

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

NATIONAL PARK MOVEMENT HISTORY

The student will appreciate how Belle Isle was an act of “city-building” in Detroit, and Detroit’s place among American cities.

City = place that has a permanent concentration of population, political autonomy, permanent buildings and a permanent market.

In the early 1800s, cities were small dots in a vast wilderness – the biggest of them covering but a square mile. People worked in their homes, traded with their neighbors, and were only infrequently to leave the city’s settlement. In the mid to late 1800s, these cities were growing so rapidly into gigantic manufacturing centers, that most acquired large open spaces for parks. In 1879, Detroit purchased Belle Isle, to provide a place for its

growing population in addition to protecting fresh river water from pollution.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the premier designer of these park spaces, was hired to plan Belle Isle. He wanted to bring nature to the people – to all members of society, regardless of income. Cities developed their showcase parks with brand new cultural institutions – such as aquaria, conservatories, and zoos – and with sculpture and memorial monuments.

City-building = efforts by local leaders, business or citizens to increase the amount and quality of economic, social, cultural, and political activities and infrastructure in urban life.

QUESTIONS: *What value does Belle Isle have for Detroit ?*

RESOURCES: *Timeline of Early Detroit History; 1920s view from Eastside
How Belle Isle Changed Detroit Forever
Growth of Detroit from 1830
Every City Initiated Major Public Park Plans in the 19th Century
Chicago “White City” of 1896*

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE

The student will appreciate the island's ecology and architectural resources.

Ecology = the relationship between living things and their environments

The natural features of the island distinguish it: a unique mix of trees, a migratory flyway of waterfowl, the main greenspace on the Detroit Riverfront, its own floodplain ecology. Because of construction projects meant to make the island more recreational, the old forest is the only part of the island today that is close to its original state.

The island is a living thing. It has its own ecology, which is always changing, such as flora which today are completely different than 100 years ago. Some change is due to human activities: drainage and shoreline erosion, with intensive use of the land and river; a herd of deer introduced in the 1930s and a wildlife bird sanctuary in the 1940s.

The system of canals, bridges and lakes was made by dredging marshes and cutting down trees; landfill has extended all sides of the island; roads, walkways and trails, floral beds, formal gardens and other landscaping, cover the island.

The built environment, developed mostly at the turn of the 19th century, includes an impressive list of buildings, bridges, sculpture, and other structures today, which earned the island's designation on the National Historic Register of Places. Some architecture memorializes local people and events; some of it vanished in the park's first century.

Architecture = the art or practice of designing and building structures

QUESTIONS: *Why is greenspace important ?*
Why pay attention to architecture ?

RESOURCES: *Existing Land Use Map - Proposed Belle Isle Master Plan*
"The Living Island" Suzan Campbell, Belle Isle Nature Center
View of canal running through the old forest preserve
Some Vanished Buildings of Belle Isle
List of historic and architecturally significant buildings

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

CIVIC AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The student will appreciate the civic and recreational importance of the island as public space.

Civics =
relating to the
communal needs
or interests of
living in a city

We appreciate the variety of entertainment opportunities the park has offered, many quite unique because of its island and river setting: cultural institutions such as the Aquarium, Conservatory, Nature Center, and Great Lakes Museum; special events such as band concerts, model yacht races, sail and powerboat races, bike and running marathons, children's field days and pageants; athletic leagues and tournaments.

Park facilities have also been a focal point for organized social and civic purposes. For example, the Nancy Brown Peace Carillon, created from the annual sunrise peace services of the 1930s, honors the peace movement. During World War II, the Detroit Garden Center led the citywide Victory Garden campaign for the country's war effort from the White House. The park is a natural gathering spot for public purposes such as these.

Public space =
area that is
shared by
everyone in a
community

Another park attraction is its individual and personal leisure potential, due to its unique aesthetic setting. Park facilities support any variety of activities such as biking, jogging, picnics, family reunions, weddings, and campouts.

QUESTIONS: *What is the importance of leisure to a community ?
What should cultural institutions do ?
How does the park bring people together ?*

RESOURCES: *1907 bathhouse sign and swimmers
The Legend of Belle Isle – Bob St. Thomas Profile
Courting on the Canals – Ann Duane Family profile*

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MANAGING THE PARK

The student will appreciate the importance of city planning and government to the vitality of the island.

