



# Lowell Park HISTORY

By Tom Wadsworth

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Dixon, Illinois

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# Introduction

Ever since Lowell Park was given to the city in 1907, the park has been the crown jewel and cornerstone of Dixon's remarkable park system. As years flow by, the park's story is often lost to new generations of citizens who enjoy its features but are unaware of its rich history. These chapters, based on fresh research into its founding documents, early newspaper coverage, and other historical sources, hope to reclaim and retell the history of the park.

# 1 A Gift to the City

In 1859 Charles Russell Lowell III, a railroad executive from the East Coast, acquired the 201 acres now known as Lowell Park. The small town of Dixon, about three miles south of the acreage, had about 2,000 residents at that time. Due to the recent arrival of two railroad lines to Dixon, the town was then experiencing significant attention and growth.



## About Charles Russell Lowell

Lowell hailed from Boston's elite, a nephew of the poet James Russell Lowell and a grandson of the Unitarian minister and abolitionist Charles Lowell. In 1859 the younger Lowell was a single 24-year-old who had distinguished himself as the valedictorian of Harvard in 1854. His writings reveal him to be an idealist, a transcendentalist, and a disciple of the poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, another Harvard graduate.

Lowell discovered the riverfront acreage near Dixon when he worked in Burlington, Iowa, with the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, later known as the Chicago Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Lowell's knowledge of the 201 acres came from John Ames, a Burlington railroad engineer and Harvard classmate who recommended the property.

The remarkably close proximity of the property to the Illinois Central railroad tracks may have been a factor in connecting Lowell with the land. In 1855, four years before Lowell made the purchase, the Illinois Central took some timber from the property's dense woods to lay its tracks only 800 feet south of the acreage.

Lowell once visited Hazelwood, a scenic neighboring property now known as the Walgreen Estate. It's likely that he then took the time to survey the 201 acres.

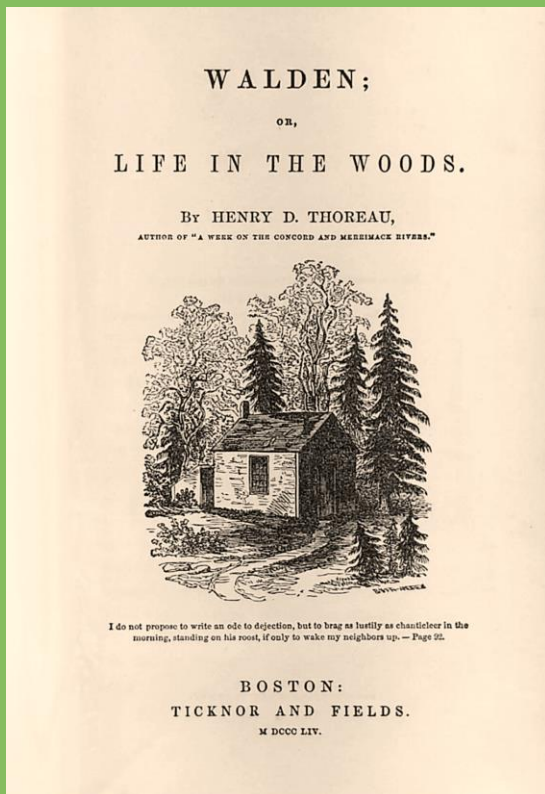
Why did he purchase the property? Lowell had spoken highly of the beauties of this property and that he planned to eventually live here. It seems safe to assume that he was attracted by its picturesque half-mile Rock River frontage, its majestic bluffs overlooking the river, and its spectacular natural panoply of birds, animals, trees, and flowers.

### **“Life in the Woods”**

To appreciate the idea of living in such an estate, Lowell may have been influenced by Henry David Thoreau's famous book, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. The book, now regarded as an American classic, traces Thoreau's two-year experiment of living simply in a cabin in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, along the shores of Walden Pond. There are several reasons to connect Lowell with Thoreau's signature work.

The timing of Lowell's purchase is one reason. Thoreau's book was published in 1854, and Lowell's purchase of the Dixon property was just five years later when the book was being widely acclaimed throughout the country in newspapers at that time. Since Lowell quoted from Thoreau in his published letters, he must have known about Thoreau's book.

A second reason is the personal commonalities of Lowell and Thoreau. Both men were Harvard graduates who hailed from the Boston area, where the book was published. Both were also admirers of Ralph Waldo Emerson and attracted to transcendentalism, which promoted non-conformity and self reliance, personal renewal, the unity of nature and spirit, and rebelling against society and established institutions.



A third reason is their personal connections to Emerson, another Harvard graduate, Boston native, and the leading transcendentalist of the time. Thoreau's two-year experiment at Walden Pond was hosted by its owner, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's son, Edward Waldo Emerson, was the first person to chronicle the life of Charles Russell Lowell. Edward was a friend of the Lowells, and Lowell's wife asked him to write her husband's biography. Like Lowell, Edward Emerson graduated from Harvard and worked in Burlington, Iowa, for the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad.

So, it seems inevitable that Lowell would have read Thoreau's book about the glories of living at a rustic waterfront domicile. Thus, the book may have inspired the youthful idealist Lowell to purchase the 201 acres near Dixon in hopes that he could experience the serenity and self-reliance of living in a similar natural haven.

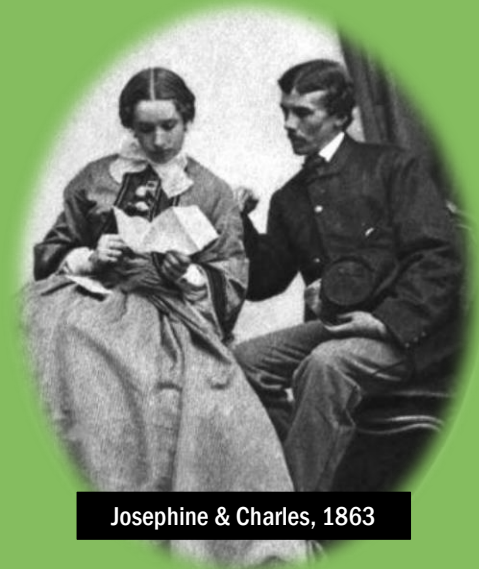
As Thoreau wrote in the book:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

## **An Untimely Death**

In April 1861, however, the cannon fire on Fort Sumter interrupted Lowell’s aspirations of developing his Dixon estate. Lowell, then living in Maryland, immediately signed up with the Union army and was commissioned a captain. Over the next three years, he served in a cavalry regiment with vigor and gallantry, distinguishing himself in the Union victory at Antietam. Over many battles, his horse was shot beneath him thirteen times, and he eventually rose to the rank of colonel.

