



*Daffin Park:*

THE FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS

*1907 - 2007*



*“Fresh air and sunlight space in which to move about ought surely to be provided in full measure for every day dwellers...moreover, it seems necessary for people to come into close touch with nature in order to maintain a proper sense of beauty and proportion, all of which goes to show how vitally important it is to have something of the freshness and beauty of the country embraced within the city itself.”*

Mayor George Tiedeman, 1911, referring to Daffin Park in Mayor's Annual Report

Dear Citizens of Savannah:

Throughout the year 2007, the City of Savannah will be celebrating the 100th birthday of its historic Daffin Park. The words you see above about Daffin Park were written in 1911 by Mayor George Tiedeman. While the language reflects an earlier time, what he had to say about the park still holds today – not only for Daffin but for all parks in urban settings.

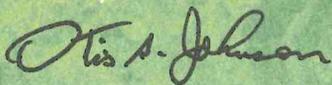
We have only to read current headlines in any city to know that parks are desirable in cities because they connect people to nature and to each other, they energize and stabilize neighborhoods, and they benefit urban economies by attracting investors, residents and visitors alike.

How blessed Savannah is to have a legacy of open spaces and parks that began with the colonial town plan and was continued for many, many years.

Daffin Park has a rich history, which you will read in this publication. Daffin represents several “firsts” in Savannah: it was Savannah's first park project of the 20th century, the first park project of the then-new Savannah Park & Tree Commission, and Savannah's first major park designed by a landscape architect.

The City is pleased to celebrate the 100th birthday of one of Savannah's best loved, most used parks. Events throughout the year will highlight Daffin's many offerings. Join us during 2007 as we applaud the place of parks in our beautiful city.

Sincerely,



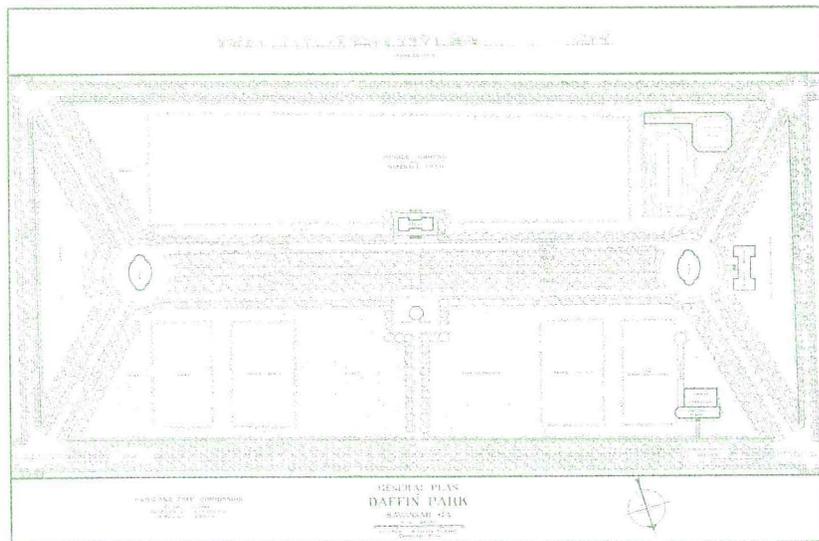
Otis S. Johnson, Ph.D.  
Mayor

# Daffin Park:

## THE FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS

By Tania June Sammons

*Daffin Park* one of Savannah's favorite community gathering places, has served Savannah's recreational and leisure needs for a century. Designed in 1907, the park plan took several decades to implement. The evolution of Daffin Park echoes that of the surrounding neighborhoods as well as the social and recreational development of the city during the twentieth century. Today, the park is vibrant with life, but the story of Daffin Park's first one hundred years includes high and low points, struggles and successes, conflicts and concurrences.



*Nolen's plan for Daffin  
City of Savannah*

Daffin Park was Savannah's first significant twentieth-century green space, measuring 80.4 acres. Designed by landscape architect John Nolen of Massachusetts, the park's grand plan included open green spaces, tree-lined promenades, fountains, recreational areas and a school.

His European-inspired plan focused on beauty, balance and symmetry. His ideas for the park evolved out of the early twentieth century's City Beautiful Movement, which sought to remedy social ills in American cities by bringing beauty and order into urban areas.

Savannah's City Council gave management responsibility for the park to the newly-formed Park and Tree Commission, chaired by Philip Dickinson (P. D.) Daffin. Shortly thereafter, the Council named the new park "Daffin Athletic Field," to recognize the local businessman and civic leader. City Council had also considered naming the site "Jeff Davis Recreation Grounds" in honor of Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

Not wasting time, in 1907 the Park and Tree Commission hired Nolen on the strong recommendation of businessman and Park and Tree Commissioner George Baldwin. They paid him \$500 to design Daffin Park, as the "Athletic Field" became known. While not all of Nolen's elements were built, and others



*Portrait photograph of John Nolen, #2903.  
Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscripts  
Collections, Cornell University Library*

*Through this work and his exposure to Europe's "garden city" experiments which focused on developing smaller towns rather than larger metropolises, Nolen began to envision a career in city planning. At age 33, he entered Harvard's School of Landscape Architecture, where he studied under such well-known landscape architects as Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. Nolen began his work in Savannah shortly after graduation in 1905. He went on to complete more than 350 commissions throughout the United States. (Thomas W. Hanchett, "John Nolen and the Planning of Savannah's Daffin Park, 1906-1909." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LXXVIII, No. 4, 1994, 810-827.)*

*John Nolen (1869-1937)  
Born in Philadelphia, John Nolen began his career studying economics and public administration at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduating, he ran the Society for the Extension of University Education, a progressive program that brought college-level courses to urban workers.*

not intended were added, the basic structure and footprint have been respected.

The Park and Tree Commission's enthusiasm for the park was high, but funding from the city was low. As a result, the implementation of John Nolen's plan, with compromises, took decades. With few resources, the Commission spent the first two decades filling low-lying and mosquito-breeding areas, including a large pond on the south side and part of the DeRenne Canal in the northwest section. The Commission also provided proper grading in preparation for planting, laid drainage pipes, tore down unneeded buildings, maintained others, and constructed a park keeper's residence on the west side, using the press stand from

#### *Savannah Park and Tree Commission*

*On November 30, 1895, Georgia's General Assembly passed an ordinance which created the Savannah Park and Tree Commission. The first meeting was held in January 1896. Dr. George Stone was the first Chairman, followed by P.D. Daffin in 1898. The early projects of the Commission included Colonial Park Cemetery restoration, Emmet Park, the median of Oglethorpe Avenue, Daffin Park and Bonaventure Cemetery, as well as street tree plantings. The Commission today is an advisory board, with day-to-day management of the city's trees and parks carried out by the Park and Tree Department.*

were transported from Ossabaw Island by "tug and lighter" and planted in the mall. More live oaks were planted in 1910, and a privet hedge was added in 1915. In 1916, the Commission planted 60 live oaks and 28 palmetto trees. In 1917, the department added hedges along the north and south edges of the central mall. The live oaks that shade the central mall and surround the entire park are favorites among Savannahians. In fact, in 1993, when years of parking inside the mall revealed extensive damage to the trees, concerned citizens were successful in urging the city to prohibit parking in that area.

