

# Duluth's Historic Parks

THEIR FIRST 160 YEARS



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*Duluth's historic parks: their first 160 years*

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**COVER:** LITHOGRAPHIC POSTCARD OF THE PAVILION IN LINCOLN PARK, CA. 1900. [IMAGE: ZENITH CITY PRESS]

**TITLE PAGE:** SKETCH OF A SCENE IN GARFIELD (CHESTER) PARK, CA. 1895. [IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]

**COPYRIGHT PAGE:** SKETCH OF THE BRIDGE CARRYING TERRACE PARKWAY OVER CHESTER CREEK, CA. 1895. [IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]

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**PAGE IV:** LITHOGRAPHIC POSTCARD OF GEM LAKES, CA. 1900. [IMAGE: ZENITH CITY PRESS]

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**PAGE VI:** LITHOGRAPHIC POSTCARD OF CASCADE PARK, CA. 1900. [IMAGE: ZENITH CITY PRESS]

**PAGES VII & IX:** SKETCHES SHOWING PORTIONS OF TERRACE PARKWAY, CA. 1893. [IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]

**PAGE XI:** LITHOGRAPHIC POSTCARD OF LINCOLN PARK DRIVE WITHIN LINCOLN PARK, CA. 1900. [IMAGE: ZENITH CITY PRESS]

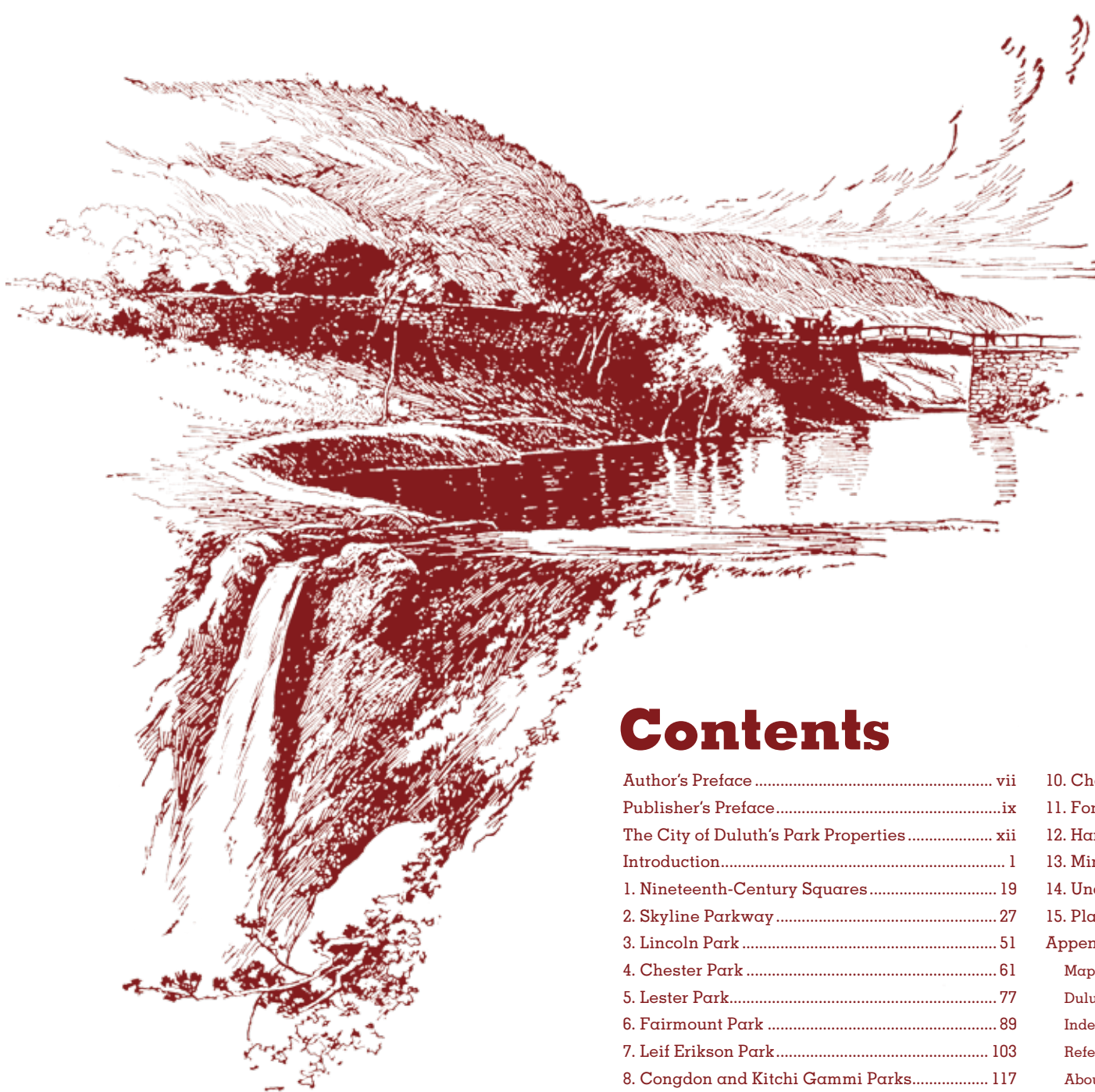
*For all those who have  
donated time, energy, property,  
and funding to help create and  
care for Duluth's city parks.*

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#### 4. Chester Park

## 'A Primeval Forest in the Heart of the City'

**W**hen first established in 1889, Chester Park, created along with Lincoln Park to form the bookends of the boulevard, extended along both sides of Chester Creek between East Fourth Street and today's Skyline Parkway. The area above the parkway, called Upper Chester, was added to the park in 1920. Together these parcels of land tell a greater story of Duluth's history. One was the site of an early Duluth cemetery while the other was once home to the highest ski jump in the world.

