

ROCHESTER HISTORY

"This is where I love to go": The (Re)creation of Place at Ontario Beach Park

by Kyle Somerville



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"The Coney Island of the West," as Ontario Beach's amusement park was called, can be seen in full swing in this postcard. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

This issue of *Rochester History* tells the story of Ontario Beach Park and how it evolved from a busy, if challenging, port to a recreation and amusement Mecca for area residents, and then to the community, beach, and port we enjoy today. The story of how Charlotte and Ontario Beach grew into a destination for residents seeking relief from the summer heat, looking for a lovely picnic spot near the water, or just pursuing some fun is one that may touch you personally. My own parents spent time dancing the night away at some of the beach resorts still in operation in the 1930s and 1940s, and I recall my grandmother speaking of making a trip to the beach with her family in the late 1890s. Today, I visit Ontario Beach for things as varied as a summer movie or concert enjoyed outdoors on a balmy evening, or for the annual Polar Plunge in the middle of winter. The buildings and people may have changed, but the spirit of fun at Ontario Beach lives on!

Patricia Uttaro, Library Director

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“This is where I love to go”: The (Re)creation of Place at Ontario Beach Park

by Kyle Somerville

Rochester is richer than most cities in the number and diversity of its pleasure resorts. These may be said to extend continuously along the shore of Lake Ontario for 20 miles, or from Manitou Beach on the one hand, to Sodus Bay on the other. Ontario Beach is similar in its character, and equally attractive as Coney Island. The summer resorts are too numerous to mention, and all are easily accessible by rail or water.

– Rochester Chamber of Commerce, 1899¹

For many Rochesterians, a mid-summer trip to the lake is a welcome annual tradition. Whether to swim, sunbathe, dine out, or just wander the sands, the lakeshore holds an indelible place in their hearts. Of the numerous beaches and parks along the Monroe County lakeshore, Ontario Beach Park, in the former Village of Charlotte, now part of the City of Rochester, was—and is—one of the most well-attended; today it is a popular gathering place and host to summer festivals, concerts, and Abbott’s Ice Cream. Indeed, Ontario Beach Park is a unique site amid many along the lakeshore. But how and why the park became a special place, a destination for leisure and amusement, has to do with more than its location or history. Rather, the contemporary Ontario Beach Park that Rochesterians know and love exists because people have shaped and defined it over more than a century, endowing it with meanings and significance distinct from other nearby lakeshore destinations, such as Sea Breeze, Crescent Beach, Hamlin Beach, or one of the many vanished leisure spots along the lakeshore.

Central to an analysis of Ontario Beach Park’s history and transformation is the concept of *place* as socially constructed space, in which people assign specific meanings and values to geographic locations and then reinforce these attachments through repeated observations of customs. Humans define places by and through their actions, making a favorite public park precisely that. Place is therefore a medium for and an outcome of human interaction, recognized by means of specific activities, buildings, photographs, and maps, which both define place and are defined by it. This attachment to a specific site facilitates a sense of security, or familiarity, and in turn becomes a source of identity for a community of people and a source of memory.²

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the use of the lakeside at Charlotte has undergone several key changes, evolving from an early commercial port on Lake Ontario to a lakeside resort, then an amusement park, and finally a public beach. These changes in how people used the lakeshore landscape mirrored similar transformations that occurred elsewhere in the United States as a result of improved transportation, increasing amounts of free time among the working and middle classes, and new ideas about and attitudes towards leisure. Yet nothing about Ontario Beach Park's evolution was predestined or fixed; the periods of transition between its phases of development reveal Rochester in various stages of cultural flux, at moments of sweeping change and open possibility. In particular, Charlotte's metamorphosis from the era of resorts (1870s-1890s) to that of amusement parks (1880s-1910s) highlights a striking period of history in motion. Tellingly, it was through lakeside leisure activities that a diverse range of Rochesterians—in the middle and then lower classes—claimed greater privileges for themselves and their families, even as they defined Ontario Beach Park as a place.³

From Commercial Port to Lakeside Resort: Leisure and the Social Creation of Place

Although Charlotte and Ontario Beach Park are often referred to synonymously, the histories of these locations are separate and yet intertwined, with the park emerging as a much more recent creation than the community. Nonetheless, their respective histories have common origins in the glaciers that covered much of New York State 500,000 years ago. These glaciers diverted the already flowing Genesee River from Irondequoit Bay to its current course to the west, filling in the Genesee gorge.⁴ This created a potential port for the future city of Rochester, albeit one that was shallow and clogged with silt, a veritable obstacle course of grassy marshes, shoals, and sandbars. The difficulty of ship navigation was one reason why the Village of Charlotte, settled in 1792, never became a major location for commercial shipping.⁵ In addition, the falls of the Genesee prevented the passage of boats further than six miles upriver from the lake. Moreover, the official opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 enabled the shipment of Rochester flour (the city's main industry and export) across an interior route, simultaneously allowing a longer shipping season and freedom from the often vicious storms of Lake Ontario.⁶

In spite of all obstacles, Charlotte developed into an active, mid-sized shipping port and transportation terminal. Steamships plied the waters around the village as early as 1817, carrying passengers as well as cargoes of flour, lumber, wheat, pot and pearl ash, whiskey, and barrel staves.⁷ By the late 1820s, in a preview of recreational activities to come, Rochester newspapers advertised three-hour lake excursions leaving from the harbor in Charlotte. Longer

distance travel was also possible. Passengers could book cabin passage from Charlotte to Detroit for a grand total of \$16 in the early 1840s, or, a decade later, embark on a cruise on the *Princess Royale*, which departed regularly for such Canadian destinations as Toronto, Darlington, and Port Hope. Furthermore, although its commercial success paled in comparison to neighboring Buffalo and Oswego, the harbor of Charlotte still saw regular shipping traffic. It served as an import hub for the Canadian wheat that flowed into Rochester's mills and an export center for flour. Other common Charlotte import staples included fish, lumber, horses, peas, and wool; among exports were machinery, furniture, footwear, fruit, cheese, and potatoes. In the port's banner year, 1855, some 1.5 million dollars' worth of goods flowed into the village.⁸

Charlotte's status as a viable-if-not-lucrative port was confirmed by the efforts expended by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which in 1829 constructed the first in a line of piers intended to broaden its shipping channel.⁹ That same year, the federal government invested in a dredging project around the port designed to clear the sandbars blocking the passage of larger vessels.¹⁰ The addition of a lighthouse on the western pier in 1838 gave Charlotte the appearance of a modern wharf. Occasional newspaper reports of bustling trade further reinforced this image. "There is considerable activity at the Charlotte docks, vessels arriving and departing daily," one paper reported in 1864. "Yesterday 20 sails could be seen in the offing, including propellers."¹¹ Yet even on its busiest days, Charlotte never seriously challenged the primacy of its Lake Ontario neighbors to the east and west, Oswego and Buffalo. In 1838, for instance, the total freight tonnage shipped out of Charlotte was 408, a paltry sum compared to 6,582 for Oswego and 9,615 for Buffalo.¹² Still, the Village of Charlotte held its own as exactly the sort



*A depiction of the Genesee River, ca. 1838, during Charlotte's early days as Rochester's port.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*



*A stereographic print depicting the pier and its lighthouse, ca. 1880.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*

of harbor required by Rochester, a city content to rely on the double arteries of the canal and railroads for its transportation needs.

