

Smothers Park – Riverside Park

By Jerry Long
c.2025



HISTORY OWENSBORO PARKS AND RECREATION 1815-1990



WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY
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Page 4: Introduction

.... Daviess County and City of Owensboro history began long before the county was formed. People make history and people became interested in this area about 1780. Some hunting camps were set up, but no permanent settlements were established in what then was called Yellow Banks and later became Rossborough and then Owensboro.

By 1799, William Smeathers, his wife and his sister established the first permanent settlement. They built a log cabin on a ravine that ran into the Ohio River near the foot of the present Frederica Street and parallel to First Street northwestward.

Smeathers and three squatters cleared an acre or two of land along the ravine, probably to grow crops for food. Surrounding them were about 150,000 acres from which to glean a living.

Little did William Smeathers dream that this strip of land along the "yellow banks" of the river upon which shade trees grew would become building sites and in the future would bear his name as a city park. There is no doubt that the first city park in the developing Owensboro Parks and Recreation system was the Riverview Park or Smothers Park, as it was named in 1963.

The parklike land on the river front was 170 feet wide and 1,400 feet long, running from the east side of Lewis Street westward to the west side of Frederica Street to a plot of land 50 feet x 170 feet at the juncture of the ravine entering the Ohio River. A plat of Rossboro was laid out by May and Ross to establish the town. A text was filed with Daviess County Court for the December 1816 term and in Frankfort, January 7, 1817. There is no doubt that the first city park in the developing Owensboro Parks and Recreation Department system was the Riverside Park or Smothers Park.

Pages 54-59: Chapter 1 – SMOTHERS PARK

Smothers Park is a "highly specialized" community park overlooking the Ohio River north of the downtown section of the city. Existing facilities include: playground equipment, benches, picnic tables, gazebo, observation platform, boat dock area, fountain and flag display, (city sold the boat dock operations).

Due to its location, Smothers Park serves as the center of attention for many citywide special events, including Bar-B-Q Festival and Summer Festival activities. Open space, however, is extremely limited. Plans for the revitalization of the downtown area include expansion of this park, or "greenways" connected to it.

This land, located on the Ohio River between Frederica Street and Daviess Street in Owensboro, was probably set aside in 1816 as a place for the public to gather when John L. May and David Ross through their agent George Handley, first laid out a plan for a town on the Ohio River above the cabin site of the first resident, William Smothers.

Daviess County Court, in its December 1816 term, recorded on the 30th day of December the town plat called Rossboro. This area was known as Yellow Banks before 1816 because of the color of the soil in the river bank.

May and Ross had a land grant of many acres, and no doubt wishing to see the area grow, proposed and established a town to be called Rossboro. Following is the explanation of how the first town came into being. Note on the plat that along First Street from Frederica to Daviess Street contains an area on the Ohio River that has been parklike from the beginning.

The area of about 80 acres covered by the plat was within the 3,000-acre tract of land purchased by Robert Triplett, an early Owensboro land dealer. He paid Richard Mason of Virginia \$5,000 for the 3,000 acres. The Kentucky Court of Appeals ruled in October, 1821, that Richard Mason and not Ross and May owned the land, but Owensboro had been established and the plat plan was permitted to stand as the beginning of Owensboro. The following was filed with the Daviess County Court:

PLAT OF ROSSBORO 1816

At the request of Mr. George Handley agent in this business for May & Ross laid off the Town of Rossboro in Daviess County at the Yellow Banks on the Ohio River Beginning at a stake on the River Bank fronting Frederica Street on the lower side and running thence up the river bending thereon N 790 E 1400 feet crossing Frederica Street at 80 feet St. Ann Street at 410 feet Allen Street at 740 feet Daviess Street at 1070 (feet) and

Lewis Street at 1400 feet to a stake on the River. Thence leaving the River and running S 110 & 1308 feet crossing Water or front Street at 120 feet Second Street at 516 feet Third street at 912 feet and Fourth Street at 1308 feet to a Stake in a Small pond thence S 79 [feet] W 2720 feet crossing Lewis Street at 66 feet Daviess Street at 396 feet Allen Street at 726 feet St. Ann Street at 1056 (feet) Frederica Street at 1400 feet St. Elizabeth Street at 1730 feet Locust Street at 2060 feet. Mulberry Street at 2390 feet Walnut Street at 2720 feet to a stake thence N 110 W 765 feet crossing Fourth Street at 66 feet Third Street at 396 feet Course Continued 369 feet to a stake on the ravine thence down the ravine Binding thereon N 56 1/2 [feet] East 1260 feet to a stake on reserve land thence with reserved land N 79 [feet] & 176 feet to a stake front Frederica Street on the Lower side thence down said street N 110 W 50 feet to the Beginning as will more fully appear by reference to the within plan.

Jas. W. Johnson SDC
March 23rd 1816

Daviess County Courts December Term 1816

This plan of the Town proposed to be established at the Yellow Banks which was laid off by James. W. Johnston Surveyor at the Instance of the proprietors of the Land, was exhibited in court and approved of by the Whole Court and Ordered to be recorded, and William R. Griffith is appointed agent on behalf the County to Enter into a division of the Lots with the proprietors agreeably to their Contract with the Commissioners. IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF and that the Said plan is duly recorded in my office In conformity to the Order of said County I as Clerk of said County hereunto Set my hand this 30th day of December 1816 and 25th Year of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

William R. Griffith

Frankfort January 7th 1817—We the undersigned hereby approbate conform and Sanction the foregoing plan of the Town at the Yellow Banks as laid off by James W. Johnston Surveyor on the application of our Agent George Handley Witness our hands date above.

Test Wm. R. Griffith

David Ross by his agent Thomas Lewis

John L. May

Daniel and Polly Epes by J. L.

May his attorney in fact

John Wilder by J. L. May his attorney in fact

Riverfront, or Riverview Park, was renamed on August 2, 1963, "Bill Smothers Pioneer Park" in honor of the Bill Smeathers (Smothers) who built the first permanent home in the park area in or about 1797 or 1798. This name change was proposed by the Daviess County Historical Society and was in ordinance Number 15-64. Funds were also approved to purchase a historical marker which was erected in the park. Little did William "Bill" Smeathers think that when he built his cabin in 1798 or 1799 in what was to be Owensboro that there would be a park named after him 90 years later.

When the plat for Rossboro was presented to the Daviess County Court during the December term 1816, this small riverfront park was left as an overlook along the Ohio River and along Waterfront, or Water Street.

No deed or proclamation of any kind has been found to show City ownership of this area. This leaves us to assume that the 1817 act of the Kentucky General Assembly Chapter XCII, provided for use of public areas for park purposes. This act read:

An Act to establish and regulate the town of Rossboro, in Daviess County, and change the name thereof.

Approved February 3, 1817.

Whereas the commissioners appointed by an act of the Kentucky general assembly for the erection of a new county out of the county of Ohio, did in pursuance of the powers in them vested. . . fix on a place for the permanent seat of justice in the county of Daviess, the Yellow Banks, part of three thousand acres of land patented in the names of David Ross and John May; and whereas the proprietors of said tract of land have laid off a town containing about 80 acres of land at the said Yellow Banks, and called the same Rossborough [the plat spells it Rossboro]; and have made a donation of one-half of the said town lots to the county of Daviess, to aid in the erection of public buildings; and also given two acres of ground for a public square . . . it becomes necessary to provide by law for the complete establishment of good government of said town; therefore . . . the said town shall hereafter be called and known by the name of Owensborough, in memory of the late Col. Abraham Owen, who fell at Tippacanoë (sic); in which name it is hereby established, and not that of Rossborough.

