

History of the Deschutes Estuary, 1895 to 1948

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<https://sites.google.com/site/deschuteshistory/>

Introduction

The creation of Capitol Lake in Olympia, Wash. was not the natural outgrowth of a landscaping plan for the Washington State capitol campus. Rather, it was the result of a decades-long lobbying effort by local businessmen and politicians to create an appealing water feature and “scrape the moss off” Olympia.

Recently, the future of the artificial lake at the mouth of the Deschutes River has been debated and defenders of the lake have used a distorted telling of history to support their cause. They argue that the origin of the lake stems solely from the Walter Wilder and Harry White 1911 plan for the campus and is therefore central to the campus design.

This is a short history from the Capitol Lake Improvement and Protection Association's website:

The Vision of the Lake came about in 1911 under a plan that was created for the State Capitol Campus. In 1855, Edmund Sylvester donated 12 acres on Budd Inlet for the Washington State Capitol. Wilder and White's plan for the Capitol, which included a freshwater reflecting lake, was chosen by the State in 1911. The Olmsted Brothers were asked by the State to submit a landscape plan. The 1912 Olmsted plan included a saltwater reflecting lake, but the plan was not adopted. In 1938, the State authorized the actions to create the Lake.

(savecapitollake.org, January 13, 2012)

In addition to getting some dates wrong, this narrative simplifies decades of history around the development of the Deschutes River waterway.

There were at least three proposals before Wilder and White to create a lake at the mouth of the Deschutes. The first suggestion actually predates Wilder and White by more than a decade. Leopold Schmidt, the founder of the Olympia Brewing Co., proposed damming the river with a set of locks in 1895 to facilitate shipping to his then-planned brewery (Morning Olympian, September 1895).

An 1897 report by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers discusses the general desire in the Olympia community to dam the Deschutes. The hope by Olympia city officials was that a timber mill would be built on the freshwater lake, storing logs there (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1897).

In 1903, another proposal to create a freshwater lake in Olympia came in response to Seattle's establishment of a freshwater port at Lake Union. That proposal was to build a weir across Budd Inlet at Priest Point to maintain navigable depths south of there and allow ships to enter the port at high tides (Morning Olympian, January 1903).

The desire to create a freshwater lake was already well established in the Olympia area by the time the plans for new state capitol buildings were put together in 1911-12. While we don't know for sure that Wilder and White drew from local sentiment, we do know that the lake didn't enter their plans until after Walter Wilder actually visited Olympia in late summer of 1911.

Wilder and White's Ambiguous Treatment of the Reflecting Pool

The Wilder and White architect team and the Olmsted landscaping firm were hired in 1911 to develop portions of the capitol campus design. Both plans by Wilder and White and the Olmsted firm included a reflecting pool for the campus, but they differed about how it would be accomplished.

The Wilder and White plan for the lake is summarized in the August 1911 "Report of Group Plan" correspondence from the architects to their employers, the State Capitol Commission. The document is just over four pages long and was written after Wilder had visited Olympia to meet with the commission.

In the report Wilder and White quickly lay out three questions from the commission (Wilder and White, 1911):

1. Was Olympia the right place for a permanent state capitol building for Washington state?
2. Can the city express any special character possessed by the state?
3. Can Olympia's development be directed to "enhance the importance of the state"? (This was an important question because capitol buildings in many older states had become crowded and overgrown by their host cities.)

Wilder and White demur on the first question because of their limited exposure to Washington. They do point out that a coastal city was a proper choice because the state itself is coastal. In terms of Olympia's small size compared to other cities, Wilder and White point out that the city can be more attentive to the needs of the state government than larger cities like Seattle which would have a wider commercial focus.

Wilder and White move quickly past the second question, answering that it is:

...in the possibilities that (Olympia) contains for expressing the character of the state, that the city in general as well as the site for the capitol is remarkable, and we believe careful development of these possibilities, will result in an effect unequalled by any capitol in the world.

Most of the report (the remaining three pages) deals with answering the third question, how Olympia's growth could be shaped to emphasise the capitol campus they proposed. It is in answering that question that they refer to a lake.