In 1863 in a brief break from the war, he married Josephine Shaw in New York City. The next year, Lowell was felled by a bullet at the Battle of Cedar Creek in the Shenandoah Valley of northern Virginia. As he lay mortally wounded, General Philip Sheridan promoted him to brigadier general, saying “I do not think there was a quality which I would have added him. He was the perfection of a man and a soldier.” Lowell died the next day at age 29 on October 20, 1864. Six weeks later his only child, Carlotta Russell Lowell, was born.



Josephine & Charles, 1863

## **A Gift to the City**

Upon his death, responsibility for his 201 acres in Dixon fell to his widow, Josephine. She later visited Dixon and viewed the property,



but it remained essentially untouched for decades. Josephine lived the remainder of her life in New York City, where she became an admired benefactor of many charitable causes.

Believing that parks bring great value to cities, Josephine formed a plan to give the land to the city of Dixon in memory of Charles, but she died in 1905. In 1906 her daughter, Carlotta Russell Lowell, then carried out her mother's wish by presenting the land to the city of Dixon for use as a park. The city graciously accepted the gift, and the transaction was consummated in 1907.

Carlotta hired the Olmsted Brothers, renowned landscape architects of Brookline, Massachusetts, to examine the land and devise a professional plan to develop the property into a park. The Olmsteds sent Arthur C. Comey, a 1907 Harvard graduate, to come to Dixon for two years to oversee the project personally. Dixon didn't know it at the time, but the young Comey would later become nationally known as a landscape architect, city planner, and professor at Harvard.

Arthur C. Comey's work and vision would become a major factor in securing the park's long-term success. His fingerprints can be found on so many of the park's popular features, including the Pinetum, Woodcote, the well house, the shelters, the overlook, the extensive use of the park's quarry rock, the boat docks, and the location of the roads. Let's now take a closer look at some of these popular elements of the park.

## 2 The Pinetum



When the Lowell family donated the land to Dixon in 1907, the area of today's Pinetum (pronounced pie-NEE-tum) was 11 acres of cornfield that had been originally cultivated by John Richards, the first settler in the area of the park. Richards came to the area in 1836 and built a home in 1837 within the confines of the future park. His home, which is noted by a historical marker near the Vaile and Pitcher shelters, was located in the northwest portion of the Lowell land, in the upper section.

### **1909: The Pinetum Proposal**

In addition to the donation of land, Carlotta Lowell also donated the services of landscape architect Arthur C. Comey to propose strategies

for improving and preserving the park's beauty and utility. Comey's 1909 report noted the many beautiful wildflowers in the park and nearly 150 species of birds, but he described the forest area just east of the pinetum as a "rather uninteresting woods."

Comey recommended that this area be "enlivened by a few groups of dark-needed evergreens such as hemlocks, cedars, and pines, which are now to be found growing wild a few miles to the north of the park." These "wild" pines may have been a reference to the White Pines area, 8 miles to the north, which had been proposed as a state park in 1903.

The architect thought that such a planting would "provide protection to the woods from the hot, dry southwest winds of summer (and the cold dry northwest winds of winter), which (had) already killed the trees along the exposed borders of the park."

### **1920s: 4,000 Seedlings**

Carlotta Lowell then donated \$500 for a pinetum, which is "a planting of pine trees." In 2020 money, \$500 is about \$15,000.

The pinetum project, however, didn't take place until the 1920s when the Park Board started planting 4,000 seedlings of 22 species of trees in the pine family. Included were nine different kinds of pines, four different spruce species, three kinds of fir trees, and others.

At that time, some wayward individual took advantage of the new seedlings. In 1927 the Dixon Park Board responded by announcing a reward of \$25 to find the person who had stolen some of the newly planted trees from the pinetum.

While the planting offered ecological and aesthetic advantages, it also meant that the Pinetum became the only section of Lowell Park that

is not in its original natural state. Thus, it is the only part of the 201 acres of Lowell Park that cannot be classified as a “natural park.”

## 1825: Kellogg’s Trail

One of the notable historic features of Lowell Park is that Kellogg’s Trail proceeded through the Pinetum area.

Oliver W. Kellogg was the brother-in-law of Father John Dixon, who famously took over operation of the ferry over the Rock River in 1830.

Kellogg, however, had been through the area as early as 1825, blazing a trail from Peoria to the Galena lead mines, which were attracting many fortune-seekers at that time.

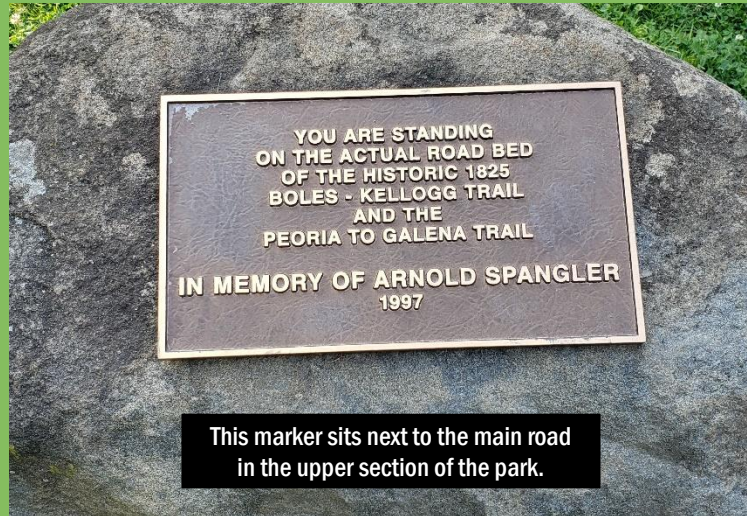
Kellogg’s Trail, also known as the Galena Trail, was widely used by the early settlers of northwestern Illinois. These travelers came through here on horseback, in stagecoaches, with wagons, and sometimes with livestock.

In 1941, a Lowell Park history reported, “The physical feature on the land of greatest historical importance is the deep ruts of the old ... Trail to Galena still plainly visible between the south road and the Pinetum.” Today, however, the ruts are not “plainly visible.”



