

Historical Outline of Wapato Park

By

Melissa McGinnis

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Wapato Lake was formed approximately 15,000 years ago during the retreat of the Frazier Ice Sheet. The lake was likely formed as a basin in glacial drift, created by a block of ice which melted after the retreat of the main ice sheet. The area was once a heavily forested rolling plain. Vashon Till underlies the area.

The Native American name for the lake was “Wappato” for a wild plant (*sagittaria latifolia*) that grew in profusion around the lake. The plant produced small bulbs that looked like potatoes. These thickened root stocks were an important part of the diet of local Native Americans. The Indian Henry Trail from Mount Rainier to Commencement Bay ran east of Wapato Lake and one branch of the trail led to Wapato.

Little is known of the early history of the lake. The U. S. Government Land Office’s field notes and map make no particular mention of the lake other than to note its existence at the time of the original township and section survey in 1862,

The growth of Tacoma’s south end and the area around Wapato Lake was originally dependent upon the construction, in 1888, of R. F. Radebaugh’s narrow gauge streetcar line to Fern Hill, a small community located six miles south of Commencement Bay. This line ran in the vicinity of South M Street near the Indian Henry Trail. Radebaugh had come to Tacoma in 1881 when he and H. C. Patrick started the *Tacoma Weekly Ledger* newspaper. That same year he purchased 80 acres on Wapato Lake where he built a cottage. At that time there were only two families living between his Wapato home and his workplace in downtown Tacoma. Radebaugh was “carried to and from his office by horse”. In addition to his many investments and business interests, Radebaugh made many judicious real estate purchases, including the purchase of an additional 280 acres surrounding Wapato Lake.

Radebough bought out his streetcar partners and continued the Fern Hill line to Wapato Lake where he planned to build a fashionable residence district. He platted the land, sold large tracts, and developed Wapato Lake Park. He hired Ebenezer Roberts to oversee the development. Roberts’ “artistic sense and boundless enthusiasm soon began to make a floral fairyland of the place”. It was the beginning of real park work in Tacoma.

On **June 5, 1889** a reporter interviewed Roberts about the contemplated improvements of the Wapato Lake property. Roberts noted that at Hosmer Avenue there was a beautiful wooded driveway, which was already graveled and graded down to the lake. He said that “it would not be long before Tacoma will possess a park rivaling the Princess Park of Liverpool in attractiveness, the Bois de Bologne of Paris in beauty, and the Fairmount Park in Philadelphia in natural scenery”. Ornithology and zoology will be fully represented in the magnificently adorned area. Carefully engineered driveways, shaded bridal paths and sequestered walks will make the park a veritable Eden. A large conservatory will be built at the north end of the lake. It will be more than 200 feet in

length and will be heated by steam. A large boiler will also be utilized in lifting water to any part of the park. Everything appertaining to sport will be found there. There will be several bowling alleys, tennis courts, croquet grounds. Billiard halls and racquet courts. A pavilion and band stand will also be erected in this section of the park. To the west of the Conservatory will be placed the deer park. An aquarium is also expected to be added to this section of the park, which will contain representatives of the "finny tribe". A large number of swans and water fowl will be placed in the lake which will also be stocked with trout. On the west side of the lake is platted seventeen lots. They are each 200 feet in width, from four acres and a fraction in length on the north side to six acres and a fraction on the south side.

Roberts noted that "Wapato Lake Park is to be devoted to the public within certain limits. All well-disposed people will be welcomed to enjoy the pleasures of the park without charge, except where there is a call for those pleasures which cost money. It will doubtless prove very attractive for picnics and all well-conducted parties will be made welcome".

Roberts also described the vegetation. "The native trees in the park are of great number. They include pines, cedars, oak, silver fir, alder, ash, maple in varieties, poplar, dogwood, crabapple in great variety and manzanita. Equally numerous are the shrubs. Among them can be found the azelis, altheas, deutizia of many varieties, spireas and laurels. Ferns are also very prolific and grown in great luxuriance and abundance". But none the less important of the projected improvements is the nursery which is to be erected on the 40 acres of the drained lake bottom, east side of the main driveway approaching the lake. It will be the largest establishment of the kind in the west. Propagating houses of immense size will be erected, and a general nursery business of an extensive character will be conducted. The rose houses will also be a special feature, growing every known variety.