Following an almost two page discussion of the orientation of the campus and a proposed new road to "connect the main ridges contained within the city," Wilder and White suggest regrading the hill between Water Street and the campus, to create space for a park-like setting for city and

“other public buildings.”

Only then do the architects quickly discuss building a tide lock to “form a lake and the whole effect would be visible from most parts of the city as well as from the Sound.” In the entire document, this is the only mention of a tide lock or a lake.

Then follows a more important discussion of the long-term benefits to Olympia of developing in the manner they prescribe. They quickly pivot from their specific recommendations about the growth of the city to the benefits that would be created by “any sacrifice made by property owners in the city for the sake of its beauty...”

The sacrifices on the part of the city would, in our opinion, be trifling compared to the advantages that would accrue from them, while the development outlined would facilitate the natural travel through the city and direct it past the most beautiful portions.

At the close of the letter, they refer to the need for more detailed plans for the campus.

While Wilder and White do mention a lake in this letter, it is important to put their suggestion in context. The reference is a single sentence in a more than four-page long document. It is also only one suggestion of many about how the city itself should grow.

This is an important point in the discussion of the campus and Capitol Lake. By placing the lake in the discussion of how the city itself should grow and outside the group plan, Wilder and White make the lake secondary. Their primary concern was the axis upon which the campus would be oriented.

Little of what Wilder and White wanted in Olympia's growth actually happened. In fact, the lake is practically the only thing they advised that was carried through.

Also, by using words like “sacrifice” when talking about the city's growth, it is clear that Wilder and White never saw these improvements as part of the capitol campus proper. Their proposal intended for the roads, civic buildings and the lake to be constructed by the city and not the state.

In fact, both architects pointed out in an article in the Cornell Architect that the ““Report of Group Plan” and the accompanying birds eye view featuring a blocked estuary were context for the city itself:

It was evident that the presence of the Capitol Group should have an important influence in the development of the city of Olympia and at the request of influential citizens we prepared a report containing suggestions to that end. In order to facilitate their comprehension a birdseye view of the city was prepared showing the proposed relation of the Capitol to these improvements.

Wilder and White never saw the creation of a lake as part of the campus, but rather the broader city-wide context upon which the campus would sit.

It's also worth exploring the ambiguous use of the word "tide lock" in their description. One could assume that the reference to a lock is a nod to the shipping industry in Tumwater. Tide locks can allow the passage of vessels at any tide level, but they have also been used to allow saltwater tides to pass over them. Built in the 1890s, the Richmond Lock on the Thames in London is an example of such a tide lock. A tide lock as proposed in 1911 might have allowed for the tides to flow more normally.

The local reaction to Wilder and White's campus plans did not focus (or even mention) the creation of a lake. For example, a contemporary newspaper article covering the plan in depth did not include a single mention of the lake (Olympia Record, October 1912). The article doesn't ignore the landscaping and terraforming aspects of the plan, spending more than a paragraph on the proposed roads. But, there is no mention of a lake in this or any other newspaper clips in the year after Wilder and White released their plan.

In contrast to Wilder and White, the Olmsted Brothers firm envisioned a much more limited lagoon, created by a north to south running berm as part of a larger (and eventually rejected) proposal to shift the focus of the capitol group to the northeast. John Olmsted wrote about a reflecting pool that changed with the tides. From a Jan. 19, 1912 letter to the State Capitol Commission:

...extend a dike with a driveway upon it along the east side of the channel from Capitol Park to 6th Street (Legion Way) and to acquire all the flats between the river and the proposed Capitol Avenue, this area to be mainly devoted to a salt water pond which would be kept nearly up to high water level, merely fluctuating a foot or two at every tide so as to ensure a change of water.

(Epstein, 66)

The Olmsted reflecting pool would be filled by salt water and refreshed by the tides. A sill would keep the pond filled and ensure mudflats weren't exposed, but the tide would not have been totally blocked.

In the end, the creation of a reflecting pond was by no means a central issue in the planning for the campus in 1911-12. The Olmsted's limited lagoon plan wasn't rejected initially on its own merits, but rather because it was part of a larger plan that shifted the focus of the capitol group toward downtown Olympia (Johnston, 35).

