

# It's My Park | Fun Facts!

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## The Origin of Parks

- The word park is derived from Middle English and was a legal term for land owned by royalty for keeping game and hunting. Parks were originally natural areas used for hunting.
- In the Middle Ages through the 17th century, parks were part of the estate of royalty. They typically had a fence on one side and the bank of a river on the other. Some parks were surrounded by walls. Phoenix Park in Dublin, Ireland had a wall built as part of a public works commission to create jobs during the Irish Potato Famine.
- Eventually, due to public pressure, royalty began to give the public access to their private estate gardens. Some kings, like Charles II of England, granted access to his royal grounds so that he could have more connection to his subjects. Some royalty gave surrounding residents keys. For example, St. James Park gave out 6,500 keys to residents living nearby in the 1750s.
- We still have parks that are for nearby residents only and closed off to everyone else, like Gramercy Park.

## The Importance of Parks in Cities

- During the Industrial Revolution, which took place from the late 1700s to the mid 1800s, cities grew tremendously as people moved away from suburbs and rural areas to work in factories in urban areas. The density of urban populations grew faster than housing could accommodate and many families lived in one room. Air pollution increased as did refuse and waste from factories and residential areas. People, including children, worked very long hours in cramped spaces. The spread of disease was rampant, people drank a lot, and life expectancy was low.
- The original purpose of parks in cities was to allow the working class access to fresh air and relaxation. These spaces served as havens from the difficulties of urban work life and living conditions. Parks promoted better health and encouraged people to stroll with their families instead of drinking away their despair in bars.

## The Benefits of Parks Today

- Improved personal well-being and public health:
  - Parks help people feel more relaxed and composed through the restorative properties of nature.
  - Urban dwellers no longer work in fields or on farms, which makes other forms of exercise necessary.
  - Parks can help prevent modern-day diseases like heart conditions, diabetes, and obesity by providing spaces for physical activity.
  - Parks provide space for organized sports, exercise, and fun. Parks give children space to play and express themselves in a safe environment.
  - Parks allow users to create and maintain a safe community. People connect through common activities like walking dogs, jogging, sitting next to one other on benches, and playing in playgrounds. Everyone is welcome to enjoy parks, which creates a space for people of all ages and backgrounds to interact and observe one another. A well-maintained and programmed park leads to crime reduction. Central Park fell into disrepair in the 1980s and the local precinct reported 1,006 felonies in 1982. In 2003, after millions of dollars was invested to restore the park and bring in programming, only 93 felonies were reported.
- Clean air, clean water, and habitat for wildlife:
  - Trees absorb carbon dioxide and provide oxygen. Plants also absorb particulate matter in the air, preventing it from going into our lungs. Grass and climbing ivy can reduce nitrogen dioxide by 60% and particulate matter by 40%.
  - Parks reduce heat island effect — it's cooler around plants! Concrete buildings and streets radiate heat, while plants absorb it.
  - Planted soils in parks absorb rain and storm water, which leads to less water flowing through our streets picking up oils, heavy metals, and other pollutants and bringing them into our waterways. By absorbing and filtering rain and storm water, parks mitigate the overflow of wastewater treatment plants, keeping our combined sewage overflows (CSOs) sewage-free.
  - Parks provide coastal protection from flooding, habitat for wildlife, and even reduce noise pollution!

Reference: Garvin, A. & Brands, R. *Public Parks: The Key to Livable Communities*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2011