

Gateway District

1915, 1953, 1967

The original Gateway Park, located at the intersection of Hennepin Avenue, Nicollet Avenue and Washington Avenue, opened in 1915 as a green area within the larger Gateway District, bordered by the Mississippi River, Fourth Street South, Hennepin Avenue and Third Avenue South. “Gateway” referenced the park’s proximity to the railroad station on Hennepin Avenue. The park would serve as a Gateway to Minneapolis for passengers departing the railroad station.

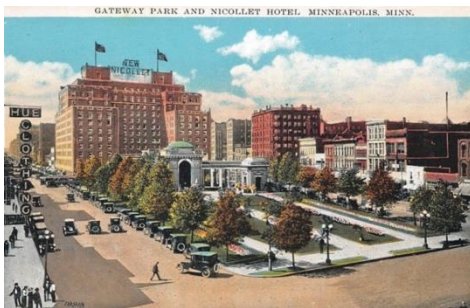


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Historically, the area was a vibrant, often considered seedy, assortment of businesses, including missions, pawn shops, hardware stores, day labor employment agencies, burlesque clubs, gambling parlors, hotels, small grocery stores, stand up bars, and chicken-wire flophouses – beds separated by chicken wire, often located above saloons, which could be rented by the hour. This part of downtown was often referred to as Skid Row. A proliferation of saloons in the area was the result of a 1884 city ordinance making it difficult to open a saloon elsewhere. The reasoning was driven by the belief that law enforcement would be easier and neighborhoods safer if drinking establishments were confined to one area. Ironically, the ordinance inadvertently ensured the presence of “Skid Row.” By 1902, there were more than one hundred saloons on Washington Avenue alone.



Gateway Park served as an attempted rebranding of Skid Row. The park contained a pavilion, a flagpole, and a water fountain. The pavilion consisted of a 1-1/2 story center section, designed in the Beaux-Arts style, flanked by curving colonnades that extended from the center in a welcoming gesture. The pavilion contained public bathrooms and a space used by the Minneapolis Tourist Bureau. The front of the pavilion included the words carved into stone, “The Gateway: More than her gates the city opens her heart to you.” Within two years of the

dedication, a flagpole decorated with a laurel-leaf framed relief of George Washington was donated to the park by The Daughters of the American Revolution. A water fountain, donated by the Daughters of Veterans of Minneapolis, served as a memorial to Civil War veterans. The Minneapolis Library was provided space in the pavilion for a “deposit station.”

Initial response to the new park was positive. Twenty-seven neighborhood saloons were forced to close due to their proximity to the park. In 1920, Prohibition was passed into law. As non-alcohol related businesses moved into the area – dance halls, gambling rooms, soft drink bars, candy shops, and cigar stands, incidents of public intoxication declined.

The success of Gateway Park was reversed as the country slid into the Great Depression. Unemployment rose and the park became a hang out area for transient workers and the down and out. Many of the drifters were young men, driven from their homes by poverty and looking for better opportunities. The Bureau of Public Welfare began using the Gateway Park pavilion as a location to help the unemployed. The pavilion could not accommodate the need for its services. In 1923, five percent of the General Park Fund intended to maintain all the city parks was spent on Gateway Park. It was estimated that 8,000 people used the public toilets daily. The park was crowded and overrun, and the expenses overbudget.



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The Great Depression took a toll on the Gateway Area and Gateway Park. Buildings in the area were not maintained, the area became rundown, and flophouses flourished. With the repeal of Prohibition, the saloons returned. Skid Row had returned, and the area would be considered a blight on the downtown for the next twenty years. The Gateway Area was a frequent destination for Farm Security Administration (FSA) journalists and photographers who were hired to document the suffering of the Depression.

During the years following World War II, the suburbs continued to grow. The population of Minneapolis decreased by 40,000 in the 1950s. City officials once again planned significant changes for the Gateway District, as buildings had decayed, did not meet building code requirements, and the area was infested with rats. By now, the Gateway Park pavilion was a hang out spot for the 3,000 men who considered the Gateway District to be their home.



In the early 1950s, federal urban renewal funds became available to the City of Minneapolis, funds that would lead to the demise of the historic Gateway area. These funds were used to clear away the bars and flophouses along Washington Avenue, considered by many to be a blight on the downtown area. The Gateway Park pavilion was demolished in 1953 and replaced with a 4-foot-high fence perimeter, to prevent anyone from hanging out on the lawn area.

In addition to Gateway Park, nearly seventy acres in the Gateway District were considered for redevelopment. The Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) was granted \$13 million from the Urban Renewal Association. This would be the nation's largest urban renewal effort.



The HRA purchased land often in opposition to public sentiment. Not all building owners wanted to sell their buildings. The Metropolitan Building, a twelve-story masterpiece of Romanesque Revival architecture, was the most significant loss stemming from the 1950s urban renewal project. The building was slated for demolition and despite opposition, the HRA won the legal battle, and the building was demolished in 1961. The Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission was not established until 1971, and as such, organized advocacy for historic preservation was insufficient to save the building. In total, over two hundred buildings were razed, 2,500 residents displaced, and twenty-two city blocks were partially or completely leveled – about one-third of the entire downtown Minneapolis area.

After the massive demolition, new construction began. Some of the first buildings included the Sheraton-Ritz Hotel and the IBM building. The Northwestern National Life Insurance Building (now ING, at 20 Washington Avenue South), designed by Minoru Yamasaki, graces the end of the Nicollet Mall. The River Towers project led the downtown housing boom that continues today. Most of the leveled blocks became surface parking lots and remained as such for decades. The Gateway Project came to be regarded as the biggest planning mistake in the history of Minneapolis.



Gateway Park exists today on a smaller scale, occupying the southeast corner of Hennepin Avenue and First Street South, between River Towers and Hennepin Avenue. The flagpole is the only remaining object from the original Gateway Park. A new fountain was installed in 1967, and the original is now located at Lyndale Park near the Rose Garden. Decorative pieces of stone from the Metropolitan Building were saved and now serve as seating, edging and artwork in the urban plaza at Twenty-fifth Street and Nicollet.