Chapter XCII, 1817 Acts of the Kentucky General Assembly.

Smothers Park has been updated from time to time over the years; however, in early days little was done to update what was sometimes called Riverfront, or Riverview Park. In fact, the Ohio River with its curving course cut into the unprotected river bank below the park grounds. This erosion continued into the early twentieth century, when the river bank had to be repaired after all of First or Water Street had been claimed by the river (see accompanying picture which shows this street still intact).



View looking west, down river from east end of Smothers Park in early 1900 showing First Street. The Ohio River has now claimed this bank. Large tree is on edge of river bank now.

The river bank and part of the down-river park area had to be filled in to prevent further toll on the area. This was done about 1918 or 1919 according to the late Russell Shifley, who in 1986 related what he remembered to the author. He said:

I remember building [improving] Smothers Park that had been washed away. We built it about 1918 or 1919. We dumped cinders, rocks, concrete rubble on it, and we built up the bank where once the curb of old First Street [Front or Water Street] ran. We built it from Daviess and St. Ann Streets to Frederica Street.

The approach to the river from St. Ann Street to Frederica Street all the way down to low water's edge, where boats now are launched into the river, was paved with cobblestones laid by the old workhouse crews. This drive was built about 1920 and the cobblestones were paved over in late 1960 just before the first Regatta Boat Race was held."

In 1815, according to the original plot of Ross and May, the land where the park is now was 1400 feet long and 170 feet wide, including Front or Water Street (now First Street). In 1989, this area was one block shorter (from Lewis to Daviess) and thirty feet narrower. It is now 140 feet wide.

An ordinance in May 1918 designed to protect the river bank made it unlawful...

... to cut any tree or shrub undergrowth or remove any driftwood along the riverbank by the park. It is also unlawful to cut or dig a ditch or damage the bank in any way so as to cause the bank to erode, wash away or cave in. It is unlawful to throw, cast or empty any thing whatsoever into the river from the shore and from any vehicle, boat, barge or any other craft, any kind of refuse or debris from front of northern terminus of Frederica Street and St. Ann Street and any area between these two streets.



Gazebo in Smothers Park offers shelter, social benefits and a panoramic view of the Ohio River. It was dedicated on 5 May 1974.

A gazebo was built to accommodate those using the park. It has been used for sitting to look at the river and the U. S. 231 Highway bridge, for speech giving, for orchestra and band performances and for at least one wedding. It was built in 1975 at a cost of \$3,880.78, not counting labor. The decision to build a gazebo in the park came after several citizens contacted the Mayor to build a gazebo. National Park Magazine carried this article in 1975:

GAZEBOS: Popular again

By Cissy Gregson, Program Dir., Dept. of Parks & Rec., Owensboro, Kentucky

Several citizens mentioned to our Mayor C. Waitman Taylor, Jr., how nice it would be to have a gazebo at Smeathers Park. (This park is approximately two acres along the bank of the Ohio River in the downtown area.)

After considering the matter, Mayor Taylor contacted Mr. Carlos Jagoe owner of the Daviess County Planning Mill and Mr. Randall Martin a local builder, and asked (as a civic project) if they would design for Owensboro . . . at no Cost . . . a gazebo that would be attractive in Smeathers Park.

Mr. Jagoe and Mr. Martin, on their own time, looked at several gazebos in different cities and then decided on the design of the one that is now located in Smeathers Park. Our initial plan was to design a gazebo with round columns, etc.; however, Mr. Jagoe was of the opinion—and rightly so—that the gazebo should have more a New Orleans look (or a waterfront look); hence, the reason for the present wrought iron design. Furthermore, Mr. Jagoe was of the opinion that if we used as much iron as possible in the design and construction of the gazebo, then the gazebo would be less subject to deterioration and decay over the years.

The Gazebo was dedicated, with a concert by the Owensboro-Daviess County Band under the direction of Richard E. Skaggs. Keys to the city were presented at this dedication ceremony to Mr. Jagoe and Mr. Martin for all their time and labor. A plaque has now been installed on the Gazebo pointing out that was it designed by Carlos Jagoe and constructed by Randall Martin.

Since its completion this structure has been used for band concerts, picnics, public speakers, several weddings, and it was used during the Owensboro Hydroplane Regatta. The citizens of Owensboro are very proud of the Gazebo and feel it is most attractive and well designed.

Susan Walton Jeffries and Dr. William L. Tyler III were married June 5, 1981, in the gazebo with friends and family of both bride and groom standing outside the gazebo shelter in drizzling rain. Susan was Director of the Owensboro Parks and Recreation Department.

Boat Dock

In the 1960s and 1970s the Parks Department operated a boat dock adjacent to Smothers Park on the Ohio River, which served the public as a place to dock, to refuel and to launch their boats. It needed repairs frequently and during flooding would break loose, necessitating retrieving and anchoring. In 1974 the dock broke loose during a flood and came to rest on the ramp at the foot of Frederica Street. A news article in 1974 pointed out the need to correct the trouble:

City searching for old barge to use at dock

Owensboro's municipal boat dock is resting high and dry on the boat ramp at the foot of St. Ann Street while it awaits inspection and possible repairs.

Meanwhile, City Commissioner George Greer reports the city is searching for a military surplus barge which can be used as the base for a new refueling barge and office for the boat docks.

Greer said, however, "because our government always moves so slowly," the city now plans to try to repair the current refueling barge for use until the end of this season, and replace it with a rebuilt structure next spring. The present boat dock has had to be repaired at the beginning of each season for several years.

Last summer one of the pontoons under the barge began to leak, and it nearly sank. The pontoon was repaired by filling it with a plastic foam material.

Earlier this year city officials had questioned whether the current barge would last another season.

Because another barge probably will not be available during the coming season, Greer said, the city has little choice but try to repair its present facility.

The city sold the boat dock in 1982 after unsuccessfully trying to make it pay expenses. A news article pointed out the problems of operation:

Parks department employees to run city boat dock
By KEITH SMITH

The Owensboro Department of Parks and Recreation plans to run the local boat dock and marina on the Ohio River this summer with departmental employees, City Manager William Sequino said Thursday.

Sequino verified that the parks department sent a letter to Ted Peveler Jr., who has had the city's contract to operate the facility for seven of the past eight years, telling him that the city would use its own people to run the dock this summer.

Last year's contract gave Peveler 55 percent of the tenant fees plus all of the concession proceeds. The city received the remaining 45 percent of the tenant fees.

During fiscal year 1980, the city's share of the revenue was \$6,000, but it spent \$10,000 in maintenance at the boat dock, for a loss of \$4,000, according to a 1981 report by Riney, Hancock & Co.

Riney, Hancock recommended in that report that the city sell or discontinue operating the boat dock. But a recent budget proposal from the parks department asked that the department be allowed to continue the service for one more year using department personnel.

"If successful arrangement cannot be achieved during the '82 boating season, we propose that this facility cease operations as a city entity and be sold," said Susan Tyler, the department's director, in a budget proposal to city officials. Mrs. Tyler was unavailable for comment Thursday.

Peveler quoted the letter as saying that parks department employees would maintain the dock and marina on a 50 hours-per-week basis.