City planning = the practice of establishing goals, policies and procedures for the physical or social environment a city

The City of Detroit maintains most of the park infrastructure, or its physical systems, and manages most of its operations. Examples of infrastructure are the forest, lakes, lagoons, canals, bridges, light poles, shoreline drive, Central Avenue and Ways. Island operations include the cultural facilities, the waterslide, Casino and picnic shelter rentals, and golf courses.

These tasks take labor and money. The roles of city, county, state and federal governments, of nonprofit public interest groups, and of business leaders, in these management tasks have evolved and changed over time.

After purchasing the park in 1879, the City government grew in size to better realize the park ideal. Tax money supported major infrastructure projects and staffing to offer facilities and services. The Park Commission gradually acquired park space, boulevards, and recreation centers and offered activities throughout the city; Zoological and Historical Commissions were created to manage cultural operations. Business leaders paid for some exhibits and monuments. Today, the nonprofit Belle Isle Botanical Society, Great Lakes Maritime Institute and Friends of Belle Isle support various operations.

Infrastructure = permanent physical systems of a community, such as roads, water supply, lighting and electricity

QUESTIONS: *What would the park be like without any government activity ?
What is the benefit of business or nonprofit involvement ?*

RESOURCES: *Jack of All Trades – profile of first Zoo Curator
Decreasing Importance of Belle Isle in the City’s Recreation Program
City plans develop visions for public places*

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Early Detroit was a different place than we know now:

- 1805 Fire destroys every building outside of Fort Detroit
- 1823 cornerstone of the 1st State Capitol building laid in what is now Capitol Park, downtown
- 1825 1st street paving in Detroit (cobblestone)
- 1828 Michigan Historical Society forms in Detroit
- 1831 State repeals law authorizing use of public whipping post (located at Woodward and Jefferson)
- 1836 Detroit Terminal of the 1st railway chartered in the west is built at Jefferson and Dequindre
- 1838 Michigan Avenue, federal highway to Chicago, is surveyed
- 1847 telegraph reached Detroit
- 1850 introduction of luxury cruise line operating between Detroit, Buffalo, Cleveland and Mackinac Island
- 1854 1st governmental hospital opened in Detroit, at Jefferson and Mt. Elliott
- 1867 last known of original French pear trees falls at 13th Street - Third Avenue
- 1879 City's purchase of Belle Isle from Campau heirs for use as a public park

*taken from Woodford & Woodford's All Our Yesterdays (1969)
and the J.L.Hudson Company Historical Detroit project of 1926*



courtesy of
the Detroit
Recreation
Department,
Forestry
Division

View of
the lower
Eastside
and
island
from the
Water
Board
Building,
circa
1920.

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*Belle Isle has been more than just the park we love.
It changed Detroit forever, in these 6 ways:*

- 1. The park invented the modern concept of public space, as something in which everyone could and should share.**

It was the most ambitious public space in Detroit, probably ever, and the first that was envisioned for all Detroiters to use, and to use side by side.

- 2. The park showcased “culture” as something for everyone, showcased the natural world, and gave us a focal point for civic gatherings.**

Unique institutions were created on the island, such as a zoo, aquarium and flower conservatory. Because of the park’s popularity, sculptural monuments were created to remember important events, recreation and leisure activities became more popular, and park space was developed throughout the city.

- 3. Buying the island assured that river water would remain safe for people, and plentiful for anyone who settled in the eastside, and that the eastside would become part of Detroit as development occurred.**

Business interests fought for manufacturing and a railroad junction on the island; instead, some of the most distinctive residences in Detroit were built along East Jefferson in view of the spectacular riverfront and island park.

- 4. Controversy about the purchase of the island was so intense that fights broke out at the citizen meeting about its purchase.**

This led the State to change the local budgetmaking process, and spurred local leaders’ ultimately successful push for more local government control, or “Home Rule,” which is still a timely issue today.

- 5. The beauty of the park fueled a movement to make Detroit more beautiful and orderly.**

The popularity of the park – attributed to its aesthetics and mix of land uses – supplied a vision for the Cultural Center, Grand Boulevard and other development.

