



Part I: The First Fifty Years



## ■ Prologue



Construction of the Garden State Parkway in Wall Township, early 1950s.

## *Superior recreation facilities are an essential component of this environment*

IN THE MIDDLE of the 20th century, the postwar economic boom transformed Monmouth County as new roads, jobs, families, and buildings consumed its beautiful farmland, meadows, and forests at an alarming pace. Several farsighted County leaders at that time fortunately saw the need to preserve open space for present and future generations, and they created the Monmouth County Park System in 1960. In its first 50 years the Park System has preserved 16,633 acres, including some of the County's finest natural areas and historic sites, for recreation and conservation.

Many dedicated people have contributed to this accomplishment through their vision, planning, perseverance, commitment to quality, and creative leveraging of County resources with other public resources. Many have also generously donated their land, buildings, artifacts, money, and time. Their collective legacy is one of America's finest county park systems, which will continue to benefit residents and visitors alike for many generations to come.

## *A sound and orderly development of the County*

The construction of the Garden State Parkway in the 1950s provided easy access to shore towns and opened up tens of thousands of acres of prime farmland and forests for development. Between 1940 and 1960 the County's population more than doubled from 161,000 people to 333,000, and nearly half of this growth occurred within three miles of the Parkway. Eighty-five per cent of the population lived along the Bayshore and coast, but demand for new housing and commercial buildings steadily moved inland.

The farsighted business and civic leaders who had grown up in the prewar farming era envisioned a "sound and orderly development of the County," with diverse recreational opportunities and open space as key to ensuring a high quality of life. Their vision drew on the long tradition of public parks in the United States, dating back to Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux's efforts a hundred years earlier to create New York's Central Park—the "People's Park"—for recreation and the enjoyment of nature.

The success of Central Park led the New Jersey Legislature in 1894 to authorize counties to develop "ample open spaces for the use of the

public." Essex County established the country's first county park commission a year later. With a \$2.5 million bond referendum for acquisition and development, Essex County leaders created multiple parks and reservations for recreation and for preserving scenic beauty. Hudson County established a county park commission in 1907, Union County in 1922, Camden County in 1926, and Passaic County in 1927. By 1930, New Jersey's five county park systems had preserved nearly 10,000 acres of prime land, an accomplishment that could not be replicated because of the land's increased value. As wartime development consumed open space in suburban areas, Middlesex, Ocean, and Bergen Counties established park systems in 1940, 1945, and 1946, respectively.

By contrast, the only significant public open spaces in Monmouth County at the end of World War II were Allaire State Park in Howell and Wall Townships, donated by the Arthur Brisbane Estate in 1940, and the State's Turkey Swamp Public Hunting and Fishing Grounds in Freehold Township, established in 1942.

With all the development projects following the Parkway, Joseph C. Irwin, Director of the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders, saw the need to guide this unprecedented growth. Irwin had served for sixteen years as a Freeholder and two years as Director, and understood political and land use issues around the County. As an avid sportsman and proprietor of the Irwin Yacht Works on the Navesink River in Red Bank, he was also keenly interested in recreation.

Under Irwin's leadership, the Freeholders, including Victor Grossinger, Walton Sherman, Earl L. Woolley, and Abram D. Voorhees, established the Monmouth County Planning Board in April, 1954. They wisely appointed E. Donald Sterner, a Belmar businessman, as Chairman of the Planning Board in July and charged him with establishing "a sound County Planning Program." Sterner had served in the State Assembly and Senate and as the State's first highway commissioner, so he understood the impact of highway construction on suburban and rural areas. He also loved outdoor activities and soon helped to initiate the County's efforts to create parks.

In his first six months as Planning Board Chairman, Sterner organized a county-wide planning conference for officials and residents, set up Agricultural and Resorts and Recreation Committees with dedicated leaders, and hired Charles Pike as the County's first Planning Director. Pike was only 26 years old, but his vision and professionalism provided crucial leadership in the County's nascent planning efforts.

William Duryea, Sterner's pick to head the Agricultural Committee, loved open space and valued its preservation. He served as the sec-



## PROLOGUE

Freeholder Director Joe Irwin, right, at the Howell Park Golf Course dedication with, from left, Recreation Commissioner Axel Carlson, Park System Director Jim Truncer and Governor William Cahill.

**JOSEPH C. IRWIN**

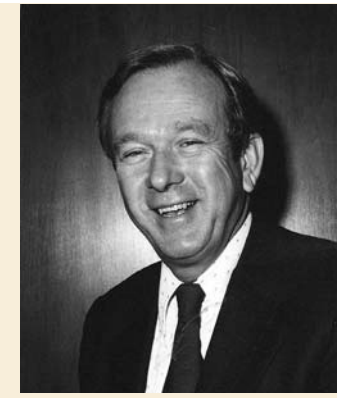
*Mr. Monmouth County*

Joseph Irwin's grandfather captained a schooner out of Red Bank that delivered county produce to New York, and young Joe grew up in his family's boat business, the Irwin Yacht Works. He sailed, played football, basketball and baseball, led Red Bank High School's first unbeaten football team in 1922, and played varsity quarterback at Rutgers University. He was elected to the Red Bank Borough Council in 1932 and to the State Assembly in 1936, and served two terms in each post. In 1938 he was elected to the Board of Freeholders where he served for 36 years, 22 of them as Director. He also served for 20 years on the County Planning Board.