Gradually, however, Charlotte also experienced the wider transportation revolution that transformed Rochester from a frontier outpost to a boomtown—the “young lion of the West”—in the early nineteenth century. The leap forward came none too soon in light of the painful disconnection smoldering between town and port, city and neighboring village. Through the mid-nineteenth century, that Rochester and Charlotte were estranged from one another was common knowledge. As one mid-nineteenth-century newspaper lamented: “Rochester people have easier and better means of communication with Buffalo and Albany than the village of Charlotte only seven miles distant.”¹³ To help rectify matters, in 1849 the city improved the crude dirt path previously linking Rochester to Charlotte overland—a treacherous byway flanked with steep ravines and rugged in the extreme—by installing a plank lane. (Hoping to capitalize on summer traffic, the Rochester and Charlotte Turnpike Company replaced this street with a toll road in 1882).¹⁴ Railroad service between Rochester and the port, courtesy of the New York Central, began in May 1853. For a fare of 18 cents, Rochesterians could ride to Charlotte; on the return trip, they could watch in wonder as a turntable rotated their train for the voyage back to the city.¹⁵ By 1876, the New York Central extended its lines in Charlotte nearly to the lakeshore. It also faced new competition that year, as Charlotte became a stop on the Hojack Line, which provided east-west service from Oswego to Lewiston. The first electric trolleys from Rochester to Charlotte appeared in the late 1880s. Getting to Charlotte had never been easier or more affordable for middle- and late-nineteenth-century Rochesterians.

There was little mention of Charlotte as a pleasure destination prior to 1853, when a reporter for a Rochester paper observed more than 100 men and women bathing in the lake during the “melting season” of late summer.¹⁶ The memoirs of longtime Charlotte resident (and village historian) Emma Pollard Greer suggest that local beaches were only rarely used until after the Civil War. “Before 1870 there was very little at the beach to call the people there,” Greer recorded, “a sandy waster on both sides of Broadway and not a great amount north of the present Beach Avenue.”¹⁷

Despite the inherent lack of amenities or fanfare, a steady trickle of Rochesterians nevertheless availed themselves of the natural splendors of the lake: its beaches and cooling waters. For the most part, the first excursionists to Ontario Beach were picnickers, usually associated with church or school groups. From the mid-1850s through the late 1860s, the continual presence of children playing in the groves and bluffs overlooking the lake led to the construction of seating areas, swings, and even a ball field. And yet, as Greer remembered, “When picnic parties commenced coming at the rate of three [groups] and for a day in the early [eighteen] seventies, Charlotte was not prepared for such gatherings.” The “increasing migration” of Rochesterians on holiday at the lake, Greer added, “necessitated restaurants, lodging, and bars,” businesses which were altogether lacking in the little hamlet.¹⁸ In truth, while the sleepy beachside community was growing, it was not doing so nearly fast enough to accommodate the demands of what native villagers took to calling “summer people.”

The slow invasion of “summer people” from Rochester continued apace into the 1870s. Alongside the usual assortment of picnickers and other visitors, however, came a new breed: pleasure-seekers who stayed in residence throughout the warm weather months to enjoy swimming, walking the piers and sands, fishing, and pleasure-boating. By most accounts, Dr. Edward Mott Moore (an influential figure in the founding of Rochester’s parks) pioneered the practice. Beginning in 1865, when Moore and his family erected a large tent shelter on the beach, they took to maintaining a permanent summer presence at the lake.¹⁹ Finding this to his liking, Moore quickly replaced the tent with a “handsome cottage”; by 1872, fifteen other prominent Rochester families followed suit and acquired lakeside seasonal dwellings of their own.²⁰ The stream of “summer people” threatened to become a flood in the fall of 1872, when a pair of entrepreneurs purchased acres of farmland on the lakefront and subdivided it into 74 lots for new vacation homes. “Three or four years ago hardly a cottage was to be seen,” one shocked reporter commented in 1874, “while now for a mile in both directions from the mouth of the river, elegant private residents may be found every few rods.”²¹ The rush to Charlotte was officially on.



This postcard from the turn of the twentieth century shows Rochesterians enjoying the fresh air and water of Lake Ontario. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

If the Village of Charlotte had been slow to accommodate the consumer demands of its tourists in the 1850s, it caught up quickly in the 1870s. With individual lots selling out almost immediately upon hitting the market, and with scores of people in search of shorter-term lodging, grand resorts rose to meet those needs. The enterprising members of the community, as well as Rochester investors, showed a determination to establish the hospitality industry that had been absent a generation earlier. Before long, with the construction of the Spencer House (1873), Bartholomay Cottage Hotel (1874), the Hotel Ontario (1884), and many others, Charlotte “became lined with hotels and restaurants.”²² Although Rochesterians of modest means could—and did—justify visiting the resorts on special occasions, the splendor and opulence of the hotels were intended for an affluent clientele. The elegance of each resort’s pavilion became legendary. Recalling his childhood amongst the hotels, one Charlotte native confessed that he made a point of walking by the resorts to “watch the Summer folks sitting there on the veranda eating their meals. I remember the silverware and the pure white linens on the tables. We thought those people were millionaires and wished they’d throw us a few crumbs!”²³ This was a going impression. Many residents of Rochester in the 1870s and 1880s believed, as Emma Greer put it, that Charlotte “might become to Rochester what Cape May is to Philadelphia.”²⁴

Ontario Beach Park’s “resort era” peaked in the early 1880s, though many hotels (those fortunate enough not to catch fire—an all-too-common occurrence) stayed in business through the next several decades. Their prestige remained sufficiently high that when President Benjamin Harrison visited Rochester in May 1892 a train excursion to the resorts of Charlotte was included on his agenda. In the city to dedicate the Civil War monument in Washington Square, Harrison

preceded the ceremony with a morning trip to Ontario Beach. After riding to the lake in a private rail car, President Harrison, along with such distinguished guests as the Governor of New York and Mayor of Rochester, feasted on a sumptuous breakfast at the Cottage Hotel. Indicative of the grandeur of the resort, an orchestra hidden in an alcove above the President's table serenaded the dignitaries as they dined.²⁵