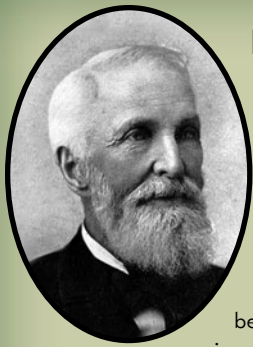
The land along the lower reaches of Chester Creek was settled very early in Duluth's history by Charles Chester, who, in September 1857, purchased a large parcel of land along the creek that bears his name. Little is known of Chester during his time in Duluth outside of one or two brief references, including one from pioneer Sidney Luce, whose memoir of those days mentions "Charles Chester and reputed wife." It is thought that Chester left Duluth by 1860 in the wake of the Financial Panic of 1857 and moved to California to look for gold. The census data from 1870 and 1900 show him living

in Oakland. If this is the same Charles Chester that Luce wrote of, he was born in Illinois in 1829 and had an actual wife (presumably his second), Carrie, who he married in 1896. According to census records Chester was a widower by 1910 and died in Oakland on December 29, 1913. While we know very little about Charles Chester, for over one hundred years his name has remained firmly attached to the park and creek.

Perhaps the park should instead have been named "Ray Park" in honor of another early Duluth settler, James D. Ray. He first came to the Head of the Lakes in 1855 and stayed to become a highly respected Duluth businessman willing to invest his money and energy in the successful development of the city. In response to a community need, in 1879 Ray laid out a cemetery on land he owned on the west side of Chester Creek above East Fourth Street. He named it Forest Hill Cemetery and planned to eventually enlarge it to thirty-five acres and landscape it with trees and shrubs. He built a receiving vault in 1883, but it quickly proved to be too small. A larger vault was

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LITHOGRAPHIC POSTCARD,  
CA. 1905, OF A RUSTIC FOOT  
BRIDGE SPANNING CHESTER  
CREEK WITHIN CHESTER PARK.  
[IMAGE: ZENITH CITY PRESS]



## DULUTH'S FIRST FOREST HILL CEMETERY

As early as 1849, small pioneer cemeteries could be found scattered throughout the area that is now Duluth. By 1870, the year Duluth first became a city, demand surfaced for a truly large cemetery within city limits. In October 1872 the Duluth Cemetery Association organized to find an appropriate site, electing James D. Ray (pictured) as its president. Ray first came to Duluth from Ashtabula, Ohio, in 1855, but left after the Panic of 1857. He returned to Duluth just before the end of the Civil War and began buying up property, much of it abandoned by his fellow 1850s pioneers. He subsequently made a fortune in real estate, accumulating extensive property in Duluth and the Mesabi Iron Range area.

The cemetery association considered several locations and finally chose a spot in November 1872, as the *Duluth Minnesotan* reported: "The tract is a beautifully located one, lying on a gentle rise; covered principally with maple trees; and the small stream which passes Decker's brewery runs though its entire breadth. It is approached by Piedmont Avenue [today's Mesaba Avenue], which intersects the Rice Lake Road." Essentially, today the site would be centered at about the top of Thirteenth Street where Mesaba Avenue becomes Rice Lake Road. Most of the stream—Brewery Creek—has long since been forced underground.

Apparently the Panic of 1873 put a halt to cemetery development, as there are no records of anyone buried in this location. When Forest Hill Cemetery did open—in October 1879—the property was described as running from East Fourth Street up to East Seventh Street between Twelfth and Fourteenth Avenues East. Chester Creek, not Brewery Creek, meandered through the property. This site also contained part of the claim of Chester Creek's namesake, Charles Chester, who like Ray left Duluth before 1860. But Chester never returned, and Ray purchased his property.

The date of the first interment in Forest Hill is unknown, but by the early 1880s notices of burials there appeared in Duluth newspapers, which throughout the 1880s wrote of bodies that had been buried in earlier cemeteries along Minnesota Point being moved by relatives to the new, well-maintained cemetery. In 1883 the association built a receiving vault to hold caskets until burial, but by 1885 it became inadequate in size. That year Ray hired architects Charles McMillan and Edward Stebbins to design a large stone receiving vault for the cemetery. The *Lake Superior Review and Weekly Tribune* described the elaborate structure: "The vault will have a frontage of twenty-five feet and a depth of about thirty.... The material used in its construction will be heavy blocks of Fond du Lac brownstone and Duluth granite.... The entrance will be flanked on each side by pillars of polished granite and surmounted by a stone arch. The doors will be of polished granite, enormously heavy, and an effectual bar to all intrusion. Over the entrance, carved in the stones of the arch, will be the date, 1885, and the words 'Forest Hill Cemetery.' The roof will be of arched brickwork and covered with iron." The *Duluth Weekly Tribune* predicted the vault could hold sixty caskets waiting for burial.

At the same time the new vault was being built, Ray enlarged the cemetery to thirty-five acres by acquiring a city block from Fourteenth to Fifteenth Avenues East between Fourth and Fifth Streets. Despite these actions, by 1887 Forest Hill was crowded almost to capacity with new burials and those moved from other cemeteries. The *Duluth Daily News* also

expressed the opinion of many: the cemetery should not be in a residential neighborhood. In fact, it said, the site of the original Forest Hill "is a very fit place for a park."

