

# Susan E. Lurton Park

## *Historical Background*

Long before the first settlers arrived, Lake Classen and the land around it were well-known to Native Americans. The nearby *Watertown Trail*, stretching from St. Anthony Falls to the Crow River rapids, guided travelers westward for over 400 years. Not far away, along the south side of the trail, an area set aside today as the *Seven Nations Nature Area* was believed to have served as a sacred meeting site. And, between the trail and Lake Classen, several major artifact sites have been found. (*Tamarack Hill, Lone Tree Hill, and 'Classen Lake'*). It is unfortunate that few records exist that give the Native American perspective of the history of the land.

The land around the Susan E. Lurton Park is also steeped in Orono history. The park itself was originally part of the *Henry Stubbs* homestead. Stubbs, one of the areas early pioneers, came to Minnesota from Ohio in October of 1856. He made a 160 acre claim, long and rectangular, extending from the west side of Lake Classen to just south of the Watertown Trail (*Figure 2*). He built his first log cabin along the Trail and it was there that he established *Tamarack*, the area's first post office. He served as postmaster until 1861 when mail collection was moved to what is now Long Lake. After Minnesota became a state in 1858

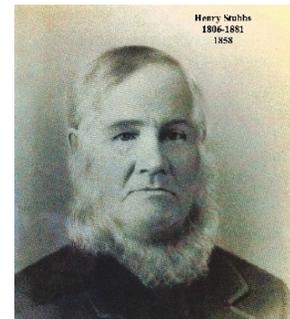


Figure 1 Henry Stubbs

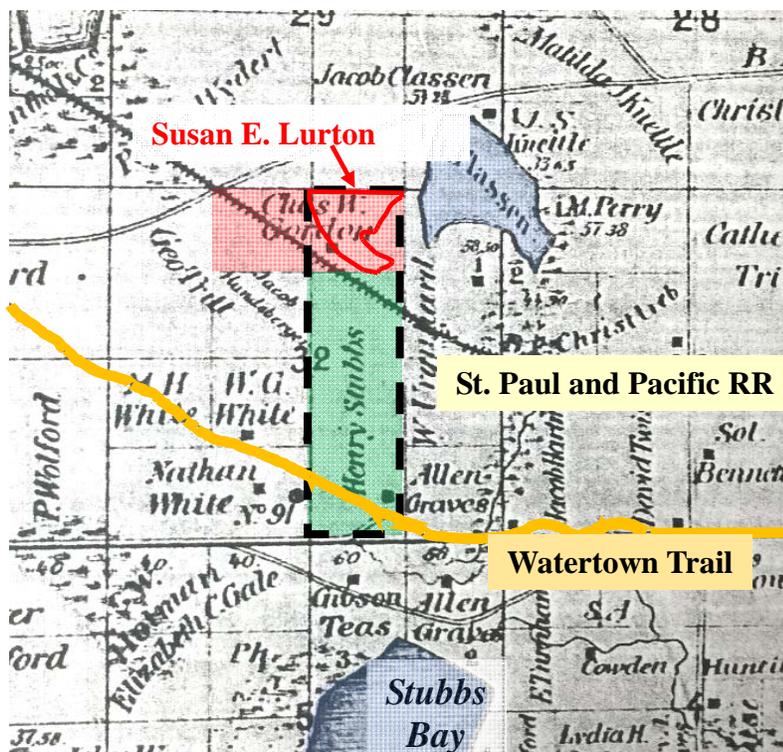


Figure 2 Map of Hennepin County 1873 (excerpt)

homesteaders were required to purchase rights to the lands they had claimed. The Stubbs homestead was on a military bounty claim that had been awarded to Solomon Stranzer, a veteran of the Ohio Militia in the War of 1812 by the 1855 Pension and Bounty Land Acts of Congress. Stubbs purchased the claim from Stranzer's widow Lydia Ann and his new land warrant was signed by Abraham Lincoln on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1861. Years later Stubbs recalled that the trip to Minneapolis to get the warrant

took two days travel with horses through an early November snowstorm that raged across the prairie and Big Woods between the city and Lake Classen.

Stubbs was the head of a large Ohio Quaker family. Eventually all ten of his living children joined him in Minnesota where they became well-known contributors to the settling of the Lake Minnetonka area. Daughter *Elizabeth Mendenhall Stubbs* and her husband *Charles Williams Gordon* were married in Indiana in 1852 and moved



Figure 3 Charles and Elizabeth Gordon

to the Minnesota Territory in 1858. Gordon became a skilled cabinet maker who started out working at the Sears factory in Minnetonka Mills. In 1865 he and Elizabeth acquired 80 acres of land extending west from Lake Classen (Figure 2). They purchased 40 acres adjoining the lake from Elizabeth's father for \$250 and the remaining 40 acres from Samuel and Mary Thompson for \$225.

