters and won a competitive contest. Spinti went on to spend several years at the Wisconsin School of Art under Alexander Mueller. He later took classes at the normal school (now UW-Milwaukee) and at the Chicago Art Institute under Frederic Fursman. Spinti's interests took him to architecture where he felt he could combine both art and science into one profession. Spinti made at least one trip to Europe as part of a group of 18 artists who went abroad to sketch and paint. Spinti later had some of his work exhibited in the Journal Gallery of Wisconsin Art.

Spinti was apparently married briefly in 1921 but returned, single again, to live at his parents house on Second St. until the late 1930's. In 1922 Spinti began work as a draftsman for local architect T. S. Van Alyea who had offices on Jefferson St. downtown and in 1928 he was officially registered with the state as an architect. Spinti later became the firm's third associate architect. From about 1936 through 1941 Spinti had his own offices on the fifth floor of the Patton Building at the northeast corner of 5th and W. Wisconsin Ave. and shared office space with architect Walter Veenandaal. During World War II Spinti went to work at the Froemming shipyard. Spinti later practiced out of his own home at 6068 N. Bay Ridge in Whitefish Bay, to which he moved in 1938 about the same time he remarried. His son Robert joined him in his practice under the name Spinti & Spinti from 1948 through 1966 when George Spinti retired. Robert Spinti became the vice-president and then president of Eschweiler, Schneider & Associates, a successor to A. C. Eschweiler, and had offices at 720 E. Mason St. until 1975 when the firm dissolved. George Spinti was a member of the American Institute of Architects, the North Shore Congregational Church, the Sketch Club, the Henry L. Palmer Masonic Lodge, the Walrus Club, and the Whitefish Bay Men's Retirement Club. He also served on the Milwaukee City Plan Commission and the Whitefish Bay Board of Appeals and taught architectural design at UW-Milwaukee at night school for 17 years.

George F. Spinti Jr. died in February 1968 at the age of 77. The majority of his work seems to have been residential and most of his projects were in the north shore suburbs, especially Whitefish Bay. He designed the Whitefish Bay library and fire department station and the River Hills service building. In addition to his work on the Carver/Lapham Park and Gordon Park bathhouses, Spinti is known to have worked on the Marguerite Brodesser Forster House at 2912 E. Belleview Pl. (1923), the Robert E. Locher House at 2547 N. Summit Ave. (1925), and the Eugene August Lindemann Double House at 2579-2581 N. Wahl Ave. (1952). He also worked on the Marjorie Montgomery Ward Baker House, Knollward (1928), in Oconomowoc, the 1998 Symphony Showhouse, probably one of his most important commissions when he was an associate of Thomas Stevens Van Alyea. While Spinti did not work on large and prominent commissions he is characteristic of the many firms which handled residential and church design and served on public commissions and helped to define the appearance of many of our 20th century neighborhoods.