## Passing Through the Pinetum

The trail likely entered the upper park area from the south in the overgrown area just west of the South Road. The trail then stretched through the east end of today's pinetum.



In the center of the park, about 100 yards east of the Nature Center, a rock with a historical marker identifies where Kellogg's Trail crossed the Main Road through today's park. The trail then continued in a north-northwesterly direction, exiting the park boundary at the point where the North Road is closest to Lowell Park Road. (See map, p. 11.)

## Improvements

In 1934, about a half mile of new roadway was built through the Pinetum. At that time, about 2,000 of the "small pines" were transplanted from this area into other sections of the park to replace trees that had died. A new planting of 2,500 pines in the pinetum then commenced. Over the years, other improvements included the periodic clearing of dead or diseased pines trees in order to maintain the beauty of this distinctive area of the park.

Even though the Pinetum's connection with Kellogg's Trail is historically significant, the beautiful open area of the Pinetum has been more appreciated for almost a century as a favorite place for recreation, nature walks, kite-flying, and even weddings.

### 3 The Lowell Shelter

All the shelters in Lowell Park are named for a local citizen who has been instrumental in developing the park. The Lowell shelter, however, is named for the Lowell family that gave the land to the city in 1907.

The Lowell Shelter was probably the second shelter built at Lowell Park. The first was probably the Vaile Shelter, which is on the North Loop Road on the north bluff. The Lowell Shelter, the only “log cabin shelter” in the park, was built in 1916. The walls of all the other shelters are made of quarry rock.



When planning the park, the designer knew that “showers often come very suddenly in summer.” Consequently, these shelters were built not only for picnicking events but also to offer shelter from storms. In addition, many shelters featured stone fireplaces for cookouts, where a fire could be built safely without creating the danger of a forest fire.

In keeping with the original plan, the shelters were designed to be simple and to harmonize with the surrounding woods. Accordingly, the rock in all the park’s shelters came from the park’s own quarry, located just 600 feet to the northwest of the Lowell Shelter.



## **The Overlook**

This site, which is 170 feet above the level of the river, was obviously chosen for its beautiful overlook of the Rock River. Over the years, the park has occasionally needed some tree-thinning in order to maintain the visual benefits of this overlook.

One of the major thinning projects took place in the 1980s when the panoramic view was greatly improved. At that time, several citizens voiced their objection to the cutting of trees, but today, few would complain of the breathtaking view that has become a favorite venue for photographers.

## **The Ice Box**

Lowell Park enthusiasts know the unique rock formation known as the “cooler” or the “ice box,” which is just a few steps from the Lowell Shelter in the bluff below and to the right (south). The cleft

in the rock is just wide enough for a person to climb up and down the natural steps. Even during the warmest days, hikers can go to the ice box where it is always cool and damp.

## **Going the Wrong Way**

In the park's first 10 years, it was commonly visited by people in a horse-driven carriage. Dixonite Ruth Rammelt once recalled that, in 1916 when she was about eight years old, her father was carrying the family in their horse-and-buggy down these hairpin curves. She said they were all terrified when they nearly collided with another horse and buggy coming from the opposite way. No one was hurt, but the incident frightened everyone so badly that her father complained to the mayor the next day.

On August 1, 1916, the city council passed an ordinance making this road a one-way road going down only, assessing a fine of \$10 to \$200 for anyone using the road to go up.

## **Improvements**

The original shelter at this spot was 25 feet closer to the road, as is indicated by the concrete pad between the shelter and the road. In 1934 the shelter was moved back. The likely reason was to increase safety by improving the ability of pedestrians and vehicles to see one another while everyone has their eyes on the spectacular overlook. At that same time, the Park Board also decided to build five more shelters throughout the park.

In 1996, the Lowell Shelter's original timbers and roof were replaced since they had deteriorated over the previous 80 years. In keeping with Lowell Park tradition, the shelter's log walls were replaced with hardwood logs harvested within the park.



## 4 Bathhouse and Riverfront



The Lowell Park Beach, 1910

By 1907, when the Lowells gave this property to Dixon, there was already a “large and increasing amount of boating on Rock River.” So, in the very first year of “Lowell Park,” two substantial boat landings were erected, and one of them was in the southeast corner of the park.

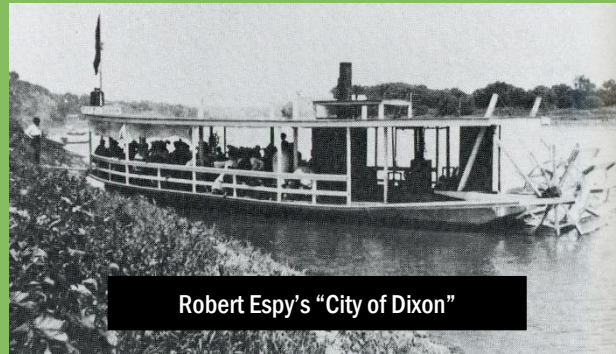
From the very beginning, it was expected that people would come to the park in one of two ways: one was by “carriage” (horse and buggy), and the other was by boat. For many people, the boat dock was their primary entry point into Lowell Park.

Many of these boaters did not have boats of their own. Rather, they arrived by a boating service that charged a fee to board the boat in

Dixon at the north side or south side dock just above the Dixon dam. From there, they took a pleasant 4-mile ride upriver to Lowell Park.

## **Boating Services**

One popular boating service was offered by Robert Espy. In 1902, before the days of the automobile and before Lowell Park was established, Espy built a paddle-wheel steamboat named the “City of Dixon,” which could hold about 116 passengers. His service then took passengers to and from popular sites such as Assembly Park with its big dome auditorium and the “Island Park,” which is the big island just above the Dixon dam.



When Lowell Park began in 1907, Espy’s business increased so much that he added two more boats and placed a piano on the “City of Dixon” to entertain passengers during their boat ride. During the summer months, Espy even lived in his houseboat at Lowell Park. He continued his boating service for more than 40 years until his death in 1944.

## **Boat Races**

Boat races were also a common feature at Lowell Park in its early decades. When the park first opened in August of 1907, nearly every business in Dixon closed to commemorate “Lowell Park Day.” An estimated six thousand people came to the park for a full program of activities that included boat races, aquatic games, sack races, a watermelon eating contest, a “fat men’s race,” and music. However, no activities were held in the evening because of “the difficulty in getting proper lights.”