By later that same month the park is evidently open to the public. On **June 24, 1889** the newspaper reports that the Tacoma & Fern Hill streetcars are now running to Hosmer Avenue, the present entrance of Wapato Park. The article continues to report that "the people began coming early in the forenoon and kept it up all day. Everything was in harmony, in keeping. Little children romped in the sand or played hide-and-seek, while their mothers wore faces that showed they had forgotten for the moment household cares and worries, and men of affairs lolled along shaded byways quite given up to the enjoyment of the our. The park is rapidly becoming the most beautiful vista of landscape in this section of the northwest. Its lake, a pure crystal sheet of water, its swimming pools, where one can enjoy a luxurious bath, its lovely shaded walks, fringed on either side by virgin timber, commend it to those in search of such pleasures as they can afford".

The **4th of July 1889** was an especially busy day at the park. The Tacoma & Fern Hill railroad sold over 600 tickets each way to Wapato Lake Park and could have sold more if the train could accommodate them. A neat house, containing several large dressing rooms for bathers, had been started. Roberts noted that, "I tried to get some bathing suits in Tacoma but none were to be had; consequently a large number of people who wanted to

swim today were disappointed”. Roberts also stated that “there at the south end of the lake will be a terrace 500 feet long and 100 feet wide. At the top of this terrace will be a flower garden. The baseball ground will be built to the west of the terrace instead of east of it as was first intended, the latter ground was found too hilly. A tidy refreshment stand is now handsomely housed on the shore of the lake and several rustic summer houses have been built in shady nooks”.

On **July 7, 1889** the Tacoma Ledger ran an ad for Wapato Lake Park:

Wapato Lake Park – Beautiful Pleasure Resort
Boating and Bathing, Fine Pavilion with Dancing Platform, Picnic Grounds,
Summer Houses, and Delightful Shady Walks
First Class Refreshments
Take the Tacoma & Fern Hill Railroad
E. R. Roberts, Manager
This lake is the only body of water near Tacoma having a temperature
suitable for bathing. All other are too cold. Bring your bathing suits.

Business continued to boom during the summer of 1889 as evidenced by a newspaper article on **July 19, 1889** announcing that the Tacoma & Fern Hill Street railroad would now run to Wapato Lake Park seven days a week, not just on weekends. Round trips cost just 20¢. Features in the park now being promoted were a large bathing raft floored with dressed lumber, diving spring board, refreshment pavilion, beautiful bridle paths, and grottoes. Newspapers noted that Wapato Lake Park was fast becoming very popular and that it is one of the prominent features of the City of Destiny. Even with all the development taking place, plans did not include any considerable alterations in the natural features of the park according to Roberts. “The aim being to simply aid nature by removing what may be objectionable to the eye and by planting attractions suitable to such a place. The work of clearing near the south end of the lake for the glass forcing houses is under way. Near the southeast corner there will be made ready for next season grounds for an agricultural fair with a mile race course and for baseball and cricket grounds, all enclosed by a high close fence with the motor line passing in front of the main entrance”.

The following summer it appears that development and activities are still making Wapato Lake Park as popular as ever. A **June 27, 1890** newspaper article described a picnic hosted by “Citizen Train”. Citizen Train was George Francis Train, a friend of Radebaugh, Tacoma booster and the man credited with name Tacoma the “City of Destiny”. Train referred to Wapato as “Tacoma’s Fir Tree Central Park”. At this time Ebenezer Roberts and his wife were still managing the park. Roberts took the picnickers through his wonderful collection of plants in the largest greenhouse on Puget Sound and Mrs. Roberts treated the children to ice cream. Radebaugh hosted a candy party on the verandah of his homestead. Train’s bungalow on the lake was “ornamented with lovely Japanese fans, spoils of his round-the-world trip, great umbrellas, beautiful Japanese curtains were tacked on the wall inside and out, and curios that charmed the children”.

Later that summer a visitor from Yakima described his visit to the park in a newspaper article on **August 11, 1890**.

“It is the property of R. F. Radebaugh and contains 344 acres. The surface is undulating with here a high hill and there a low vale, and over almost all is the primeval forest, not dense, but of mammoth firs, with great trunks rising to a tremendous height and crowned with a dense foliage that canopies all below. These grand old kings of the forest will doubtless stand as a comfort and a pleasure to the multiplying thousands of the City of Destiny and a monument to the mighty forest of Puget Sound for generations after they are shorn of their glory for Mr. Radebaugh has determined to spare them for this wise purpose.

Easterly in the park is Lake Wapato, a beautiful little sheet of spring water nestling among the hills. Around it, on a natural ridge, is a shade drive of about two and one-half miles. On one side is a nicely appointed pavilion, dance platform, boat and bathhouses. At the foot of the lake in a charming spot are two large floral houses built in modern style. One is complete and well stocked with choicest of plants and flowers. To these will be added six more of equal size and finish and when complete will stand in two rows and the arena between leading to the lake will be covered with glass. Nearby is a beautiful white cottage, the home of Mr. Roberts, the experienced florist in charge.