Although the Gordon's had four young daughters, Charles heeded Lincoln's call for volunteers and joined Minnesota's 11<sup>th</sup> Civil War Regiment in 1864. It meant a year away from Elizabeth and his young family just as they were getting started on their new homestead. Letters exchanged between the two tell of the hardships of the times and the difficulties the separation caused, especially for Elizabeth and her daughters. When Gordon returned from the war he began improving their land. By 1870, according to the Minnesota State Agricultural Census, he had established a small farming operation with a few cows and twelve cleared acres. That same year he sold about six acres as a right-of-way to the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad which extended its line west, crossing directly through his farm (Figure 2). Charles Gordon continued logging the land but began replacing the trees of the Big Woods with apple trees. A family friend,



Figure 4 The Wealthy Apple

*Peter Gideon* of Excelsior, helped select varieties and advised him on how to establish and care for his orchard. Gideon was a renowned apple breeder who had developed the *Wealthy* – the first apple cultivar to thrive in the Minnesota climate. (Prior to that most varieties brought to the state would die off after a few years). Gordon became an avid horticulturist and continued to add more apple trees of different varieties. Although he struggled with weather, pests, and disease, his orchard eventually grew to 800 trees (!) and his advice was widely sought as a writer for the Minnesota Horticultural Society. In addition to the apple orchard, the family also tapped native maple trees to make syrup and sugar. Most of the apple

and maple trees were on the land where the park is now located. In time the maple trees were all logged for cropland.

Two more daughters were born to the Gordons after Charles returned from the war - Sybil in 1868, and Esther in 1873. Another daughter, Eva, died in 1870 at the age of 15. Elizabeth Stubbs Gordon died in 1884 at the age of 51, leaving the two youngest daughters still at home. Three years later Charles married Drusilla Coleman, widow of John Coleman, an early settler credited by many with the founding of Long Lake in 1855. (Coleman had several ties to the Stubbs family. He taught school in the first area school house which was built on the Stubbs farm in 1857, and also succeeded Henry Stubbs as postmaster in 1861.) Drusilla moved to the Gordon farm with her 17 year old son Almon. Two years later the farm became part of the new Township of Orono, formed in 1889 by splitting off the southern half of the town of Medina.

The 1890s brought great change to the Gordon family. The two youngest daughters married - Sybil to Almon Coleman in 1890 and Esther to Arthur Grey in 1891. Then tragedy struck. Oldest daughter Alma White died of blood poisoning in September of 1891 at the age of 38. That same month Charles succumbed to internal injuries suffered when he tried to rescue a cow from the bogs of Lake Classen. Settlement of Gordon's estate, recorded January 9, 1893, divided his land equally among his daughters and provided a life estate for Drusilla. After several transactions within the family the westerly 40 acres was split into several parcels, including 19 acres for Drusilla and a small lot for Sybil and Almon Coleman. Twelve acres had previously been sold by Charles to daughter Mary Lockwood. The 40 acres on Lake Classen as well as a few acres remaining from the westerly 40 were eventually sold to James and Julia Lane. Although the deed is dated April 1897 it is likely that the Lanes lived on the farm for several years prior to the sale. There is evidence that they made an addition to the Gordon house and began to tend the apple orchard. However in 1898 an infestation of army worms ravaged the area and destroyed many of their trees. James Lane died unexpectedly the same year and Julia, with three children at home, decided to sell the farm and return to Edina.



Figure 5  
Frank and Sarah Butterfield

**Frank Butterfield**, the son of another Lake Minnetonka pioneer, purchased what was left of the original Gordon Homestead from Julia Lane in 1899. Frank's father Nathaniel, a native of Vermont, had also been a furniture maker at Minnetonka Mills, and was one of the first territorial pioneers, settling in Minnesota in 1855. The Butterfields already had a farm in Edina but Frank was looking for more acreage. Although one of Frank's sons recalled that there had been a swap of the two farms, the warranty deed listed a sales price

of \$2400 with no mention of a trade. The Butterfields, including wife Sarah, six children (three boys and three girls) and a load of furniture, arrived in two sleds to what son Fred later described as “a large rambling house and rundown farm”. Roads were poor and Orono didn’t have money or facilities to improve them. Rather than increase taxes, farmers were expected to put in a days work on the roads. The Butterfields faced an additional challenge in that much of the surrounding terrain was swamp, and tamarack logs had been used to build rickety bridges and corduroy roads to reach their land from the east. Horses were often lost as logs gave way.