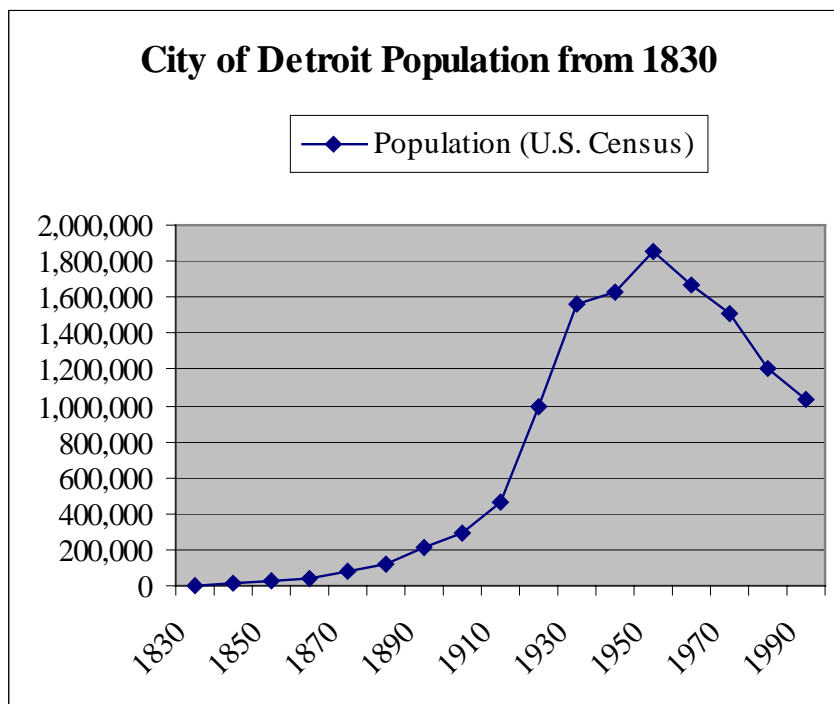
- 6. The park put Detroit on the map in the country and the world as a place with a high quality of life.**

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

DETROIT'S POPULATION STARTED SURGING IN THE MID-1800s, AND STARTED DECREASING IN THE 1950s.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% change</i>	<i>Sq. Miles</i>
1830	2,222		
1840	9,124	310.62%	
1850	21,619	136.95	5.85
1860	45,419	110.09	
1870	79,577	75.21	12.00
1880	116,340	46.20	
1890	205,876	76.96	
1900	285,704	38.77	23.00
1910	465,766	63.02	
1920	993,678	113.34	46.00
1930	1,568,662	57.86	139.00
1940	1,623,452	3.49	
1950	1,849,568	13.93	
1960	1,670,144	-9.70	
1970	1,511,482	-9.50	
1980	1,203,339	-20.39	
1990	1,027,974	-14.57	
2000	951,270	- 7.50	

[“Population” from the U.S. Census; “Square Miles” from City records]



ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

EVERY MAJOR CITY INITIATED MAJOR PARK PLANS FOR THEIR CITIZENS in the LATE 19TH CENTURY. DETROIT'S IS ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING.

City – Park (date of first acquisitions)	Size	Unique features
Baltimore – Druid Hill Park (1860)	600 acres	Oldest operating municipal conservatory; architectural gateway
Boston – Emerald Necklace (1877)	7 miles	Boston Common and Garden linked with 7 regional parks and parkways
Brooklyn – Prospect Park (1865)	526 acres	Long Meadow; Olmsted's favorite park
Buffalo – park system (1868)	800+ acres	Parkway system with 3 parks; most complete Olmsted plan
Chicago – Lakeshore parks (1871)	15 miles	“White City” legacy of cultural institutions and planning
Cincinnati – Eden Park (1859)	186.3 acres	Pioneering concrete Melan Arch Bridge of 1894; old stone quarry
Detroit – Belle Isle Park (1879)	1003 acres	Oldest operating Aquarium; system of canals and lakes
Milwaukee – Lakeshore parks (1868)	10 miles	Longest uninterrupted public access waterfront
New Orleans – City Park (1880s)	1500 acres	art and architecture spanning from neoclassical to art deco
New York – Central Park (1858)	843 acres	1 st Olmsted landscaping project; start of the national park movement
Philadelphia – Fairmount Park (1867)	5200 acres	1 st waterworks; boathouse row
Pittsburgh – Schenley Park (1889)	500 acres	Scenic river overlook
Saint Louis – Forest Park (1876)	1371 acres	1904 World's Fair buildings
San Diego – Balboa Park (1868)	1400 acres	Hosted 2 world Expositions
San Francisco – Golden Gate Park (1870)	1017 acres	Completely man-made land
Washington D.C. – The Mall (1870s)	2.5 miles	national monuments

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

The Living Island

Suzan Campbell, Belle Isle Nature Center



When French settlers first visited Detroit in the early 1700's, they wrote "one league from Fort Detroit is an island called Isle aux Cochons, a league long, having the finest timber in the world, and prairies without end.....handsome....of very rich soil." Later renamed Belle Isle, the island still retains about 200 acres of its original forest.