Here also will be erected an elaborate pavilion with boat and bathhouses and finally a grand hotel. Not far away will be the zoological garden and deer park. . . Large money has already been expended in beautifying these naturally handsome grounds and in working out his ideal Mr. Radebaugh will expend many thousands more on them.

On two prominent sites overlooking the lake are elegant residences of stone and wood in pure Queen Anne style, large with spacious verandas, etc, and finely finished with a variety of choice woods. These houses will be just alike in structure will have ample and beautiful settings and when complete will be made the homes of Messrs Allen C. Mason and R.F. Radebaugh.

Lake Wapato Park will always be free to the public and Mr. Radebaugh will deserve and receive the blessings of the millions who in time will enjoy it. “

The greenhouses at Wapato Lake Park were so prolific that “floral parlors” were opened at 908 Railroad Street in Tacoma to display and sell the flowers and plants. Specialties of the floral parlors were the cut flowers and floral designs for bouquets, weddings and funerals. Theater parties could be “promptly fitted out with hand bouquets and boutonnières”.

A **January 1, 1891** listing of building projects in the newspaper reported that Mason, Radebaugh and George Mathews were all building house in Wapato Park.

The glowing reports and articles about the wonderful resort at Wapato Lake Park stop appearing in newspapers in 1891. Ebenezer Roberts leaves Radebaugh's employ in late 1890 and is hired by the City of Tacoma's Board of Park Commissioners to oversee the development of Wright and Point Defiance Park. The nation-wide depression which began in 1891 hit railroads especially hard. Radebaugh sold the *Tacoma Daily Ledger* and apparently suffered extreme financial loss during the depression which lasted throughout much of the 1890s.

An **April 9, 1899** newspaper article it reports that the Wheelman's Club (bicyclists) is debating two local projects involving the improvements to local lakes. Both American Lake and Wapato Lake are being discussed. The Wheelmen have been discussing plans "to revive the onetime popularity of Wapato Lake. The Wapato Lake project has not reached quite as much popularity, but numbers adherents quite as enterprising. The grounds have been fitted up once and although somewhat in disrepair, could be improved again with small expense. Wapato can be made an excellent bathing place, for although the banks are muddy in spots, there is plenty of chance for good approaches. The surroundings are not as fine as at American Lake but could be improved artificially. The property still belongs to Mr. Radebaugh and is in care of a keeper, fenced away from the public, but concession can be secured without great expense".

It is not known how much improvement the Tacoma Wheelmen did to Wapato Lake Park but in 1906 another company had its eye on the property to develop 'Olympian Garden'. An **October 6, 1906** article in the *Tacoma Daily News* announces that a new organization called Olympian Garden has plans to develop an "amusement and exposition enterprise that will eclipse anything of the kind ever attempted on the Pacific coast."

The group "proposed to erect a permanent exposition building for the display of the vast resources of the Pacific coast. Also a spacious Stadium for the revival of the Olympian games. This building will seat 12,000 people and will enclose a circular course 680 feet in length and 280 feet in width. This will be paved. The arena will offer a place for all varieties of speed contests, athletic exhibitions, and numerous amusements, features of the most modern and attractive kind, electric fountains, mirror mazes, electric theater, cycloramas, scenic railway, etc. Besides the Stadium, the larger structures of the group will include a permanent exposition building 110 by 450 feet; one of the amusement feature buildings will be the castle 110 by 250 feet, the highest point being 50 feet for a waterfall. Numerous smaller buildings will be erected."

"It is the intention to begin work at once on the mammoth enterprise and have the Olympian Gardens ready to throw open to the public by the first of July 1907."

The Olympian Gardens were never built at Wapato Lake. By **1910** the newly formed Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma began discussing the possibility of incorporating the area into the park district. In **1911** they recommend purchasing 110 acres but funding was not available. Finally in **1920** Horace and Helen Scott donate 20 acres to begin the acquisition of Wapato Park.

1920 to the Present

Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma's Wapato Park

With the donation of 20 acres by Horace and Helen Scott, the Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma began their ownership of Wapato Park in 1920. The following year the Park District purchased an additional 17 acres from Caroline Menzel.

In **March 1927** the Park Board begins discussing the development of Wapato Park and Lake Wapato. The Park District now owned 37 acres around the lake. The Park Board wants to focus their efforts on the four main parks in the system: Point Defiance, Wright, Wapato and the newly acquired site at Titlow Beach. Rowboats are transferred to Wapato from Point Defiance and plans are developed to construct a building for a caretaker, dressing rooms, a store and a boathouse.