In June 1888 the Forest Hill Cemetery Association—which replaced the original cemetery organization—announced it had chosen a new cemetery site along Woodland Avenue that was then far away from Duluth's residential neighborhoods. By May 1890 the new Forest Hill Cemetery was accepting transfers from its original location. Ray remained heavily involved. During May and June 1890, Duluth newspapers carried daily announcements from Ray stating he would meet with relatives or friends of those buried in the old cemetery to make arrangements to move bodies to other cemeteries, usually the new Forest Hill. In October 1890 a judicial order vacated the old Forest Hill Cemetery "preparatory to platting."

The 1885 vault was used during the relocation process. In August 1892 the vault was described by the *News Tribune* as being in "rather bad shape." All caskets were reported moved by the end of 1892—but some were missed. In 1912 while excavating for a basement at Thirteenth Avenue East and Fifth Street, workers unearthed three bodies. They were reburied in the new Forest Hill Cemetery. Apparently the old vault was moved to Forest Hill about this time—at least temporarily. In 1907 the *Duluth News Tribune* announced that ground had been broken in Forest Hill for a new vault and chapel. Eight years earlier the *News Tribune* had reported that the Woodland Cemetery Association was planning extensive improvements to its site on Woodland Avenue north of Calvary Road. The facility was established in 1895 by Temple Emanuel as a Jewish cemetery. By 1910, the 1885 Forest Hill vault had been relocated to the Temple Emanuel cemetery (shown below ca. 2014). It remains there today, although in disrepair. The words "Forest Hill" have also been removed. Today the site of the original Forest Hill Cemetery contains both a residential neighborhood and the southernmost portion of Chester Park.



built in 1885, but by then the neighborhood surrounding the cemetery was growing rapidly. Duluth was booming, and by 1887 public sentiment favored William K. Rogers's plan for establishing a park along both sides of Chester Creek. To create the park system Rogers envisioned, the park board needed to purchase land from individual owners.



Ray was willing to give up a portion of his cemetery—the land he owned between Fourth and Seventh Streets from Fourteenth Avenue westward—which included one of the most scenic waterfalls on Chester Creek. This meant moving the cemetery, and in 1890 Ray began the process of disinterring bodies and relocating them to a new Forest Hill Cemetery on Woodland Avenue.

By September 1891 the park board had acquired most of the land needed for the park; it controlled about 125 acres from Fifth Street to the parkway between Thirteenth Avenue East and Fifteenth Avenue East. Negotiations for the land that fronted on Fourth Street dragged on for many years, and squatters frequently took over the area that the park board wanted for the entrance to the park. It wasn't until 1908 that negotiations were finally completed for purchasing the last of the property required for the main entrance to Chester Park.

The board gave no explanation of why it officially named this public greenspace Garfield Park in 1894, but, as explained in the Lincoln Park chapter, it was likely in honor of President James Garfield, who had been assassinated in 1881. Whatever the reason, Duluthians who lived near the park did not like the name. In 1902 a group of local residents successfully petitioned the park board to change the name to Chester Park, and the board never again tried to alter it.

Chester Park could be reached from downtown Duluth in twelve minutes by streetcar. The board chose to leave the area relatively

POSTCARD OF THE BRIDGE  
CARRYING TERRACE PARKWAY  
OVER CHESTER CREEK AT  
GARFIELD PARK, MADE BY  
DULUTH LITHOGRAPHERS  
CHRISTIE & COLLIER IN 1894.

[IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]

POSTCARD OF THE FALLS AND  
CAULDRON OF THE GLENN  
WITHIN GARFIELD PARK MADE  
BY DULUTH LITHOGRAPHERS  
CHRISTIE & COLLIER IN 1894.

[IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]



POSTCARD OF THE FALLS ALONG  
CHESTER CREEK BELOW NINTH  
STREET MADE BY LITHOGRAPHERS  
CHRISTIE & COLLIER IN 1894  
WHEN CHESTER PARK WAS  
KNOWN AS GARFIELD PARK.  
[IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]

undeveloped, leading the *Duluth News Tribune* to describe the park as a “Primeval Forest in the Heart of the City.” In 1902, park employees finally constructed stairways into the park from Fifth Street on the east and Sixth Street on the west, connecting to a footpath along the creek and two footbridges to provide access to both sides of the gorge. A few years later the board provided funding for the construction of a pavilion (with drinking water), which was located on the east side of the creek, deep within the park about half way between the upper

and lower footbridges, near today’s Ninth Street Bridge. With the addition of the footpath and pavilion, the park became a favorite spot for summer picnics and strolls along the creek.

When the playground movement gained momentum in Duluth around 1911, the park board installed some simple equipment in Chester Park at the corner of Fifth Street and Fifteenth Avenue East. In 1915 this playground was one of three locations selected for a summer experiment that provided supervised daily recreational

activities for children. The experiment was overwhelmingly successful, and the city promptly hired organizer John Batchelor as a public recreation director. Today the site is known as the Lower Chester Park recreational area and includes several ice rinks and a clubhouse. (See chapter 15, “Playgrounds and Sports Facilities” for more about Duluth’s playgrounds.)