Despite these small advances in the early years, the Park and Tree

the automobile races held in 1910 and 1911 as the foundation. Another employee lived in a small house on the eastern portion of the property.

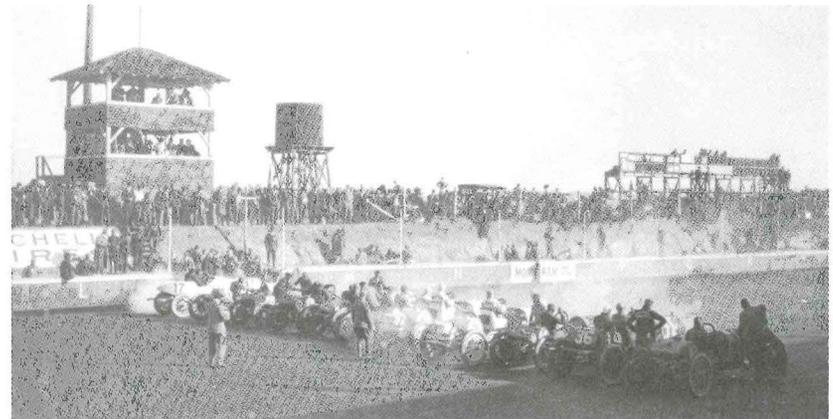
Additional improvements followed as appropriations were made available. In 1908, 156 live oak trees

Commission grew frustrated year after year with its meager funding. Between 1908 and 1917, the Commission spent a total of \$16,013. Budget allocations for Daffin during the first few years were minimal, despite annual pleas from the Park and Tree Commission for additional funds. Finally, in 1916, City Council increased the park's budget from \$500 to \$2,500. This decision was probably influenced by the fact that the surrounding neighborhoods were growing and park usage was increasing.

During these early years, the city rallied around two significant events held near or in Daffin Park. Still legendary, Savannah's automobile races brought international crowds to the city. A lesser known event placed Daffin Park at the center of Georgia aviation history when the first airmail flight in Georgia and the South was held on its grounds.

#### AUTO RACES

In the years 1908, 1910, and 1911, Savannah hosted automobile races sponsored by the Savannah Motor Club and sanctioned by the



*Grandstand of the automobile races  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society*

Automobile Club of America. The route for the races, including the famous Vanderbilt Cup and U.S. Grand Prize Races, was a circuitous path that passed Daffin Park on Dale Avenue (now part of Victory Drive) in 1908, and in 1910 and 1911 included Waters Avenue. After the 1908 races, the Automobile Club shifted its attention to the Northeastern United States. Dejected, the city tore down the grandstand located on Estill Avenue (also now part of Victory Drive) near Habersham Street. When the races returned in 1910, the city rebuilt two grandstands on Waters Avenue in Daffin Park near 46th Street. From that point forward, all the races began and ended at that location.

The automobile races were grand affairs, bringing visitors from across the nation and internationally. Julian K. Quattlebaum wrote that the events “attracted entries from the major car builders of Europe and America, together with the most famous drivers of the times.” The final race, the U.S. Grand Prize Race, occurred on November 30, 1911. Racing left Savannah for a number of reasons, including increased traffic and population along the racing route, competition by other cities hoping to host the races, and dwindling numbers of volunteers willing to organize the huge events.<sup>1</sup>

## AVIATION

On November 25, 1911, Savannah “Postmaster Henry Blun, Jr. handed a mailbag containing 502 postal cards and 20 letters to an aviator sitting at the controls of a rickety-looking biplane.” New York pilot Beckwith Havens, who was sworn in as an official U.S. mail carrier for the occasion, circled the field and dropped the sack at the northwestern end of the park. An assistant postal worker collected the package and transported the mail to the post office. The event “was part of an exhibition of speed and altitude flights” held during the auto races. Letterboxes and a temporary post office were set up at the site. Specially printed

postcards read, “This card was carried by aeroplane from United States aerial postal station located at the Savannah, Georgia, aviation field.”

The cancellation stamp read “Aerial Substation, Athletic Park, Savannah, Georgia.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1919, the Park and Tree Commission granted permission to the government to use the southern side of Daffin Park as a temporary airfield for mail service.

The landing field

was never used on a consistent basis; however, planes – both governmental and private – used the field intermittently throughout the decade. In 1920, there was some discussion about naming the field in honor of World War I pilot Lt. Frank O’Driscoll Hunter of Savannah, but Commissioners steadfastly held that the site was only a temporary airport.

In addition to planes flying in and out of the park, southbound tourists traveling to Florida from all parts of the nation by the relatively new method of transportation – the automobile – camped at Daffin Park. February 1922 photographs in the *Savannah Morning News* show an encampment in an open field with a variety of cars encased in tents surrounded by electricity poles and small trees. The headlines noted the popularity of the site and enticed locals to view the campground as if it were a carnival: “Visit To Site Is Novel Experience: ‘Tin Can Visitors Include Many Unusual People.’”<sup>3</sup>



*Filling the swimming pool*  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society

## EVOLUTION OF THE PARK DESIGN

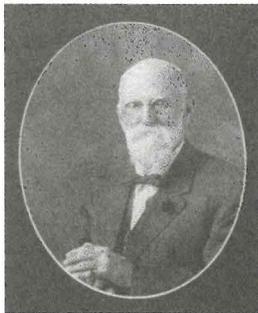
Nolen's plan was not implemented fully according to his original design. Several buildings and water features were not developed, while in later years a large stadium and a lake were added where none had been planned.