The department's budget proposal said the facilities would be operated 60 hours per week. Sequino said he did not know which figure was accurate.

Presently, the marina concession building is beached on the riverbank a few hundred yards down river from where it is moored in the summer, but Assistant City Manager J. D. Vaughn (sic) said there is no problem with the building being where it is.

The marina was beached during a storm a couple of weeks ago when the river was higher, Vaughn [sic] said. Officials are waiting for the river to rise so that the higher water stage will help in freeing the structure.

Vaughn [sic] said there is no problem with the building being where it is right now. "It'll float," he said, "it's just hung up on there on the bank." [sic]

Peveler said that one of the building's compartments is flooded and has received some damage.

This boat dock was not the first to occupy this position and location below Smothers Park. In the 1860s Murphy and Triplett operated a wharf boat at the same spot where the boat dock now floats. It is assumed from the accompanying sketch of Owensboro river front near Smothers Park that there were two wharf boats at the landing; one was the People's Wharf and the other was the Triplett, Bacon and Company (earlier known as Murphy and Triplett Wharf Boat before 1866).

Wharf masters for Owensboro City Wharf (possibly the People's Wharf) from 1866 to 1875 changed often; first appointed by the City Commission was Lafayette Elder serving from 1866 to 1868; no record found for 1869; Murphy-Triplett served as Owensboro Wharf masters during 1870-71; during 1871 Robert S. Triplett was appointed by the city for 1871-72; T. W. Bacon became wharfmaster for 1872-74; E. B. Traub served the 1875-76 term. Robert S. Triplett and T. W. Bacon became co-owner of the commercial wharfboat after Murphy sold to Bacon.

A wharf boat ledger dated 1870-71 with the names of Murphy and Triplett as owners has the name Murphy struck over and the name of Bacon written above Murphy showing a change of ownership in July or August 1870. (The author salvaged this ledger from a trash pile when the old courthouse was torn down in 1964.) This ledger is in the collection of the author.

The first entry in this ledger was written with "dip pen and ink" showing one hogshead of tobacco being shipped to Glover White and Company in Louisville, Kentucky, on the steamer Tarascon, August 29, 1870, with charges of \$2.50 per hogshead and \$1.00 other charges. (A note attached read "Shipped by W. R. Knox to sell.")

The second entry registered the steamer Pine Bluff from Owensboro to Evansville; Cairo, Illinois; Scuffletown, Kentucky; and Enterprise, Indiana. On board was one bundle of empty sacks; 31 sacks of wheat (at 100 per sack); two barrels of copper whiskey (500 charge); four empty mineral water boxes (25); ten dressed poplar planks-213 board feet sent COD \$7.45 and 50 drayage and one bale of jeans, 500. All of the above totaled \$10.50 including the COD charge but not including the ten cents per sack for the 31 sacks of wheat.

Barbecue Festival

The first barbecue festival was held at Smothers Park in the spring of 1979. It is still an annual event with 40,000 or more people in attendance. They come to eat the barbecued mutton, pork and chicken by the tons. This event is recognized as one of the top 100 events held in the United States each year. Owensboro has come to be known as "The Bar-B-Q Capital of the World."

A flat boat race—pioneer style with oarsmen propelling the boats—was organized by the Chamber of Commerce in 1964. These flat boats either launch or dock at Smothers Park with tremendous fanfare and celebration. If they launch at the park, they end the race at Henderson, Kentucky, a day or two later after a series of fast-heat rowings. Sometimes the boats launch at Hawesville, Kentucky and finish at Owensboro.

A Regatta was held at Smothers Park from 1969 to 1979; the name was changed to the Hydrofair in 1980. The National Gold Cup Race was held in 1978. One year later the final races

were held. (They were moved to Evansville, Indiana, where they received strong support, and the event became Thunder-on-the-Ohio.)

On December 18, 1988, the RiverWalk project was dedicated when Mayor David Adkisson cut the ribbon and turned on the new lighting. Smothers Park received most of the appropriation for improvements. A large fountain with landscaping near St. Ann Street was the focal point. A brick-paved walkway stretched from Daviess Street to St. Elizabeth Street and the area was landscaped. Beautification crews in the Owensboro Parks and Recreation Department did all of the landscape plantings under direction of Eddie Atherton, horticulturist.

This area will continue to grow. The new RiverPark Center ground breaking is scheduled for 1990. The idea for the Center began in 1982, when a core group of leaders began developing an overall concept to build a civic auditorium as a home for the Owensboro Symphony, Theatre and Dance groups, and as a meeting place for the local colleges and others. The idea grew and grew until in 1988 the RiverPark Center, Inc. was established to spearhead establishment of a downtown civic center. The Center will encompass an auditorium with 1,500 seats, a bluegrass museum of 21,000 square feet, a riverfront amphitheater and much more. A home for Bluegrass Music will be in the museum, honoring Bill Monroe, a native of nearby Rosine, Kentucky, Ohio County. He shaped and refined his distinctive music style in the 1930s and is now known as "Father of Bluegrass."

All this has a price tag of about \$13,000,000 raised by contributions, gifts, grants and endowments. Thanks to Speaker of the House Donald Blandford, a \$4,500,000 grant was secured from the Commonwealth of Kentucky as a catalyst for the five-year fund raising drive.

The new brick RiverWalk state-of-the arts lights and light poles and a fountain encircled by 12 flags are a focal point of the RiverWalk project with landscaping extending into the RiverPark Center. The flagpole spectacular display was assured for the project when Texas Gas Transmission Corporation gave a \$50,000 grant in 1989. The Center building, with a two-story facade facing the river, will be an extension of Smothers Park and RiverWalk, making the park an integral part of the total scene of the riverfront all the way from the Executive Inn to the Ohio River Bridge. Although the RiverPark Center will not be an Owensboro Parks and Recreation Department responsibility, Smothers Park itself is a responsibility for which the Department is proud.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 29 May 1924, section 4, p.4:

Beautiful Parks Add To The Many Charms Of Owensboro

**By Hon, J. H. Hickman
(Mayor of Owensboro)**

Riverside Park

Riverside Park has been established along the bank of the Ohio, and in summer it is one of the most popular places in the city. From it magnificent views may be had of the Ohio east and

west of the city. In addition to its affording a place to rest and view the beautiful Ohio, it has likewise enabled the city to do much to protect, the bank of the river at that point by filling in with available material from excavations and other sources. Its proximity to the more thickly populated portions of the city makes it available for young and old and rich and poor alike.



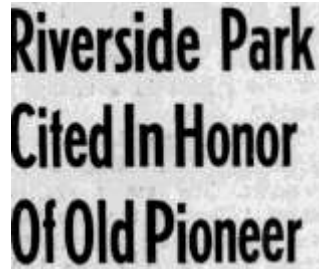
**Sixty Years of Owensboro, 1883-1943, William Foster Hayes
(Owensboro, KY: Messenger Job Printing Co., 1944) p.84:**

CITY PARKS:

.... Then there is the Riverview Park of about one acre lying at the foot of Allen Street. There seems to be no record of its acquisition, but it has probably been an open park for many years. And the last time I saw it, its appearance left much to be desired in the way of such attention and care as would make it a source of pride to the city.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 18 April 1964, p.1:



From now on, the name of Riverside Park will be "William Smeathers Pioneer Park" in honor of one of Owensboro's earliest settlers, Indian fighters and military heroes.

