

Bath's Waterfront Park

Remarkable Transformation of a Semi-Derelict Downtown Site

by Randall Arendt

Location: Commercial Street, Bath, Maine

Developer: City of Bath

Site Designer: Bath Waterfront Park Committee

Development Period: 1974-76

The remarkable waterfront park along the Kennebec River in Bath, Maine (population 8,300) almost never came to be. Municipal officials, who had purchased two waterfront parcels during the late 1960s and had cleared them (one for parking, the other for outdoor storage of construction materials), had considered selling them to generate new tax revenue. Community residents, informally led by Linwood Temple (1918-2005), began to voice support for the idea of expanding municipal ownership and creating a small public park in this area, just one block from the city's primary downtown shopping district, along historic Front Street. Temple has spent many childhood hours along the river, where his father and uncle sold firewood to ships from the old ferry slip not far from the future park. A Bath native, and chief chemist at the Bath Iron Works, Temple was a leading citizen, serving three terms as chair of the school board during the 1960s. Although the park is much smaller than the extensive public waterfront recreational facility proposed in the 1959 Comprehensive Plan, it was also much more feasible. (That large complex was eventually built on a spacious greenfield site away from downtown.)

After residents approached the Planning Board, which was receptive, the Board recommended that the City acquire a parcel between the two properties, to consolidate them. It was further recommended that the City Council officially designate the three parcels as parkland. However, after purchasing the middle parcel, the chronically cash-strapped City sold it to a local developer who constructed a group of contemporary buildings that reduced Bath's public waterfront ownership to just 60 feet. This was a very difficult economic period for the city, which was struggling to finance a costly new sewage treatment plant at roughly the same time that its principal employer – a nationally renowned shipyard – was experiencing substantial cutbacks in construction orders.

When the Council, worried about finances, suggested that this last parcel also be sold for development, citizens asked that a public referendum be held to determine popular sentiment on the issue. In June 1972, shortly after three-quarters of voters approved the proposal to create a waterfront park, the Council enacted an ordinance establishing the park, and appointed a Waterfront Park Committee to



Figure 1: This aerial view shows the five earthen mounds linked by curving walkways. At the bottom left are the restrooms. In the top center is the pier/overlook, and to the right is the picnic pavilion. The Farmer's Market, not pictured here, is located on the brick sidewalk and adjacent parking spaces.

design it. The decisiveness of the referendum vote was essential to the park's creation during those relatively weak economic times, at both the local and national levels.

However, after two years, when no further action had been taken by the City to follow through, Temple marshalled support from the local Garden and Rotary clubs to enlist volunteers in the fall of 1974 to spread topsoil and plant grass seed on the land. Those pro-active and highly visible volunteer efforts re-energized the project and spurred critical momentum. With state and municipal funding, improvements were completed by the fall of 1976. A decade later the park was named in honor of Linwood Temple, who had done so much to promote its creation. From its inception to its early implementation, this attractive oasis between the river and the City's commercial core could justly be considered to be a "people's park", as noted by Kenneth Martin and Ralph Linwood Snow, authors of *Maine Odyssey* (1988). It attracts visitors continuously from late April until late October, and serves as a mutual magnet for the Farmers' Market held every Saturday morning during the summer and fall on the sidewalk running along its street frontage. A similar and mutually advantageous relationship exists between the park and the Front Street shopping district, with many park visitors becoming shop customers, and *vice versa*.

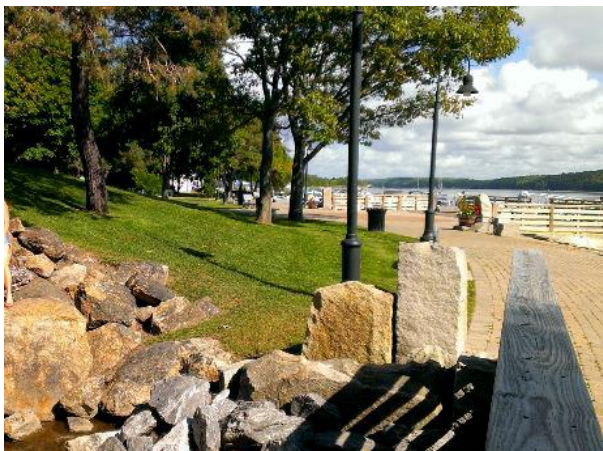


Figure 2: The undulating terrain of the park can be appreciated at left; the slightly elevated view from the top of one of the mounds, looking out to the river, can be seen at right.

In the mid-1990s, on the occasion of the city's 150th anniversary in 1997, the park, which had not been particularly well maintained, was fully restored, with a combination of municipal and private funding (the latter notably from three banks).

The park is a local gem, a masterpiece of site planning and design. About 430 feet long and ranging from 120 to 175 feet deep, its 1.6 acres are crossed by a network of cobble-paved pathways winding between five earthen mounds planted with grass and trees (37 deciduous and 14 coniferous). The landscaped mounds, offering elevated views of the river, rise from four to eight feet above street level. Along its western side, where it meets the brick sidewalk, a low masonry retaining wall provides informal seating.

Other features include large Adirondack-style chairs, granite benches, public restrooms, outdoor lighting, a 750 sq. ft. a picnic pavilion, and a waterfall and a bridge over the waterway flowing from it. (Water for the "stream" is pumped from the Kennebec, to which it returns after its short journey.) A small pier, 70 feet wide and extending 30 feet into the Kennebec, adjoins an area paved with a compass rose pattern, befitting this maritime location. (The pier is supported by old wooden pilings, reinforced with rip-rap made of granite left over from sewer line construction.) A number of mooring places are provided for recreational boaters and fishermen, extending the park's use to those arriving by water.



Figure 3: Large Adirondack-style chairs are located on the tops of the mounds, beneath the spreading branches of many shade trees, catching a breeze and providing excellent water views. The middle photo shows the bridge over the waterway flowing from the park's fountain, while the picnic pavilion is seen on the right, again with outstanding river views.



Figure 4: Vendors at the Saturday morning Farmers' Market locate their vehicles at the edge of the brick sidewalk running along the front of the park. The park and the market work symbiotically, each benefiting from the presence of the other.



Figure 5: View of the park from Commercial Street.

Current plans are to extend public access to both the north and south of the park, in a new Riverwalk footpath that is to extend about one-half mile. Its \$1.8 million cost will be paid for with bonds funded by tax increment financing.

The park's creation paralleled, but was not directly linked to, efforts to improve the appearance of historic Front Street, one block uphill to the west, with broad, brick-paved sidewalks, granite curbing, shade trees, benches, underground wiring, and period lighting. Those efforts gained momentum after advocates organized a bus tour for city officials, property owners, and merchants to visit Newburyport, Massachusetts, which had implemented those kinds of downtown improvements. Remarkably, just two days after the trip, the Council approved \$422,000 of recommended streetscape improvements, in July 1975 -- in the exact area that had, a decade before, been recommended for clearance and reconstruction with modern buildings by the Urban Renewal Authority. True to its era, the urban renewal proposals failed to recognize what are arguably two of Bath's greatest resources: the historic buildings along Front Street and the magnificent Kennebec River views. The City is exceedingly fortunate that those plans were never adopted and implemented.