### The Lake

In the 1920s, the city installed a lake along the north side of the park on Dale Avenue. William Henry Robertson, superintendent of the Park and Tree Commission, designed the lake in the shape of the contiguous 48 United States. Robertson saw the need for a swimming site in the city after witnessing children riding a wooden door in a water-filled depression after a rainstorm. The lake was oriented along the compass

### *Philip Dickinson (P. D.) Daffin (1841-1929)*

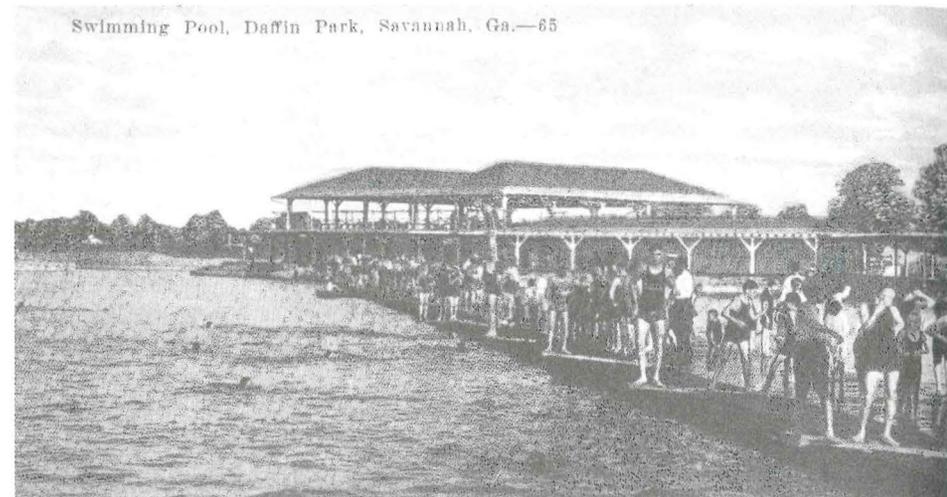
*P. D. Daffin, a cotton broker, railroad president, civic leader and a founding member of the Park and Tree Commission (established in 1896), became the Commission's chairman in 1898. He held that position until his death in 1929. A Florida native, Daffin moved to Savannah after the Civil War. He was a Confederate Army veteran and later became a founding member of the Savannah Cotton Exchange. A Savannah Morning News obituary described him thus: "with his snow-white beard, his cane and his gay neckties, he made a striking figure that was known to thousands of Savannahians." The local paper also noted, "his fresh outlook on life and his gay and youthful spirit were characteristics that remained with him to the end. (Savannah Morning News, December 20, 1929)*



*Courtesy of City of Savannah Park and Tree Department*

points of the park, which placed the Canadian border along Dale Avenue, the northern part of the park. When completed, the lake was divided into two halves, one for swimming, the other for boating and fishing.<sup>4</sup>

Every summer the Daffin Park "pool" became the focal point for the white children of Savannah (African American children had a separate swimming site in the city). Admission to the pool was free, but patrons paid five cents for the use of showers and soap



*Postcard of Daffin swimming pool  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society*

in the bathhouse as mandated by the health department. Nonetheless, some children found their way around that requirement when they lacked money. Kit Chandler Pelletreau recalled "[we would] sneak in by wetting ourselves in the boating waters behind the bathhouses and rush into the pool as if we'd already been swimming." Bathers could also rent swimsuits if they did not own one. By the 1940s, the city chlorinated the pool section of the lake and provided a lunchroom for bathers, run by restaurateur Herb Traub. Night swimming was also available during this time.<sup>5</sup>

### Municipal and Grayson Stadiums

Another departure from Nolen's plan occurred in 1926 when the city constructed a municipal stadium on the eastern section of the park, an area originally designated for a pine grove. While providing the city with an important facility, the new structure interrupted the landscape architect's symmetrical design. However, in 1935, the city planted a grove of 1,000 slash pine trees on five acres between the stadium and Bee Road

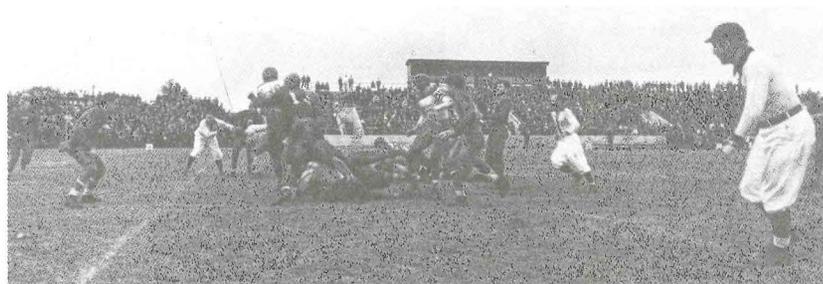


*Dr. Charles Herty*  
Courtesy of Georgia Archives,  
Vanishing Georgia Collection,  
CTM 236

in honor of Dr. Charles H. Herty. Herty, a chemist who studied at the University of Georgia and Johns Hopkins University, revolutionized the southern forestry industry. He chose slash pine trees because “the tree holds more promise of wealth for the future of Georgia and the South...it grows faster, sheds its lower limbs more readily... [and] makes more turpentine.”<sup>6</sup>

The stadium was first constructed of wood, with a concrete grandstand added before 1940. From the opening of Municipal Stadium, Daffin Park became the focal point for civic events, including

high school graduations, city functions, and even a presidential gathering. However, Municipal Stadium was best known as the host of Savannah’s athletic events, from high school football games and minor league baseball to occasional college-level sports events and professional exhibition games. For example, perhaps the longest running local high school football rivalry occurred between Savannah High School and Benedictine Military Academy. Between the years of 1927-1959, the two teams went head-to-head in front of hundreds of onlookers at their annual game in the Stadium on Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving night in the mid-20th century also brought rivals Tompkins and



*High school football game*  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society

Beach High Schools to the stadium. On “Turkey Night,” families would eat Thanksgiving dinner during the game in the evening. Bernie Polite, offensive guard for Tompkins in 1959 and 1960, recalls “the stadium would be rockin’, it would vibrate.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the stadium didn’t host a permanent baseball team until 1936, when the Savannah Indians sent three players to the New York Giants, Municipal Stadium began a baseball tradition in 1927. The stadium hosted an exhibition game between the 1926 World Series Champion St. Louis Cardinals and the previous year’s American League pennant holders, the New York Yankees, featuring Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. The Cardinals beat the Yankees 20-10.

On August 11, 1940, the wooden section of the stadium was destroyed by a hurricane. Later that year a Stadium Committee, led by General William L. Grayson, formed to look into building a modern municipal athletic stadium on the same site. General Grayson (1870-1941) was a prominent civic, political, and social leader who distinguished himself in the Spanish-American War. He was the Clerk of Superior Court for the Eastern Judicial Circuit for thirty years, and served two terms as an Alderman. By early 1941, the city razed the remainder of Municipal Stadium and a new structure was under construction by the summer. Plans for the new stadium called for a horseshoe shape with a seating



*Triple XXX Thirst Station, Victory Drive, 1938*  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society



*Grayson Stadium*  
© Jack Leigh Gallery

capacity of 12,000. During the planning stages in 1941, General Grayson died. Less than two weeks later, the City Council unanimously adopted a resolution to name the new stadium in his honor. However, due to World War II, construction (and baseball) halted. The stadium was never fully completed as planned, but the structure still allowed for use. Since then, the stadium has undergone a number of renovations and most recently, in 2005, the city installed a new parking lot.