The board of city commissioners adopted a resolution yesterday establishing the new name for the site. The designation was requested by the Daviess County Historical Society.

Mayor Dugan Best and Commissioners Irvin Terrill and Tom Sweat voted for the change. Commissioners Bill Carneal and George H. Greer were absent from yesterday's session.

Best said the park will soon have a marker erected by the Kentucky Historical Society which will bear the name of the park and give a concise biography of the old settler and soldier.

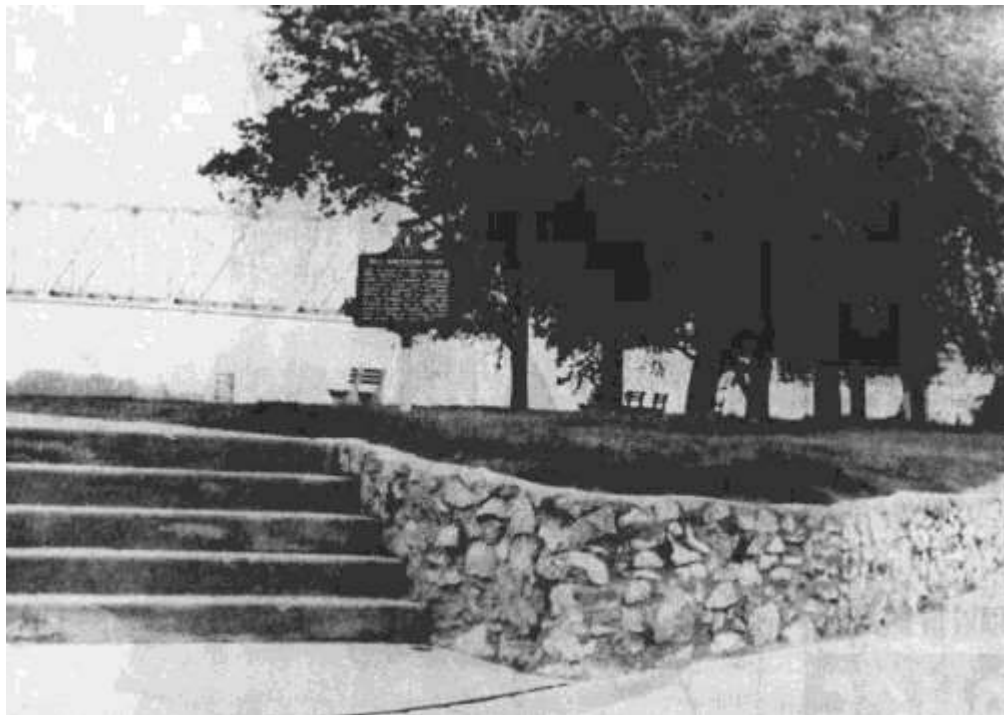


“Bill Smothers Park” historical marker was dedicated on 27 October 1964. It was erected by the Kentucky Historical Commission and Kentucky Department of Highways. (Marker Number 744). The memorial is in Smothers Park, on the riverfront in Owensboro, Daviess County, KY, at the intersection of West Veterans Boulevard and Frederica Street.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 4 June 1967, pp.1C & 5C:

Smothers Park Is Six-Year Dream In Motion



Attractive entrance – These cement steps and the stone wall were suggested largely by sketches made by Mrs. William Feldhaus, an Owensboro artist, The improvements were made this year on Smothers Park. The stone used in making the wall is from quarries in Ohio County.

A small plot of ground on the banks of the Ohio in recent months has become a source of civic pride in Owensboro. Formerly named Bill Smothers Memorial Pioneer Park, and more commonly referred to as "Riverside Park" or "Riverview Park," the recreation area, running parallel to First Street, is taking on a new look after six years of planning.

The fact that Owensboro even has Smothers Park today is looked upon as something of a minor miracle. Early city planners envisioned the space as the location of an extra-wide First Street. But the river, with its powerful currents sweeping around a bend to the northeast of the city, has for hundreds of years crashed into the Owensboro bank, stealing it away piece by piece. Only through constant landfill and bank re-enforcement has the area been saved.

No one seems to know for sure how Owensboro ever got a park overlooking the river. William Foster Hayes, in his book "Sixty Years of Owensboro 1883-1943," published about 1946, says of the area, "There seems to be no record of its acquisition, but it has probably been an open park for many years."

That statement has not bothered city planners in modern times nearly as much as what is suggested in another statement made by Hayes: "The last time I saw it (the park), its appearance left much to be desired in the way of such attention and care as would make it a source of pride to the city."

It was six years ago that Tom Sweat, Owensboro City Commissioner, decided something needed to be done about the city's riverfront. "The park is Phase Two," of a riverfront improvement program he said, noting that Phase One was improvement of the sloping parking and boat launching area just west of the park between Frederica and St. Ann Streets. Sweat said it was five years before he could get support for his ideas to improve the park, but the late Mayor Dugan Best appointed a committee last year and, with the assistance of local garden clubs and sketches by Owensboro artist Liz Feldhaus, plans were devised. Mrs. Frankie Hager was very helpful in the early planning stages, Sweat said.

"We planned to improve the top half of the park last year." Sweat observed, "but we waited to see if the Army Corps of Engineers would do anything to improve the bank."

City Engineer Earl Patton said that three plans were submitted to the Corps. The first required locked sheet piling to be driven to a depth of approximately 20 feet, more or less, leaving 18 inches protruding above the pool stage so that riprap could be toed. This would prevent slipping or under-cutting around the bottom of the riprap at pool stage and above. This plan would have cost \$175,- 000, including labor, sheeting and material as well as a rock-riprap.

The second plan included the toeing of 30 inches – thick riprap at least 10 feet below pool stage. The cost for this plan would have been \$78,000.

A third plan called for the bank to be smoothed with a drag bucket, that all eroded places be filled with stone or gravel, and that a complete and uniform planting of willows or other suitable growth be started along the entire 610 feet of the park. The estimated cost was \$5,000 for shaping of the bank, the buying of materials for the eroded area and 350 willows of suitable size for planting.

But Col. R. R. Wessels. of the Corps of Engineers, replied to Mayor Best, "We have found from an inspection of the bank conditions that the river bank is fairly stable at this time and that there is no immediate threat to the publicly owned property adjacent thereto.

"It appears evident from the vegetated condition of the bank that the large aggregate material previously dumped along the bank by the City of Owensboro has been effective in arresting the bank caving conditions.

"Section 14 of the 1946 Flood Control Act is the only authority enabling the Corps of Engineers to participate in works such as you request. Work under this authority is limited to the construction of economically feasible emergency bank protection works to prevent flood damage to public property.

"In view of all the circumstances, I must conclude that the bank stabilization measures at Owensboro you have requested are not eligible for accomplishment at this time with Federal funds under our available authority."

Commissioner Sweat said he felt that large rocks, such as those used at Kentucky Dam, might be the most economical answer. "It would be good-looking and would eliminate the worries that vegetation would provide," he said. Such rocks will also provide a longer-lasting buffer against the river, Sweat feels.

Patton noted that "The Corps of Engineers will let you use anything that doesn't float," for bank protection.

Park and Recreation Director Jim Brown has suggested possibly using multiflora rose, a rapid – growing plant which has few flowers. It has been used along the fence at the Sportscenter Pool, he said.