Butterfield was an avid horticulturist who knew how to care for the Gorden apple trees. Soon the farm was said to be “one of the finest apple orchards in the northwest.” In addition, son Jim went to the University of Minnesota School of Agriculture where he worked with the spraying crews and learned about the control of weeds and pests. Apple production reached 3000 bushels in the peak years of the early 1900s, with yellow, red and white varieties ripening throughout the late summer



Figure 6 Butterfield’s “Honey Hill Farm”, c. 1910 (Orchards at left)

and fall. As more stumps were cleared the family added raspberries and strawberries and became active members of the Minnesota Fruitgrowers Association. The soil was good - their Marlborough Raspberries won medals at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. The Butterfields

became fixtures at the Minneapolis Farmers Market, driving their horses through the night to be the first there before the morning opening at 6 am. After several successful seasons they were able to buy a new Buick chain drive truck – the first truck ever driven to the Farmers Market.

In the early 1900s neighbor Almon Coleman helped Frank catch a stray swarm of honeybees. It was the start of a honey business that eventually became the largest in the state, with the Butterfield apiary reaching 240 colonies during the sugar shortage of the First World War. Sarah Butterfield named the farm “*Honey Hill Farm*.” The photo at right shows her in the apple orchard, tending the bees she loved. During the period



Figure 7 Sarah Butterfield

1900-1930 the family sold hundreds of glasses and pails of honey at the Minneapolis Farmers Market and earned a similar number of ribbons from their exhibits in the Horticultural Pavilion at the State Fair. The bees were also welcome pollinators for local orchards and berry farms.

During the nearly 50 years that the Butterfields occupied their farm the land changed considerably. The changes can be seen on a 1937 aerial photo used as a reference (Figure 8). The original 1899 purchase from the Lanes is outlined in green.

The acreage was expanded for a period of time shortly after 1899 when the Butterfields purchased the northwest quarter of Burkhardt Island, which lay just east on the south shore of Lake Classen. The land was covered with stones that had to be removed before the ground could be plowed. Fred Butterfield recalled that the plowing turned up “enormous snapping turtle eggs that bemused professors at the University.”

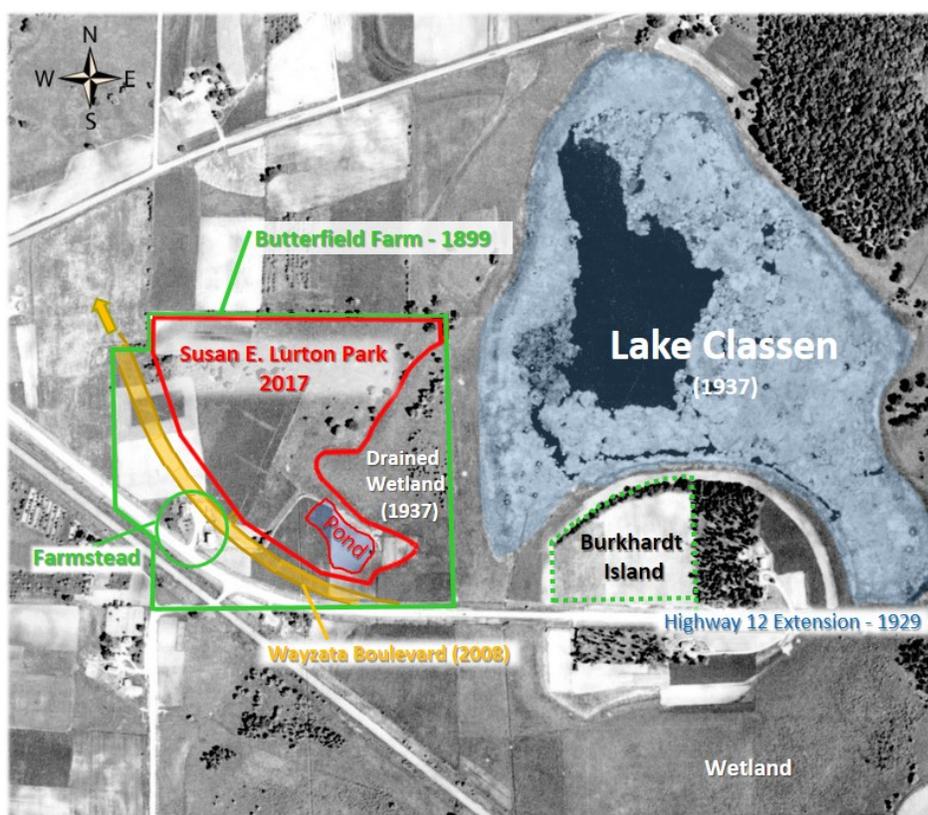
The original farmstead with its large rambling house had only a small log barn. In 1910 a new larger barn was constructed, a structure that stood until the road construction of 2008. Around 1917 the wetland area extending east to Lake Classen was drained as a part of a government program to create more cropland. Although still evident on the 1937 photo, the effort failed as the soil was too ‘sour’ to support crops and too soft for cattle.