After World War II, in 1946, the Savannah Indians became the first Savannah team affiliated with a major league ball club, the Cleveland Indians. The following year, pitcher Lou Brissie – a war hero with an injured leg – led the team to a South Atlantic League championship. In

subsequent years, the professional sport brought a number of baseball legends to the city. In addition to Ruth (who also made an appearance in 1935) and Gehrig, baseball legends Jackie Robinson, Mickey Mantle, Hank Aaron, and Dale Murphy have played at the stadium.

#### TENNIS

Six tennis courts were installed in Daffin Park in 1927 and expanded to nine in 1949. In 1927, one hour of singles play cost \$.10 per person, a fee that was raised to \$.15 in 1933.

Despite issues regarding proper grading, Savannahians loved

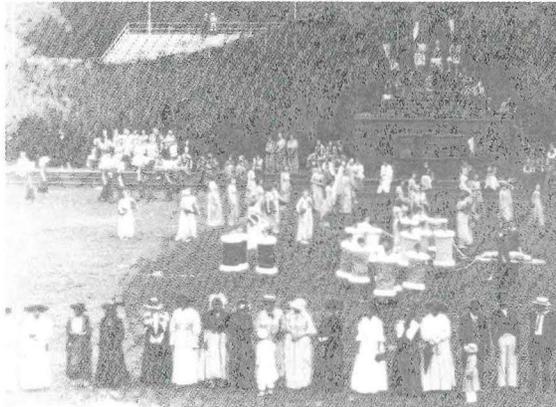
playing tennis in Daffin Park. Reports listing admissions in the early years showed 17,506 players in 1931, 12,256 in 1932, and 13,472 in 1934. Like baseball, Savannah tennis also brought stars of the game. For example, Ellsworth Vines, a three-time number one player in the world, as well as tennis stars Lester Stoefen and Berkeley Bell, all played at Daffin Park in 1936.

In 1991, the City opened a new tennis clubhouse dedicated to William Washington “B” Gordon IV, who died in 1977. An instructor of many of Savannah’s youth, he was known as “the grand old man of tennis in Savannah.” Additional clay courts will be added before 2012.

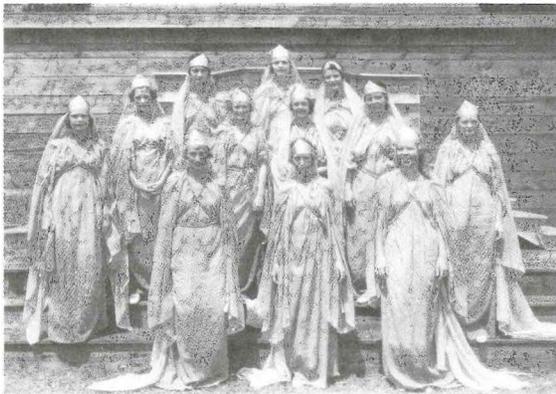
## GEORGIA'S BICENTENNIAL

### Bicentennial Pageant

Perhaps the biggest events to occur at Municipal Stadium took place in 1933 in celebration of Georgia's Bicentennial. As part of the occasion, Savannah put together two programs, both held at the stadium. On February 12, a pageant was held to commemorate Georgia's colonization on the same date in 1733. Hundreds of men and women from throughout the city and state ran these events through two groups



*Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society*



*Scenes from the Bicentennial pageant*  
*Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society*

created especially for the occasion – the Bicentennial Commission of the State of Georgia and the 200th Anniversary Commission of the City of Savannah.

The pageant depicted various aspects of the first one hundred years of Georgia's history. Episodes and processions recognized and represented the Trustees, James Oglethorpe and Tomochichi, Salzbergers, Hebrews, Masons, Moravians,

Highlanders, Bethesda, Midway, Negro Spirituals, Arrest of Governor Wright, Victory Parade, Burning of Yazoo Land Act, Sailing of S.S. Savannah, Ball for President Monroe, Cherokee Evacuation, Development of Higher Education, and the Centennial Celebration Parade.

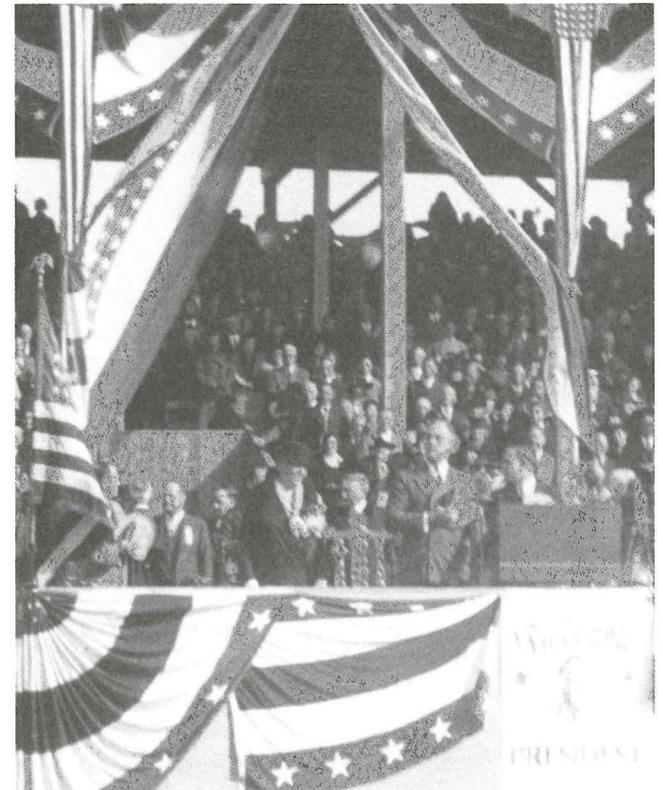
The state's early industries – silk, rice, indigo and cotton – were also represented. The Savannah Philharmonic Orchestra and the Firemen's Band provided music.