## **Building the Bathhouse**

Although Lowell Park Beach was used for swimming as early as 1912, swimming became a major attraction in 1922 when the Park Board opened a bathhouse along with a new dock with a diving board, all at a cost of \$9,000 (or about \$150,000 in 2020 money). The south and west wings of the bathhouse contained men's and women's dressing rooms and showers, while the front area had a concession stand for selling refreshments and renting clothing baskets that could accommodate 800 swimmers.

In addition to building the bathhouse, the Park Board also moved the beach to the bathhouse location from its previous location to the north. Sand was also added for a more comfortable beach.

Since the bathhouse incurred ongoing expenses for paying a lifeguard and maintaining the docks and the bathhouse, the Park Board charged ten cents for each patron of the bathhouse. Many, however, avoided the dime fee by simply changing their clothing in public, outside the bathhouse. This caused the board to receive several complaints of indecent exposure.

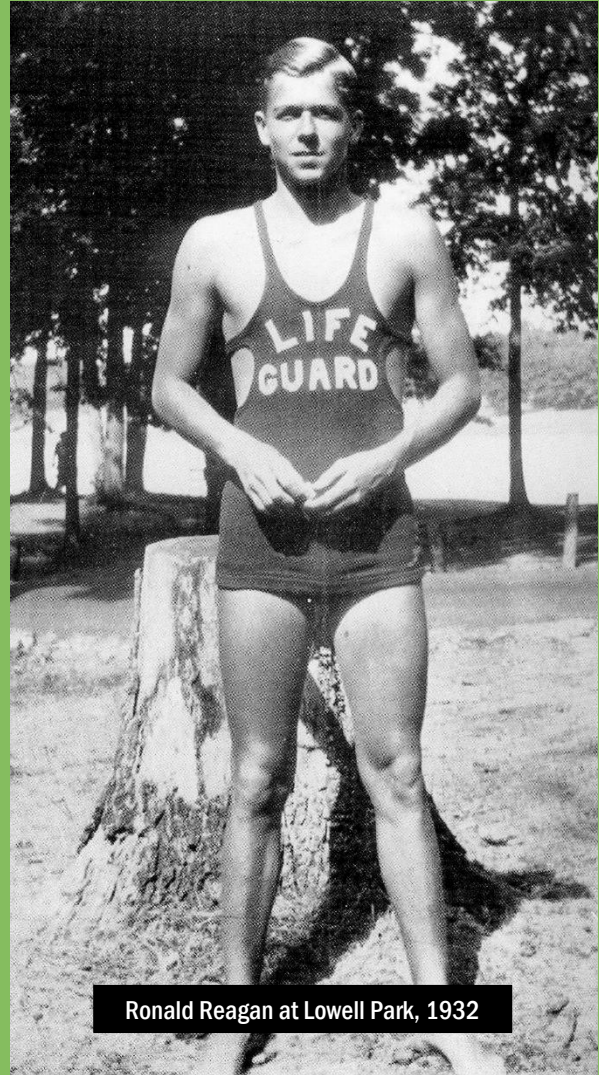
By the 1920s most people were coming to the park in automobiles, and people felt free to park their cars on the grass or wherever they wanted. So, the Park Board arranged for large blocks of stone from the quarry to be placed along the roadside to keep cars off the grass. These stone blocks enhanced the natural beauty of the park and were so durable that they can still be found around the park, a century later.

## 1926-1932: Ronald Reagan

In 1926, 15-year-old Ronald Reagan was employed at the park for the first of seven summers as a lifeguard and swimming instructor at the beach, where it was not uncommon to have 500 to 800 swimmers in a 12-hour day. In his 1990 autobiography, Reagan described his lifeguard days as “one of the best jobs I ever had.”

At the time, Reagan had taken a course on lifesaving at the YMCA, and he jumped at the chance to quit a construction job and become a lifeguard at Lowell Park. He recalled working “seven days a week, ten to twelve hours a day,” for \$15 a week, eventually increasing to \$20 a week. He continued as a lifeguard every summer through his college years, using the money to pay for tuition. His final summer as a lifeguard was in 1932, just after he graduated from Eureka College.

Reagan’s renown as a lifesaver was well known at that time, as the Telegraph had published articles in the 1920s and 30s that chronicled the increasing tally of lives that he saved at Lowell Park Beach. As Reagan said in his autobiography, “One of the proudest statistics of my life is seventy-seven—the number of people I saved during those seven summers.”





His lifesaving record is recorded on a historical marker just to the left of the boat landing area. You might think that 77 is an inflated number. But hundreds of swimmers were known to be here on any day throughout those seven summers. On peak days, the number could reach 1,000. Since Reagan worked 10 to 12 hours a day for seven days a week, it's not hard to see how he could eventually save 77 lives.

When Reagan returned to Dixon in 1990, he visited Lowell Park. While standing on the shore, he skipped stones on the river as he used to do as

a lifeguard. Standing at his side, Ed Conroy reached down to get more stones, but he slipped and started to fall toward the water. Reagan quickly reached out and prevented Conroy from falling.

Reagan then quipped, "That's 78."

## Popularity of Swimming

In the 1940s, visitors to the Lowell Park riverfront reached a peak during July Fourth celebrations. In 1943, during the war, Lowell Park held "V-Day," which attracted "over 10,000 people" for swimming races, sporting events, picnics, and concerts by two bands. On July 4, 1947, that number had increased to "an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people" for a "day-long program ... of swimming ... of boat races ... bubble gum contests, husband-calling contests, hog-calling contests, an amateur show, and other features." It was reported that "thousands of swimmers splashed in the river" on that day.

With all the swimmers braving the Rock River currents, you might think that there would be an occasional tragedy. But in 1948, the Telegraph reported, “For more than 35 years the board has maintained a bathing beach in Lowell Park which has the enviable record of but one drowning.”

In the 1950s the popularity of the Lowell Park Beach began to drop off. The opening of Memorial Pool in Dixon in 1950—dedicated by Ronald Reagan himself—may have been a contributing factor. Finally, in 1959, “the beach was closed due to declining usage, thus ending an era of over 50 years of enjoyment by tens of thousands of people.”

### **Restoring the Bathhouse**

In time, the bathhouse began to fall into disrepair, and in the 1980s, the restrooms at the bathhouse were closed. But in 1997, while Reagan’s health was declining, the community came



together to save the historic bathhouse from the wrecker’s ball. Over \$10,000 was raised to repair and restore the bathhouse, which was later named “Reagan Bathhouse” in honor of Dixon’s favorite son, who spent seven summers there as a lifeguard.

