

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

I. Name of Building or Site

(1) Common
ORTON PARK

(2) Historic (if applicable)
Village Cemetery

II. Location

(1) Street Address
1100 Spaight

(2) Ward
6th.

III. Classification

(1) Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)
Park

(2) Zoning District
R4A

(3) Present Use
Neighborhood Public Park

IV. Current Owner of Property

(1) Name(s)
City of Madison

(2) Street Address
210 Monona Avenue/704 E. Gorham

(3) Telephone Number
266-4711

V. Legal Description

(1) Parcel Number
(none)

(2) Legal Description
All of Block 180 of Original Doty Plat

VI. Condition of Property

(1) Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)
good

(2) Altered or Unaltered?
Altered from cemetery to park

(3) Moved or Original Site?
original

(4) Wall Construction
(Does not apply)

(5) On a separate sheet of paper, describe the present and original physical construction and appearance (limit 500 words).

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

VI. (5) Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance:

Orton Park, a former cemetery, is a three and one-half acre neighborhood park located eleven blocks east of the square, close to Lake Monona. It comprises all of Block 180 of the original Doty Plat. The tract is gently rolling with about a thirty foot elevation above Lake Monona.

Before it became the village cemetery in 1846, this block was part of an area which was a dense oak and hickory forest with considerable hazel-brush and lots of quail.

Today "Orton" is a heavily used neighborhood park and a center of activity for all ages. A concrete sidewalk cuts diagonally through the park and another walk borders all four adjacent streets. Near the center on the northwest side is the "bubbler" which has marked the arrival of Summer for several generations of Orton Park neighbors. Considerable children's play equipment, a soft-ball area, and a basketball court are present in various locations. The trees are still primarily oak and hickory, and there has been little recent replanting. Some trees have been lost due to disease and age. Currently a large green crocodile (not real) is perched more than half way up one of the oak trees near the Few-Spaight intersection.

Being ringed by homes of great architectural diversity is another obvious feature of Orton Park. Some fairly elegant near-mansions designed by Claude and Starck and by Gordon and Paunack are noticed, as well as several modest cottages. These homes complement the park and their placement around the open park give a Midwestern version of the New England "green" and the Spanish "plaza."

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)

VII. Significance

(1) Original Owner Village of Madison	(2) Original Use Cemetery
(3) Architect or Builder (Does not apply)	(4) Architectural Style (Does not apply)
(5) Date of Construction (See "Significance")	(6) Indigenous Materials Used Oaks and hickory trees
(7) On a separate sheet of paper, describe the significance of the nominated property and its conformance to the designation criteria of the Landmarks Commission Ordinance (33.01), limit of 500 words.	

VIII. List of Bibliographical References Used

1. Durrie, Daniel Steele, A History of Madison...to July 1874, p. 146
2. Minutes of the Village Trustees, (Madison), 1846-56
3. Wisconsin State Journal, Madison Past and Present, 1902
4. Wisconsin State Journal, numerous articles from 1852
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

IX. Form Prepared By:

(1) Name and Title Leigh and David Mollenhoff	
(2) Organization Represented (if any)	
(3) Address 1501 Morrison Street	(4) Telephone Number 255-2234
(5) Date Nomination Form Was Prepared September 7, 1975	

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (4)

VII.(7) Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:

Orton Park deserves designation for four reasons:

1. It was the Village of Madison cemetery. Just after Madison was formally designated a village in 1846, the Trustees purchased Block 180, laid it off into 256 burial lots and viewed this action as a welcome advance of civilization. Unfortunately this early pride seems to have been lost because between 1847 and 1852 the cemetery was a simmering local scandal. The problem according to indignant newspaper editorials was that pasturing cows were desecrating the graves of dear departed citizens and the trustees were too cheap to put up a fence. Bovines it seems were not the only unwelcome interlopers. So were a group of UW medical students who helped themselves to a pauper's body believing it could assuage their anatomical curiosity.

As early as 1852 it occurred to the Trustees that a 3.5 acre cemetery was hardly adequate for a growing village. By 1853 with only about half of the lots unsold or unused, the search was begun for a larger site. Soon after the city charter went into effect in 1856, the Common Council selected the present Forest Hill site and began to phase out Block 180.

2. It was the first city park. Until Orton was formally opened in 1887, Madison did not have a single local park. Yes, it had the Capital Park, a lot of vacant accessible land and several private resorts, but no land legally set aside for the free enjoyment of residents. James Duane Doty simply had not provided any in his 1836 city plat. Credit for starting the park was given to John George Ott who in 1875 presented petitions asking the Common Council to remove the cemetery. The Council approved and in 1877 completed the long process of disinterring and reburying the bodies at Forest Hill. In 1879 Ott once again took the offensive, this time raising a \$100 private subscription to convert the block into a free public park. Again the Council responded affirmatively and Ott's subscription was put to work "transforming that unsightly piece of ground." In 1881 the City appropriated a small amount of money for planting grass and putting up a fence and in 1883 formally named the park in honor of Harlow S. Orton, then Supreme Court Justice and former Madison mayor. What accelerated the leisurely park improvement program was the suggestion in 1887 that the increasingly attractive block or a part of it be used as the site for a Franciscan Sisters' Hospital. Indignant Sixth Warders fended off this suggestion for a "pest house" in their midst and decided the time had come to finish the process that had been dragging along for eight years. In May a raking bee was held. In June an executive committee was appointed to superintend the remaining work and raise money. Everybody was asked to give to the Sixth Ward "honor roll" and all who did were divided into "big hearts, the mediums, the small hearts, the dodgers and the skin flints." Twenty iron settes were donated and set along newly laid out walks, a two story, 18 foot octagonal bandstand took shape in the center of the park and gas lamps were added. Orton Park officially opened on July 29, 1887 with a band concert, speeches and not a little breast-beating. Editorialized the

Wisconsin State Journal, "if the entire community had the snap and enterprise of some of the Sixth Warders, Madison would be a booming city." Not until Tenney Park was opened around 1900 did Madison get its second public park.

3. It is one of those rare instances where a cemetery has been turned into a public park. In the context of finding more park land, the suggestion is often made, use cemeteries! While logical, the idea is rarely executed largely because of the tremendous difficulties of swapping old cemetery lots for new and getting the bodies disinterred and reburied to the satisfaction of relatives. In the case of Orton, the bodies were exhumed in the winter and transferred to Forest Hill on bobsleds. At least one relative insisted upon doing the work himself, not entrusting the job to the Sexton's men. Madison can pride itself in being of very few cities in the country where a cemetery has been successfully converted to a city park.

4. It has been a focal point of neighborhood pride and social life for 90 years. Perhaps no other park in Madison has been defended against so many incursions or outright attempts to obliterate as Orton. In 1877 the plan was to turn the block into a beer garden, or alternatively, just another residential block. In 1887 a hospital was the cause celebre and in 1922 a plan to construct a diagonal highway through the park for the convenience of suburban commuters. In each case a spirited and successful defense was made. Perhaps it was all worth it because when Life Magazine did its 1948 feature designating Madison as the ideal city, Orton Park was cited as one of the country's most attractive neighborhood parks.

Almost from the day the park opened, it has served as a focal point and front yard for neighborhood social life. In the 1880's and early 1890's regular summer band concerts were held, paid for interestingly enough, by local residents. During the early years of this century, the Ladies Aid of Pilgrim Congregational Church (now Wil-Mar) had frequent and fondly remembered ice cream sociables on its velvet lawn. More recently the park has served as the site for the neighborhood summer festival and a weekly farmer's market.