

GRADUATE ESSAY WINNER



The Racial Segregation of the Baltimore Park System 1890-1917

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This paper explores race as an issue in the public parks system of Baltimore, Maryland during the early years of the twentieth century. What the records help us to understand is that racially-motivated politics and the politics of race contributed an all-white cast to the public parks in Progressive-era Baltimore. Moreover, the parks, as well as sport and recreation more generally, divided blacks themselves. Some middle and upper-middle-class blacks did not realistically perceive the “wall” effect of white Progressive park programs. They adopted the belief system and the language of middle-class whites and denigrated some of the activities of working-class blacks.

Between 1900 and 1917 the public park system of Baltimore developed along racial lines. The policies and decisions on park locations, park facilities and park rules and regulations limited the use of Baltimore’s parks by blacks. In Baltimore’s seventeenth ward a condemnation decree used to take black housing also affected the city’s parks. The routes of streetcars and trains, plus the cost to ride them limited blacks’ ability to recreate. These policies and customs led to the racial segregation of Baltimore’s parks.

As with a crisis facing any city or town, people opposed to such injustices arose to combat the racist practices of Baltimore’s park system. Blacks opposed to segregation based on race confronted the city and park commission about their racial practices. Not yet fully aware of the racial attitudes and practices of the adults, black and white youths openly played together in at least two of Baltimore’s parks.

In the end, the city planned a park for blacks outside the city limits. Blacks also opened their own facilities for recreation, used the neighborhood sitting parks, or occasionally played at two of the city’s parks.