The hopeful foreword to the Pageant Book explained that the celebratory event would create "a common bond of understanding and sympathy between groups ordinarily having few possibilities of cooperative contacts."<sup>8</sup>

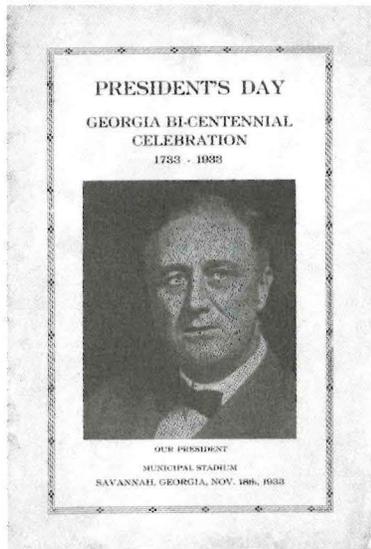
### President Franklin Delano Roosevelt Appears

Savannah's second and closing event celebrating Georgia's Bicentennial brought President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, honorary President of the Georgia Bicentennial Commission,

to an overflowing Municipal Stadium on November 18, 1933. Writing in the *Savannah Evening Press* later that day, journalist Anna C. Hunter captured the atmosphere of the setting as the President entered the stadium: "The huge amphitheater was massed with Georgians, who turned out today in whole-hearted allegiance to their Democratic



*President Roosevelt and his mother at Bicentennial Celebration*  
*Courtesy of Herbert S. Traub*



*Program of the Bicentennial Celebration*  
Courtesy of Herbert S. Traub

leader...a telling silence falling over the thousands assembled to catch his simplest word." During his short speech, President Roosevelt reminded his audience of "the kinship which my wife and my children bear to the early settlers who participated with Oglethorpe in the founding of civilization on this portion of the Atlantic seaboard." The president's mother, Mrs. Sara Delano Roosevelt, accompanied him on the visit.<sup>9</sup>

Thousands of people came to see the president; one estimate numbered the crowd at 40,000.

*Savannah Evening Press* journalist

James H. Cobb reported that 15,000 school children waved American flags as a 21-gun salute announced his approach and the entire audience sang the first verse of "America." Before the program 600 African Americans sang with "melodious voices [that] filled the air with their spirituals and other songs."<sup>10</sup>

## AFTER WORLD WAR II

After World War II, Savannahians, like most Americans, shifted their attention from overseas to home. Aside from the success of the Savannah Indians baseball team, the rest of Daffin Park needed attention. With the continuous growth in the neighborhoods surrounding the park, a group of civic-minded women, in addition to Park and Tree Commissioners, began to criticize the neglect of the park. In 1947, the American Association of University Women sent recommendations to the City

Recreation Commission, which took over Daffin Park's management in 1944, requesting additional playgrounds, ball fields, picnic areas, tables and benches for the park. The Association sent the recommendations along with a petition signed by more than sixty heads of clubs, churches and school bodies.

Criticism continued in March 1948. Another women's group, the Women's Advisory Board, encouraged an orderly and thorough development plan for Daffin Park and submitted a five-point action plan to city council that would result in "a beautiful area containing necessary recreational facilities for young and old." Their concerns stemmed from the lack of focus regarding the park and cited John Nolen's original plans when they requested that the park be a comprehensive recreation site. The *Savannah Morning News* agreed. A 1947 article noted: "Failure to obtain sufficient appropriation from the city to carry out the plan has left Nolen's ideas on the drawing paper down through the years, but they are as modern and useful today as ever with some slight modifications."<sup>11</sup>

The Park and Tree Commission had its own complaints, all targeting the city. The Commission's criticisms and obvious frustration harkened back to earlier struggles with the city. "Lethargy on the part of our people and various city governments since that time have permitted it to remain neglected and undeveloped. The Park and Tree Commission has never been able even to obtain enough funds to curb and pave its axial avenues and its central mall. This central mall is 216 feet wide...when completed - if ever - it will be one of the most beautiful malls in the country. Any developments in Daffin Park at present are of a temporary nature, although the stadium has sadly mutilated the original Nolen plan."<sup>12</sup>

A small success occurred on May 21, 1947, when a newly installed playground opened. Although seen as an improvement, officials criticized the city for failure to properly integrate Nolen's plan during early years, noting, "every hour spent by young people on our playgrounds



*Palm-lined median of Victory Drive,  
with Daffin in background*  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society

means an hour spent away from any possible evil influence.”<sup>13</sup>

In the midst of criticisms, other interested parties sought to alter the park. In October 1947, the City Recreation Commission approached City Council about building an indoor sports arena at Daffin Park, located between the tennis courts and

Grayson Stadium. Then, in August 1949, the Board of Education petitioned the city to give five acres of Daffin Park for an elementary school. Both requests brought fierce opposition from the Park and Tree Commission, which hired Alan B. Burrirt, recreation planner for the National Recreation Association, to report on improvements to the city’s recreation areas in 1949. In his report, Burrirt criticized the sports arena proposal. His colleague, R.B. Van Fleet, Georgia/Florida district field representative for the National Recreation Association, also advised against construction of a sports arena or school in Daffin Park. Finally, City Council voted for no action in regards to Daffin Park changes.

### **A New Pool**

In October 1952, the health department proclaimed Daffin Park swimming pool unsanitary and unfit for public use due to sewer leakages. This action left the white community without a pool. By February of the following year the City Recreation Commission proposed a new pool that measured 165 x 60 feet and cost \$75,000. City Council took nearly a year, including the summer of 1953, to decide in favor of building a new public pool for the white population. Despite their unanimous decision

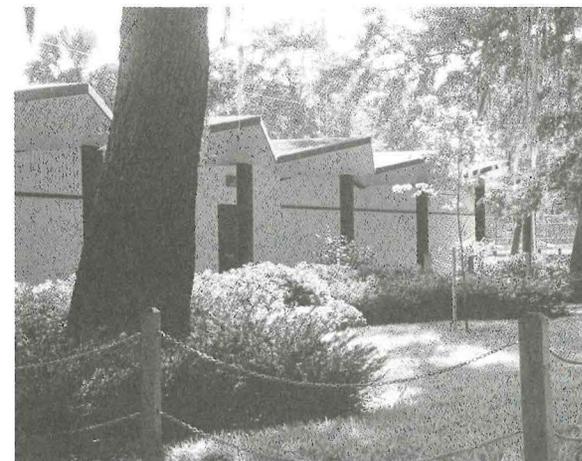
in October 1953, the project did not pass without criticism.

At a meeting in January 1954, the Park and Tree Commission voted to adhere to Nolen’s Park Plan and Alan B. Burrirt’s “complete report and survey which improved the original plan” in an effort to protect the park from “schools, separate swimming pool, circus area, sports arena, skating rink, midway shows and minstrel shows.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite these rumblings, the new pool, measuring 165 x 50 feet, opened on August 21, 1954. The pool encompassed part of the lake and became the first public concrete water filtering system facility in Savannah. Thirteen year-old Robert Anderson of 49th Street had the pleasure of being the first to jump in the pool. Five hundred children and 175 adults quickly joined him. Tickets to the new pool cost \$.15 for children and \$.25 for adults. Night swimming cost \$.35.