If Charlotte's resorts were still capable of putting on a decadent show in the 1890s, they were fading fast before a new power. The construction of a wooden boardwalk in 1884, sponsored by the New York Central Railroad to attract more customers, altered the character of the beach considerably. Ultimately, it ushered in the era of Ontario Beach as an amusement park. So did the rides and attractions that followed suit. In 1885 a carousel was the first arrival in a parade of even more dramatic amusements: a fun house, the "Virginia Reel" (a swinging, turning ride), the "Waterchute" (a slide into the lake), and many more. Arranged together on a midway, the growing number of attractions contributed to an atmosphere of perpetual carnival. Hoping to drum up business still further, the owner of the amusement park undertook an advertising campaign that coined a new slogan and introduced a new identity for the beaches of Charlotte. Thus did Ontario Beach Park become popularly known as "the Coney Island of the West."²⁶ For better or worse, the nickname stuck; through the 1910s Charlotte emerged more as Rochester's answer to Coney Island than its version of Cape May.

Although the age of resorts and Ontario Beach's amusement park phase overlapped during the 1880s and 1890s, the latter was clearly winning out. The eclipse of fashionable, genteel hotels by the bawdier thrills of whirling mechanical rides, exotic concessions, and



Dignitaries in attendance for the unveiling of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, May 1892. President Benjamin Harrison, who breakfasted at an Ontario Beach Park resort that morning, is the second person visible to the right of the smokestack. Famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass is the sixth person to the right of Harrison. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.



*A postcard depicting the "Virginia Reel," a popular ride during Ontario Beach Park's amusement era.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*

fantastical shows changed not only the dynamic of the park, but spurred its transformation into a mass phenomenon in line with New York's Coney Island. "Until 1880," William Aeberli reminds us, "Summer crowds were usually in the hundreds, but a decade later...the opening of the [amusement] park...swelled visitor population into the thousands."²⁷ Regardless of whether it was the hundreds of Rochesterians frequenting the resorts or the thousands thronging to the amusement park shortly thereafter, the actions of humanity at leisure left its mark. In short, these people played a large part in turning a *space* into a *place*.

New Modes of Leisure

There are no manufactures of importance [in Charlotte]. During the beating seasons the village presents its busiest appearance and the influx of pleasure seekers is at times something surprising. From the port of Genesee boats are constantly departing for other lake points and a corresponding number are daily returning. As a summer and pleasure resort Charlotte and the Beach are the most popular places in Monroe County. To accommodate the multitudes frequently gathered here, the village proper is provided with six hotels, while at the Beach are four more.

– L. C. Aldrich, *Landmarks of Monroe County*, 1895²⁸

How then did Ontario Beach Park, first as a resort and subsequently as an amusement park, become a unique destination created out of the lakeside? Before considering the logistics of how it evolved from a beachfront space to a manmade place, one must explore the broader cultural transformation taking place in late nineteenth-century Rochester, as well as in the United State in general. The era of resorts and amusement parks, according to the historian John Kasson, “coincided with a critical period in American history, when the nation came of age as an urban-industrial society and its citizens eagerly but painfully adjusted to the new terms of American life.”²⁹ Of paramount importance in this seismic shift, new understandings of leisure emerged during the latter part of the nineteenth century, forming the basis for viewing Charlotte as a destination for recreation.

Prior to, and even during the early stages of this social reconstruction, a decided ambivalence existed towards leisure, divided by social class. In the United States before the Civil War, recreational activities such as reading, attending lectures, concerts, and the theater were primarily middle-class activities that lent themselves to strengthening the body and mind so that personal duties towards family, church, and community could be more successfully accomplished. Amusement for its own sake, especially if it involved overindulgence in food or alcohol, was frowned upon by moralist writers and preachers. The middle class also proved adept at enforcing its own rigid standards. An enduring belief in the Protestant work ethic fostered distrust in the idleness of leisure, which many regarded as anathema to “[w]ork, discipline, and industry...the virtues that allegedly counted for the success and well-being not only of individuals, but the nation itself.”³⁰

For the working class, by contrast, composed largely of immigrants, even the blandest forms of middle-class recreation seemed out of reach. Struggling to make basic ends meet, the scholar Kathy Peiss notes, “the working class family could afford only the cheapest of amusements...leisure activity was brief, casual, and noncommercial.”³¹ Among laboring men this might mean frequenting the taverns and saloons dotting Rochester’s streets or seeking refuge from the worries of the shop floor and the crowded tenement in a neighborhood club. Working class women and children also found sources of “cheap” leisure close to home, gathering on street corners, stoops, and doorways, “relaxing and socializing after their day’s work.”³²

Although the attitudes and conditions circumscribing middle- and lower-class pursuits of leisure were widespread throughout the United States, Rochester proved particularly beholden to them. In the words of former City Historian Blake McKelvey: “It required a special occasion, such as the nation’s birthday or some other holiday, to justify a fishing excursion on Irondequoit Bay.”³³ In 1862, the City’s Common Council banned card playing, gambling, bowling, billiards, kite flying, and bathing in the canal and river within the city limits between the hours of 6 a.m.

and 8 p.m.³⁴ What McKelvey dubbed a “straight-laced” spirit of “Yankee restraints” prevailed in Rochester through the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁵

In Rochester, as with the United States generally, popular attitudes towards leisure began to loosen after the Civil War.³⁶ An increasingly centralized economy, organized around the large corporation instead of the small shop, changed the nature of work in America in the years after the Civil War. It also changed the nature of play. More and more, the middle class became salaried employees of big businesses, white-collar professionals entitled to weekends and vacations. Working-class neighborhoods, too, were undergoing profound changes. McKelvey lists “the foreign-born segment of the population becoming more diversified” and the swelling number “of their American-born children” as driving forces behind “their restless desire to get out of their crowded homes...and to the lake and bay resorts.”³⁷ Across social classes, the pursuit of leisure arose through a combination of an increase in time for it due to shorter work days and rising incomes. The desirability of the lake beckoned as summer vacations became common practices for middle-class professionals in the 1880s. Increasingly but slowly, laborers too received opportunities to take advantage of leisure pursuits. The Saturday half-day was first introduced in Rochester in 1881 by the owner of a perfume factory who let his workers out at noon so they could take care of personal business and be ready for church services the next day.³⁸ Finally, broader factors such as the rejection of the puritanical view of leisure as immoral combined with these socioeconomic forces to transform leisure into something desirable on a broad, sweeping scale.³⁹

In the Northeast, seaside destinations such as Cape May and Newport Beach became popular escapes for upper- and middle-class patrons in the 1870s and 1880s. Once there, the types of leisure open to resort vacationers pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Not only did the posh hotels invite guests to shrug off notions of modesty and thrift, they encouraged them to reconsider other Victorian restraints. “Summer resorts seemed to be providing a space in which some of the rules of middle-class propriety were suspended, or at least relaxed,” the historian Cindy Aron has observed. “Women and men engaged in a wide range of sports and amusements, some of which brought them into close physical contact...[and] new forms of social intercourse.”⁴⁰ Providing opportunities for bending—if not breaking—certain codes of etiquette, resort-era leisure could be liberating.