During the renovation, a vintage rental bathing suit, probably from the 1920s, was found in a box at the bathhouse. That suit has been framed and mounted and is on display at the Ruth Edwards Nature Center near the front of the park.

Today, the Reagan Bathhouse can be rented, and it has become a popular venue for gatherings of all kinds such as birthdays, baby showers, club meetings, and reunions. In the summers, it has often been rented almost every weekend by groups that love the historic setting, the fresh air, and the beautiful view of the Rock River.

# 5 Woodcote



The term ‘Woodcote’ means “cottage in the wood,” and the term is a perfect description of this building. Over the years, this cottage has often been called “Lowell Park Lodge,” but from the very beginning, “Woodcote” has been its official name.

After the park was given to the city in 1907, it appears that a pavilion near the river was the very first structure completed. The second building was Woodcote, constructed before any of the shelters.

## **Designing the Home**

In 1907 Carlotta Lowell hired the renowned Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts, to design the park. One of the brothers, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., established Harvard University’s first formal training program in landscape architecture, and he was the



son of Frederick Law Olmsted, who is regarded as “the father of American landscape architecture.”

Much of the planning work on Lowell Park was done by the firm’s Arthur C. Comey, a fresh 1907 graduate of Harvard’s landscape architecture program. From 1907 to 1909, Comey spent much time studying the property and crafting his 1909 report that offered his recommendations for careful development.

Comey felt that building the caretaker’s home was a crucial first step to designing a successful park. In keeping with Olmsted principles, he created the home with a design that “does not call attention to itself” and that “works on the unconscious to produce relaxation.”

### **Blending with Nature**

Thus, Woodcote was built of natural materials including nearly 40 cords of limestone that came from the park’s quarry. The home offered a view of the river, yet it left the entirety of that river view available to park visitors. The building is secluded and blended so well with the environment, park visitors might never be aware that Woodcote exists.

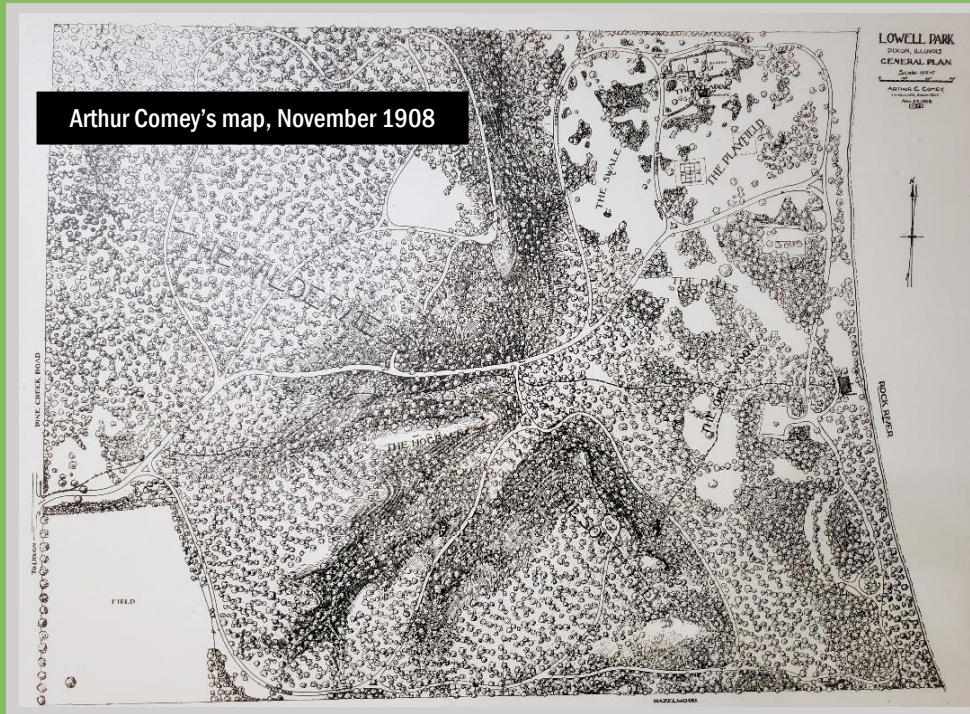
Reflecting the common transportation methods of 1909, the first Woodcote included a stable with stalls for three horses and a large area for carriages. The home itself has four bedrooms and a basement under the whole house. The surrounding grounds were beautified by natural shrubbery, flowers, and a place for a garden.

When the home was completed in September of 1909, Woodcote was described as “something entirely new and novel in park homes.”

## Its First Resident

Comey's 1909 report included a detailed description of the ideal candidate for the park superintendent who would live at Woodcote. Comey said the caretaker must be “an active physically strong and

brave official” who would police the property. His very presence should be “sufficient to prevent the worst forms of injury to the property without the necessity of arrests or fights of any sort.”



In addition to being a policeman, he said that the caretaker must also be an educator, tree surgeon, fence repairer, and sign-maker. He would also constantly remove dead brush to reduce the possibility of fires and dig trenches that guide storm water in appropriate directions.

## The Consultant Becomes Caretaker

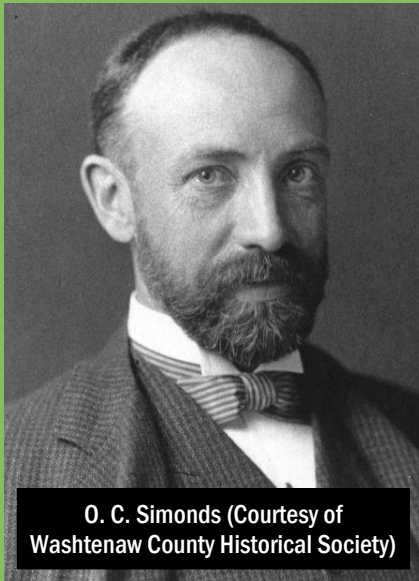
Comey also recommended that the caretaker sign a three-year contract. The Park Board liked his recommendations so much that it hired Comey himself to be the first park superintendent at a salary of \$100 per month.

The 23-year-old Comey accepted the offer, but he did not stay long. Even though he submitted his recommendations in March of 1909, he was gone by the fall. (Yes, he violated his own recommendation for a 3-year contract.)

Arthur C. Comey returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he soon became a renowned and nationally known landscape architect and city planner who published widely and taught at Harvard. But his very first professional employment was here in Dixon as Lowell Park's first superintendent and first resident of Woodcote.

