



National Recreation and Park Association

MARVIN GAYE PARK BACKGROUNDER

Marvin Gaye Park is a 1.6-mile-long area of Ward 7 in northeast Washington, DC. Formally called Watts Branch Park, the area was officially rededicated as Marvin Gaye Park on April 2, 2006, on what would have been the singer's 67th birthday.

Marvin Gaye Park is the longest municipal park in Washington, D.C. and is undergoing the largest community park revitalization in DC history, led by the NRPA, Washington Parks & People, the DC government and local residents.

The park includes the Watts Branch stream that flows from the Anacostia River into the park, as well as the broader community made up of distinct residential neighborhoods including Burrville, Lincoln Heights, Capitol Heights, Kenilworth and Deanwood.

History

In the 1870s, developers began subdividing the area, what was then farmland, into suburban homes. The park was not thoughtfully incorporated into the new settlement pattern, and many real estate maps of the area even failed to show the Watts Branch stream.

In 1938, officials began developing the park system as it is today, removing buildings and unsettling hundreds of residents. After the park landscape was complete, the 1950s and 1960s brought the development of large public housing estates, built in part to accommodate residents displaced by urban renewal and highway building in the center of Washington.

The extraordinary linear park has gone through cycles of neglect and rejuvenation. Some of the notable people who developed the area include engineer and civic activist Howard D. Woodson, for whom H.D. Woodson Senior High is named, and pioneer educator Nannie Helen Burroughs. Burroughs, a leader in the education of African American girls and women, founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in 1909 on Deane Avenue, which was renamed Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue in 1976.

On May 18th 1966, First Lady Lady Bird Johnson rededicated a newly refurbished eight acres of Watts Branch Park as part of her Capital Beautification Campaign. These eight acres are still a part of the current park located between Minnesota Avenue and 44th Street. Because of the First Lady's initiative, new flower beds were constructed and planted, large grassy areas were mowed and cleaned up, and the stream bed of the Watts Branch tributary was lined and walled with blue granite stone. The site was stunning, completely rejuvenated by funds donated by Laurance S. Rockefeller and community support. Lady Bird Johnson said in her speech the day of the park's rededication: "No one more than the residents of this area know what magic has been wrought here at Watts Branch."

After Lady Bird Johnson's beautification, Watts Branch Park was used regularly and loved deeply. However, in 1970 federal funding for park maintenance was discontinued, and care was turned over to the District government. Unfortunately, city funds for maintenance were limited and once again the park fell into disrepair.

The park became a hub of illegal dumping and crime activity for a generation. An open air heroin market developed and the park was dubbed "Needle Park" due to the rampant drug use within its borders.

Washington Parks & People

In 2001, Washington Parks & People, a non-profit network of community park partnerships, began a multi-million dollar revitalization of the park. Over a period of five years, 24,000 volunteers helped clean up the park. Volunteers removed more than 3.5 million pounds of trash, 9,000 hypodermic needles and 78 abandoned cars from the stream and its surrounding land. Over 1,000 native trees have been replanted, and in 2008 the city closed a nearby methadone clinic that drew hundreds of drug addicts to the area.

The National Recreation and Park Association

This year, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) launched a new revitalization program called "Parks Build Community." The program boasts a sustainable model for restoring blighted urban areas around the county—with its first project being Marvin Gaye Park.

NRPA's Parks Build Community program focuses on reviving inner-city communities through purposeful park restoration and sustainability, understanding that the health of a park is directly connected to the health and beauty of its surrounding neighborhoods.

The revitalized park will feature:

- New, state-of-the-art playground equipment
- A permanent mosaic honoring 200 community heroes
- Job training for hundreds of youth and ex-offenders
- A youth-run farmer's market
- A Marvin Gaye Amphitheater
- 1.6 miles of newly-rebuilt hiker/biker trails

The park will also provide a multi-generational gateway for broader community and family programs in crime reduction, community revitalization, housing, health, fitness, nutrition, music, culture, experiential learning, and job training and referral.

Generous contributors have donated over \$300,000 to make the NRPA Marvin Gaye Park project possible, including Playworld Systems, Playcore, Landscape Structures and Kompan.