Similarly, the amusement park evolved into a place for white collar professionals and working-class people alike to escape the boredom of their jobs and subvert social restrictions. On the one hand, they offered fresh air, (relatively) clean waters, and plentiful (and often unique) food, as well as a welcome getaway from the grit and grime of the city.⁴¹ On the other,

even more so than resorts, a striking feature of the amusement park was its ability to blur class distinctions. These waterside places enabled men, women, and children of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to mingle in a setting that encouraged, and made acceptable, much more intimate contact with each other than was possible outside the park. Amusement parks, then, facilitated a unique egalitarianism, that of the loud, messy crowd—an experiment in pluralistic elbow-rubbing and shared delights—without equal in a stratified society. Parkgoers effectively “crossed a critical threshold, entering a world apart from ordinary life, prevailing social structures, and positions.”⁴² Thus, the amusement park provided both a respite from the tight structure of everyday life and a venue for cross-cultural exchanges.⁴³

While class status is dependent on a number of factors aside from personal wealth, some inferences can be made regarding the classes of people the earlier lake resorts hoped to attract. Lithographs of the interior of the Bartholomay Hotel suggest ornate and well-apportioned dining rooms and parlors, while a 1904 menu from the Hotel Ontario, which opened in 1884, carried a wide variety of sumptuous



Artist's rendition of Bartholomay Cottage Hotel and Pavilion, ca. 1888. View faces west. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.



Dining room of the Bartholomay Pavilion, 1874. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.



Parlor of the Bartholomay Pavilion, 1874. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

and expensive entrees of beef, chicken, and seafood. An 1880 photograph of the boardwalk also reveals men and women in fashionable dress, carrying parasols to protect them from the sun. These images suggest that the early resorts and hotels at Ontario Beach Park catered to a decidedly middle-class clientele. This would change as the introduction of half-holidays and vacation time in Rochester and elsewhere freed people to enjoy amusement parks on their own time. By 1895, the growing Midway drew a socially diverse crowd with its use of new mechanical and electrical technologies capable of producing new ways of freeing individuals from the boredom and drudgery of everyday working life, if only for the brief time of a ride or attraction.⁴⁴ It was out of this early context—the nascent array of lights, sounds, smells, and thrills of amusement—that the park lived up to its billing as “the Coney Island of Western New York.”

“Half the Pleasure of Summer is a Trip to Ontario Beach Park”: Practice, Place, and Memory at the Park

Photographs give some indication of this environment, but they alone cannot do it justice. We must try to imagine the smells of circus animals, the tastes of hot dogs, beer, and seafood, the jostle of surrounding revelers, the speed and jolts of amusement rides, and, what especially impressed observers, the din of barkers, brass bands, roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, and...other attractions—above all, the shouts and laughter of the crowd itself.

— John Kasson, *Amusing the Million*⁴⁵

Of course, Ontario Beach Park did not emerge on its own; it was a deeply social construct that came into existence through the experiences and actions of the people who went there and the buildings and amusements that formed and defined these experiences and actions.⁴⁶ A place is named or represented to distinguish it as a unique entity and is constantly reinterpreted, perceived, felt, and re-imagined by the people who go there.⁴⁷ A sense of place is also created and defined by the things that people build to mark it.⁴⁸ Public areas like parks, plazas, and other open spaces that are not legally or formally owned by any one person, structure interactions between the landscape and people. When those public spaces also provide material things to entice people to visit, such as transportation, rides, food, places to sit, and spaces to play, a variety of behaviors and actions will consequently emerge which then shape the ideas of what that place *is*.⁴⁹ The repetitive actions of people thus create emotional and sentimental bonds between themselves and a place, binding a geographical location and the meanings invested in it together. This emotional attachment to a place creates a sense of familiarity, defines social

Dinner, a la Carte

| | | | |
|------------|----|--------------|----|
| Chamo | 37 | Chin Cuckoo | 38 |
| Chow River | 85 | Chow Frigate | 88 |
| Chow | 85 | Chow | 11 |
| Chow | 40 | Chow Chow | 40 |
| Chow Chow | 20 | Chow Chow | 20 |
| Chow Chow | 20 | Chow Chow | 20 |

SOUPS

| | | |
|----|-----------------------|----|
| 18 | Cream of Tomato | 40 |
| 19 | Chicken Gaze | 40 |
| 20 | Clam Chowder | 38 |
| 21 | Green Turtle, Clear | 70 |
| 22 | Green Turtle, Muffalo | 70 |

FISH

| | | |
|----|----------------------------|------|
| 80 | Ookerie Whitefish, Smoked | 40 |
| 80 | Ookerie Whitefish, Stuffed | 1.00 |
| 75 | Bluefish, Smoked | 50 |
| 80 | Bluefish, no Bones | 40 |
| 80 | Bluefish, a la Creme | 40 |

EGGS AND OMELETTES

| EGGS AND OMELETTES | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|----|
| 25 | French Omelette | 25 |
| 25 | Tomato Omelette | 25 |
| 25 | Pineapple Omelette | 25 |
| 25 | Ham Omelette | 25 |
| 25 | Omelette with Chicken Liver | 25 |

ENTREES

| | | |
|-----|----------------------------------|----|
| 13 | Chicken Croquette, with Peas. | 40 |
| 140 | Chicken Liver, en Bourrette. | 40 |
| 141 | Spring Chicken, en Casserole. | 40 |
| 71 | Chicken Roast, à la Maitre. | 40 |
| 142 | Roast Mutton, à la St. Maryland. | 40 |
| 143 | Wedge, en Madrilaine. | 40 |
| 144 | French Mutton, en Tonic. | 40 |
| 145 | Lamb Chops à la Welsh. | 40 |

VEGETABLES

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|----|
| 125 | New Argentina | 50 |
| 126 | Polish Chicken | 50 |
| 127 | New Pate | 50 |
| 128 | French Pate | 50 |
| 129 | New Boston, Beefsteak | 50 |
| 130 | Knaggett, au Gratin | 50 |
| 131 | Knaggett, Maitre d'Hotel | 50 |
| 132 | Knaggett, plain | 50 |
| 133 | Primer Sausage | 50 |
| 134 | au Poivre, Beef | 50 |
| 135 | Sausage Peppercorn, Stuffed | 50 |
| 136 | Tomatoes, Fried or broiled | 50 |
| 137 | Tomatoes, Stuffed | 50 |
| 138 | New West House | 50 |
| 139 | Spiced | 50 |