## **The Graybill Era**

So, in the fall of 1909, the Park Board hired a local man, 40-year-old Isaac Graybill, to be the park's caretaker. He and his wife, Sadie, and their 14-year-old adopted son, Edward, then lived at Woodcote.



O. C. Simonds (Courtesy of Washtenaw County Historical Society)

Sadie also became a noted asset to the park. Around 1914, she began cooking meals for the public at Woodcote, and she also rented rooms at Woodcote.

The Graybills capably handled the labor tasks of a caretaker, but the Park Board still needed expert advice on developing the park. So, in 1910, the board hired O. C. Simonds, a prominent landscape architect in Chicago, to serve as a consultant to supervise the park's development.

## **The Simonds Era**

Like Olmsted and Comey, Simonds was also a renowned figure in landscape architecture. In 1913, he served as president of the American Society of Landscape Architects, and he also designed the

grounds of the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois. Simonds was retained by the Dixon Park Board for the next two decades.

When Lowell Park approached its 100<sup>th</sup> year, the Park Board applied for recognition on the National Register of Historic Places. Its application for historic status was greatly enhanced when the reviewers saw that the celebrated names of Olmsted, Comey, and Simonds had worked on the design and development of the park. Lowell Park was officially added to the Register in 2006, just in time for its centennial.

## **Reagan and the Graybills**

But let's go back to the 1920s. By then, the Graybills' son, Ed, and his wife, Ruth, began running the concession stand and bathhouse during summers at Lowell Park. During the seven years when Ronald Reagan served as lifeguard at Lowell Park Beach, he developed a good friendship with the Graybills, who had hired him and often served him meals.

In 1985, President Reagan wrote a letter to Ruth Graybill, in which he recalled the Graybills serving him spareribs and sauerkraut. He remembered one long summer day of working at the beach when he and Johnny Crabtree ate "four pounds of spareribs" that Ruth had provided.

In 1990, during Reagan's last visit to Dixon, he made a point to stop and talk with 91-year-old Ruth Graybill about their Lowell Park days. Ruth died five years later, in 1995.

## **The Jensen Era**

Even though Ed and Ruth Graybill would continue to manage the beach and concession stand into the 1930s, Isaac Graybill resigned as

park superintendent in 1926, as he and Sadie moved into town. Sadie then continued her reputation as an excellent cook, but she did so as a manager at the Assembly Hotel in Dixon's Assembly Park. At that time, she and Isaac were approaching 70, and they both died in the 1930s and were buried at Oakwood Cemetery.

Meanwhile, at Woodcote in 1926, Isaac Graybill was replaced by John Jensen as Lowell Park Superintendent. He was described as "able and intelligent" and as someone who always acted in the park's best interest. His wife, Minnie Jensen, continued the Graybill tradition of offering lodging and excellent meals at Woodcote for visiting dignitaries, private parties, and club meetings.

The Jensens served the park faithfully for almost 30 years, resigning around 1953. It appears that after this time, the director of Dixon's parks no longer lived at Woodcote. By then, the Dixon park system "encompassed more park acreage per capita than any city in the state," and the park director needed to focus also on parks throughout the city.

### **Available for Rent**

So, starting in the mid 1950s, it appears that Woodcote became available as a rental property. In 1954, ads even appeared in the Chicago Tribune, advertising "Sleeping rooms by day or week in beautiful Lowell Park Lodge" in Dixon. Even today, Woodcote Cottage is available for rental, and it continues to be a treasured charming hideaway nestled within Lowell Park's womb.

In 1909, when Woodcote first opened, the Dixon Evening Telegraph reported, "All who have seen this home have been well impressed with it."

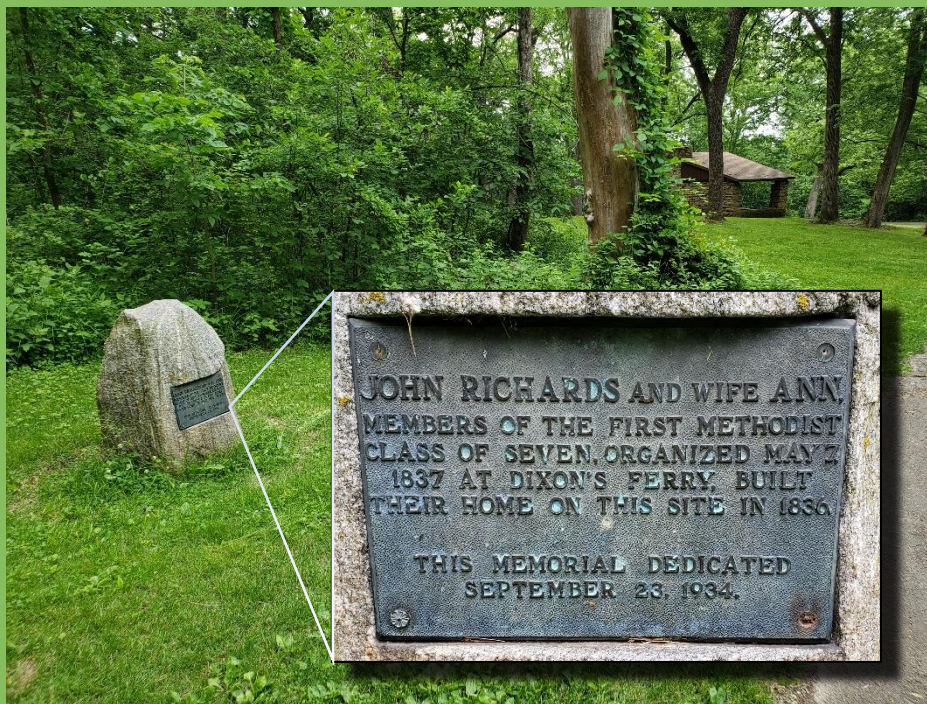
Today, the same compliment still applies to this “cottage in the wood,” which stands as the oldest and most distinguished man-made structure at Lowell Park.

# 6 Vaile and Pitcher Shelters

## The 1837 Home of John and Ann Richards

As is noted on the historical marker next to Vaile Shelter, the family of John and Ann Richards built a home near this spot in 1837. Originally from England, they came to Dixon's Ferry from Chicago, a journey that took four and a half days by covered wagon.