Renovation Starts

With all hope of work on the bank now gone, Sweat and the Mayor's Committee proceeded with their plans to beautify the park. Spending about \$3,500 for materials, the sewer and street department, under the direction of Russell Shifley, began renovation of the park. Dirt that was used came from the Ben Hawes Golf Course, Shifley noted.

Work on the park was done without consultation with the Park Department, Sweat said, a move considered irregular by some. "We just made up our minds and went ahead." More than one city official has suggested that Smothers Park, as a result, is a sore spot with the department.

An overlook, requested by a local garden club, was built primarily with surplus material in the street and sewer department, according to Shifley. The club requested round wooden piling to support the overlook, "but we had no means of driving it. We had steel pilings in stock, and used those, driving them 20 feet into the ground," he noted.

All the piling, grading and cement work was done by Shifley's department. The only material for which he had to let on contract was the iron railing on the overlook. A garden club – one of six involved – suggested the idea for the steps to the park on the corner of First and St. Ann Streets, and the stone wall was initiated by one of Mrs. Feldhaus's sketches.

Patton said it is his understanding that additional flowers and trees will be planted by the garden clubs. Sweat said a white horse-farm type fence is being considered which will follow the river bank along the park's north edge.

Finally, a fountain will be located in Smothers Park, at the foot of Allen Street. Green River Production Credit Association had donated \$1,000 for the construction of a fountain, but requested it be built in front of their establishment, somewhat east of Allen.

"We looked at the drawings, and felt to put the fountain anywhere but at Allen would throw the park off balance," Sweat said. He added the \$1,000 has been returned to the credit association. "Next year, the city will build the fountain from the general fund," Sweat related.

A plat at the City Engineer's office shows that the first settlement along the river – now the downtown area – was called Rossboro.

This area was named in honor of hotel keeper David Ross; one of the first streets, Frederica, was named for his daughter.

But a park overlooking the river clearly is not indicated. Instead, these planners of December, 1816, had designed the street along the river, at first known as Water Street, would be 120 feet wide, extending to the bank of the river. Water Street extended from Walnut to Lewis Streets, but its widest point is where the park is located today.

(Thirty - five days later, on Feb. 3, 1817, an act was approved by the Kentucky General Assembly to provide "by law for the complete establishment and good government" of Rossboro. Its final paragraph specified that " ... the said town shall hereafter be called and known by the name of Owensborough, in memory of the late Col. Abraham Owen, who fell at Tippecanoe; in which name it is hereby established, and not of that of Rossborough.")

Ross and Mays Subdivision is shown in a plat dated Nov. 8, 1824. It includes an area that is roughly bounded by what is today Fourth to Ninth Streets and Poplar to Crittenden Streets. It also showed the old Rossboro section.

This plat shows Water Street not extending all the way to the river, but rather a small section of unidentified land between the street and the bank. This is where the park is now located.

The history of the little park, however, at no point ever becomes clear. An 1881 map of Owensboro shows a wide street, called Front Street, running along the river, a street which ran all the way to Triplett St.

The plat indicates the park did not exist, and that the street had "grown" once again to include the park.

But the plat also shows that the river bank was badly eroding, and that Front Street became progressively narrower as it neared Triplett, so as to avoid a crumbling bank.

Rumor has it that the area along the river was once a type of city dump, which once eroded to the north curb of First Street. But this was in 1819 and 1820, a time when the street's north curb may have been built to the river bank to begin with.

City Engineer Patton feels he has the solution to the appearance of the park. "Downtown streets are measured off by the chain and link method," he said. "All streets except Frederica are 66 feet wide, or two chain links." (a chain, built by blacksmiths, measured 33 feet).

He thinks that First Street, at least in more recent times, was measured to be 66 feet wide, leaving approximately 50 feet of land width between the street and the river. This land evolved into a park.

The park remained virtually unchanged, except for an occasional grass - cutting, until the recent renovation by the city Commissioners and the Street and Sewer Department.

But just prior to that, the acre park was in the news because its name was changed. This was the result of an undertaking by the Daviess County Historical Society, formed in connection with the Daviess County Sesquicentennial, at the suggestion of a WOMI editorial of the air by station manager Hugh O. Potter.

The City Board passed an ordinance at the request of the historical society, and the name was changed. Potter said that the word "pioneer" was added to the park's name to include all pioneers that followed Bill Smothers (or William Smothers) to the area.

Potter said the name was selected because there is strong evidence that Smother's home was located near the park site. In a suit held in a local court on Feb. 28, 1807, (May, Banister and Co. vs. James Adams, - the Heirs of George Mason and others), attempting to settle a land dispute, testimony was given by Major William Bailey Smith.

Smith said he knew of Yellow Banks (the original name for the Owensboro area because of the clay color of the Ohio's border) in March of 1780 when he came here "to hunt for improvement." He said the whole bank for three or four miles was of a yellow color.

The Major recalled William Smothers cabin located "at the mouth of a gut at the yellow banks."

This "gut" was a ravine which once ran from the western section of town, to its mouth at the Ohio approximately where the VFW home is located presently. It was here, then, that Owensboro's first settler lived, about half a block from the park now named in his honor.

Apparently Smothers was colorful figure, with a somewhat questionable background. More than one city commissioner was reluctant to name the park after him because they questioned Smothers' way of handling Indians.

Today we know that Smothers came from Virginia. He was a captain in a Kentucky Company of Militia in 1812, which was part of DeBois Mounted Spies.

Smothers came to Owensboro from Hartford, Ky., in approximately 1798, after, as Potter puts it, "there became too few Indians or too many neighbors."

An historical marker was placed in the park following its renaming, through the efforts of Mrs. Louise Gasser Kirtley, chairman of the district for historical markers, and Potter, chairman of the Daviess County group for the erection of the signs.

Smothers Park came to Owensboro, uninvited. It was never planned. But weary shoppers who rest their tired feet while sitting in the little park and enjoy one of the city's most spectacular views of the river, are glad it is here.

As long as the city can retain the bank, keeping the beautiful but mighty Ohio in its 'place, the park's future seems assured.





Pictures of Smothers Park made by Jerry Long on 8 August 1993. In 1988 water fountain and flags were erected at the west end of the park.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 8 June 2006, p.1C:

Smothers Park would be a great place to put a log cabin

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

What downtown needs is a log cabin.

And the new, soon-to-expanded Smothers Park is just the place for it.

When they get through building a wall from the riverbed to the top of the bank at Smothers Park, city officials say the park will grow by up to four acres.

That's plenty of room for a replica of the cabin built more than 200 years ago by William Smeathers – aka Bill Smothers – the man for whom the park is named.

And tourists like to look at log cabins.

Now, there is some debate about whether Smeathers was really the original Owensboroan.

The 35-year-old Virginian is said to have grown tired of cramped-up life in Fort Hartford (population 85) and moved his family up the "Buffaloe Road" to a spot on the Ohio River that was roughly where the VFW post is on Veterans Boulevard today.

There, Smeathers is said to have built a cabin and begun selling whiskey and other goods to the crews of keelboats traveling the Ohio River.

We have a description of that cabin from one of America's literary giants.

In his work, "The Early Experiences of Ralph Ringwood," which appeared in 1845 in "The Knickerbocker Sketch-book," Washington Irving wrote about a trip to western Kentucky in the early 1800s.

He describes a visit to the cabin of "honest Bill Smithers," which Irving says was "a mere log hut, with a square hole for a window, and a chimney made of sticks and clay."