No more than two Persons Served with one Portion
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A DELICIOUS BOUQUET

No more than two Persons Served with one Portion

STEAKS AND CHOPS

[illegible]

ROAST

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------------|
| Roast Beef _____ 40 | For Two _____ 60 | Broiled Spring Chicken, half, 75 | whole 1.25 |
| White Chicken, Stuffed _____ 1.00 | | Spring Duckling, half, 1.25 | whole 2.00 |

GAME

| | | | |
|---------------|----|-----------------|------|
| Squid on Tuna | 12 | Squid on Capers | 1.00 |
|---------------|----|-----------------|------|

SANDWICHES AND COLD MEATS

| | | | | |
|------------------------|----|---------------|-----|----|
| Ham or Turkey Sandwich | 11 | Chicken, cold | \$1 | 20 |
| Chicken Sandwich | 20 | Turkey | 20 | 20 |
| Turkey Sandwich | 20 | Roast Beef | 40 | 00 |
| Roast Beef Sandwich | 20 | Egg | 25 | |
| Club Sandwich | 35 | Tongue | | |

SALADS

| | | | |
|---------------|----|-----------------------|----|
| Watercress | 55 | Potato Salad | 55 |
| Lettuces | 55 | Wheat Salad | 56 |
| Tomatoes | 44 | Salad Dressings | 56 |
| Cucumbers | 45 | Fresh Lettuce Salad | 57 |
| Chester Salad | 55 | Tomatoes or Asparagus | 57 |

DESSERT

| DESSERT | | | |
|---------------------------------|----|-------------------|----|
| STRAWBERRY SHORT CAKE, 50 Cents | | | |
| Cherry Pie | 25 | Edgar Wine Jelly | 25 |
| Green Apple Pie | 15 | Chambré Sauce | 25 |
| Vanilla Custard | 25 | Guinevere Ketchup | 25 |
| Roasted Cakes | 25 | Chambré Sauce | 25 |

ICE CREAMS

| ICE CREAMS | | | |
|--|----|-------------------|----|
| INDIVIDUAL ICE CREAM IN FOUR'S, 15 Cents | | | |
| Fresh Strawberry Ice Cream | 25 | Maraschino Almond | 25 |
| Chocolate | 25 | Kirsch Sherbet | 25 |
| Vanilla | 25 | Orange Sherbet | 25 |

111

| | | | | | |
|------------------------|----|-----------------|----|---------|---|
| Laurens Shorbet | 71 | Bavette Shorbet | 53 | Pig Two | 3 |
| Creme de Menth Shorbet | 72 | Meringue Pateau | | | |

CHEESE

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|----|--------------------|-----------|----|
| Esquifort | 25 | Isol Tea or Coffee | per glass | 15 |
| Richemont Chamoisbert | 26 | Coffee, per cup | | 15 |
| Edouard | 27 | Coffee, per pot | | 15 |
| Finchepiquet Creme Chomp | 28 | Isol Tea | | 15 |
| Edouard | 29 | Tea, per pot | | 15 |
| Bar Le Duc | 30 | Tea, per cup | | 15 |

RESTAURANT OPEN FROM 6 A. M. TO 11 P. M.

 CIDER---A Beverage for the Whole Family

Kubicek & Gifford, Polychaeta, 78 N. 1st Street East, Rochester, N. Y.

*Selection of menu items available at the Hotel Ontario, 1904.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*

boundaries, and stabilizes memories.⁵⁰

As a particular place among many on the lakeshore, Ontario Beach Park was defined by buildings and other structures that gave shape to its character and peoples' activities. In the 1870s and 1880s, large hotels lorded over the handful of comparatively smaller and primitive inns. These resorts were constructed in a variety of shapes such as Us, Ts and Hs, all designed to create maximum fields of view to the outside world. These hotels primarily catered to picnickers and dinner guests rather than overnight guests.⁵¹ Porches and verandas, defining features of nineteenth-century hotels, changed from a functional means of moving efficiently about the structure into an active and permeable aesthetic wall, a space of its own mediating between indoors and outdoors and enabling guests to survey not only the environment of the lakeshore but other people.⁵² Such displays were almost mandatory. "Taking part in the spectacle, as either observer or participant, was a critical component of a fashionable vacation," Cindy Aron notes. "What newspapers described taking place at these spots was a form of 'theater'—the promenading of guests, the grand entrance at balls, the emphasis on costume and dress."⁵³

Constructing resorts capable of showcasing their guests required an overhaul of



The Spencer House, 1873. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

Charlotte's previous built landscape, a tearing down of the old to make way for the new. Although a hotel was built on the Genesee River as early as 1808, the true first lakeside hotel at Charlotte was McIntyre's Beach House, a small saloon constructed in 1854 near what is now the western pier. Built principally out of driftwood, the one-story oblong shack on the beach was owned by Martin McIntyre of Rochester, who left his mark on the village by planting rows of willow trees around his property and the lake. Despite his efforts at beautification, however, the *Rochester Times-Union* described McIntyre's location as "little more than a sand pile."⁵⁴ Still, for local residents of Charlotte as with the occasional early traveler, the hotel served a fine basic purpose. In addition to providing lodging, it acquired the reputation of being a reliable source of tobacco, liquor, and fishing and swimming supplies. And, according to one account, the hotel's proprietor "was noted for his white fish suppers," served with a topping of homemade gingerbread.⁵⁵

As tourist traffic increased in Charlotte, so did the scale and refinement of the hotels at the beach. The Spencer House, opened in 1873 on the site of McIntyre's inn, had 76 rooms, numerous parlors, dining rooms, and dressing rooms, and a barn large enough for 100 horses. In 1874, Henry Bartholomay, owner of one of Rochester's largest breweries, constructed his large resort complex where the current bathhouse now stands. This complex included the prominent Cottage Hotel, a number of smaller summer cottages, a pavilion which served German foods and Bartholomay's beer, and sizeable stables.⁵⁶ Along with four smaller hotels later constructed nearby, these grand venues made Charlotte the leading lake resort in the area.⁵⁷

In this way, the consumption of leisure as a social activity—the assortment of food, luxuries, and architecture not readily available elsewhere—created emotional ties between the

park goes and this particular location on the lakeshore. The park grounds, the boardwalk, and even the utilitarian pier all created opportunities for people to not only mingle with the lakeside in a controlled, formal manner but also to engage in pleasure boating, restaurant dining, and ultimately, to see and be seen by other people.

