

The Sugar Bowl Pavilion

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The *Sunday Morning Star* of 13 April 1902 announced that "The iron work for the new pavilion to be built in Brandywine Park is almost ready for delivery" and the structure was expected to be finished by Memorial Day. This brief announcement marked the completion of a project first proposed in 1895, when Theodore A. Leisen, chief engineer for the parks, recommended that a pavilion be built on the edge of the bluff near the north end of the Washington Street Bridge. This, he said, would afford "a picturesque outlook up the Brandywine."

The Park Commissioners' annual report for 1901 describes the structure--27 feet high and 110 feet in diameter--as a "concrete-steel pavilion." The Edgemoor Branch of the American Bridge Company produced the ironwork and the ten Ionic columns supporting the roof were cast iron from "Pattern No. 4871," suggesting that they were a standard item in the company's catalogue and reasonably easy to produce.

A railing with balusters shaped like elongated urns encircled the round floor of the pavilion. They also may have been standard items as well and readily available. They closely resembled the ones used five years later on the Van Buren Street Bridge. The bridge balusters had an iron rod through the center and then concrete cast in an urn shape around the rod.



Records do not refer directly to the roof material, although surviving project blueprints from the American Bridge Company identify "Materials needed for the pavilion roof." Although there are examples of cast iron domes on similar pavilions from the same time period, it seems most likely that the metal provided a structure that was then clad in concrete.

Work on the project began in 1901 with the construction of the stone wall parapet and round granite base and in 1902, workers completed the steel and concrete portions of the pavilion. The final work on the structure was the installation of seats around the interior in 1904. The Zoo also opened in 1904 and the path to the Zoo lead down the slope to the north of the pavilion. Contemporary postcards depicting the pavilion often identified it as marking the Zoo's entrance. Postcards also show the lawn in front of the pavilion with two cannons, which are now displayed in H. Fletcher Brown Park on Market Street.

Interestingly, a 1905 article in the *Wilmington Board of Trade Journal* reported that local businessman Alfred Gawthorp, visiting a villa in Port Antonio, Jamaica, had seen a "pagoda" that was "an exact reproduction" of the Brandywine Park pavilion. The superintendent in charge of the villa provided a souvenir booklet that included an illustration of the Wilmington structure. Although the Jamaican structure appears to have been of stone on a concrete foundation, the similarities must have seemed especially striking to Mr. Gawthorp, whose relative, J. Newlin Gawthorp served on the Board of Park Commissioners at the end of the 19th century. Certainly, the existence of a second pavilion raises tantalizing questions about the relationship of the two.

Eventually called the Sugar Bowl because of its lid-like domed roof, the structure served for several decades as a meeting place and a venue for various musical programs. Its end appears to have been due to severe damage from Hurricane Hazel, though no documentary evidence has come to light to confirm this hypothesis. Certainly after the 1954 storm, the Board of Park Commissioners annual report noted the destruction of the rustic pavilion in Rockford Park and referred to "many other park buildings" being damaged. The Sugar Bowl may have been one of them. The recollections of a number of city residents also support the supposition that the mid-1950s marked the end of the pavilion.

In 1999, a group of interested volunteers began discussions about rebuilding the Sugar Bowl. New interest is now being shown for recreating the pavilion. The Sugar Bowl project will be a collaboration of the Friends of Wilmington Parks, the Division of Parks and Recreation, the City of Wilmington, and a newly formed group made up of friends of the late David Hudson. Before his death in January 2003, Mr. Hudson had expressed an earnest wish to see the Sugar Bowl rebuilt. Funds from his estate are being offered to help underwrite the cost of the project. The Wilmington City Council passed a resolution in March endorsing the undertaking.

Because any new structure will employ modern materials and will be modified to the extent needed in order to meet contemporary code requirements, it will not be an exact replica of the Sugar Bowl built over a century ago. But a new pavilion would return to a currently little used corner of the park a welcome focal point for activities. It would also provide an opportunity to fulfill the dream of a local citizen who loved the park.

[The author is grateful to the Wilmington Department of Planning for calling attention to the *Board of Trade Journal* article about the pavilion in Jamaica.]