In **January 1935** the Park Board accepts another 15 acres around Wapato from J. H. Easterday. In December of that same year, the Park Board accepted 12 more acres at Wapato Lake. The land was a gift from Joseph Kemp, the President of Oakwood Cemetery. The Park District now owned 62 acres around the lake.

On **March 1, 1936** the *Tacoma Daily Ledger* reported that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) had dredged 180,000 cubic yards of mud from the lake leaving a sand and gravel bottom. The muck will be used as top dressing for 65 acres of parkland. The planned WPA work will result in "a park that will rival Point Defiance Park in attraction, if not in size". Plans included gondolas and rowboats, illumination around the lake with log uprights and wrought iron arms, planting of native shrubbery and trees and more formal landscaping at the entrances. The roads were to be lined with hundreds of native shrubs, Japanese cherry trees and roses. In the past chlorine was used to keep down disease in the lake but it is now hoped that the water will be as clear as crystal once the mud is pumped out. There will be three entrances: one on the north via Alaska Street, one on the south via 72nd Street and one on the east via South 68th and Sheridan.

On **September 22, 1937** the *News Tribune* recorded the official donation of 7 1/2 acres of wooded land from the Kiwanis. This area will be known as Kiwanis Field.

Wapato Park was the site of a major WPA work project. Sherman Ingalls, Metropolitan Park District Supervisor at Wapato directed the project and designed the park improvements. The WPA built bridges, boat and bathhouse, modern kitchen with hot and cold water; installed electrical outlets; graded, leveled and seeded the park; built modern ball fields, a sandy bathing beach, and a stone entrance; cleared roads and pathways, and developed Alpine gardens and a lily pond.

The formal reopening was **June 1938** when the *Tacoma Ledger* declares that "Old Swimming Hole of Half Century Ago Blossoms Out to Take Place Among Major Attractions of Tacoma." 2,000 people attended the opening. The project cost \$228,000. The only complaint was that with all the work they had done the main entrance road had not been improved or widened. A reporter compared it to "a man who wears a two bit tie with a five dollar shirt!"

On **July 20, 1939** a bronze tablet dedicating Kiwanis Field was unveiled.

On **February 14, 1940** it was announced that Tacoma had been selected for the second official community planting of rhododendrons by the Olympians, Inc. which was arranging for the planting of a million rhododendrons throughout the state during the next ten years. Fifty rhododendrons will be planted by Sherman Ingle, Park Superintendent at Wapato Park. Later that year the *Times* reported that approximately 500 varieties of tuberous-rooted begonias were being grown in Wapato Park under the skillful handling of Bob Ellener.

Numerous newspaper articles during **July 1942** report that a storm water sewer intended to carry only surface water has also been carrying sanitary sewage into the lake. Swimmers are developing rashes. Consequently, the Health Department closed Wapato Park to swimmers on July 2, 1942 citing that storm sewers were dumping “bugs” into the lake. The city appropriated \$15,000 to construct a diversion sewer from Wapato to South 72nd and Aston Street. The money came from a \$3,000,000 postwar sewer improvement fund from bonds voted by the people.

On **June 5, 1947** a public meeting was held to discuss opening Wapato Lake to swimming. The Health Board warned of polio and swimmer’s itch in the lake and that human waste from septic tanks was also a problem. The City Engineer promised to divert the sewage from the lake. The Park Board pointed out that the lake had been stocked with 30,000 fingerling trout and any attempt to chlorinate the lake to improve water quality would kill the fish. Fishing was stopped in the lake so that the fingerling trout could grow. The bass were also removed because they destroy the young trout.

The Park Board said that testing will be done and if a dangerous condition exists a “tile pool will be built.” Several on the city council were in favor of constructing a concrete pool near the lake. In the past, the Park District staff chlorinated the lake by filling a sterilized gunny sack with chlorinated lime and dragging it back and forth through the swimming area until the water tests pure. This method would be made more fool proof by the enclosure of the swimming area in a concrete wall to extend below the floor of the lake. Planning is underway for a ball field in the northeast corner of the park.

The following year, on **June 6, 1948** the Park District announced that Wapato Lake was open again to swimmers. Superintendent Thomas Lantz “hinted plans for an eventual sanitary concrete pool at the park, close to the beach, where the waters could be chemically treated and swimming activities would be under closer supervision” were under discussion.

On **October 25, 1949** the City of Tacoma deeded to the Park District a 4.35 acre piece of land plus approximately an equivalent water area making up the south end of Wapato Lake.