The importance of the lakeside at Charlotte thus began to take shape, first as a destination for people to gather for special occasions and then as a destination for leisure and escape. Even before Bartholomay built his resort, the site had already become not just a recreation destination but an expression of German identity in Rochester. After the surrender of the South ended the Civil War in 1865, the Summer Night Festival held by the German Men's Chorus at Bartholomay's park was "hailed as an outstanding success" by the city newspapers.⁵⁸ On September 5, 1870, local German societies organized a parade to celebrate the Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian war. Marching from the city to Bartholomay's lakefront property, the parade gathered in the park, waving patriotic banners, singing old German songs, and listening to martial music until late into the evening.⁵⁹

Other social, ethnic, and religious groups also helped fashion the lakefront into a special place along the lakeshore. In order to pay for its expenses, in 1879 St. Mary's Church in Rochester planned the largest picnic Rochester had ever seen. Five chartered trains brought people from the city to Charlotte, and hundreds of carriages descended on the village. The church provided food for 10,000 people, including oxen roasted whole and a wagonload of Bartholomay beer. Fireworks were set off at dusk over the river. Crowds exceeded the expected 10,000.⁶⁰ By 1880, Ontario Beach Park was increasingly viewed as a place for leisure by the citizens of Rochester.

The Bartholomay complex and its lakefront cottages attracted many leading families from the city and served as the impetus for future development of the park into the equivalent of Coney Island West.⁶¹ The growth of leisure facilitated, and was facilitated by, the construction of these hotels and their grounds and their use by parkgoers. July became the favorite month for excursions, especially surrounding the Fourth of July, when visitors from Canada also came to witness the spectacle. Special activities during the day and fireworks displays over the Genesee River at night attracted tens of thousands of people to Charlotte and Sea Breeze.⁶² These activities suggest that by this time, the space that would become Ontario Beach Park was already an important place for the people of Rochester.

The summer resort as a "quasi-democratic" place for people to see and be seen became increasingly commercialized in the age of amusement parks.⁶³ Leisure transformed into a profitable commodity of excitement, experience, and pleasure that could be bought and sold

as easily as Coney Island hot dogs, cotton candy, and souvenirs.⁶⁴ Many amusement parks in the United States were owned or supported by railway companies, built as a means to attract more riders. The Midway and hotels at Ontario Beach Park were the creation of a group of local businessmen in Charlotte, who formed the Ontario Beach Improvement Company with financial backing from the New York Central Railroad in an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of Coney Island and other waterside resorts. The company acquired a 20-acre plot at Charlotte in 1883 and constructed the prominent Hotel Ontario, which opened to the public in August of the following year.⁶⁵

Amusement parks like Coney Island and Ontario Beach Park fostered the “industrial saturnalia,” where crowds composed of all social classes commingled and indulged in excess food and drink, inverted and trespassed over rigid social class lines, and participated in unique forms of entertainment offered by the amusement park.⁶⁶ Middle-class values towards amusement coexisted uneasily alongside older pleasures during the nineteenth century and even into the heyday of the amusement park at the beginning of the twentieth century. But while many middle-class observers viewed lakeside amusements as the manifestations of unbridled hedonism, boredom, and self-indulgence, their idealism often fell short in practice, and the parks continued to attract people across class and gender lines.⁶⁷ By the mid-1890s, Ontario Beach Park had become a popular venue for seeing interesting and unique sights that could be witnessed neither in the city nor elsewhere on the lakeshore. Watching elephants bathe in the lake, a boxing exhibition featuring the world’s heavy-weight champion, tightrope walkers



*The Hotel Ontario, built in 1884, as it looked in 1890.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*



Entrance to the Japan Bazaar, ca. 1901-1914.

Note the “Super-Sarenic” architecture. From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

and daredevils, and the flight of one of the first airships ever created were just some of the ephemeral spectacles that drew people to Ontario Beach Park. Novel exhibitions within the park included the Japan Bazaar, boasting a tea house managed by an “authentic” Japanese

proprietor, a family of “savage” Africans (in truth an African-American family paid to dress up), and Native Canadians in full winter garb. As Donovan Shilling points out, “When few families ever traveled farther than the rails could take them, what could be more intriguing than a vicarious visit to the mysterious Orient?”⁶⁸ These attractions gave patrons the opportunity to see strange cultures in their own town, while mechanical amusements such roller coasters, funhouses, and a large rotating swing simultaneously terrified and thrilled parkgoers.⁶⁹

The architectural style of the Midway, a bizarre amalgam of Moorish, Oriental, and Queen Anne-style structures characterized by soaring spires, turrets, and minarets made of wood and “staff,” a mix of plaster and burlap fiber that was molded to quickly and cheaply produce unusual and wondrous structures.⁷⁰ This style, dubbed “Super-Sarenic” or “Oriental

Orgasmic,”⁷¹ gave a sense of exotic uniqueness to Ontario Beach Park, separating it not only from other places along the lakeshore but also other nearby places. Not even Sea Breeze, the park’s competitor down the shore line, rivaled the wondrous



“Super-Sarenic” architecture on the Midway at Ontario Beach Park, ca. 1920. From the Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center.



Postcard depicting a crowded Midway. [Note the "Coney Island Hots" sign visible in the lower center of the frame.] From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.

architecture, amusements, and spectacles offered on display at Ontario Beach Park. Designed by architect Fredric Thompson for Coney Island, the "Super-Sarnic" motif gave the park an all-encompassing theme, to make more than the sum of its rides and games. The architecture cocooned the visitor in illusion and light, transporting him or her "to a dream city, a mysterious palace of play."⁷² These totalizing aspects of the park also created a sense of permanence in ways which more transitory amusements such as circuses and fairs could not match.⁷³

An 1895 handbill trumpeting the slogan that "Half the Pleasure of Summer is a Trip to Ontario Beach Park" reflects these bonds between patrons and the park.⁷⁴ Repetition—in the form of people being drawn to the park every summer—and the continual search by the park's proprietors for new and exciting spectacles to bring people to the park created a replication of action, reinforcing Ontario Beach Park's prominence as a special place along the lakeshore. A collection of amusement park memories (printed in the *Greece Post* in 1977) captures how Rochester lakegoers experienced the unforgettable spectacles as a visceral process. Consider, for example, the following firsthand accounts about "the Coney Island of Western New York":

"Boy! What a sight that was when I was a kid! There'd be up to 10 people riding in these tallyhoes and sitting up front were two drivers, one blowing on a horn."

"Yes! There sure were big doings going on years ago. The park was a real drawing card and the grounds were chucked full of all kinds of amusements, entertainment, and music."