In addition to the main pool, the city also had a “therapy pool,” built for handicapped children, specifically those who suffered from polio. The pool was called “Sunshine Pool” and remained in use until the late 1970s.

In 1959, the old dilapidated bathhouse was replaced with an “ultra plush, modern, unique” bathhouse, which could be used by “bathers, tennis players and any other athletes using the park.” Two decades after the pool opened, the City Recreation Commission recommended that the city build a new pool. Instead, the city repaired the existing pool in 1975.<sup>15</sup>



*Modern bathhouse buildings, now used as offices*  
Kacey Ratterree

### A New Lake

Renovations of Daffin Park's lake began in 1955. Over the next two years the City Recreation Commission worked with the State Game and Fish Hatchery and the Junior Chamber of Commerce to dredge and deepen the lake (from 2½ to 6 feet) with the goal of introducing larger fish. Removal of dirt amounted to 250,000 cubic feet. Finally, the lake was filled with three million gallons of water and stocked with 2,500 bream and 2,500 bass. The lake opened in 1958 to children 14 and younger. Later, the city also allowed senior citizens to fish in the lake.

A few years later, in 1957, the city introduced small sailboats, which the Savannah Recreation Commission and American Red Cross used to train children ages 8 to 12 how to sail. In 1973, the city spent \$60,000 on park improvements. In addition to lighting some tennis courts, building an additional basketball court, and paving the parking area, an octagon pavilion was added to the island in the lake.

Despite all efforts, the lake was doomed to ongoing maintenance issues. By 1963, concerns about the lake's weed and algae overgrowth led to discussions about draining, cleaning and restocking the pond. In the mid-1970s, vegetation growth remained a problem and was complicated by people using the lake as a dump. Finally, in 1975, an Earth Moving Platoon from Ft. Stewart-Hunter Army Airfield complex cleaned and deepened Daffin Lake as a training exercise. Shortly afterwards, the city had to repair a breached sewage line that ran under the lake, causing the lake to drain into the city's sewage system. In the mid-1980s, the city discovered that the lake was still leaking into the sewage system under the lakebed, which led to a \$600,000 renovation that rerouted the drainage system and renovated the lakebed and banks. The lake was rededicated in March 1989, but by 1990, the algae had returned. To help eliminate the vegetation growth, the city added carp to the lake, in addition to chemical treatments and floating fountains to aerate the water.



*View of Daffin lake*  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society

Finally, with the lake repaired and mostly algae-free, the city's local Rotary clubs, led by Herb Traub, beautified the Daffin Lake area as a legacy to the 1996 Summer Olympics. They dedicated their efforts to Desert Storm veterans. From 1991 to 1998, their "Olympic Legacy" resulted in two 60-foot jet fountains with lights, a pathway along a landscaped shore, ornamental lighting, benches, a spruced-up pavilion topped with a five-foot bronze sculpture by blacksmith John Boyd Smith and Kevin Palmer, and picnic tables. The project totaled nearly \$225,000.

### DESEGREGATION

Up until (and partially throughout) the 1960s, Daffin Park, like other Southern public spaces before the Civil Rights movement, was considered a "white" park. Nonetheless, African Americans were

allowed in the park on certain occasions. During the 1933 Bicentennial Celebration in Municipal Stadium, African Americans were invited to participate in the celebrations. Groups of African Americans sang for the crowds gathered to commemorate the state's history and welcome President Roosevelt.

African Americans were also permitted to work in Daffin Park in areas such as the skating rink, lunchroom and pool area. John White, one of Savannah's first African American police officers, worked in the skating rink and concession area as a teenager from 1939 to 1942. He recalls that legendary boxer Sugar Ray Robinson trained in the skating rink, owned by Henry Gottlieb, during that time.

Aside from the few people who worked in the park, Municipal Stadium – and later Grayson Stadium – provided African Americans the only Daffin Park venue open to the Savannah's black citizens. However, seating arrangements were segregated. The NAACP began protesting this practice in 1962, which resulted in the local team's (Savannah White Sox) move to Lynchburg, Virginia, during the middle of the season. Baseball did not return to Savannah until 1968.

Despite these frictions, some individual baseball teams were more progressive. On April 14, 1953, third baseman Al "Izzy" Israel and right fielder Junior Reedy, both African Americans, started in the home opener against the Jacksonville Tars, making Savannah the first team to break through the South Atlantic League's "color barrier" that prohibited integrated play. Other teams in the league soon followed Savannah's lead.

Another first occurred in 1973. Tommie Aaron, the younger brother of Hank Aaron, became manager for the Savannah Braves. His position made him the first African American to serve as a manager of a professional team in the Deep South. Furthermore, he was the first black manager to hold the reins of a AA ball club in the nation.

A less positive experience occurred in January 1961. Six black men, who were playing basketball on an early Monday afternoon in Daffin Park, were arrested for "breach of peace." The Supreme Court of Georgia affirmed the conviction and the United States Supreme Court agreed to hear the case. *Nathaniel Wright et al. v. Georgia* went to the United States Supreme Court. On May 20, 1963, the Court unanimously overruled the state's verdict of guilty. In his opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren found "the convictions are violative of due process of law secured by the Fourteenth Amendment."<sup>16</sup>

Another lawsuit, filed by 23 plaintiffs on March 1, 1962, addressed discrimination at the Daffin Park pool. Judge Frank Scarlett dismissed the case in May 1964.

In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was scheduled to speak in Daffin Park. Due to bad weather, however, the event was moved to St. Paul's CME Church. One of King's bodyguards, Officer John White, recalls the security concerns and noted King's awareness of his safety. Two weeks later, King was killed in Memphis, Tennessee.

#### LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

After desegregation, life at Daffin Park resumed with normal recreation activities, and, on occasion, other community events, including the Jaycees' Kiddie Fairs and New Year's bonfires. In the 1970s, the city transformed the park's bathhouses from showers to activity and meeting centers. Later they became offices for Leisure Services staff, as they remain today. The city's Christmas tree was also moved to Daffin Park for a short time during the decade. Other changes in the 1970s included a park ordinance that banned motorbikes, motorcycles, horseback riding, and golfing. Four basketball courts located in the center of the mall were removed, as was the spray pool on the western side of the park. City officials filled in and planted the circular pool with shrubbery, claiming

the threat of automobile traffic near children as well as the deterioration of the spray pool as reasons for the closure.