Irwin considered the Monmouth County Park System and Brookdale Community College, the county college in Lincroft, his most important accomplishments for Monmouth County residents. When he died in 1987 at the age of 83, State Senator Alfred Beadleston of Rumson said, "He did everything that was within his power to make Monmouth County a better place to live in. The people of this County will be forever in his debt. He was Mr. Monmouth County." Park System Director Jim Truncer remembers Joe often saying, "If it's a choice between politics and the public good, then it's the public good."

ond N.J. Secretary of Agriculture from 1925 to 1937 and generously conveyed his farm in Upper Freehold to the State for the Assunpink Wildlife Management Area. In October, 1954, Duryea proposed making Monmouth the 'Best Looking' county in the State by planting along highways, restricting the use of highway frontage, and restoring and creating ponds and lakes for recreation and water conservation.

Sterner responded to Duryea's proposal by raising "the possibility of a County park," and he established the Resort and Recreation Committee with Thomas Heward as its chair and Walter Schoellner as a member to look into it. At their first meeting, they discussed 'Turkey

**CHARLES M. PIKE**

*Outstanding in planning for the future of Monmouth County*

Born in Matawan in 1928, Charles Pike graduated from Rutgers University, where he studied city and regional planning, and later studied at the Columbia University Graduate School of Housing and Planning. After serving in the Korean War as a Marine Captain, he became the County's first Planning Director in 1954 and developed plans for water supply, solid waste, hospitals, and transportation. When he left the Planning Board in 1971 to direct the State's Division of Water Resources, Freeholder Director Irwin told him, "We regret you're leaving us. I think Monmouth County is a better place to live because of Charlie Pike." When Pike died in 1977 at the age of 49, Donald Sterner said, "He was my right arm when we founded the Planning Board," and Irwin commented, "He was a wonderful executive, one of the finest in the state. He was outstanding in planning for the future of Monmouth County."

Swamp' in Freehold Township as a possible County park and also the Earle Naval Air Defense Base in Middletown if the Federal government ever closed it. Schoellner also mentioned a site in Middletown Township that the owner might donate for a County park. In the beginning of their park efforts, County leaders were already looking to leverage County resources with transfers of Federal property and donations.

*The three most pressing needs in the County*

Charles Pike began studying population, traffic, recreation, land use, and employment in the fall of 1954, "to answer the basic questions of where people live, work, and play and how they travel from place to place, and to help point out deficiencies in existing patterns and indicate future needs." He identified traffic arteries, recreational areas, and protection of surface water supplies as the three most pressing needs and the ones in which the public was most interested.

In his "Survey of Recreational Facilities" in June, 1955, Pike listed municipal parks totaling 132 acres. With only a few parks over 10 acres, he

concluded that “there was a need for a few large parks in the neighborhood of 100 acres to service the populated regions of the county.”