In a foreshadowing of future problems, a torrential rainstorm on July 21, 1909, resulted in damage to many city parks, including Chester, where a disastrous landslide covered the parkway on the west side of the Chester Creek Bridge. According to the *News Tribune*, “a surface an acre in extent moved bodily and was carried a distance of 400 feet. Thousands of tons of earth were in the moving mass. ... The slide filled the creek and started up the opposite hill with such force that even there it snapped and carried before it trees a foot in diameter. It swept away over half of the roadway of the boulevard for a distance of 100 feet just west of the Chester Creek bridge and left a perpendicular declivity there, 40 feet high. ...Where great trees stood, the hillside is swept clean.” It took the park board several years to repair the storm damage.

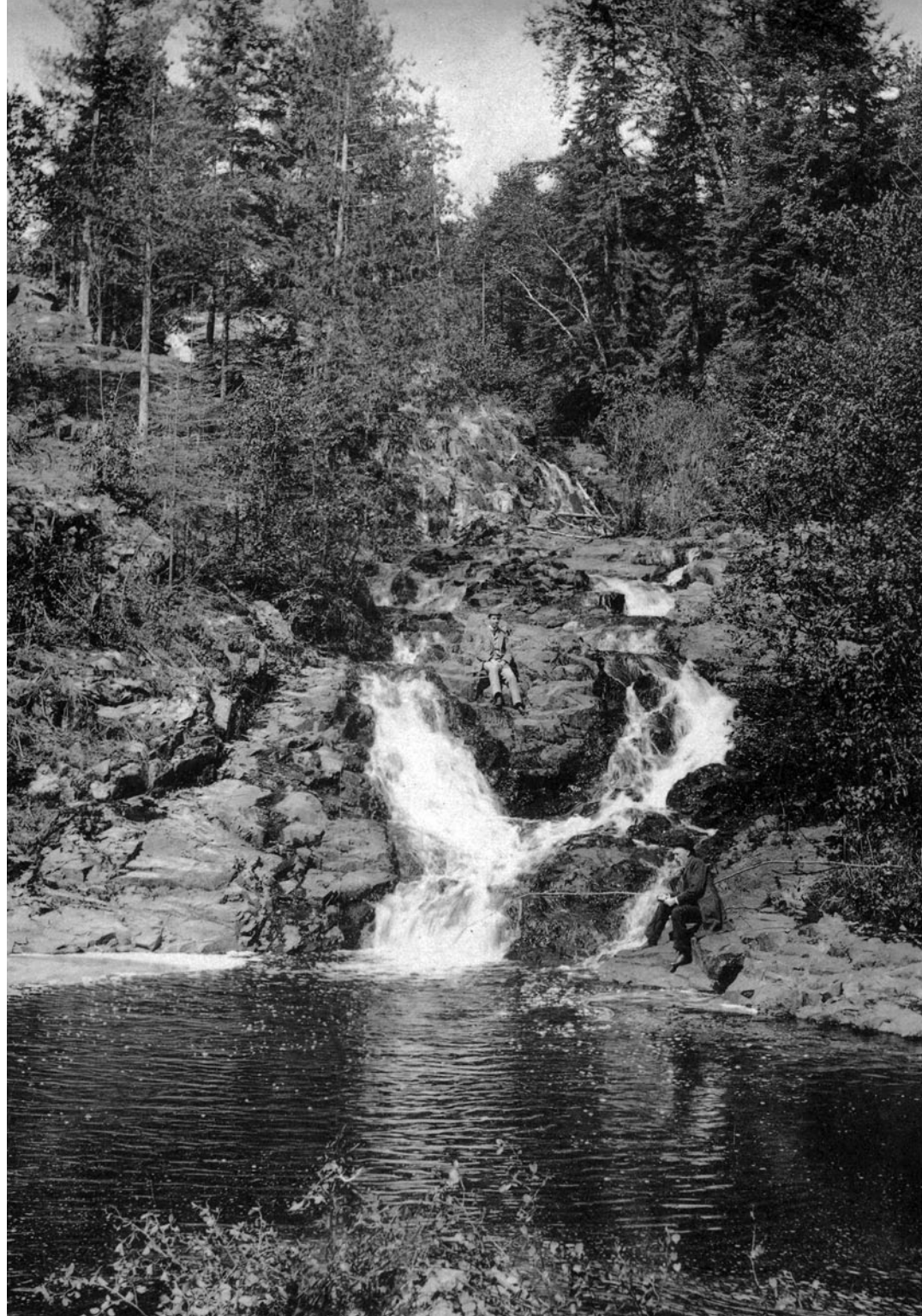
### Chester Bowl / Upper Chester

In 1919 Duluth mayor Clarence Magney proposed expanding Chester Park by acquiring land above the parkway, the area now referred to as Chester Bowl or Upper Chester. But even before it officially became part of the park, many people used the Chester Bowl area for recreation, especially ski jumping.

The Duluth Ski Club moved from its first home in the Hunters Park neighborhood when it purchased property and built a ski jump in Chester Bowl in December 1906, naming the jump “Chester Creek Hill.” The *News Tribune* pointed out that the new site “is much nearer town than the Woodland hill [so] it will be much easier of access for those who have but a short time once a week to spend on the runners.” The club also favored the Chester Creek site because the surrounding hills sheltered it from wind and the northern exposure protected it from the rays of the afternoon sun.

THE CAULDRON AT THE BASE OF THE WATERFALL ON CHESTER CREEK  
BELOW ROGERS BOULEVARD WITHIN CHESTER PARK, CA. 1905.

[IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]





THE GLENN IN CHESTER PARK,  
CA. 1910. (PHOTO BY HUGH  
MCKENZIE.)

[IMAGE: T. KASPER COLLECTION]

The Ski Club paid \$5,000 for the Chester Creek land, purchasing it from an out-of-town owner. Club members went to work immediately to clear brush and build a wooden scaffold for ski jumping. They also cleared a number of paths down the slopes where, according to the *News Tribune*, “the novice can disport himself merrily with jumps of from two to ten feet” and prepared toboggan slides with “bumps over which the women and children can shoot the chutes and gain some of the exhilarating effects which belong primarily to the ski rider.”

On New Year’s Day 1907, the *News Tribune* reported that more than five hundred Duluthians enjoyed the new facilities at Chester Bowl. A small tournament was held, but only two members of the club used a temporary jump. Novice jumpers, the newspaper said, furnished “plenty of amusement for the spectators.” The permanent jump was finished January 6. More scaffolding was soon added to make the jump higher in order to break distance records—the *News Tribune* claimed the Duluth jump was the largest in the world.



The hill officially opened with a tournament on January 6, 1907, and the most successful skiers of the day landed jumps of seventy-five to eighty feet. For the next nine years, the Duluth Ski Club dominated the sport in the United States, and Chester Creek Hill became the center of American ski jumping.

The club hosted the Fourth Annual National Ski Tournament of America in February 1908. The best ski jumpers from across the country poured into Duluth, along with thousands of spectators. The tournament began on Tuesday afternoon, February 11, with Flaaten's Third Regiment Band leading the contestants in a march from downtown Duluth to Chester Creek Hill. The band remained at the hill throughout the afternoon, playing music to entertain the crowd. Another parade took place in the evening with contestants carrying torches as they walked in a procession along Superior Street from Lake Avenue to Eighth Avenue West.

The next day sleighs carried spectators from the streetcar on Ninth Street up to Chester Bowl for the tournament's main events. Despite warm weather and soft snow conditions, Duluth's John Evenson set the new American record jump of 116 feet. Evenson's teammate Ole Feiring jumped even farther—134 feet—but he fell on his landing, disqualifying the attempt. The festivities ended with a huge

banquet at the St. Louis Hotel, which over three hundred people attended. Mayor Marcus Cullum pronounced the tournament a great success and the city of Duluth the best in the world.

In addition to record-setting jumps, many firsts took place at Chester Creek Hill. The *News Tribune* reported that at the club's local tournament in January 1908, skier John Rude “turned a complete somersault on skis...the first time that this trick has ever been accomplished in public at the head of the lakes.” And a few years later the ski club advertised that “the first moving pictures of ski jumping ever made in America will be taken...by Lyman H. Howe.”

In April 1908 the massive scaffold collapsed following a wind storm; club members rebuilt it by December. In May 1916 another wind storm destroyed the slide, the tower, and the grandstand. The ski club had already faced a financial shortfall every winter trying to keep up with necessary repairs to the structures and this loss,



LITHOGRAPHIC POSTCARDS  
SHOWING PATHWAYS ALONG  
CHESTER CREEK WITHIN  
CHESTER PARK, CA. 1905.  
[IMAGE: ZENITH CITY PRESS]



## THE DULUTH SKI CLUB

Ski jumping in Duluth can trace its history back to January 1, 1905, when the *Duluth News Tribune* called on Duluthians to organize a ski club to participate in the "Norwegian sport" of skiing. Nordic skiing and ski jumping as sports were fairly new concepts, and the newspaper felt compelled to describe a ski. "The ski is the Norseman's shoe," the newspaper explained, "differing from the American Indian's footgear [snowshoes] in having its bearing surface of solid wood and not a webbed frame."

Forty-two Duluthians answered the call at Duluth's St. Louis Hotel on November 21, 1905, organizing as the Duluth Ski Club. Its founders consisted almost exclusively of Norwegian immigrants. John Mangseth was named the club's first captain and I. A. Iverson its first president. The club's bylaws stated that "any white man or woman of good standing over twelve years of age may become a member of the club" and that "no liquor can be served or sold at any of the functions of the club." An early proposal to limit membership to those of Scandinavian descent was dropped "as a policy which could work to no good end."

For its first ski hill, the club chose a spot in Hunters Park behind Washburn School on St. Andrews Street. Dubbed Duluth Hill, the site promised an approach of three hundred feet with a minimum jump of one hundred feet. Mangseth and four others tested the hill on December 18, 1905, with the captain jumping seventy-five feet. The Ski Club held its first event there on January 7, 1906, and a crowd of three hundred onlookers saw at least one jumper soar ninety-six feet. Later that month the Duluth Ski Club captured several awards at the first annual ski tournament on White River Hill in Ashland, Wisconsin, with assistant captain Olaf Larson tying for first place and Mangseth coming in third. Two other Duluthians finished in the top ten.

The Duluth Ski Club continued to dominate that year. At the National Ski Tournament on Brasswire Hill in Ishpeming, Michigan, in February, Duluth's Ole Feiring took the \$100 first prize and Mangseth came in second. Later that winter on the Aurora Club's hill in Red Wing, Minnesota, Duluth's Gustave Bye jumped 106 feet, a new American record.