When they arrived at Dixon's Ferry with their five children on September 1, 1836, Ann Richards said, "Where's the town?" At that time, Dixon had only 11 buildings of any kind.



Their youngest child, who was only 18 months old, died a week later and was the third person buried at Oakwood Cemetery. Since Richards was a farmer, and it was too late in the season to start farming, they spent their

first winter in a tavern in Dixon, which was probably the same as John Dixon's first log house. (In those days, a "tavern" was a place of lodging.) With the arrival of spring in 1837, Richards began to

construct a frame home in the woods, which later became the northwest portion of Lowell Park.

### **Water, Rock, Wood, and Protection**

You might think that the location is an odd choice for a frontier home. However, it was common for the early settlers to build in a grove of trees, which provided protection from the autumnal prairie fires and from weather extremes in winter and summer.

In addition, the Richards could retrieve water from the Rock River to the east and from Sevenmile Branch to the north. Rock for a foundation could also be harvested from the (Lowell Park) quarry, and the dense forest could supply an unending supply of firewood for warmth and cooking.

### **Near the Trail**

At this early time, the location of the Richards' home was just steps away from Kellogg's Trail of 1827, which runs through today's park. That trail offered a pathway to Dixon and other settlements in northwestern Illinois. When the home was under construction, Kellogg's Trail was used to bring milled lumber from Freeport by horse and wagon.

The family also traveled regularly on the same trail to Dixon, where the family developed close ties with its residents. In their first year, John and Ann Richards were one of four families that became the founding members of the town's first Methodist church, which organized in Dixon on May 7, 1837. Some of the stone used in the basement of the Richards home was later incorporated "in the fireplace in the rear of the Methodist Church in Dixon."



## River View

Another advantage of this site was the excellent view. At that time, the Rock River was visible from their home. Richards built his house with an upstairs balcony so that the family could sit on the balcony and watch boat traffic on the river.

## Farmland

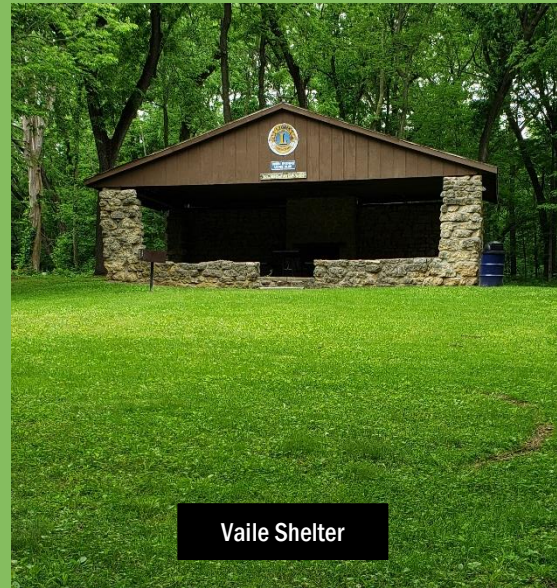
The Richards property also included an open field just across Kellogg's Trail in today's Pinetum, which would not be planted for 90 years. Richards planted corn in that 11-acre field, which is now the southwest corner of Lowell Park.

## Well Connected

In those early days, settlers needed to be hospitable to travelers. The Richards family gave shelter and lodging to several itinerant Methodist ministers who were traveling through the area. In 1837, another traveler was Thomas Ford, who spent several days in the Richards home. Five years later, Ford became the governor of Illinois; he was the first governor to be raised in the state.

The Richards family built strong relationships with many families in Dixon. For example, William Richards, their son, later married Henrietta Dixon, Father John Dixon's granddaughter, who was the first white baby born in Dixon.

The Richards family eventually left this home and moved across the river to the Grand Detour road. In 1909, when the first plan for Lowell Park was submitted to the Dixon Park Board, the landscape



architect said that remnants of the Richards' cellar wall still remained at this location. The depression for the cellar is still visible, only a few feet behind the historical marker.

## **Ed Vaile**

The two other notable sites here are the Vaile and Pitcher shelters, named after leading Park Board members who devoted decades to Lowell Park and Dixon's park system.

Ed Vaile (1874-1955) was a Dixon native who owned the popular Vaile & O'Malley clothing store in downtown Dixon. In 1907, immediately after Lowell Park was given to the city, Vaile served on the first Board of Commissioners of the park. His service continued for 46 years until he resigned in 1953, having served 14 of those years as board president.

Intensely interested in Dixon history and its parks, Vaile was the person who generated the proud statistic that "Dixon has more park acreage per capita than any city in the state." The gift of Lowell Park was a key factor that made that statistic possible.

Ed Vaile died in 1955 at age 81. In his final days, the Park Board passed a resolution, announcing that Vaile had "given more years of valuable service to the public than any other citizen of this community."

## **Louis Pitcher**

Louis Pitcher was also a Dixon native who was very active in community affairs. He was a long-time employee of the Dixon Home Telephone Company, where he worked his way through the ranks to serve as its general manager. He was elected president of the Park

Board in 1929, and he served on the board for 23 years until his death in 1951 at age 70.

## **The Shelters**

When the initial plans for the park were laid out in 1909, the landscape architect recommended that two shelters be built. One shelter would be located along the river and the other “in the north half of the upper plateau.”

He said, “These shelters should be simple yet substantial and picturesque, but without ornamentation. They should be rather dark in color so as to harmonize with the woods.” All of these shelters, including Woodcote and the stone pillars at the entrance, were built with stone harvested from the stone quarry located in the middle of the park.

The Vaile Shelter, as it was named in the 1930s, was built sometime in the 1910s and was probably the first shelter in the park. At that same time, the north road that runs by this shelter was completed.

## **View of the River**

This site was selected for the shelter because of its location along the north bluff, which, at that time, provided “an excellent view of the river.” The 1909 architect’s report said, “From the crests of these bluffs are discovered beautiful views through the trees up and down the broad valley of Rock River.” The view of the river from this point must have been similar to the view enjoyed from the Richards’ balcony 80 years earlier.

Although the architect’s report cautioned against “extensive tree cutting,” the architect encouraged some “judicious thinning, felling trees one by one until the views are completely opened.” He said that

these views would then be “unusually attractive without appreciably altering the aspect of the surrounding woods.”

### **Later Improvements**

In 1934 and 1935, during the Great Depression, funding became available through Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal to put Americans back to work in various public construction projects. With this funding, several improvements were made to the park, which included paving this “north road” with asphalt and adding five new shelters, which included the Pitcher Shelter.