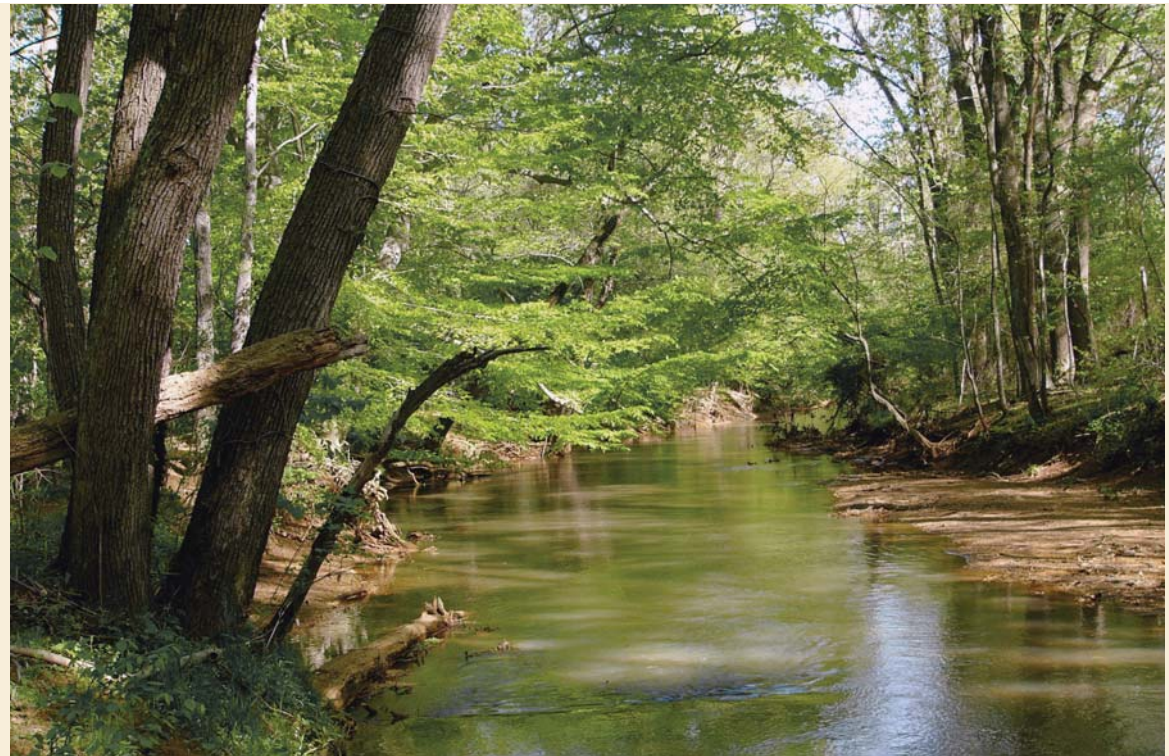
Recognizing “the urgency during this time of rapid growth,” the Resort and Recreation Committee responded, “The rate of growth of Monmouth County has steadily accelerated during the past few years. To accommodate this growth and also to guarantee a sound and orderly development of the County, the Resort and Recreation Committee recommends that a system of county parks be planned for the dual purpose of conserving the surface water supply of the County and providing additional recreational facilities to the increasing number of year-round residents in the County.”

### *The urgent need of immediate action*

The Planning Board adopted the Resort and Recreation Committee’s recommendations with a resolution, “realizing the urgent need of immediate action, the Planning Board requests the Board of Freeholders to establish a County Park Commission.” Planning Board members and staff identified non-profit corporations, land donations, and referendums as ways to help establish and operate parks. After Morris County voters approved a referendum establishing a County Park Commission in 1956, Thomas Heward told his fellow Planning Board members that “a program linking park areas and water supply would pass a referendum in Monmouth County.”

The Freeholders set up a Park Department within the County Planning Board in 1957 and asked the members of the Resorts and Recreation Committee to work on a county parks program for 1957. At the October Planning Board meeting, Donald Sterner “mentioned the possibility that Mrs. Geraldine Thompson might contribute two hundred acres in the Lincroft area for county park purposes (and) stated that within the next month he would like to meet with her to discuss this further.” This quiet revelation began an 11-year process that would eventually create Thompson Park, the headquarters of the Park System.

The Freeholders appointed Abram Voorhees as liaison to the Park Department in 1958 and allocated \$25,000 for it. Walter Schoellner became chairman of the Resorts and Recreation Committee and sent letters to “all of the local recreation departments and other groups interested in recreation to determine what type of facilities they would be interested in seeing the County develop.” He thought that “the most logical approach would be the development of one good centrally-located county park which could serve as a showcase and generate public support.”



The Manasquan River, 2006. “The protection of the Manasquan is very important for the County’s future,” 1955.

### **Reasons for a County Park System**

Resort and Recreation Committee, Monmouth County Planning Board, October 27, 1955

*Since the County Planning Board started reviewing subdivisions on January 1, 1955, a total of 93 major subdivisions have been submitted containing 5,190 lots. This represents a total of 2,700 acres or 4.3 square miles. Land is also being swallowed up by highways, business, and industry... As this growth continues westward, much of the open land of the County will be built up and conveniently located park areas will be impossible to obtain.*

*In a county where land values rest largely upon the availability of attractive open space, it is important to protect our basic assets... Action is needed to keep a portion of the open space, trees, and rural atmosphere which have been one of the chief attractions and economic assets of Monmouth County. Many of our residents commute daily to the metropolitan area and are reminded of the contrast which exists between Monmouth County and those older areas.*

*County Parks, properly located on the outskirts*

*of heavily developed areas, can be coordinated with zoning, farming, and open tideland uses to define the limits of urban development.*

*The protection of watersheds, major streams, and dam sites can be accomplished by planning now to protect these areas by incorporation into a county park system. Monmouth County has two major drainage basins and many minor drainage basins which are the major sources of any future surface water supply within the County. The Swimming River is partially developed as a source of potable water; the Manasquan River is entirely undeveloped. The protection of the Manasquan is very important for the County’s future.*

*If the area along these major streams was designated as future Park areas, they could be acquired as development takes place. Along these streams could be located bridle paths, hiking trails, and bicycle trails, and in other areas where adequate access existed and where centers of population are located these could be expanded into major park areas.*