Prior to European settlement, Belle Isle was covered with a constantly changing matrix of marsh, wet prairie and wetland forest, which varied as the river rose and fell. In dry years, woody plants would become established in larger areas on the island, prairie would move out toward the island's edge, and the marshes would extend further into the river. In wet periods, many of the trees would be inundated and die, to be replaced by the herbivorous vegetation of the prairie and marsh. Thriving in this variable habitat were such species as Michigan Lily, the State Endangered Yellowish Gentian, and the Federally listed Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid. This latter orchid was once so common that visitors to the island collected it in bouquets.

Although the vegetation was adapted to periodic flooding, the people using the island viewed it as an obstacle to be overcome; by the end of the 1800s, the entire island had been ditched for drainage, and the marshes had begun to be filled. Through the foresight of Frederick Law Olmstead, a large portion of the island was preserved as forest in a relatively undeveloped state. Later, Michael Dee, a local newspaperman proposed that the interior marshes be dredged to create canals and lagoons, and the fill used to build up the adjacent areas. Eventually, the marshes were virtually eliminated, and the wet prairie was filled and planted with turf grass.

In the intervening years, altered hydrology from road construction, soil compaction from the island's many visitors and overbrowsing by the island's herd of fallow deer have taken their toll. Some of the island's many treasures however, still persist. In 1998, two rare species of trees were discovered; Pumpkin Ash and Shumard Oak, species more commonly found on the bottomlands of the lower Mississippi. Ironically, Spicebush and White Trout Lilies, which were once uncommon on the island are now abundant; as the deer find them unpalatable, they have spread as tastier species were eliminated. Lake Sturgeon still occur just offshore, and a small population of Blanding's Turtles persists at the eastern end of the island.

In an effort to preserve and restore the island's natural areas, staff at the Belle Isle Nature Center and Belle Isle Conservatory are cooperating to propagate species originally found on the island for use in restoration projects. With the help of local students and volunteer groups, small areas of prairie and wetland have already been established, and a tree nursery will eventually provide native stock for restoration and landscaping as older trees die off. In related projects, Blanding's Turtle habitat, and spawning habitat for the Lake Sturgeon are planned to bolster the populations of these protected species. In an era when natural areas are increasingly being swallowed up by development, Belle Isle provides an ideal laboratory for conserving and restoring nature in a highly urban environment.

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Courtesy of City of Detroit Recreation Department, Forestry Division

View of canal running through the old forest on Belle Isle
(winter, circa 1930):
the park design combines recreational activities with natural landscapes