The following season the club abandoned its Hunters Park hill when it purchased land adjacent to Chester Creek above the parkway and built a ski jump called Chester Creek Hill, which unofficially opened on Christmas

Day 1906. The new hill's first tournament was held on January 20, 1907, with Feiring jumping 112 feet, shattering Bye's record before a crowd of 3,500. Feiring's new American record was still twenty-seven feet shorter than Norway's best. On their new home hill, the Duluth men took first through fourth place. Feiring's record was short-lived. Four days later in Red Wing, Aurora Club member Ole Mangseth—John Mangseth's brother—jumped 114 feet. Despite this setback, Feiring went on to dominate tournaments for the rest of the season, with several first-place finishes.

A February tournament at Chester Creek Hill drew an estimated crowd of 5,000. The following year, after building a warming house for spectators and a club house for members, the Duluth Ski Club hosted the Fourth Annual National Ski Tournament of America. By nine in the morning on the first day more than 9,000 spectators had surrounded the hill. Feiring, who was greeted by "deafening applause," fell twice, putting him out of the running. Duluth's John Evenson came through for the Zenith City, setting a new national record at 116 feet. Four days later, during a special extension of the tournament, John Mangseth broke Evanson's record when he jumped 117 feet. Later that same month in a tournament in Ishpeming, Evenson landed a 132-foot jump, closing in on the world record. Duluth had become the center of ski jumping in the United States.

Still, the Duluth Ski Club had no monopoly on ski jumping in Duluth. The West End Ski Club organized in 1907 with boys from the Mork Athletic Club and Hill Toppers Club coming





together to host tournaments on a hill adjacent to Piedmont Avenue. That same year the West Duluth Ski Club organized, jumping from a hill located along today's Skyline Parkway between Fifty-ninth and Sixtieth Avenues West. (In 1931 the city built a ski jump in Lincoln Park, mostly utilized by the Zenith Ski Club.)

National focus remained on the Chester hill and the Duluth Ski Club. In February 1908 the club hosted the Fourth Annual National Ski Tournament of America at the Chester Creek Hill. That April the slide and its scaffolding came tumbling to the ground after a wind storm. It was rebuilt, and at eighty-one feet tall the new jump stood twenty-five feet higher than its predecessor.

The Duluth Ski Club continued to play a large role in the National Ski Association for the next nine years, hosting the national tournament again in 1915. By then Duluth skiers had ceased to dominate the winner's platform. When the club raised the jump to ninety feet before the tournament, it appealed in local newspapers for new members—their dues were needed to finance the construction.

In the fall of 1915, the club was in desperate need of money. The following May the entire jump came down in another wind storm, "tossed a hundred feet into the woods and shattered to bits," the *News Tribune* reported. The grandstand tipped over; the slide approach was blown halfway down the hill. The club folded shortly thereafter. In 1918 the city began negotiations to purchase the Chester Creek Hill.

After two promising years of unorganized jumping at the Miller Creek hills—including a tournament each year—former members and new enthusiasts were encouraged to reorganize in 1922. The following year the Duluthians donned the club's green-and-white uniforms for the first time, sending eight skiers to the national tournament in Minneapolis.

POSTCARD  
IMAGES:  
ZENITH  
CITY  
PRESS



Over the years, several Olympic ski jumpers trained at Chester Park as members of the Duluth Ski Club, including Adrian Watt, Greg Swor, and Jim J. Denney. During trials for the 1968 Olympics, Watt landed a jump of 337 feet, setting a record at Pine Mountain in Iron Mountain, Michigan. He competed in the 1968 Olympics and the following year won the U.S. Championship. A member of the U.S. Ski Team from 1970 to 1975, Swor was U.S. junior champion in 1970 and U.S. Champion in 1972. Denney captured the U.S. ski jumping championship in 1976 and 1980 and the 1978 World Cup. He was inducted into the American Ski Jumping Hall of Fame in 2008. Chester Bowl saw its last ski jumping competition in 2005, and the Duluth Ski Club has not been active since then. (It technically still exists as a legal entity called Duluth Nordic Ski Club, Inc., owned by former club member George Hovland.) In August 2014 workers pulled down what remained of Chester Park's historic ski jumps.



THE 1926 BIG CHESTER ALL-STEEL  
SKI JUMP, PHOTOGRAPHED IN 1929.  
(PHOTO BY F. R. PAINE.)  
[IMAGE: UMD MARTIN LIBRARY]

estimated at \$1,000 or more, proved to be the final blow for the club. The ski slide was not rebuilt, and the club abandoned Chester Creek Hill—at least for the time being.

### **The City Takes Control**

Chester Park—and indeed all of Duluth’s parks—received a boost in 1917 with the election of Clarence Magney as mayor. During his first year in office Magney recommended that the city purchase Chester Bowl as part of a sixty-acre tract of woodland between Skyline Parkway and Kenwood Avenue that would become known as Upper Chester Park. The purchase was finally completed in June 1920, for a price

of \$37,000. Park Superintendent Henry Cleveland announced plans to rebuild the ski slide and make needed repairs to the toboggan slides as soon as funds became available. He predicted that this new section of Chester Park would be “one of the prettiest and most popular parks in the city some day,” a prophecy that has certainly come true.

But before the city had a chance to improve the winter sports facilities, the Chester Bowl area became a summer campsite. After Henry Ford made automobiles affordable to a wider portion of the population in the early 1900s, car ownership exploded, and people across the nation took to the road to tour the country. In 1921 Mayor Snively and Park Superintendent Cleveland formed a plan to cater to



this new group of tourists—known as “autoists.” They worked with the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway Association to create three auto tourist camps in Duluth: at Indian Point on the St. Louis River, Brighton Beach on the shore of Lake Superior, and the newly acquired Upper Chester Park.

