

# Theodore A. Leisen, Engineer and Benefactor

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When park visitors admire the rugged strength of Rockford Tower or the attractive sweep of the Van Buren Street Bridge, it is easy to forget that someone had to have the vision, make the plans, and oversee the erection of such noteworthy structures. Fortunately, Wilmington had the services of Theodore A. Leisen, a civil engineer whose work between 1893 and 1908 provided the city not only with these now landmark additions to the landscape, but also an essential, if invisible, infrastructure.

When twenty-seven-year-old Theodore Leisen started his city employment in 1891, he was a draftsman in the Engineering and Surveying Department. By 1893, he was a park engineer for the Board of Park Commissioners. Chief engineer two years later, he eventually served as both park engineer and superintendent. In 1903, the Board of Water Commissioners appointed him chief engineer, his job for the next five years.

Leisen made important contributions to several projects. In 1895, he recommended that "a large pavilion and observatory" be built in then-new Rockford Park. The "massive structure" was to be of local stone so that it would quickly have an "antique appearance." At the time that Leisen made his proposal to the Park Commissioners, the city's Water Commissioners had reached the conclusion that Wilmington needed a new water tower in that section of the city. The two Boards merged their projects in Rockford Tower, a single structure that would serve as both water tower and observatory. As Leisen wanted, "the design [was to] be of an ornamental character," although his hope that the pavilion include a refectory to sell refreshments went unsatisfied.

Also in 1895, Leisen suggested building "a pavilion . . . on the edge of the bluff near the northerly end of the Washington Street Bridge." Lack of funds delayed the project until autumn 1901 when foundations were laid for a circular pavilion. Completed in the spring of 1902, the structure came to be known as the Sugar Bowl because of its round, domed roof.

In 1906, the city's expanding water system needed an additional water main and the new main had to go through Brandywine Park to connect two reservoirs. At the same time, the Park Commissioners wanted a bridge across the

Brandywine to link both sides of the park. Once again, the interests of the Water Commissioners and the Park Commissioners coincided. The Van Buren Street Bridge satisfied both needs, serving as both bridge and aqueduct. Completed in 1907, the bridge was both functional and, as Leisen described it, "ornamental in design."

Leisen understood the challenges of transforming unimproved acreage into parkland. Apparently undaunted by chronically tight budgets, he gave constant attention to providing amenities expected in "a pleasure ground"—roadways, footpaths, pavilions, and comfort stations. He took advantage of "scenic vistas" that park topography afforded, with an observatory atop Rockford Tower, a retaining wall with a scenic overlook along the south side of the Brandywine, and the Sugar Bowl site selected for its "picturesque outlook up the Brandywine."

Not all of Leisen's projects within the parks were so visible. In 1902, he designed a sewer for Rattlesnake Run. Storm water run-off was carrying substantial pollution into the city's water system. The new sewer diverted the offending water to a flume that discharged it downstream from where water was pumped out of the river. Nor were all his projects restricted to the parks. In 1906, for example, he worked on the design and construction of the Porter Reservoir on Concord Pike. Viewed from Augustine Cut-off, the wall around the reservoir bears a striking resemblance to the stone walls found throughout Brandywine and Rockford Parks.

Theodore A. Leisen, a Philadelphia native, had worked for six years on railroad construction in Colombia before coming to Wilmington in 1891. In 1908, he left Wilmington to become the chief engineer and superintendent at the Louisville [Kentucky] Water Company where he oversaw the completion of a new water treatment plant. Ever the builder, Leisen acted as the consulting engineer on the construction of the Frankfort [Kentucky] water system and, when he relocated to Detroit in 1914, he supervised the construction of the world's largest water filtration plant. He worked in Detroit as general superintendent and civil engineer until 1922, taking time during World War I to serve as a major at Camp Custer [near Battle Creek] where he was in charge of construction and was the camp utilities officer.

In 1923, Leisen made his last employment move. At the age of 59, he became the general manager for the Municipal Utilities District in Omaha, Nebraska. His tenure there produced the company's Downtown Headquarters Building, which opened in 1927, and a substantial Service Building, which opened in 1926. His responsibilities extended beyond city water service to include the provision of gas to Omaha's homes as well. His efforts paved the way for the changeover from manufactured gas to natural gas.

Theodore Leisen retired in 1939 at the age of 74. He returned to Detroit to live during his retirement and he died there in 1944. In 1993, the Nebraska Section of the American Water Works Association established the Colonel Theodore A. Leisen Memorial and Training Endowment Fund. Annual grants from the fund are available to encourage

water industry professionals to add to their training and to encourage graduate students to consider the water industry as a field of work.

Wilmington was a fortunate beneficiary of Leisen's attention and talent. He enhanced the parks' fresh air and open space with elegant and useful structures, in particular Rockford Tower and the Van Buren Street Bridge. In addition, his efforts enlarged and improved the city's water system. A century after Theodore A. Leisen worked in the city, Wilmingtonians continue to benefit from his steady combination of experienced practicality and engaging passion.

*[Note: Portions of this article are based on the author's earlier article "Vistas and Visions: the legacy of Theodore A. Leisen" published in the Friends of Wilmington Parks newsletter in 1998.]*