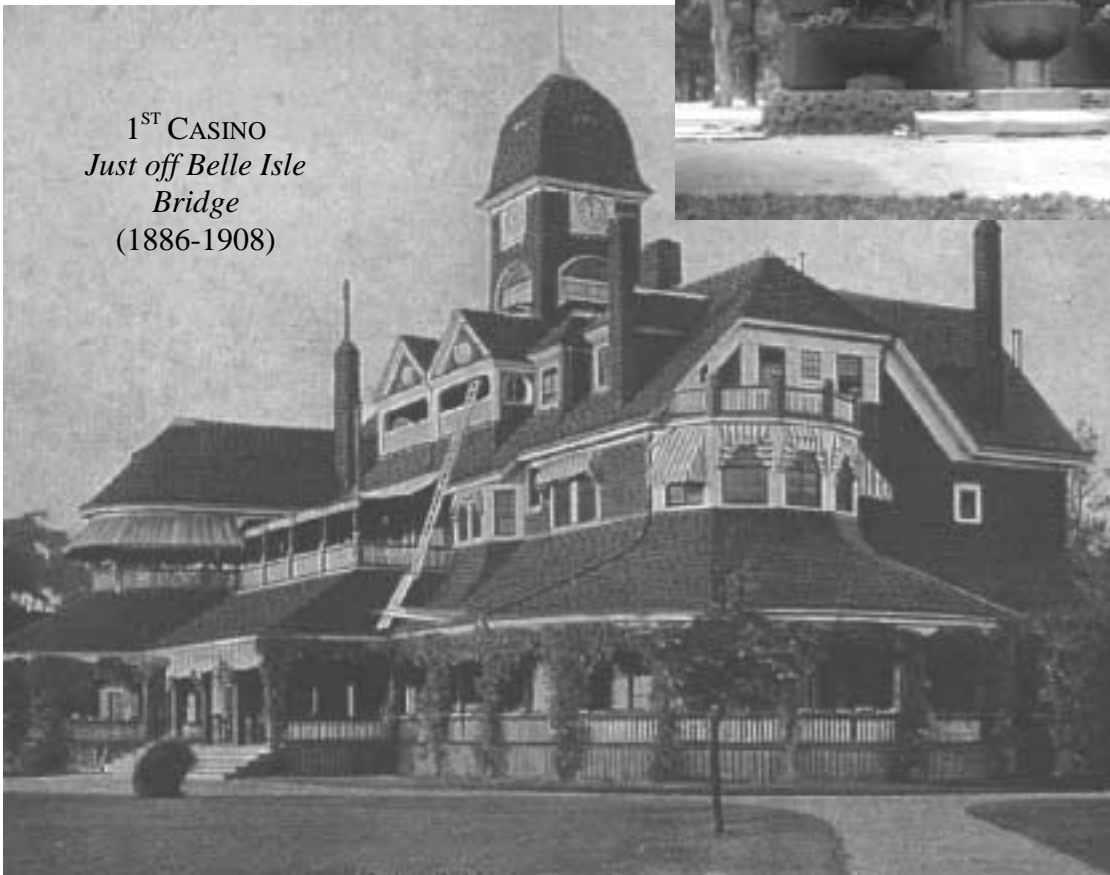
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SOME VANISHED BUILDINGS OF BELLE ISLE



Skating Pavilion
(1884 – 1940s)

Courtesy of Detroit News Library



Courtesy of
Detroit Recreation
Department,
Forestry Division

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

The list of historic and architecturally distinctive buildings is impressive:

- **Conservatory** – graceful steel and glass with original wood gingerbread trim
- **Aquarium** – aqua tile vaulted ceiling is Pewabic Pottery’s 1st commission; articulated brick façade with copper roof
- **2nd casino** – Albert Kahn-designed yellow brick Italianesque with 4 corner ornate towers framing arched colonnades and verandas; mosaic and marble floors and tiffany glass dome
- **Police Harbormaster station** – Mason & Rice Romanesque style fieldstone, blending earth colors and natural materials; adjacent comfort station shares features
- **Detroit Boat Club** – country’s 1st reinforced concrete structure
- **Detroit Yacht Club** – interior Pewabic tilework in fountain and pool; verandas
- **Remick bandshell** – cantilevered roof and recessed lighting were acoustical state of art
- **Early Comfort stations** – cupolas, cornice work and arches
- **Victorian athletic shelter** – unique series of conical turrets and wood detailing with tile roof (restored)
- **Victorian picnic shelter** – unique series of conical turrets and wood detailing (restored)
- **Flynn Skating pavilion** – horizontality of design and native materials reinforce rustic aesthetic
- **Superintendent’s (“White”) House** – wood frame structure with gingerbread detailing, bay windows and gable roofs; oldest on island
- **Maintenance and repair quarters** – 1894 Mason & Rice work combines stone, brick and dark stained wood with red tile roof
- **Riding Stables** – the old Cadillac Square market, moved in 1894; Victorian wood craftsmanship
- Various Loop Canal, Lake Tacoma, Sylvan Creek and other **bridges**
- **Riverbank Road bus depot** – brick mass with steep shingle roof flanked by 2 open steel structure platforms

[Demolished]

- **1st Casino** – wood frame with 8000 sq.ft. canopied verandas [1908]
- **1st bathhouse**, at east end ferry dock [1908]
- **2nd bathhouse**, at present beach – marble interior columns [1973]
- **Bandstand** – pavilion over the canal [1942]
- **Old lighthouse** – red brick dwelling with a green metal roof [1941]
- **Original Skating pavilion** – original chateau [circa 1950]

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT



courtesy of Detroit News Library

In the past, there were rules about bathing suits that the public had to follow when they gathered to swim at the Belle Isle Beach.