Cleveland converted the Duluth Ski Club’s old building at Chester Bowl into a shelter for tourists, established tent sites, and installed toilet facilities, electric lights, and public telephones so that the autoists would have “all the conveniences of a camp near the city.” While the Indian Point and Brighton Beach camps survived for many years, the tourist camp at Chester Park lasted only two years.

Meanwhile, the Duluth Ski Club became active again. Although it had lost its valuable location at Chester Bowl when the city purchased the property, its members voted to rebuild at Chester during a meeting in November 1923. In order to operate their organization on park property, the club made a gesture: it purchased additional land at the top of Chester Parkway and donated it to the city, which then allowed the club to build the new slide that Cleveland had promised. In 1924 the club erected Duluth’s largest ski slide to date. Nicknamed Big Chester, the wooden slide was approximately 65 feet or 20 meters high. Two years later a steel-girded slide, reportedly the “largest steel slide in the world,” was built at Chester. (While local and national

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AN UNIDENTIFIED BOY PREPARES  
TO DIVE INTO THE ARTIFICIAL POND  
CREATED BY DAMMING CHESTER  
CREEK NEAR THE FIELDHOUSE,  
1929. (PHOTO BY F. R. PAINE.)

[IMAGE: UMD MARTIN LIBRARY]

newspapers failed to mention the slide's height or length, club historian Ben Rasmussen wrote in 1955 that it was originally 125 feet or 38 meters high.) The club immediately began referring to the new steel jump as Big Chester. The 1924 wooden jump, renamed Little Chester, was thereafter used by the Chester Park Boys Ski Club.

The Ski Club continued to work in cooperation with the city to maintain Chester Park—at least the upper portion, including Chester Bowl and the ski hills. In 1927 the club worked with the park department to build toboggan slides and a new fieldhouse at Chester Bowl. A skating pond was created by damming a portion of the creek below the ski jumps. According to Park Superintendent Paine,

upstream from the ski jumps the creek was shifted farther to the west to make room for full-sized football and baseball athletic fields. Tennis courts were added in 1928. Paine's annual report referred to the effort as "the vision of the Duluth Ski Club and the Duluth Outdoor Club...to make Upper Chester Park a center for outdoor activities the year around."

Designed by Chalmers Agnew, the fieldhouse included a kitchen and lunch counter, a meeting room, dressing rooms for skiers, and living quarters for a caretaker. A separate building provided storage for seventy-five toboggans. According to the *News Tribune*, two toboggan slides started from "just south of the Kenwood car line." The

CHESTER PARK'S 1927 TOBOGGAN  
SLIDE PHOTOGRAPHED IN 1929,  
LIKELY BY F. R. PAINE.  
[IMAGE: DULUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY]





A DOUBLES MATCH UNDERWAY IN 1929 AT CHESTER PARK'S TENNIS COURTS, INSTALLED THE PREVIOUS YEAR. (PHOTO BY F. R. PAINE).

[IMAGE: UMD MARTIN LIBRARY]

slides crossed Chester Creek and carried riders six hundred and seven hundred feet, finishing on the athletic field. A third slide traveled eight hundred feet “along the west side of the ravine ending up at the old ski jump and just west of the skating pond.” This third slide, the newspaper reported, was “for those who are looking for thrills.” Street lights made the skating pond and toboggan slides accessible after dark. Tobogganing cost ten cents a day per person, and checking shoes while skating was also a dime. Toboggans could be rented for twenty-five cents an hour.

Just two years after these improvements were completed, the nation entered the Great Depression. Many employees of the park

department lost their jobs following severe budget cuts, and workers from national programs, including the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, completed most of the maintenance projects at Chester Bowl during the Depression.

### Post-Depression Chester Park

Big Chester was modified in the 1940s after a sixty-meter jump was built at Fond du Lac Park; its rear tower was removed and a new jumping platform was installed at its base. While this reduced the steel structure's height, it actually increased the slide to a fifty-five-meter jump. In 1971 Little Chester was converted to a thirty-five-meter



A CROWD GATHERS TO WATCH A FIGURE-SKATING DEMONSTRATION ON THE POND IN CHESTER PARK, 1929. (PHOTO BY F. R. PAINE.)

[IMAGE: UMD MARTIN LIBRARY]

steel slide. The new jump completed a project begun in 1969 that included the addition of an alpine ski hill and a tow rope. A natural practice slope was also modified into a twenty-meter jump called Rabbit Ears. By the mid 1970s, Chester Bowl boasted five ski jumps: Big Chester (fifty-five meters), Little Chester (thirty-five meters), and training jumps Rabbit Ears (twenty meters), Bunny Ears (ten meters), and Copper Peak-a-Boo (five meters).

In 1977 Chester Park's playing field hosted Duluth's first high school soccer tournament. In winter the athletic field has often been flooded to create a speed-skating practice rink. The fence surrounding the tennis courts still stands, though the courts have not been maintained for decades.

The 1927 fieldhouse was replaced in 1974 with a ski chalet. Two years later the city hired Thom Storm to manage the Chester Bowl Ski Program; he and his family lived in the chalet's caretaker's apartment

for seventeen years. A ski lift that had served the beginner's hill at the Spirit Mountain Recreation Area was moved to Chester Bowl in 1985 to replace the tow rope. In 2008 the city announced it was unable to continue funding the program through the Parks and Recreation Department. Storm retired at that time, then became the executive director of the Chester Bowl Improvement Club, a group of volunteers who now operate the ski hill. In 2015 he retired for good, handing the reins to David Schaeffer. The chalet that Storm and his family lived in was renamed the Thom Storm Chalet in 2015, and in February 2016 Schaeffer announced plans to add a third floor to the facility.