Today, this area may be among the least visited sites in the park, but it contains some of the park’s oldest and most historic sites.

# 7 The Nature Center

In 1909, when landscape architect Arthur Comey identified his list of recommendations for developing the park, he said that one of the “valuable results” of the park was “the cultivating of a love for nature.”



Comey said that appreciating nature has “a refining influence” that makes people appreciate its artistic beauty, bringing them “out of their surroundings and into a healthy outdoor life.”

Noting that the park “affords excellent opportunity for nature study,” he then identified a long list of birds, wildflowers, and trees that are found therein.

## **Birdlife**

In 1908, the Telegraph published several articles by Comey in which he identified many of the common winter birds found at Lowell Park such as the nuthatch, the chickadee, the junco, and the downy, hairy, and red-bellied woodpeckers.

But when spring arrived, Comey spotted more than 50 bird species that had entered the park in May, such as the ovenbird, the scarlet tanager, the bobolink, the red-eyed vireo, the rose-breasted grosbeak, the wood pewee, and the screech owl.

Overall, Comey counted nearly 150 different species of birds in the park, which included the loon, the ring-billed gull, several varieties of heron, the ruffled grouse prairie hen, four kinds of thrush, and twenty-five varieties of warblers.

### **More Tree Species Than England!**

Reportedly, all of England has 32 native species of trees. But Lowell Park alone has 49 varieties of trees.

In 1916, the Telegraph published lengthy articles about the fascinating trees of Lowell Park. Besides the many varieties of oak, elm, maple, walnut, poplar, and evergreens, the park is also home to the shagbark hickory, the pignut, the basswood, the hawthorn, the wild crabapple, the butternut, and the juniper.

While many visitors are oblivious to all the varieties of trees here, the botanist views Lowell Park as a treasure-trove of trees and plants that would take years to discover and appreciate. And this does not even mention all the deer that find their home here, the park's constant succession of wildflowers, or the 63 varieties of vines and shrubs.

### **The Graybill Insect Collection**

In 1909, 14-year-old Ed Graybill moved into the caretaker's cottage (Woodcote) at Lowell Park when his father became the park superintendent. Ed had been adopted when he was three, and he was the Graybills' only child. So, when growing up at Woodcote, his best

friend was the panoply of nature, and one of his favorite pastimes was capturing butterflies, moths, and insects in the park.

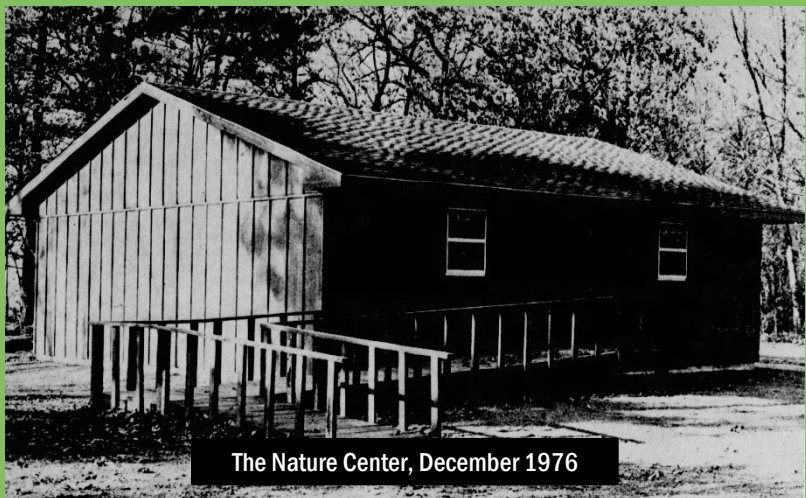
When Graybill would walk out of the park to attend a nearby schoolhouse, he was often distracted by a rare butterfly or moth. He could not resist giving chase and sometimes arriving to the country schoolhouse an hour late.

In 1937, when Ed was 48 years old, he presented to the Dixon Public Library his mounted collection of about 500 different butterflies, moths, and insects. All of them were captured at Lowell Park.

The Graybill story demonstrates, not only the myriad of natural species found here, but more importantly, the great educational playground that children can experience at Lowell Park.

## **The Nature Center**

In 1976, inspired by the idea of propagating education and the love of nature, the Kiwanis Club of Dixon undertook the task of raising funds for a Nature Center. Dixon Kiwanians led the charge to build the facility, while local businesses chipped in much of the materials and labor. When the center opened in 1977, it featured various natural history displays and reading materials.



Soon, the building was named in honor of Ruth Edwards, a Park Board member who was instrumental in developing the center. Ruth had served as a director of the Dixon Schools' Outdoor Education program for 10 years, and after the center opened, she served as its first curator from 1978 to 1982 and also served as Park Board president. Ruth died in 2013, but her legacy of educating children about nature continues throughout the year at the Nature Center.

## **Education and Rehabilitation**

In 1988, the Nature Center was licensed as a rehabilitation facility for injured wild birds and animals, thus providing a new range of educational experiences. From 1991 to 2023, the guest of honor at the Nature Center was Yowl the Owl, an injured great horned owl that had been found nearby. While his injuries prevented him from ever flying again, Yowl lived to be 32 years old, far beyond the typical lifespan of only 25 years. The center kept him safe and fed, while Yowl delighted adults and children for three decades.

In the 1990s, local Kiwanians constructed an addition to the Nature Center that included a classroom. The facility and its director now provide many free educational programs, for both children and adults, that are held regularly throughout the year to share knowledge about the wonders of nature around us.



# Postscript



In 1907 Dixonites needed a good hour to hitch up the horse & buggy and clip-clop the three miles out to Lowell Park. But today, it takes only five minutes to reach its twin stone pillars and be immersed in the tranquility of the park's carefully preserved and life-sustaining ecosystem. So easily now, we can discover what Charles Russell Lowell discovered in 1859, when *we go to the woods to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if we can learn what it has to teach.*

## About the Author

Tom Wadsworth is a sixth-generation Dixonite who has lived in Dixon most of his life. He holds a BA, MTh, ThM, and PhD, all in biblical studies. He has earned national recognition for his work in industry, broadcasting, and writing.

Locally, his articles on local history have appeared in *Dixon Living* magazine, *Sterling-Rock Falls Living* magazine, and other local publications. He can be reached at [trw@tomwadsworth.com](mailto:trw@tomwadsworth.com).