*Entrance to Ashley Dearing Playground*  
Kacey Ratterree

improvement plan for Daffin Park. The city hired the Atlanta firm

The 1980s brought another first to Daffin Park – a barrier-free playground. Named for Ashley Dearing, Jr., a former Savannah athlete who was stricken with polio in the 1940s, the playground provided children with disabilities an outdoor recreational option. Dearing Playground was the second such playground in the country at the time it was dedicated.

In 2002, the city announced a three-phase \$3.5 million

Robert and Company to design the project. The plan included additional clay tennis courts; more space for soccer and football; improved lighting; resurrection of the original fountain at the west end of the mall, rebuilding the mall's east side fountain included in Nolen's original design; improved parking; new sidewalks; improved picnic area on Bee Road side; modern playground equipment; a running path; and improved drainage. Funded by Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), the city successfully completed many of these improvements. Additional SPLOST funds will also be used for the remaining projects, which the city hopes to complete by 2012.

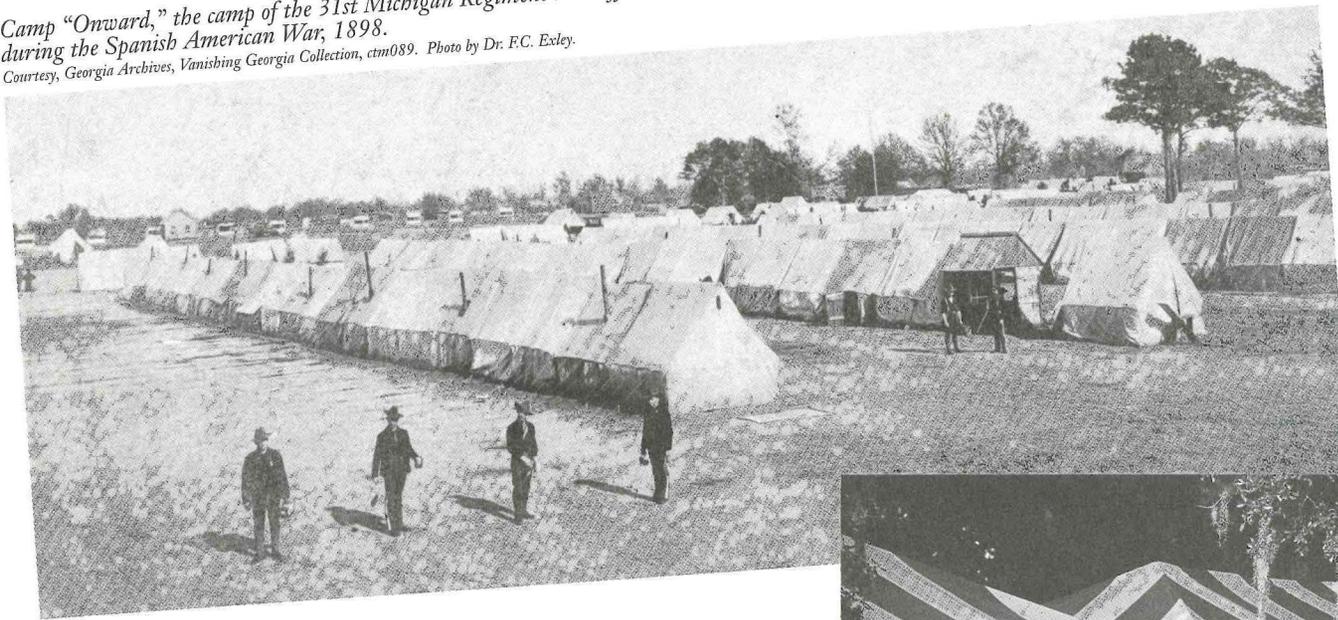
For one hundred years, Savannahians young and old, new and native, have used Daffin Park as a community gathering place to watch and participate in various sporting events – baseball, football, soccer, tennis, and basketball – and to swim, walk, fish, skate, picnic and relax. As we look to the next century, we are reminded of Mayor George Tiedeman's comments in his 1911 annual report:

*"...how vitally important it is to have something of the freshness and beauty of the country embraced with in the city itself."<sup>17</sup>*

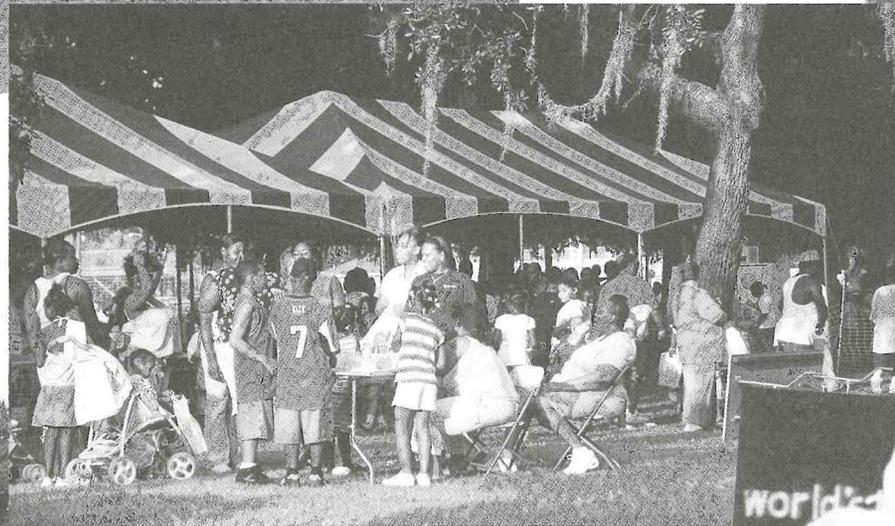
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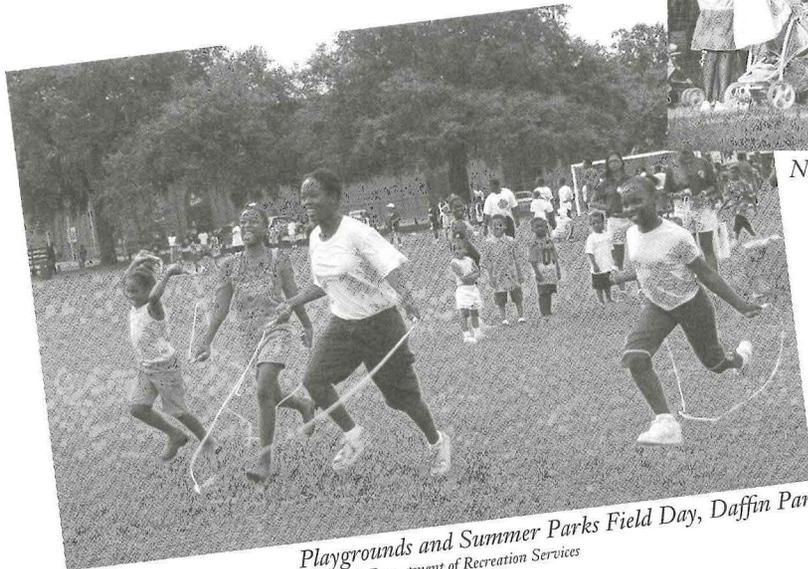
*Camp "Onward," the camp of the 31st Michigan Regiment at Daffin Park, during the Spanish American War, 1898.*  
*Courtesy, Georgia Archives, Vanishing Georgia Collection, ctm089. Photo by Dr. F.C. Exley.*