In 1979 the park was expanded when George Hovland dedicated seven acres of his own property west of the ski jumps as an extension of the park. The land became part of the park's cross-country trail system, which was appropriate: Hovland has been a long-time



promoter of cross-country skiing in Duluth (he represented the United States in the 1952 Winter Olympics) and the proprietor of the city's Snowflake Nordic Ski Center.

The 1980s saw the advent of two events that still take place in Chester Park today. In the summer a stage in Upper Chester hosts Music in the Park, a free Tuesday-evening concert series. Autumn finds thousands of Duluthians flocking to the park for the Chester Bowl Fall Festival, featuring live music, food, crafts, locally grown fresh produce, vendors, and information booths. The event raises money for the Chester Bowl Improvement Club.

In 1992 Hovland tried to take back the property he donated in 1979, which he planned to turn into a housing development. Hovland's neighbors—including legendary Duluth Ski Club member Jim A. Denney and his son and Olympic ski jumper Jim J. Denney—and the Chester Park Improvement Club fought for twenty years to stop

the development. A state district court judge ruled against Hovland. The portion of land Hovland retained west of the park has indeed become a housing development, although as of 2016 only a few homes had been built at the location.

The flood of 2012 ravaged the land along the banks of Chester Creek, and portions of the clay banks in Lower Chester Park collapsed. A stone retaining wall just east of the creek below Chester Parkway near Kent Street collapsed; most of its boulders rolled into the creek bed. The flood also destroyed a bridge over the creek in Chester Bowl and one of the 1928 dams, which allowed the pond to drain. Because Chester Creek is a designated trout stream, there are no plans to reconstruct the pond. Within days after the flood, hundreds of Duluthians young and old descended on the park, armed with shovels, hatchets, bow saws, and chain saws. They worked with city crews to remove debris from the stream and put the park back together.

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A FOOTBALL GAME UNDERWAY  
ON THE ATHLETIC FIELD IN  
CHESTER PARK, 1931.  
(PHOTO BY F. R. PAINE.)  
[IMAGE: UMD MARTIN LIBRARY]

GEORGE S. KOTLAREK (RIGHT)  
RECEIVES THE DULUTH SKI  
CLUB'S FIRST GUY R. WILSON  
TROPHY ON FEBRUARY 6, 1952.

(IMAGE: CHESTER BOWL  
IMPROVEMENT CLUB)



Among those gathered was Dan Proctor, who lives adjacent to the park near Skyline Parkway. For more than two decades, Proctor has walked the trails along Chester Creek with his dogs (including, over the years, Zoot and Otis and Honey and Waldo and Ralph), a shovel, a saw, and other hand tools. Particularly after heavy rains, Proctor maintains the trails, digging draining trenches and moving dirt to keep the paths dry and safe while his pets greet passersby. Proctor—a baker by trade, an environmentalist by practice—was once employed by the park department to work in Chester Park, but after his job was eliminated in 1991 he continued to improve his beloved park. In 2012 Duluth's city council passed a resolution

recognizing Proctor's years of volunteer service, thanking him, and naming the main trail that loops around the creek below Skyline Parkway the Dan Proctor Trail in his honor.

### Chester Park's Ski Jumps Come Down

Enthusiasm for ski jumping had declined dramatically by the 1990s with the advent of many other forms of extreme sports that attracted the same thrill seekers that ski jumping once did. Efforts have been made to revitalize the ski jumping program, but plans proved too expensive. Chester Bowl hosted its last ski jumping competition in 2005 on Little Chester. The Duluth Ski Club has been inactive since then.

In 2007 the Duluth Parks and Recreation Department announced it was considering removing the historic Chester Park ski jumps and surrounding facilities—the city had long viewed the jumps as a potential liability. Many fans of the ski jumps showed up to a meeting of the city's Parks and Recreation Commission. Jim A. and Jim J. Denney proposed a plan allowing the former Duluth Ski Club members and others to try to save the jumps. The commission passed it unanimously, but no plan ever materialized.

In the fall of 2011, citing vandalism and safety issues, Duluth's Facilities Management Division removed the lower portions of Big Chester and Little Chester along with adjacent scoring booths and what was left of the Rabbit Ears, Bunny Ears, and Copper Peak-a-Boo training jumps. Duluth Parks and Recreation manager Kathy Bergen explained to *Zenith City Online* that facilities management personnel did not contact the parks commission in reference to its decision before the demolition took place.

On August 18, 2014, Little Chester was torn down. Workers pulled down what remained of the 1926 Big Chester ski jump two days later. While the landmarks symbolized Duluth's epic contributions to American ski jumping, for many years they had become a popular and dangerous spot for underage drinking among high school and college students who often climbed the sides of the jump.

In 2012 the city formed a committee to create a memorial to the history of ski jumping at Chester Park, part of the park commission's "mini master plan" for the park. Finalized in November 2014, the six-phase plan—projected to cost between \$3.4 and \$5.1 million—is designed to improve the park's trails, buildings, bridges, and other amenities, including a \$1 million expansion and renovation of the Thom Storm Chalet.