

Vistas and Visions: The Legacy of Theodore A. Leisen

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Considering the history of Wilmington's parks, one thinks of men like William Poole Bancroft and William Marriott Canby, civic leaders who assembled the first park acreage for city residents. But another participant in those early years also left an indelible imprint on the landscape along the Brandywine. Theodore A. Leisen was a civil engineer whose work between 1893 and 1908 provided Brandywine and Rockford parks with noteworthy structures and a substantial infrastructure. His reports, maps, and plans illuminate early park development.

Leisen started his city employment in 1891 as a twenty-seven-year-old 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 September 1903, the Board of Water Commissioners appointed him chief engineer, his job until he left Wilmington in 1908 to work for the Louisville [Kentucky] Water Company.

Leisen contributed substantially 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 the stone from the area so that it would quickly have an "antique appearance." Leisen made his proposal to the Park Commissioners as the Board of Water Commissioners were concluding that Wilmington needed a new water tower in that section of the city. The two Boards merged their projects in Rockford Tower. They agreed that the water tower would also serve as an observatory and, as Leisen wanted, that "the design [would] be of an ornamental character," although they left unsatisfied his hope that the pavilion include a refectory to sell refreshments.

Also in 1895, Leisen suggested building "a pavilion . . . on the edge of the bluff near the northerly end of the Washington Street Bridge." Insufficient funds delayed this 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.

Not all Leisen's projects were so visible. In 1902, he designed a sewer for Rattlesnake Run. Storm water run-off was carrying substantial pollution into the Brandywine and into the city's water system. The new sewer diverted the offending water to a flume that discharged it downstream from where city water was pumped out of the river.

After becoming an employee of the Water Commissioners, Leisen had a final opportunity to leave his mark. 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. Again, the interests of the Water Commissioners and the Park Commissioners coincided. While the Water Commissioners needed a water main, the Park Commissioners wanted another bridge across the Brandywine. Both needs were satisfied by joint construction of a bridge that was also an aqueduct, the Van Buren Street Bridge. Begun in 1906 and completed in 1907, the bridge was both functional and, as Leisen described it, "ornamental in design."

Although Theodore Leisen enjoyed much success, some of his proposals were never implemented. In 1895, he recommended that a new dam be built across the Brandywine near the foot of Adams Street, site of a seventeenth-century dam. He enthusiastically noted that a dam could provide needed access between the two halves of the park and that the lake formed behind the dam would be perfect for boating and skating. Leisen repeated his recommendation in 1896, 1899, and 1900. Finally, in 1902 the Park Commissioners took bids on the project, only to face the threat legal action from the William Lea & Sons Company which claimed the dam infringed upon company water rights. The Commissioners failed to reach agreement with the company and Leisen complained that, with the project stopped, "the pleasure which its completion would afford to the large mass of people . . . is denied them."

In 1900, Leisen proposed that a bridge be built across the Brandywine near the foot of Rattlesnake Run. His plan called for a concrete

span with three sixty-foot arches in the creek, thirty-foot arches at each approach, a twenty-foot roadway, and two five-foot sidewalks. He pointed out that the arched approaches allowed "the footwalks . . . to pass underneath." Although the bridge was never built, Leisen's design was not wasted. When the Van Buren Street Bridge was built six years later, it was remarkably similar: concrete, three fifty-eight foot arches in the creek, twenty-eight foot arches at the approaches, a nine-foot arch on the south side for pedestrians, roadway and sidewalks comparable to the earlier proposed structure.

Leisen understood the challenges of transforming unimproved acreage into parks that would attract visitors. Apparently undaunted by the chronically tight budgets, he gave constant attention to creating and improving roadways and to seeing trolley service extended to Rockford Park. His reports reflect concern about providing amenities expected in "a pleasure ground" - footpaths, pavilions, 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, the Sugar Bowl site selected for its "picturesque outlook up the Brandywine."

Leisen was a man of his time. He proposed that the parks should sponsor open-air concerts in the summer, writing that, "As a rule, music attracts a large and appreciative audience; the assembled crowds are usually orderly, and the moral effect is beneficial." Under his care, the parks offered not only fresh air and open space, but also beautiful views and elegant structures. Both Rockford Tower and the Van Buren Street Bridge were to be "ornamental" and the Sugar Bowl clearly met standards of grace and proportion. A century after Theodore A. Leisen made his presence felt in what are now the Wilmington State Parks, visitors continue to benefit from his steady combination of experienced practicality and engaging passion.