Sounds simple enough.

But was Smeathers the first Owensboroan?

In the Kentucky Encyclopedia, historian Thomas D. Clark writes, "The settlement of the (Owensboro) area may go back as far as 1775. There was a trading post at the Yellow Banks, which apparently existed until the signing of the Treaty of Greenville in 1794."

That's apparently the legendary "lost settlement."

In 1807, a man named Philip Taylor testified in a land suit that he had visited what is now Owensboro in 1790 – a good seven years before Smeathers supposedly built the "first cabin."

"I had heard of it," Taylor said, "from the people of (Calhoun) who had come to move settlers out."

Somebody apparently had lived here and gone before 1790.

Then, there was a French military intelligence report from 1796 – a year or two before Smeathers supposedly moved here.

In a report prepared for the French Embassy in late 1796, Gen. Victor Collot noted that "Yellow Bank(s) (Owensboro's original name) is a small settlement, consisting of eight or ten families."

So, Smeathers may not have been the first settler. But whoever it was built a log cabin.

And it probably looked a lot like the one Irving described.

A replica of that first Owensboro house – the beginning of our 209-year-old housing industry – would be a good addition to our riverfront.

How big are we talking about?

The cabin Abraham Lincoln was supposedly born in in 1809 was said to have measured 18 feet by 16 feet.

And a simple reproduction of a frontier cabin – not one all fancied up – shouldn't be that expensive.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 13 March 2009, p.1A:



Motorists catch a glimpse of the construction on the riverfront development project Thursday afternoon along Veterans Boulevard.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 23 August 2012,
Commemorative Section p.2:**

Smothers Park rebirth 11 years in making

By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

When people are finally allowed to roam freely about Smothers Park this weekend, it could very well be close to breathtaking for many.

Built at a total cost of \$68 million, including an river wall extending from the RiverPark Center to Mitch McConnell Plaza, a distance of about four blocks, the all-new, greatly enlarged riverfront park is comprised of the relocated and upgraded Col. Charles E. Shelton Freedom Memorial, the eye-popping \$3.74 million "Lazy Dayz" children's playground and sprayzone, a wide river walk with a series of three river overlooks, a trio of giant, signature fountains and a unique inlet waterfall featuring water cascading down elegantly curving steps to the Ohio River.

The center of the park is dominated by a large building that holds restrooms, a concession area and rooms for mechanical equipment. Large grassy areas on either side of the Shelton memorial provide a quiet zone. Along the river walk, swings hang from arbor structures. There are benches galore and low seat walls provide even more places to relax. Hundreds of trees and shrubs provide a natural look to the park. A fountain has been added to the north side of the Shelton memorial.

A rebuilt Veterans Boulevard covered in decorative brick pavers placed in a herringbone pattern forms the south boundary of the park, which will be open to traffic, but designed as much for pedestrians as vehicles.

And to think, it all began as an erosion control project intended to reclaim land lost to the eroding power of the Ohio River. But even from the very beginning, local officials saw the potential for a dramatically improved park along Owensboro's riverfront, a venue that had seen little change in decades, save for the addition of a gazebo and a small fountain in the early 1990s, and later the Shelton memorial.

Fast forward to the present and Smothers Park is making history.

"This is the largest single project the city has ever undertaken," said Tony Cecil, the city's operations manager – and for more than 10 years the man who coordinated and kept his finger on the pulse of efforts to transform the downtown riverfront, a pulse that grew faint at times.

"Of all the good economic news, this has been the catalyst for all of it. There are 1,400 linear feet from the RiverPark Center to the McConnell Plaza. We started in 2008 with an erosion project with the (river) wall. The Corps of Engineers allowed us to regain land. It was 0.93 acres before. Now it's 3.2 acres. Including McConnell Plaza, it 5.3 acres, four city blocks, 155 feet wide on average.

"There won't be anything like this in a multi-state area. It will be an economic engine of itself."

It's been a long, bumpy road from 2001 to the present, however, including one four-year stretch when city officials working on the project wondered if they would see it finished in their lifetimes.

More than 11 years ago, the community turned its attention to its nearly forgotten riverfront, determined to do something positive. In May of 2001, PRIDE, a local group that seeks public participation on community appearance issues, held a workshop at which about 130 people participated in a community visioning process for the riverfront. From that meeting came two central ideas — establish a continuous riverfront walkway and create a visually pleasing order to the river's edge. But even at the very early stage, people talked about how much they wanted to sit in swings along the river, Cecil recalled.

The PRIDE workshop got the ball rolling, but momentum gathered later that same month when EDSA, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., planning, landscape architecture and urban design firm, was awarded a contract to develop a riverfront master plan for \$340,000. EDSA used input from more than 40 public meetings for guidance for a project that included a large, custom-made playground and a signature fountain at the foot of Frederica Street. Simultaneously, plans were under way to expand the RiverPark Center patio, build the McConnell Plaza, move the city's boat ramp to English Park and build a river wall to stop erosion of the riverbank.

The problem was, the city had only \$2.8 million to spend on riverfront development.

For the next four years the project languished.

"We had a master plan and no one wanted another plan collecting dust," Cecil said. "The difference was, the city fathers realized we had an erosion problem. We were losing the bank and sidewalks were settling and even threatening the Shelton memorial. We knew we had to make every effort and try for every bit of grant money and talk to everybody to help us. ... Maybe we'd never see it, but we had to get started."

For a long time, the city's best hopes for funding riverfront development was by garnering small sums to try to move forward with the project on an incremental basis, according to then City Manager Bob Whitmer. But even Whitmer wasn't optimistic. "We were just getting incremental funding," he said at the time. "Gathering that much funding could have taken decades."

After Tom Watson arrived as mayor, Whitmer submitted a funding request to U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell.

"On a Saturday afternoon we got a call that it had been awarded," Cecil remembered. "After 14 to 16 hours we still couldn't believe it. But after checking and rechecking and seeing it in writing, there was no small celebration."

That watershed moment came in July of 2005, when McConnell made the stunning announcement that the city would receive \$40 million in federal funds for the river wall/Smother's Park expansion project. Smother's Park would be expanded north by about three acres. While the federal transportation dollars were for the river wall only, local officials quickly moved forward with plans to build the spray park and playground, signature water features, sculptures, performance areas and upgrade the Shelton memorial.

In 2007, Cecil met with representatives from playground and fountain design companies in Florida to talk about what a new Smother's Park could include. The list included a signature playground and with custom-made equipment to look like trees. A preliminary design featured elevated walkways, "tree forts" and innovative water features. People getting their first taste of the "Lazy Dayz" playground this weekend will see how closely those original ideas have been realized.

The start of construction of the river wall had to wait until 2009, when a long ribbon of steel sheet pilings began to be pushed into the riverbank, creating a huge cavity that was filled with earth to form a much larger riverfront and the platform for what has become Smothers Park.

The other hugely important event in the Smothers Park revival story occurred in February of 2009, when the Owensboro City Commission and Daviess Fiscal Court approved doubling their respective insurance premium tax levies as the way to finance the proposed \$79.4 million downtown revitalization project, which included all the topside elements of Smothers Park. With financing secured, in August of 2010 — exactly two years ago — Hall Contracting of Louisville, one of the contractors on the river wall project, was awarded a \$19.4 million contract to do the Smothers Park-Riverfront Crossing project. The following month, construction began.