This sign hung in the women's bathhouse in 1908.

Courtesy of the Detroit Recreation Department, Park Superintendent.



A Friends of Belle Isle Initiative – 2001

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT



Bob, shown with the Leaping Gazelle in the Conservatory Gardens, has always enjoyed the island.

The Legend of Belle Isle: Building Eastside Communities

The nationally acclaimed entertainer, Bob St. Thomas has written an opera entitled “The Legend of Belle”, in connection with the Collaborative Arts Network. The opera is reminiscent of the church picnics and socials many Detroiters have attended on Belle Isle over the decades.

The St. Thomas Family moved to Detroit in 1942 to join his father who was a regional supervisor for the government-run C.C.C. camps. Bob was the first of his siblings to be born in Detroit a few years later. Bob’s father, a Baptist minister, helped to organize the picnics and often invited Catholic priests and neighboring ministers from the diverse but close-knit community to attend. Young women made box lunches to be sold at auction and the young people could meet in a structured and supervised setting. Belle Isle served as a backdrop for socials, recreation, relaxing, and as a nature refuge for city folk.

Bob St. Thomas began his professional music career when he was recruited by Marvin Gaye to be a writer on the Tamla Records label, a subsidiary of the Motown Record Company. A jazz artist, Bob was featured vocalist during the Montreaux Detroit Jazz Festival for four consecutive years. He has performed on the national live telecast of the CBS show “This Morning”. St. Thomas completed his formal education at Wayne State University and also received classical voice training at Marygrove College.

Bob’s opera reflects the memory of the monthly socials as well as the captivation the island still holds for Detroiters. The opera, subtitled, “The Tuskegee Airman and His Lady in Lace Who Walk the Gardens Behind the Conservatory” is the story of young lovers who meet on Belle Isle. The untimely death of the airman in the war and the strength of their love becomes part of the island’s folk lore. Over the years, the lovers revisit their special places on the island – continuing the legend.

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT



Loretta and Leland Archer courted in this 1916 canoe, restored by their daughter Ann Duane

Courting on the Canals

Based on an interview of Mrs. Ann Duane

The romance of the early 20th century canoe ride on the island canals has special meaning to Ann Duane, whose father courted her mother in a handsome Old Town canoe in the 1920s. Leland Archer, of Detroit's Corktown neighborhood, and Loretta Conners, a Grosse Pointe Park native, were introduced on the island and courted in his *Cupids Garden* for six years.

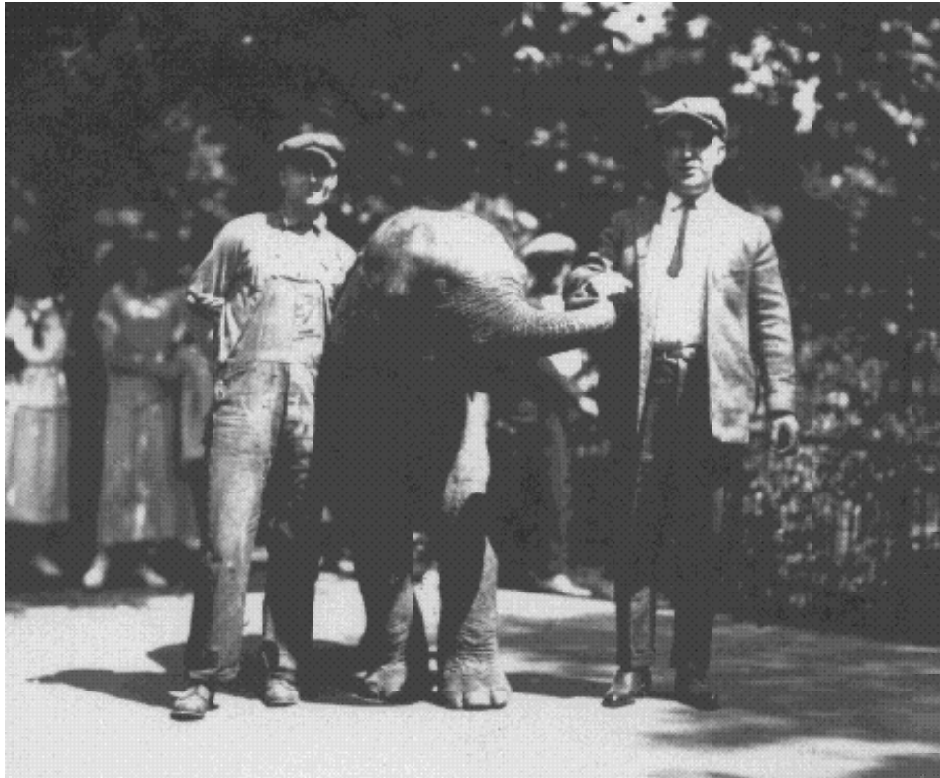
As Ann heard the story, Leland regularly took the streetcar from his Corktown home to the island, where he was introduced to Loretta by a mutual friend one summer day. For six years, while Leland cared for his aged mother, Leland and Loretta met most Sundays at the island. They were married in 1926. The arrival of their children changed their leisure habits, and the canoe was from that point always thoughtfully kept hanging in the family garage.