"My Dad would bring me into the park for the day and we'd be sitting there watching the performances drinking sarsaparilla for a nickel a mug."

"They had everything at that park. At night the grounds would be lit up so brightly from all ends, you could see it miles out in the lake. There'll never again be another spectacle like it!"⁷⁵

Few Rochesterians with living memory of the amusement park at Ontario Beach remain, but the stories they leave behind show a deep bond between people and place.

While, with the exception of a 1905 Dentzel carousel, little physical evidence of the amusement park remains today, documentary records in the form of photographs, postcards, travel guides, and maps preserve many of the amusements, practices, activities, and architecture of Ontario Beach Park. Photographs are a powerful reminder of emotional attachment to a place. This resonance is perhaps nowhere captured more poignantly than in a photograph of the park containing a view of the buildings of the Midway, the gardens and plazas, and the crowds. Above this scene, written by an unknown hand, are the words "This is where I love to go."⁷⁶

These artifacts are more than simple mementos. Photographs of Ontario Beach Park and other locations along the shore caught their subjects "with no chance for preparation, and are revealed in whatever environment or situation the photographer has confronted them."⁷⁷ Other photographs of exhibitions such as elephants in the lake or daredevils in mid-stunt depict Ontario Beach Park in full authenticity, serving as a physical backdrop and social venue for mediating these displays.

Similarly, postcards are products of turn-of-the-century leisure attitudes and a mechanism which reinforces the notion of place. The postcard offered a way to "celebrate one's outing as a step outside the everyday world"⁷⁸ and to document unique or unusual locations or events that the purchaser felt important to commemorate with another (often far away) person.⁷⁹ At Ontario Beach Park, the built environment, the hotels, and the Midway were the main subjects of postcards; the lake itself was almost never shown on its own. Postcards were products of the new conceptualization of leisure as a commodity, as suggested by the importance of the park as their main subject.



*Postcard, ca. 1904, depicting the Rome, Watertown, and Ogdensburg Railroad's "Hojack" swing bridge across the Genesee River at the Port of Rochester.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*

Ontario Beach Park and Its Place in the Lakeside Landscape

Although Ontario Beach Park was the most popular lakeside destination in Monroe County, it did not exist in isolation from other resort areas on the lake, but was instead part of a larger landscape of lakeside leisure places linked by rail, trolley, and the imagination. This landscape stretched approximately thirteen miles west to east, and encompassed a number of different beaches and trolley stops along the shore. The sheer size of the resort basin was a source of deep pride for city boosters. Indeed, the confidence projected by a 1901 promotional brochure, "Rochester's Pleasure Resorts: How to Get There," was undeniably palpable. Extolling the ease and abundance of lakeside recreational sites, the pamphlet crowed that "Rochester is particularly adapted for the entertainment of excursionists, having more pleasure resorts than any other city in Western New York, all within easy access by electric cars."⁸⁰ Rochester's pleasure resorts, indeed, were seen as municipal resources as integral to the area's vitality as its photographic, optical, and brewing industries.

The development of Rochester's transportation infrastructure reflected the enormous value placed upon Lake Ontario. Indeed, the reach of the railway and trolley lines into Charlotte during the late nineteenth century took the shape it did to accommodate increasing public demand for lakeside access. A 1909 map of the transportation grid of Monroe County makes

[A]side from [Charlotte and Sea Breeze], there are, to the East of the Genesee River—Locust Grove and Forest Lawn, The Highlands, Lake Cove, White City, Windsor Beach and Summerville, Point Pleasant, Birds and Worms, Newport, Point Lookout and Glen Haven. To the west of the Genesee—Ontario Beach, Crescent Beach, Grand View Beach, and Manitou Beach, Greenwood Beach, Sunnyside Beach, Beachwood Park and Troutberg.⁸¹

Remarkably, these specific locales shared an intricate transportation web, linked together by train, trolley, or steamboat.⁸²

Charlotte and Ontario Beach Park were central to this transportation system. The Rome, Watertown, and Ogdensburg Railroad (the “Hojack”), completed in 1876, ran through the town and across the river on a swing bridge, while a small interurban line, the Grandview Beach and Manitou, completed in 1891, further reinforced Charlotte’s importance as a transportation center. When local proponents of the Rochester and Lake Ontario Railroad founded the rival resort of Sea Breeze on Irondequoit Bay in 1877, summer cottages soon sprang up on the rail line along the bay, and special Sunday and holiday excursion trains were added to deal with the large influx of people to the resorts.⁸³ The extension of the electric trolley lines north from Rochester not only made Charlotte into a rail hub, but also connected it to the other resort areas of Manitou, Grandview, and Crescent Beaches to the west, and Summerville, White City, Sea Breeze, and Glen Haven on Irondequoit Bay to the east. These resorts were connected by electric railway with Charlotte rather than directly with the city, making the village the focal point for travel to the far reaches of this lakeside network.

As with photographs and postcards, texts such as travel guides and maps help to elucidate the social construction of place by organizing, structuring, and naturalizing spatial information. Maps reflect a way of thinking about and interacting with the landscape through the background knowledge they assume the reader has of the area, the way in which the map is read, how it is used, and the features depicted on it.⁸⁴ Travel guides provide rich details of these places, informing the reader of what he or she can expect to do upon his arrival at a particular place.⁸⁵

Prior to 1887, names of the beaches or settlements were not marked on maps of Rochester. As people began to view the lakeshore as a place for recreation and had the time and financial means to plan excursions, the increasing popularity of visiting the lakeside resulted in the construction of infrastructure for people to visit these places, and their legitimacy was strengthened by their demarcation on maps and travel guides. In this way, the lakeshore became a series of discrete places, full of “fancy names, having no local significance, given apparently to look well in print and sound well in the advertisements,” which could be found on a map and



E., W. & O. R.E.—ONTARIO BEACH.

