

Chicago's Park & Boulevard Systems

Observers of cities in the 19th century were concerned with the amount of open space available to the residents. The cities' buildings, streets, sidewalks, pavements, tracks, and utility lines transformed the former areas of North American indigenous settlement into more highly designed, European-style environments. Although these changes were emblematic of "civilization," they also distanced city dwellers from the proximity to "nature" deemed essential to physical and moral health. Within the Near West Side, two small, elegant parks -- Jefferson Park (5-1/2 acres) and the larger Union Park (11+ acres) -- had been established in the "elite" section close to Ashland Avenue in the 1840s and 1850s. Created by the city on land provided by private donors and the Canal Commission, they were improved in part with funds from wealthy residents whose property values stood to rise as a result of the desirable green spaces adjacent to their homes.

The following maps of Chicago display the city's new park and boulevard system, which greatly expanded the amount of cultivated open space in the city. The system evolved after the Illinois state legislature passed a number of bills in 1869 authorizing the creation of park commissions for the West Side, South Side, and Lincoln Park.

U.S. Census Office
Report on The Social Statistics of the Cities:
Southern and Western Cities, 1880
(Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886)

[Click to View Map](#)

By 1880, the public parks of Chicago contained "nearly 2,000 acres, of which 1,870 acres were in 6 large parks, and, the remainder in 12 public squares and similar places."¹ The three

large parks on the West Side – comprising well over 565 acres -- were Humboldt Park, Central (later, Garfield) Park, and Douglas Park. These parks were all outside of the boundaries of the Near West Side. They thus served as magnets to some of the more affluent residents for occasional Sunday visits via the streetcar or as incentives to follow the westward movement of the population to newer apartment houses and homes.

Alfred T. Andreas
History of Chicago, Vol. III
(Chicago: A. T. Andreas Publishing, 1886)
“Map of Chicago Showing the Boulevard System”

[Click to View Map](#)

The parks, one and a half miles apart from each other, were connected by Chicago’s boulevard system. Although conceived in the late 1840s, boulevards were formally authorized by the Illinois legislature in 1869 in the same bills that established its major parks. These pastoral corridors – described by the *Chicago Tribune* as “parks ‘spun out’ -- allowed the visitor to travel along broad tree-lined boulevards, at least 200 feet wide, and at some points as many as 400 feet wide.² On the Near West Side, Washington, Warren, Western, and Jackson Boulevards eventually carried the traveler to the West Side parks and to Union Park.

¹ U.S. Census Office, Report on The Social Statistics of the Cities: Southern and Western Cities, 1880 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), 496.

² *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 1872, cited in Daniel Bluestone, *Constructing Chicago* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 52.