On **August 11, 1951** the Monday Civic Club dedicated a memorial plaque commemorating one of the northwest's pioneer family's generous donation to the park system. Mrs. H.G. Scott formed the Monday Civic Club in 1910. The Scott home, which at that time was situated on Wapato Lake, later burned and the stone which remained was used to build the entrances, walks and bridges in the park. Horace Greeley Scott and J. S. Kemp were instrumental in developing Wapato as a children's park.

On **March 9, 1953** the News Tribune reported that some residents around Wapato Lake are upset about the planned condemnation of properties around the lake. Ads were run in the paper asking the citizens of Tacoma to protest the condemnation proceedings. Later that year the courts determined that the Park District did not have legal authority to condemn property.

On **August 13, 1953** Nace Field in Wapato Park was dedicated. Dr. A. G. Nace was a civic leader and member of the Park Commissioners for 22 years. He moved to Tacoma in 1903 and was an advocate of a well-rounded sports and recreation department. Nace played football for UPS and at Willamette University where he was a medical student. He also played professional baseball for two years.

A new fishing float was dedicated at Wapato Park on **May 13, 1954**. The float was made possible by a partnership with the Tacoma Sportsmen's Club Auxiliary. The float is 120 feet long with a top "T" of 100 feet.

During a Park Board meeting on **May 28, 1957** a group of women protested the terrible smell of Wapato Lake.

G.C. Casebolt and Company won the bid for beautification of Wapato Park on **September 13, 1966**. The bid was \$78,786 for landscaping, dock and other improvements. The project was funded by a \$80,000 special bond.

In **March 1976** Evergreen College was hired to perform an environmental study of Wapato Lake. Their report included the following information: "In 1971 the Metropolitan Park District hired a contractor to harvest coontail (*ceratophyllum demersum*) a nuisance submergent aquatic plant. Approximately 83 short tons covering ten acres were removed. A second cutting the next year yielded only .5 tons. Copper sulfate treatments were attempted to control plankton and submergent macrophytes but discontinued out of concern for water sports".

In **April 1976** an Environmental Impact Assessment was written. It included the following comments and information. "It is of interest to note that agitation for the development of a park came from men who had first used the lake as natural swimming hole. They felt that development of a manicured park all the way around would preserve everything that was best about Wapato Lake for generations to come."

"Little Wapato Lake should more properly be referred to as a marsh".

“City water is too high in nitrates to add to the lake water”.

The **October 1977** Draft Environmental Impact Statement reported that: “At some time before 1910 an outlet structure was built at the south end of the lake; it is uncertain whether it was to raise the lake stage for recreation purposes or for flood control. Large quantities of peat were dredged from the lake and laid over park grounds. Unable to ascertain if it was to increase the lake or build up the park area”. Also that “in 1976, with federal money from the Beautify America program, approximately two acres of shallow marshland on the south shore was filled in and a picnic area built over the fill”.

A proposed draw down of the lake was discussed at a Park Board meeting on **April 18, 1978**. Only the Tahoma Audubon Society protests.

On **March 18, 1980** the Park District announced that Entranco Engineers have been hired to oversee the clean up of Wapato Lake. The cost of pumping fresh water into Wapato Lake for one year is estimated to be \$30,000.

On **May 4, 1986** Wapato Lake reopens to swimmers after 10 years of closure and \$2 million in changes. In 1981 the lake was emptied and tons of sediment containing oil and other pollutants were hauled from the bottom. A dike was built to separate drainage basin at the north end from recreational area to the south. Later a pipeline to carry fresh water was installed. During the summer an estimated 117 million gallons were added.

On **April 12, 1988** the Park Board votes to institute parking fees and to close all parking in the 46 car lot on South 72nd. Parking fees were instituted on May 5, 1988. They were \$1 for residents and \$3 for non-residents. The reason cited for the parking fees was to cut down on cruising.

On **October 4, 1992** a grant of \$18,000 was awarded by Simpson Tacoma Kraft Company for high school students to study Wapato Lake.

In **1997** the lake is closed once again. This time due to toxic algae.

On **July 13, 1998** the Park District announces that Wapato Lake is closed to swimmers. Citizen posts a sign at Wapato proclaiming it “Duck Poop Park”.

On **August 12, 2001** the historic pergola was restored based on original plans. The uprights of the new pergola are made of concrete and fiberglass for durability. The top section is still wooden.

On **February 23, 2005** an arsonist starts a fire in the historic Bathhouse. It is seriously damaged but not destroyed.

October 2005 – The Park Board approves Wapato Park Master Plan for future development.