Leland bought the *Cupids Garden*, an Old Town canoe, a few years after it was built in 1916. The biggest of the canoes in the canals, at 17 feet long, its dark, phillipine mahogany decking was distinctive, and gold trimmed black lettering was very sharp on the white canvas skin. Constructed of cedar, spruce, and maple, the \$77 *Cupids Garden* was docked at the canoe shelter on the island.

Hundreds of couples throughout the summers packed the shallow canals to listen to concerts, drift under the varied bridges, explore the old forest. Canoes were stocked with phonograph players and leather skin blankets, and decorated with embroidered pillows and American flags. Patrons could dock their personal canoes along with public rentals at the island canoe shelter.

The canoe era officially ended in the 1980s, when the canoe rental was closed. The era of romantic drifts had ended generations before, but the memory floats along with Ann Duane and her family, who take the restored canoe out regularly at their Manton, Michigan home.

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT



John Timmons (right) with Sheba in 1924.

Island Professionals: The Changing Nature of Work

John E. “Jack” Timmons’ responsibilities as first Curator of the Belle Isle Zoo included acquisitions of fish and animals for the Aquarium and Zoo, their nutrition, and their medical care. *Detroit Saturday Night* called him a “self-made naturalist.” With only a sixth grade education, he got his start as an animal trainer and at one time was a trick rider of much merit. He was especially proud of Sheba, the elephant purchased by the schoolchildren.

Jack lived with his family from 1919 to 1930 in quarters above the maintenance and repair barns, which were provided in his compensation. He is said to have had “almost as many night calls as a doctor in a baby belt.”

In the Depression years, cuts to City government services led to Jack Timmons’ transfer from the island. Today, work has become increasingly specialized and the “Jack” of all trades is a memory.

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

Belle Isle was so popular that the City Government developed more and more parkspace over the years. As a result, the island is no longer the primary concern of the Detroit Recreation Department.

With the Addition of Rouge Park in 1942 (1200 acres), Belle Isle is no longer even the biggest park in the City.

Year	Belle Isle	City Total Park Acres	# of Parks
1879	700	713.7	6
1893	700	750.4	15
1899	707	1,139	28
1929	851	3,209	39
1940	985	3,770	48
1947	985	4,993	
2000	985	5,890	

These figures don't include the small corner playgrounds and playlots acquired since the 1950s.

Major landfill extensions of the island:

western point, for Scott Fountain construction

eastern end, for Livingstone Memorial

southern shore, for Dossin Great Lakes Museum construction

Detroit Yacht Club island – 10 year project

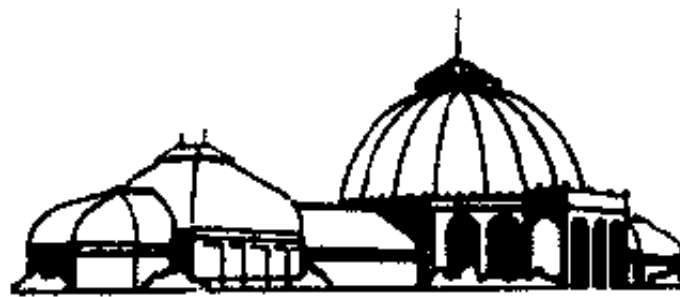
northern shore, for bathing beach and periodically for stabilization

ISLAND IN THE CITY EXHIBIT

STUDENT GUIDE MATERIALS

Appreciating what the island has meant to the City

Generous Contributors:



FRIENDS OF BELLE ISLE



Janet Anderson, PhD
(research, writing and compilation)