Carlyon's Lake is rejected

Today's Capitol Lake strongly resembles a plan drawn up by former Olympia mayor and state legislator P.H. Carlyon. His 1915 plan included a dam at 4th Avenue (just north of the current dam), replacing the wooden bridge that at the time spanned the mouth of the Deschutes River.

Using the Wilder and White as a template, Carlyon pushed for a new fill across the base of Budd Inlet. The 1911 proposal fit the city's need to connect downtown Olympia with the west side. The old bridge to the west side had failed and a temporary bridge needed a permanent replacement.

While the Carlyon lake plan had some local backing, it lacked any further support. In the spring of 1916 a local newspaper headline blasted that state and local leaders "Vigorously oppose closing waterway," a step necessary to create a lake (Washington Standard, May 1916).

Carlyon's lake was impossible at the time for two reasons:

- The so-called "Des Chutes Waterway" was privately owned. The state-owned Capitol Campus at the time was limited to the bluff at Capitol Point and didn't include any lowlands around it. It would take over 20 years for the state to purchase property that would be inundated by a dam.
- Closing the Deschutes by an east-to-west running dam would stop water traffic from reaching Tumwater and possibly ruin power generation at the Deschutes River falls.

The issue of shutting Tumwater off from the sea proved to be the axis on which debate about Carlyon's lake turned. The state attorney general eventually ruled that the state lands commissioner could not vacate a navigable waterway within a city without the city's consent. (Olympia Record, December 1916). Unless Tumwater consented to shutting off shipping to their downtown, Olympia could not close off the waterway.

Eventually, Carlyon's inspiration disappeared when a new concrete bridge was built to the west side in 1921 (Newell 278).

Carlyon's lake proposal was not his first effort in municipal terraforming. During his time as mayor of Olympia, he made significant efforts to complete the Carlyon fill, which created dozens of city blocks on the east side of downtown. This fill coincidentally also obliterated acres of the Moxlie and Indian creek estuaries. (Newell, 242)

Because of Carlyon's history with filling in tideflats, we can assume that his plan would have followed Wilder and White's inspiration in another important way. The Carlyon fill was completed with investment by local backers and there is no indication in the historic record that that his 1915 plan would have needed state funding.

Views on creating a lake began to change as the main elements of the capitol group reached completion. While the Olmsted firm was fired in 1912 for suggesting a change in focus of the group, they were brought back in the late 1920s to complete the landscaping plan for the buildings.

Depending on the source, one of two things then happened. Either the state capitol committee rejected a lake altogether or they accepted the Olmsted's earlier limited version.

In the late 20s, Wilder and White and the Olmsted firm participated in a back and forth over the landscaping plan, with the state capitol committee in the middle. In one telling, the result was that all waterfront improvements (including Capitol Lake) were written out of the landscaping plan (Johnston, 91).

According to another Capitol Campus historian, Mark Epstein, Capitol Lake was retained in the 1920s landscaping plan, but in the form of Olmsted's modest saltwater tidal pond rather than an aggressively dammed estuary (Epstein, 67). At least one article from the era referred to a proposed lake at the foot of the capitol group's bluff. This would seem to indicate that Epstein's history is correct.

Also, ten years after he first proposed it, damming the Deschutes apparently was not in the front of Carlyon's mind. As Wilder, White and the Olmsted firm debated landscaping plans that could have included a lake, Carlyon wrote an essay about the vision and construction of the capitol group. Lacking from the essay is a single mention of a lake (Carlyon, 1928).

Even though it was rejected in 1916 and was an afterthought in Carlyon's mind by 1928, the lake project did not go away.

Little Hollywood and the new need to close the Deschutes waterway

More than 20 years after Carlyon's first plan and nearly 10 years after the majority of the Wilder and White capitol group was finished (and lake plans limited or scrapped), the idea of a dam on the Deschutes resurfaced.

During the Great Depression the waterfront down the slope from the capitol campus had transformed slowly from a commercial area to a shantytown known as Little Hollywood. In the late 30s, the city of Olympia began to address the blight that had grown along the waterfront and Capitol Lake was part of that plan.