Illustrations of Ontario Beach Park from Butterfield's Rome, Watertown, and Ogdensburg travel guide, 1888.

which the traveler knew would afford an opportunity for leisure.⁸⁶

Travel guides were often published by rail companies hoping to boost ridership and were products of the cultural changes encouraging the pursuit of travel and leisure. A guide published by the Rome, Watertown, and Ogdensburg Railroad, whose rail lines passed just south of Ontario Beach Park, declared that at the park:

Every attraction is offered to the tourist or pleasure-seeker who delights in charming lake scenery. Comfortable and commodious hotels, with all modern improvements for the convenience and enjoyment of guests, offer superior advantages to families and all who delight in the beauties of natural scenery. Electric lights illuminate the beautifully arranged grounds and buildings; popular outdoor games of all kinds are provided; boating and sailing may be enjoyed without stint; bathing on the beach is not the least of the many attractions. The bluffs are terraced to make the approaches to the water easy, and all the requisites for a perfect pleasure resort will be found here adapted to the taste of the most fastidious visitor. No place more delightful can be found for relaxation and enjoyment than these pleasant lake-side resorts.⁸⁷

Similarly, the New York Central and Hudson Railroad, which had provided financial support for the construction of the new amusement park, noted that the Ontario Beach Improvement Company:

[E]rected a model Summer Hotel, and have spared neither time nor expense in adding to the number and variety of its attractions. Good fishing and hunting are plentiful, and bathing, boating, and driving, interspersed with the social attractions which the hotel affords, cannot fail to make the traveler's stay an agreeable one."⁸⁸

With such glowing praise of the park, promoters hoped that travelers would be encouraged to visit it in the comfort and speed of the railroad. In turn, leisure activities such as those suggested by maps and travel guides defined Ontario Beach Park as a place where one could enjoy them.

Conclusion

When the city of Rochester annexed Charlotte in 1916, the amusement park at Ontario Beach had already begun to decline. Concerns over illicit and rowdy behavior were amplified during Prohibition by the operation of speakeasies in the park and other places, while new forms of entertainment, such as radio and film, eclipsed the draw of the amusement park and the allure

of vacationing in one's own "backyard" faded as the automobile enabled people to visit distant places.⁸⁹ The city purchased Ontario Beach Park in 1918 and condemned it the following year. In 1920, the city tore down the amusement park and constructed parking lots, a bath house, and picnic pavilions. Today, nothing remains of the old amusement park except for a 1905 Dentzel carousel, operated by Monroe County.

A sense of place, the scholar Tim Ingold reminds us, "owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. These depend on the kinds of activities on which its inhabitants engage."⁹⁰ Today, leisure at the park still called Ontario Beach has reverted nearly full circle to its earliest days, providing a place for picnicking, wandering the pier, walking in the water, pleasure boating, and dining at waterside restaurants. Ephemeral summer spectacles such as the annual Harbor Fest, movie nights, and evening concerts performed by local musicians and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra have replaced the rides and amusements offered by the old Midway. The importance of this lakeside place to the people of Rochester is further reflected by war memorials dedicated to the Battle of the Bulge, the Korean War, Vietnam War POWs, and the Merchant Marine. The presence of these monuments at Ontario Beach Park reflects the continuing significance of the park to the community, as there are no other memorials of this kind at other lakeside places such as Hamlin Beach State Park or Sea Breeze. Indeed, the very names of Ontario Beach Park and Charlotte are often used interchangeably.

Of course, place can also be contested, holding contradictory meanings for different groups of people. While Ontario Beach stirs fond memories for many, for others the park represents everything that they perceive to be wrong with Rochester. Algae blooms frequently prevent swimming and cause the air to reek, drawing snide remarks that the beach is closed more often than it is open and that no sensible person would ever swim there. The Port of Rochester terminal is considered by some to be an embarrassing reminder of the failure of the short-lived Fast Ferry venture, a partially publicly funded automobile and passenger boat service that operated between Charlotte and Toronto from 2004 to 2006, while the Hojack Swing Bridge, once a vital part of the railroad that brought distant visitors to Ontario Beach Park and other places along the lakeshore, was called an eyesore and an obstruction to pleasure boating before its recent demolition.⁹¹

Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that parks like Ontario Beach have also been a crucible for contested race as well as class relations. Historically, as the scholar Victoria Wolcott notes, sites of urban leisure often served as overlooked but highly significant civil rights battlegrounds. For Wolcott, "conflict between ordinary black consumers

seeking leisure and white defenders of recreational space often lies outside the purview of social movements.” That is, a close investigation of parks reveals a painful blind spot in public awareness of racial inequality, an oversight rooted in the historical tendency to focus on institutional segregation instead of more “circular” patterns of discrimination “hidden in plain sight.”⁹² The history of Ontario Beach Park is no exception. Even recently, this author has heard obliquely expressed concerns about the “type” of people drawn to Ontario Beach Park, anecdotal proof that racially-charged epithets still cling insidiously in local discourse.⁹³

Contradictions in the park’s meaning are not new, nor are disputes about who has the right to use its space. Indeed incongruity in meaning is an essential component in the creation of place, and a defining feature of the park—a site of blurred and blurring lines. According to Wolcott, parks are defined by their fluidity, “spaces [that] invited young men and women to mix” and “sites where hardworking Americans could be free from inhibition and forget the mundane trials of daily life.”⁹⁴ This amorphousness makes defining Ontario Beach Park today just as difficult a prospect as it was a century ago. Consider that, in addition to the unknown past park visitor, whose sentiment of love forms the title of this essay, another unknown man sent a postcard to an acquaintance around 1900 declaring the park to be “where the music is glourious (*sic*) on a summer night.” On a different postcard depicting an idyllic gazebo with the pier in the foreground, a woman informed a friend that she took an afternoon stroll on the pier with Mr. “Ahem!,” clearly a euphemism for a gentleman caller. Of course, then, as now, not everyone felt the same way about the park, as demonstrated by a 1914 diary entry indicating that the author “went to bum Charlotte...and saw the fakirs and fools. Once a season is plenty.”⁹⁵

These opposing views of the park will ebb and flow, continually creating and recreating Charlotte and the lakeshore landscape, as they have for two hundred years and longer. The relationship between the people of Rochester and Ontario Beach Park is perhaps best summarized by Blake McKelvey, Rochester’s indefatigable former historian:

For long decades the activities at the port were a conscious and a vital part of the city’s life, adding drama and excitement as well as economic benefit to Rochester’s growth. For other long decades the port was practically forgotten or treated idly as a minor part of a lakeside amusement center. Its future will depend on our reaction to these old and several new potentialities.⁹⁶



*A view of Ontario Beach Park in September 2009, when the beauty of its gardens was recognized in the annual Flower City Garden Contest. Photographed by Ira Srole.
From the collection of the Rochester City Hall Photo Lab.*

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*Water toboggan into Lake Ontario, ca. 1901–1914. This ride was located near the present western pier.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*



Illustration of the Charlotte pier from Routes and Rates for Summer Tours, Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad, the Only All Rail Route to the Thousand Islands, the Favorite Route for Fashionable Travel to All Eastern Resorts by Theodore Butterfield (New York: Giles Litho and Printing Company, 1888).



*Ontario Beach Park, ca. 1901, as viewed from the west facing east.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*

A SCENE ON THE MIDWAY.
ONTARIO BEACH PARK, N. Y.



*The Midway at Ontario Beach Park, undated.
From the Rochester Public Library Local History & Genealogy Division.*



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