*Celebrating the 100th birthday  
of one of Savannah's  
best loved, most used parks*



*National Night Out festival*

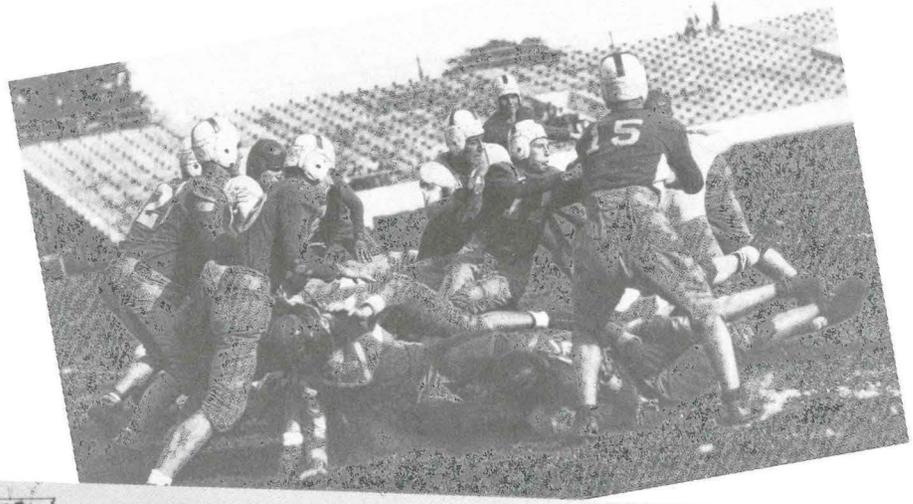


*Playgrounds and Summer Parks Field Day, Daffin Park*  
*Savannah Department of Recreation Services*



*Tompkins High School vs. Beach High*  
*1961 Wolverine annual, Tompkins High School, courtesy of B*

Football game in Grayson Stadium  
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society



Airplane in Daffin Park  
Courtesy of the Family of Margaret Donlevy Nelson



Municipal swimming pool in Daffin Park  
Courtesy, Georgia Archives, Vanishing Georgia Collection, ctm155



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Edna B. Jackson

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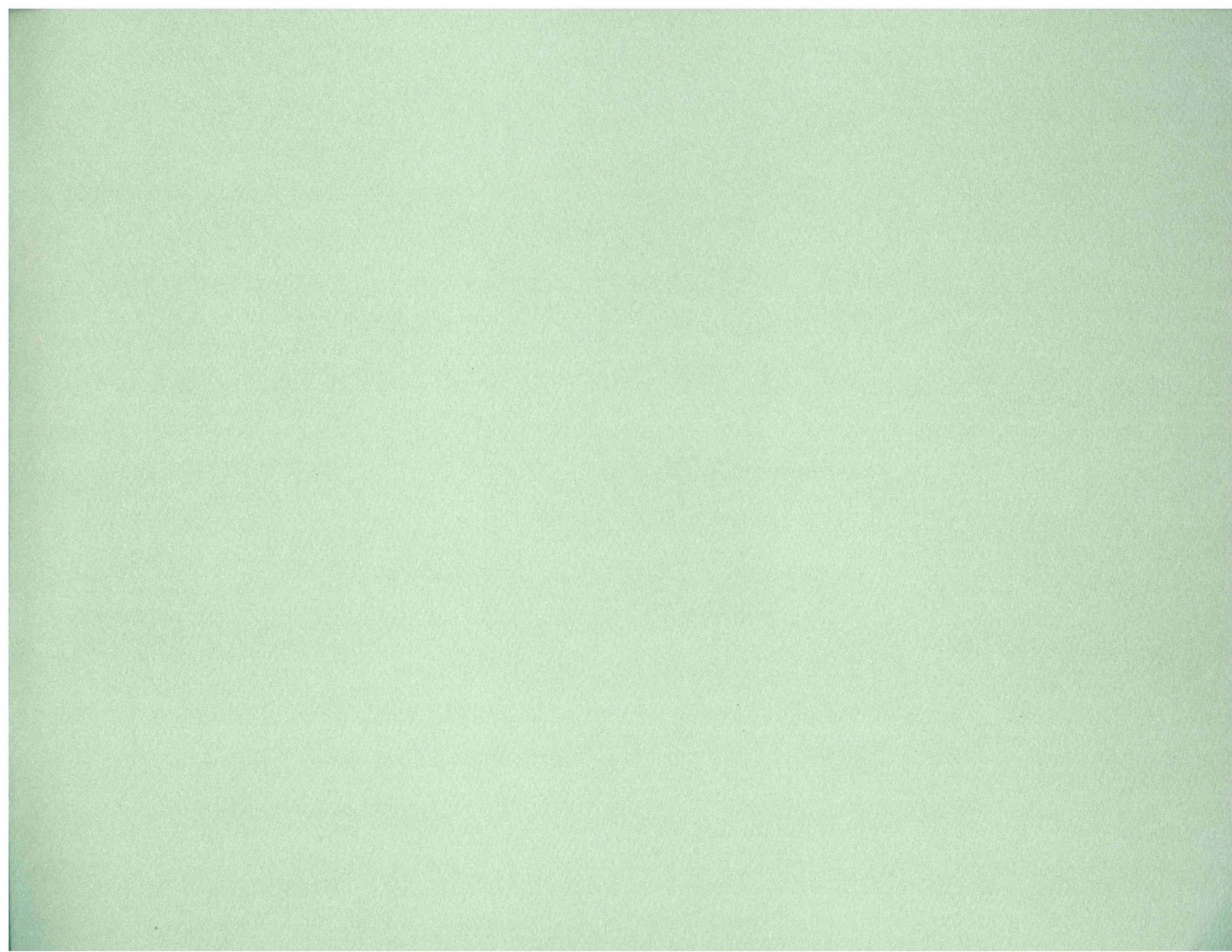
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