

The University of Connecticut's Great Lawn: A Brief History

The Great Lawn is all that remains of the original Storrs Agricultural School started in 1881. It was only half of its present fifty acres. Beginning in 1896, four separate parcels were added to the Lawn's southern boundary. These parcels were open hayfields except for a small swamp in one of them.

The founders of the Storrs Agricultural School were obviously informed about the great American park movement sweeping the country. Bushnell Park in Hartford, Central Park in New York, and Elm Park in Worcester, Massachusetts were already thirty years old. Why not surround this new school with a park? It made sense to create a beautiful pastoral setting, especially in this rural countryside and with ample land.

In 1908, Charles L. Beach became president of the Connecticut Agricultural College. It was he who enlarged the Great Lawn, though he had concerns about its development. Beach hired a prominent landscape architect, Charles N. Lowrie, to help plan the Great Lawn, especially the placement of buildings. Lowrie was well known in the profession and was one of the eleven founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899.

Lowrie made several trips to Mansfield, from his office in New York City, to study the problem. Fortunately there is considerable correspondence in the University's archives between Beach and Lowrie concerning the placement of buildings around the lawn as well as other issues. From these letters we learn that it was intentional to carefully define the northern part of the Lawn with the Family Studies Building, Gulley and Beach Halls on the west side, and Holcomb, Whitney, and Sprague Halls on the east side, all with similar college gothic architecture, some of the best planning on the entire campus. Lowrie also suggested the two quadrangles that protrude beyond the Lawn's western boundary – in front of Gulley Hall and the future Wilbur Cross Building - to act as visual and physical connectors to the developing campus.

The southern half of the Great Lawn, which is defined by Storrs and Mansfield Roads, and Manchester Hall, was developed in the the early 1920s. Students, under the direction of George Fraser, instructor of horticulture, cleared the land in the swamp, and then built a dam to create what is now Mirror Lake. The landscape around the lake remained clear and barren for several years, but in 1953, student members of the Horticulture Club sponsored "Plant a Dogwood Day." Every dormitory on campus contributed towards the purchase of fifty-two dogwoods, most of them planted around the lake.

Over the years, the great lawn has been used for almost every activity imaginable, from commencements to Farm and Home Week activities. One use has prevailed for 118 years since it was started by Professor of Horticulture, Alfred G. Gulley, when he joined the faculty in 1894, and that is using the Lawn as an arboretum site. Gulley was careful to collect and plant trees and shrubs in places that would emphasize Lowrie's plan – planting along the Lawn's perimeter, with a few select trees informally placed within the lawn as accents. Many of the trees at the north end of the Great Lawn, including the Camperdown, or Weeping Elm, are a part of the original arboretum. Over the years, the arboretum concept has spread throughout the entire campus.

To the citizens of Connecticut, and especially to alumni, the Great Lawn is the image that comes to mind as UConn. May the Great Lawn be carefully preserved forever and continue as an arboretum.

Excerpted from a talk presented by Professor Emeritus Rudy J. Favretti, FASLA, on September 26, 2012, in celebration of the Great Lawn.