The oral history of Charles Hodde, former speaker of the state House, paints a picture of the local mood that wanted to replace Little Hollywood with Capitol Lake:

It was a terrible mess, right beside the Capitol. It was a mudflat and all along the mudflat was really the old red light district of Olympia, and shacks and tumbled-down, and one thing another there, and so (Thurston County Legislator George) Yantis had wanted to get something done about it.

(Office of Secretary of State, 1986)

Local Rep. George Yantis successfully pushed the state legislature in 1937 to allow bond revenue from state trust land to buy property along the Deschutes waterway (Spokane Chronicle, 1937), the first step in the process to complete the aggressive lake plan. But, instead of the city or local community itself pursuing the lake, as Wilder and White intended in 1911, locals pushed the state to take charge.

A population surge in Little Hollywood during the late 30s convinced the city commission to give their building official the leeway to clamp down on new structures in the shantytown (Olympian, September 1938). A retrospective of Depression-era Olympia written in 1950 summarizes the city's campaign against Little Hollywood:

Fresh the air may have been but the plumbing was primitive and city officials who barely had tolerated Little Hollywood during the worst depression years decided in 1938 that the shacks had to go. The sizable job of carrying out that order was given to W.R. Turner, building inspector.

Turner enlisted the aid of Beale Messinger, city police lieutenant at the time, and the two set to work. First, the ownership of each of the shanties was determined. This was no small job in itself. Then, each of the owners was served with condemnation papers.

As Little Hollywood's residents were evicted, their shacks were burned. Two years after Turner and Lieutenant Messinger started their chore, the torch was applied to the last shanty.

(Shacklett, 1958)

While city building inspectors toured the shantytown, condemning and then burning shacks, local boosters continued lobbying the the state Legislature about damming the estuary. Just months after the city building inspector began his campaign, lobbyist and developer Edwin Henderson successfully persuaded the city commission to join the effort to create Capitol Lake.

Henderson ran a full page ad in local newspapers at the start of the legislative session in January (Olympia News, January 1939). The ad included the endorsements of almost 30 local businesses, politicians and local leaders.

Campaign ads from the era cite the Deschutes project as either a campaign promise or accomplishment and point out the importance of the lake project to the local community (Olympia News-Graphic, 1940).

In early 1941, with the land in the waterway being purchased by the state (Olympia News, March 1941), a delegation of state capitol campus commissioners and “prominent Olympians” visited a Tumwater town meeting to persuade their neighbors to drop their decades-long objection to the lake plan. And, by a 29-3 vote, the Tumwater residents agreed. (Olympia News, June 1941). Among the reasons for Tumwater's acquiescence was a new overland rail line that made shipping by water unnecessary.

While World War II stopped any further development of the lake plan, the city took the opportunity finish the slow work of clearing out Little Hollywood. The final closure of the shantytown is described here:

It was felt that, unless the outbreak of the war interfered, the long-discussed Capitol Lake would soon become a reality, and the city fathers decided, as a preliminary step, to eliminate Little Hollywood from the shores of the Deschutes waterway along the Northern Pacific rail yard.

...

The people of Little Hollywood were served eviction notices and the civic authorities turned deaf ears on their pleas for someplace to go. One after another, the shacktown occupants surrendered and went away.

...

One after another the shacks and floathouses were burned or demolished and a civic

eyesore vanished and was forgotten... just like the people who had been driven from it.
(Newell, 401)

By the fall of 1942, the last few residents were evicted and the last remains of the shacktown were burned a large bonfire (Morning Olympian, 1942).

When the contracts for creating Capitol Lake were finally approved in 1948, the Thurston County Chamber of Commerce ran a newspaper ad that reminds us of the central role Little Hollywood played in the creation of the lake. The ad features a picture of a shack on the tideflats with the capitol dome in the background and thanks state leaders for allowing the creation of the lake, which would “forever erase the unsightly view above.”

Olympia's final push for Capitol Lake

The 1947 debate about whether to fund closing the Deschutes waterway put Olympia at odds with legislators from outside Olympia.

The effort would also be the last public act by Rep. Yantis, who passed away at the end of the year. At least once during the debate, Yantis ignored the advice of his doctor, and following surgery, made a speech in the Legislature supporting the lake. Despite his efforts, the lake didn't get through the Legislature without opposition.