In the late 1920’s increasing traffic, especially from trucks, resulted in a re-routing of the highway extending west from Long Lake. The Butterfield house had to be demolished and a new one constructed further north. The barn, however, was

spared. Eventually the oldest parts of the apple orchard began to lose their productivity.

Replanting was attempted, but the soil was spent.

Frank Butterfield died in 1930 and the following year his son Fred had the apple trees cut down. The land was plowed and planted



with corn. By 1937 very few trees can be seen on the site.

It is interesting to overlay on the 1937 photo changes that have occurred in recent years. The current park is outlined in red. To the south and west its boundary has been defined by the 2008 rerouting of Wayzata Boulevard West (County Road 112). The Butterfield farmstead was also razed to make way for the highway. To the east, the drained wetland area has once again become a part of Lake Classen. A pond just to the south of the restored wetland was added in 2004.

*Figure 8 1937 Aerial Photo from the John R. Borchart Map Library – University of Minnesota*

Sarah and son Fred Butterfield continued to live on the farm during the 1930's. Sarah died in 1944 and two years later Fred sold the farm to **Harold and Myra Bollum**. The Bollums owned the farm for eight years, selling it to **Matthew McKeether** following Harold Bollum's death in 1954.

McKeether, of African-American heritage, had been a doorman at a Minneapolis hotel for over 20 years until he retired in 1959. He lived in the Butterfield home for 10 years and when he died in 1965 he left his entire estate to charity. It was widely reported at the time to have been the largest bequest ever made in Minnesota by an individual of African-American descent. The farm west of Long Lake was given to the Phyllis Wheatly Settlement House to be used as a summer camp for underprivileged children. The camp never materialized and the buildings were rented for the next 15 years until developers began to express interest in the location. It was at that time, late in 1979 that the Lurtions stepped in to purchase the property.

Susan Lurton was an avid animal lover who hated to see the effects of development on their well-being. She and her husband enjoyed watching the wildlife from their



home across Lake Classen. In 2000, when the Minnesota Department of Transportation announced plans to reroute Highway 12, the Lurtions decided to donate their 39 acres of land to the city as a passive park. In 2004 MNDOT purchased 8 acres from the city for the highway bypass. Proceeds from the sale were used to establish an endowment for maintenance of the park and to make a significant donation towards Orono's purchase of the Big Island Veteran Camp.

Susan Harvey Lurton was a life-long resident of the Orono area who grew up in Maple Plain and attended Orono schools. She died in 2006, before she had a chance to see her park become a reality. It was opened and dedicated in her honor on October 29, 2011. After several years as a passive nature area, the Lurton family proposed expanding its use to include an off-leash dog park. The park, a fitting tribute to Susan's love of animals and nature, now offers an even greater opportunity for residents and their pets to enjoy what Susan loved most.



The land that has become the Susan E. Lurton Park has certainly seen many changes over the years. From Native Americans camping in the Big Woods, to settlers and farmers tending their orchards, berry patches or apiaries, to the trails and open spaces that now welcome dogs and their owners, the land continues to provide opportunity for those who use it.

### Sources and Acknowledgements

Original records from the Hennepin County Register of Deeds were used to establish the sequence and content of land ownership transactions. Publically available historical maps and aerial photos and parcel descriptions available at the Hennepin County website helped confirm and understand the transactions. Federal and state censuses as well as genealogical information were researched on ancestry.com.

The historical context, background information, and photos that made the facts come alive were made available by the West Hennepin History Center in Long Lake, Minnesota. These included: “*Henry Stubbs Family of Lake Minnetonka*”, compiled and published by Daniel Philip Stubbs, 1997, “Information about the Gordon Land and the People Associated With It”, contributed to the WHHC by Leslie Coleman, and memoirs of the Butterfield family, compiled by Avery Stubbs. Helpful suggestions and assistance were provided by museum volunteer Bob Gasch.

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