

Eagle Creek Park History

Introduction

Before Eagle Creek Park and Reservoir were built, the area they cover was home to many people. This booklet gives a brief history of the land and the people that occupied it. Information about park buildings and sites along the trails is also included.

Native Americans

Although there were no permanent villages in the area, Miami and Lenape (Delaware) people hunted and fished along the creek prior to and after European settlement.

At the time of Indiana's statehood in 1816, the population of European settlers was concentrated in Southern Indiana. As the population grew, Native Americans were forced to move north and west.

The Treaty of St. Mary's, which is also known as "The New Purchase," caused the Miami and Lenape nations to give up rights to all land in the central part of the state in 1818. Stories passed down from early settlers indicate that there were a few Native Americans living near Eagle Creek in the 1820s.

Early Settlers

After The New Purchase, the area was surveyed and divided into counties, townships, and sections. Pike Township, Marion County, Indiana was platted in 1822. From 1822 to 1837, land patents were sold by the federal government. Most were bought by people moving to the area from neighboring states.

David Wilson and James Delong were among the first settlers to buy land in what is now Eagle Creek Park. Their families farmed on or near their original land from the 1820s through the 1930s. Roads that bear their names can be found on park property, passing through land that once belonged to them.

David Wilson's wife Anna shared her family's story with a newspaper reporter in the 1880s. She spoke of traveling with her sister's family from Preble County, Ohio to Pike Township, Marion County, Indiana by covered wagon in 1825. They brought all of their belongings and livestock with them and the trip took eight days. They built a cabin from Buckeye logs and had a brush pile for a fence. A split rail fence soon replaced it, because the brush was a haven for snakes. The flock of sheep was sold due to many being lost to wolves.

Reed Road and Reed's Place picnic area were named for a family that bought land in the area in the 1870s. A descendant, Orsa Reed, and his grandfather, Stephen Boughton, helped with the construction of J.K. Lilly's library (now the Ornithology Center) in the 1930s. They dug the basement using a slip scoop pulled by a team of horses. This was slow work that took about six weeks according to Orsa, who at age 12 led the team while his grandfather controlled the scoop.

Country Estates

In the 1920s and 1930s wealthy residents from Indianapolis began to buy old farm land and build country estates along the beautiful creek. Josiah K. Lilly, Jr., pharmaceutical company executive; Wallace O. Lee and Norman Perry, power company executives; William Hogan, moving company owner; E.H. Block, department store executive; William Griffith, owner of Dennison Parking; and Charles Latham, builder; all had country homes in what is now the park.

J.K. Lilly's library is now used as the park Ornithology Center. William Hogan's home is the park office. E.H. Block's house is now Eagle's Crest. William and Ruth Perry Griffith's house is The Peace Learning Center. Charles Latham's home is The Hideaway.

Visitors to the Earth Discovery Center shelter are on the site of Wallace O. Lee's home. The stone bridges in the valley below were once part of the Lee's picnic area. The start of GO APE is where the stable once stood. A root cellar that Mr. Lee used to store vegetables from his garden can still be seen in the side of the hill.

Remnants of Norman Perry's estate can be seen along the Edesses Trail, southwest of the Ornithology Center. A concrete wall with a vent in the earthen roof may have been a storm shelter. Stonework along the edges of an old road that once led to farm land can be seen leading down toward the water. The foundation of the house is at the top of the hill and can best be located in the spring when daffodils (which are not native wildflowers) are in bloom. The entrance to the Perry property off of Eagle Creek Parkway is framed by a crumbling concrete gateway on the gravel road next to the Ornithology Center exit.

Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church

Lit and Mary Wilson settled near Guion Road after traveling from Kentucky with other family members around 1890. In 1893 they founded Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church. In 1930, when the congregation needed a new church building, money was raised to buy land on Reed Road, in present day Eagle Creek Park.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilson's children owned homes and had small farms near the new church site. Other church families also moved to the area. After the church was completed in 1933, it was the center of a small African American community between Reed Road and Delong Road.

Like the Lees, Perrys, and other residents of the area, the Mt. Pleasant families and their church had to move to make way for the park and reservoir around 1970. Today's Mt. Pleasant Picnic Area is at the site of the church and some of the homes. A plaque on a stone at the site includes a picture and briefly tells its history.

On old Delong Road, northeast of the Peace Learning Center, there is a house where Lit Wilson's granddaughter, Evelyn Wilson Potter lived with her husband and son from the 1950s to about 1970. It has been used in the past as a Sheriff station and the Environmental Education Outreach headquarters.

Mrs. Potter grew up on a small farm on the wooded property behind the house. The trail that runs east off of Delong Road is really an old farm road. Antique fences, gates, a wagon wheel, and spring daffodils can sometimes be seen beside the trail on property that belonged to Mrs. Potter's parents, Ulysses and Vivian Wilson.

Eagle Crest Estate

J.K. Lilly, Jr. first purchased twelve acres of land around the current Ornithology Center in the 1930s and called it Eagle Crest Estate. A lodge, library, watchman's cabin and swimming pool were located on the estate.

Special attention was given to detail in the construction of the library, which was built by Charles Latham. Visitors to the Ornithology Center can still see the metal shutters on the windows, and the room- sized vault that protected Mr. Lilly's priceless collections.

Land on the west side of the creek was purchased from the Glidewell, Jennings, and Maines families for Eagle Valley Farms. With more land purchased over the next twenty years, the acreage totaled nearly 3000 acres by the 1950s.

On the east side of Eagle Creek, the Engledow Company was hired for landscaping, construction of a small lake (Lilly Lake), and to reforest former farm land. Called Eagle Crest Forest Reserve, the area was protected by a fire tower (located northeast of today's Ornithology Center) and service roads.

In 1958, due to declining health, Mr. Lilly donated all of the land and buildings of Eagle Crest Estate to Purdue University. Although the university began management of the property immediately, the transfer of ownership was done over a period of five years.

In the early 1960s, the city of Indianapolis began negotiating with Purdue to purchase land for the construction of a dam and reservoir to prevent flooding along Eagle Creek.

Reservoir and Park Construction

In 1966 Indianapolis purchased 2,286 acres from Purdue for \$3.2 million. Later that year construction began on a dam across Eagle Creek just north of Interstate 74. By 1969 the dam and reservoir construction was complete and the valley began to fill with water.

In 1970 the reservoir was completely full and open for limited use. The Museum of Indian Heritage in the former Griffith residence was also open to visitors. Construction on other park facilities continued.

Mayor Richard Lugar officially opened Eagle Creek Park in 1972 as the fourth largest municipal park in the nation.

The Eagle Creek Park Nature Center opened in 1973 in J.K. Lilly's library building after renovation by director, Harry Feldman, and his team of volunteers.

Additions after the Park Opened

1974 A Craft Center for local artists opened in Wallace O. Lee's old stable, but was in operation for only a short time.

1979 The Eagle Creek Park Foundation was created to raise funds for the park.

1984 Eagle's Crest Nature Preserve on the west side of the reservoir was dedicated.

1986 A world class rowing course was constructed in preparation for the 1987 Pan Am Games.

1987 Lilly Lodge was remodeled and opened for meetings and park programs.

The water level of the reservoir was first lowered in summer to provide habitat for shore birds

1991 Scott Starling Sanctuary was dedicated.

1997 The Peace Learning Center opened at the former Indian Museum site after the collection was moved to the Eiteljorg Museum in 1989.

2007 The New Earth Discovery Center building opened near the site of the old Ranger Station.

2009 The Ornithology Center opened at the former nature center after renovation by park naturalist Kevin Carlsen and his team of volunteers.