As he looks at the nearly completed park, Cecil said it has exceeded all of his expectations.

"What an exciting 10- to 12-year period to be associated with an Owensboro project," he said. "If you look at the time period and what has taken place, it's pretty remarkable. ... The recurring thing I've heard when I take people to see it is, 'You're telling me this is all free?'"



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 23 August 2012, p.5A:

Editorial

Smothers Park's opening begins new era

For more months, years and even decades, everything has been leading up to this historical moment — the reopening of Smothers Park and the beginning of a new era for downtown Owensboro.

Tonight, the city will rededicate the Shelton Memorial at Smothers Park. It will be the first real breath of life the riverfront has experienced since it was closed to the public in early 2009.

The special ceremony, however, is just a warm-up of what will take place Friday with the official grand opening and an air show following on Saturday.

Throughout the construction process, much has been made about the cost of the \$68 million riverfront project — \$40 million for the river wall and \$28 million for the revamping of Smothers Park, which includes Lazy Dayz sprayground.

But as we've watched the transformation of Smothers Park during the past three-plus years, it's hard to deny that it has evolved into an impressive sight that will serve as a community gathering place for future generations of Owensboro citizens.

It started in 2005 with U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell securing the federal funds to build the river wall, spurring local officials to start creating a vision for the downtown area that many thought was an impossible dream.

Too often in the past, studies were done about improving the downtown, but nothing ever developed from them. There was the general attitude that Owensboro just wasn't big enough or couldn't afford to build anything on a grand scale.

But now, we see that Owensboro can be bold with capital projects and go beyond the simple that residents had grown accustomed to.

All it took was a change in mindset in the community and its leadership.

And it's Mayor Ron Payne who is greatly responsible for seizing the opportunity to revive the downtown and building something that will benefit not just a select group, but every man, woman and child in this community.

Payne displayed the courage to press on when many other elected leaders would've folded under the public pressure.

Past and current city officials and commissioners also played a key role, providing the necessary foresight and votes to carry this plan through to the end.

City Manager Bill Parrish and Operations Manager Tony Cecil also have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make this day happen.

Smothers Park is no ordinary project — it's the kind that has potential to place Owensboro on the map.

"Great things are on the way for this community," Payne said in a speech he gave this week. "Shortly, we will open this park to the public, and, if you will, the rest of the world."

And it's about time.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 23 August 2012,
Commemorative Section p.7:**

A Rich History

Smothers Park oldest public space in Owensboro

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Its origins have been lost to time and its name has been changed repeatedly through the years.

But what is now Smothers Park is believed to be — along with the courthouse square — the oldest public space in Owensboro.

It apparently dates back to the presidency of James Madison and is nearly a year older than Owensboro itself.

In his 1991 history of the Owensboro Parks & Recreation Department, Evan Ray Russell wrote that, "This land, located on the Ohio River between Frederica Street and Daviess Street, was probably set aside in 1816 as a place for the public to gather when John L. May and David Ross...first laid out a plan for a town on the Ohio River."

The Kentucky General Assembly approved the creation of Owensboro — then spelled Owensborough — on Feb. 3, 1817, as the county seat for the new county of Daviess.

The land on the bluff overlooking the river wasn't always a park.

It wasn't until the early years of the 20th century that the park — which has also been known as Riverside Park, Riverview Park and Riverfront Park — was created.

But Russell wrote that the land has apparently always been public property.

The city has never found deeds that indicate that it was ever owned by anyone — including the city — he wrote.

But sometime around World War I, the public land was turned into a city park.

And Friday and Saturday, city officials will unveil a \$68 million renovation of Smothers Park that will increase its size from 1.93 acres to 3.17 acres.

Russell wrote that the park was originally 1,400 feet long and 170 feet wide — before erosion began to chew away at it.

By 1991, the park was only 140 feet wide.

Today, Tony Cecil, the city's operations manager, says the park is still 1,400 feet long — it now stretches all the way to McConnell Plaza, looping around VFW Post 696 — but it's an average of 155 feet wide now.

"Until you walk the park, you can't understand the scale of what's happening down there," he said.

In 1986, Russell Shifley, a former street and sewer superintendent and city commissioner, told Russell, "I remember building Smothers Park that had been washed away. We built it around 1918 or 1919. We dumped cinders, rocks, concrete rubble on it, and we built up the bank where once the curb of First Street ran. We built it from Daviess and St. Ann streets to Frederica Street."

Through the years, the city kept piling rocks and concrete along the river banks there in an attempt to hold back erosion.

But the river current continued to attack the park.

A 1924 article in the Owensboro Inquirer written by former Mayor J.H. Hickman, "the father of the city parks movement," says, "Riverside Park has been established along the banks of the Ohio, and in summer is one of the most popular places in the city. From it magnificent views may be had of the Ohio east and west of the city.

"In addition to its affording a place to rest and view the beautiful Ohio, it has likewise enabled the city to protect the bank of the river at that point by filling it with available material from excavations and other sources," he added. "Its proximity to the more thickly populated portions of the city makes it available for young and old and rich and poor alike."

But the park apparently fell on hard times during the Great Depression.

In his 1943 book, "Sixty Years of Owensboro," William Foster Hayes wrote that Riverview Park was about an acre located at the foot of Allen Street.

"There seems to be no record of its acquisition, but it has probably been an open park for many years," he wrote. "And the last time I saw it, its appearance left much to be desired in the way of such attention and care as would make it a source of pride to the city."

In 1964, as the city and county approached their 150th anniversary, the Daviess County Historical Society asked the city to rename the park in honor of William Smeathers, who is believed to have built the first cabin in what became Owensboro — a little west of the park — in the 1790s.

On April 17, 1964, the City Commission approved a resolution renaming the park "William Smeathers Pioneer Park."

But it's never been called that.

A historical marker in the park calls it "Bill Smothers Park."

And for nearly half a century, it's been called simply Smothers Park.

In 1975, when Waitman Taylor was mayor, the city added a large gazebo at the foot of Allen Street at a cost of \$3,880.78, not counting labor. It was used as a bandstand for concerts in the park, a place for people to gather for weddings and a place to just sit and look at the river.

In 1988, during the first year of then-Mayor David Adkisson's first administration, the city tackled a \$250,000 renovation of the riverfront between the future site of the RiverPark Center and the Executive Inn Rivermont four blocks to the west.

Improvements included burying all utility lines in the area, a 12-foot wide brick-paved sidewalk, more trees, decorative old-fashioned street lights and several flower beds.

RiverPark Plaza, which featured a large fountain surrounded by eight flagpoles and an overlook on the Ohio River, was also built that year.

More rip rap was also placed along the bank to fight erosion.

But by 2003, erosion was continuing to threaten the city's oldest public space.

And then-City Manager Ron Payne was asking Kentucky's congressional delegation to find \$19.8 million in the federal budget to build a wall four blocks long — from the RiverPark Center to the Executive Inn — to hold back the Ohio.

That eventually led to the massive renovations to the riverfront that are being unveiled this week.



This old black-and-white photo shows Owensboro's riverfront from Smother's Park looking west toward the American Legion in 1963. Smothers Park's name has been changed repeatedly through the years, but what is now Smothers Park is believed to be along with the courthouse square the oldest public space in Owensboro. Photo submitted by Martha Dennison.