The proposal to issue \$1 million in bonds for the lake project initially received a negative vote in a House committee due to its proposed funding mechanism. Rep. Ella Wintler (R-Vancouver), chair of the committee that gave the negative vote, opposed the bill because the trust fund that would be tapped was intended to only pay for state buildings.

Rep. Wintler added that the only reason it advanced to the House floor after receiving a poor committee report was because of consideration for Olympia's ailing Rep. Yantis (Daily Olympian, February 1947).

Rep. George Kinnear (R-King County) added:

It is high time the Legislature settled down and realized we are in big business. Miss Wintler's thoughts are so sound they are irrefutable. There are serious possibilities we have begun to overlook the business for which we are here – conducting the business of the state!

After passing the House, the bill was considered in the Senate only because of the extraordinary effort by another Olympia state senator. State Sen. Carl Mohler (Thurston County) worked out a deal with a Senate committee chair to give the committee extra time to consider the bill. Sen. Mohler aimed his arguments at critics of the lake, putting a strong emphasis on the project's funding; the funds would come from a trust, not directly from the pockets of taxpayers. (Daily Olympian, March 1947).

The lake bill passed by a 70-20 vote in the House and a 29-4 vote in the Senate, but only because state Legislators from Olympia pushed hard for it. The lake bill was not considered a high priority otherwise.

An editorial in the Olympian soon after Yantis' death gave him full credit for getting the lake passed:

It is generally acknowledged that Mr. Yantis' efforts in support of this project were the greatest single factor behind the 1947 Legislature's enactment of the present Deschutes Basin Act...

(Daily Olympian, December 1947)

In fact by 1959, there was a movement (strong enough to have a bill passed out of one legislative chamber) to rename Capitol Lake and the Deschutes Parkway after Yantis (Daily Olympian, 1959).

An editorial in The Olympian (and reprinted in the Tacoma News-Tribune) as construction on the lake was about to begin in 1948 gave credit more broadly, but still squarely on local shoulders:

Campaigning for the basin was a discouraging task at times but city officials, the chamber of commerce, various civic and fraternal organizations, real estate groups and numerous individuals kept plugging away until their perseverance was rewarded last week by the assurance that a long-fondled hope at last will be translated into reality.

News that the much-needed improvement will be started as soon as is feasible was received with immense satisfaction by the residents of Olympia and suburban areas... (Capitol Lake) will be a source of much pleasure to the people who already are established here, but also will convince visitors that Olympia is a mighty pleasant place in which to live and work.

(Tacoma News-Tribune, 1948)

Without the support and lobbying by the local community, and Rep. Yantis in particular, Capitol Lake never would have been built.

That isn't to say that even by the late 1940s, local support was universal. While Tumwater had officially agreed to closing the waterway years before, there was still some local dissent.

The Olympia Port Commission (on which Peter G. Schmidt, son of Leopold Schmidt of the Olympia Brewing Co., sat) sent a letter to the federal government agreeing to the fill that would create Capitol Lake. The port's assent was conditional to the closing not interfering with shipping at the port's terminals. But a note from the port was blind copied to the Tumwater City Council, saying that the federal government likely would receive complaints that closing the waterway would damage shipping to Tumwater (Port of Olympia, 1948). The Port, through Schmidt, seemed to be pointing out that it wasn't too late for Tumwater to prevent being cut off from the sea.

Far from being a logical outgrowth of a grand plan for the capitol campus, Capitol Lake is the execution of a long-held local goal of damming the Deschutes River at its mouth. This goal predates Wilder and White's first visit to Olympia by over a decade.

In the end, Capitol Lake was a pork barrel project lobbied for by local politicians and paid for by the state. After years of seeking a dam at the mouth of the Deschutes, local leaders took one line in the correspondence from Wilder and White and expanded it into a decades-long campaign of urban renewal. From Carylton's use of the idea to replace a bridge across Budd Inlet, to Yantis and Henderson wanting to erase Little Hollywood, Capitol Lake wandered far from its origin as a city-sponsored feature.

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