With umbrellas in hand, people gather for an Easter Sunday sunrise service in April 2001 at the gazebo in Smothers Park. The gazebo was added in 1975 when Waitman Taylor was mayor at a cost of \$3,880.78, not counting labor.



Smothers Park defined by fountains – The inlet waterfall on the riverfront features water running down 200-foot-wide curved steps to the Ohio River. While the water will appear to go into the river, it will be captured at the bottom of the steps and recirculate. Behind the waterfall is the system of three water fountains, with the center one featuring dancing water choreographed to music and light.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 25 August 2012, p.1A:

Smothers Park Thousands throng to opening

By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

Smothers Park — big, bold and brand spanking new — opened to rave reviews Friday as thousands of people streamed to Owensboro's downtown riverfront for the official opening of the "Lazy Dayz" playground spraypark and the launching of the park's three signature fountains on the first day the entire park was open to everyone after nearly four years of construction.

The grand opening celebration of Smothers Park continues this afternoon with a free, two-hour-plus air show that begins at 1 p.m. above the downtown riverfront.

Opening the Ronald Lee Logsdon Spraypark and unveiling a plaque dedicated to the longtime community activist and executive director of Audubon Area Community Services Inc., was the first order of business Friday. The Owensboro Kiwanis Club, of which the late Logsdon was a past president, partnered with Audubon Area and the city to establish the spraypark within the enormous children's playground in the middle of the park.

"Ron Logsdon was one of the finest leaders we've had in this community," Mayor Ron Payne said.

Kiwanis member Jeff Taylor introduced many members of Logsdon's family and other special guests as hundreds of people, including scores of children anxious to test the spraypark, crowded around the facility which features an array of floor-mounted water jets. After the brief ceremony, Payne led the enthusiastic crowd in a quick countdown that ended with jets of water shooting high into the air, accompanied by squeals and cheers.

"I think it's great," said Beth Smith of Owensboro, grandmother of Caleb West and Prince Moss, both of whom were soaked within seconds of the launch. "They've needed something like this downtown, and it's a good day for it."

The children's mother, Erica West, said Caleb and Prince have joined her many times in recent weeks as they walked to the park to monitor the pace of construction.

"My kids have been waiting," she said. "We live on Fourth Street. We'll be back a lot, most definitely."

Tamara Loveless and her husband, Jason, brought their children Becca, 8, and Katie, 13, and a friend to the playground.

"It's been on our calendar," Loveless said. "They've been counting down the days. It's a great playground for kids and a great way to meet up with friends and have a great time."

The plaque honoring Logsdon contained the following words: "Dedicated by the Kiwanis Club of Owensboro and Audubon Area Community Services, Inc., in honor of Ronald Lee Logsdon for his leadership, dedication and commitment to the citizens of Owensboro and Daviess County as well as throughout the Audubon service area."

Taylor said Logsdon would have been amazed to see the spraypark and the rest of Smothers Park.

"He never sought the limelight, and he didn't get recognition for many of the things he did, but he didn't seek it," Taylor said.

While children continued splashing through the spraypark, Payne and a contingent of city, county and community leaders past and present moved a short distance west to a platform for the launching of the three fountains on the west end of the four-block-long park.

"I've got to tell you it took a lot of people a lot of time to make this happen," Payne said. "Do you like the park? Tell me!"

Payne's inquiry was answered with cheers and applause

"How appropriate we use the launching of the fountains to open this park," Payne said. "Opening this park signifies a new era and a new life and a new future for downtown. ... What a great time to be living in Owensboro. Our future is bright."

Seconds later, after another countdown, the three fountains erupted with streams of water shooting high above the crowd, and it wasn't long before a formation of six vintage airplanes streaming colorful smoke trails shot across the sky before circling and making a second pass.

Cheyenne Graves of Owensboro was there for the launching of the fountains with her four children; Tysen 6, Evely, 5, Arianna, 2, and Isaiah, 6 weeks, fast asleep in a stroller.

"It's really beautiful," Graves said as her children sat on the outer edge of the round center fountain. "The crowd is great too, actually. I like the architecture. It's really pretty."

Meanwhile, all around the perimeter of the round fountain, people posed for pictures with the jets of water providing a sparkling background as the setting sun sent rays across the black granite.

Joe Berry, downtown project manager, was pleased. The existence of Smothers Park should make his job easier as he courts potential new businesses to come downtown.

"It was years in the making and now it's here," said Berry. "It's been four years since people could walk on Veterans Boulevard. It will open up downtown to so much potential. It's a great public space. It will do what we said it will do: be a draw to bring people downtown. I'm ecstatic with the turnout. It's amazing. It's certainly an asset to point to that we didn't have before. People have to see it to believe, and they are seeing it tonight."



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 20 July 2022, Extra p.1

**Smothers Park remains a community gathering place
Park draws visitors throughout United States**

By Nathan Havenner, Messenger-Inquirer

Situated along the Ohio River in downtown Owensboro, Smothers Park is known to many as the crown jewel of the park facilities operated by Owensboro Parks and Recreation.

Long a part of the community, the land that now makes up the park at 199 W. Veterans Blvd. has been a community gathering place since 1816.

While the park that features the Lazy Dayz Playground, the Charles E. Shelton Memorial and signature fountains is known to many as Smothers Park, it has not always had the moniker.

Keith Lawrence reported in the Aug. 23, 2012, edition of the Messenger-Inquirer that the park has also been known as Riverside Park, Riverview Park and Riverfront Park at different times.

In 1963, the Daviess County Historical Society mounted a successful campaign to have the park renamed in honor of Bill Smeathers (Smothers). It is believed that Smothers built the first log cabin on land located just west of the park, in what was then known as Yellow Banks.

Amanda Rogers said since reopening to the public in August 2012 after extensive renovations and additions, Smothers Park has played a key role in the development of the city's downtown atmosphere.

"It is the crown jewel, and when I think about that location, I really give credit to Mayor Tom Watson, who really drove the initial development of the riverfront plan, and then he changed tenure over to Mayor Ron Payne, who took what Mayor Watson had started and really drove it home for our community," she said.

Now the site of community events such as the Owensboro Air Show and the Owensboro All-American Fourth of July, the park has become a central hub for community members.

"Between the park, the RiverPark Center, the Bluegrass Museum, the Convention Center, that is really a wonderful heart of our community as far as programming and activity," Rogers said. "Having Smothers Park connecting those locations really makes those transitions from one location to another a real entertainment destination."

Smothers Park can be separated into three different sections: a signature fountain area with inlet water feature, the Lazy Dayz Outdoor Museum and Children's Playground and the Shelton Memorial.

The fountains feature programmable lighting and the ability to put on two different water shows, which rotate every 30 minutes. The playground area features a state-of-the-art playground featuring large replicas of native Kentucky wildlife, as well as a spray park.

The memorial area of the park is home to the Charles E. Shelton Memorial.

Rogers said that while Smothers Park is an outdoor park space, it is operated more like a park facility, with employees typically on site between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m.

"They speak regularly with people that come to visit the park, and it is always surprising to me how many people are from out of town and out of state and even sometimes out of country," she said. "We get emails that say, talked with someone from Texas today, talked with someone from Iowa today ... we had three visitors from Florida today."

While its name has changed through the years, Smothers Park is still utilized by the community for the same reason it was established more than 200 years ago — as a community gathering place.

"A community gathering place that is large enough to house community-style events, where everyone feels comfortable and safe to come and visit," Rogers said.



