

COLONIAL LAKE  
(Colonial Commons)  
Bounded by Broad and Beaufain Streets, and Rutledge and Ashley  
Avenues  
Charleston  
Charleston County  
South Carolina

HALS SC-16  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240

# HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

## COLONIAL LAKE (Colonial Commons)

HALS NO. SC-16

**Location:** Bounded by Broad Street on the south, Rutledge Avenue on the west, Ashley Avenue on the west, and Beaufain Street on the north - Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina.

Located in the Charleston Historic District.

32.778335, -79.941131 (Northeast corner of the park, Google Earth, WGS84).

**Significance:** The park at Colonial Lake derives some of its historical significance as the last remaining piece of land set aside for public use in the City of Charleston by the South Carolina General Assembly in 1768. Used as a public boat landing and mill pond during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this early industrial landscape was, under the influence of the mid-to-late nineteenth-century national Public Park Movement, transformed into a public recreational ground. Under the leadership of Mayor William Ashmead Courtney, the city created several parks in 1881. At Colonial Lake, city workers laid the first promenade path around the lake, installed benches, and built retaining walls of Roman cement with an oyster shell aggregate. Colonial Lake has served as an important urban space for celebration, contemplation and recreation and contemplation for Charlestonians and tourists for more than a century. Its sensitive renovation in 2015 ensures its role as one of Charleston's most prominent urban park. While the street furniture and plantings in the park have changed over time, its character as a place for passive recreation has remained intact.

**Description:** Colonial Lake lies on the western edge of the Charleston peninsula. Originally all marsh land and low lying ground, the area was built up over time for the needs of the city's inhabitants. Colonial Lake encompasses approximately 10 acres. This area includes a 9-acre lake, walking paths that round the lake, and greenspace. Landscape plantings installed around the park as part of the 2015 renovation are species native to the area that reflect the historic landscapes of the city. Led by the landscape firm Design Works, the 2015 renovation rebuilt the Roman cement retaining walls, edged the lake with granite coping, installed landing steps at the Queen Street entrance to the park, laid new concrete walkways around the lake, and new buried channels installed to retain connection to the Ashley River. The 2015 project retained most of the park's historic trees, removing invasive species and diseased specimens. Hurricane Mathew in October of 2016 flooded the park, but new plantings have recovered.

Rutledge Avenue separates Colonial Lake Park from adjoining Moultrie Park Playground where six tennis courts, a baseball field, and bathrooms have served the city since the 1930s. The playground retains the features of its 1970s renovation and little remains of earlier facilities. Until the 1970s, the park was more a leisure ground with a baseball field and children's play area.

**History:** The area currently known as Colonial Lake was set aside in 1768 by the South Carolina General Assembly. These 40 acres of marshland included land bounded

by what is now Rutledge Avenue on the east, Beaufain Street to the north, Tradd Street to the south, and the Ashley River to the west.<sup>1</sup> According to historian Nic Butler, a group of wealthy Ashley River Plantation owners petitioned for the land to be set aside for public use as a boat landing. A canal that ran along what is now Broad Street was converted into an accessible boat way. Banks and causeways were built to support the passage of two schooners abreast through the canal. This canal terminated at what is now the western side of Rutledge Avenue.<sup>2</sup> The colony's governor set aside the land surrounding the canal as public land.

In 1783, the state turned the land over to the City of Charleston. It has remained under city control to the present day. A Committee for the Commons still guides policies set for this last remaining piece of the city's eighteenth-century common ground. To maintain the common land and generate revenue, portions of the land were sold off over time. The land between Broad Street and Tradd Street was sold during the nineteenth century. Most of the land sold was converted into residential use. The city also leased the land, most notably for the use of lumber mills, an industry that relied heavily on local waterways. Canals were used to transport timbers cut on Ashley River plantations to mills. The area surrounding Colonial Commons was a valuable commodity to this industry and leasing the land brought in money for the upkeep of the remainder of the park.<sup>3</sup> This industry remained a vital part of the city's economy until the second quarter of the twentieth century. The last lease for the lumber mills ended in 1929.

In 1881, the city put the property under the control of the City Commission of Parks for protection from further disbursement of the land.<sup>4</sup> During this time, the lake was more properly defined by the construction of retaining walls made of Roman cement with an oyster shell aggregate. The City Commission of Parks also constructed an oyster shell walkway around the lake and placed benches along the edges. One of the laborers employed in this work was Ned Heyward, father of DuBose Heyward author of the short story *Porgy*. The city allowed for small boats to be used on the lake by permit and hired a custodian to regulate the use of boats.<sup>5</sup> Local lumber yards were allowed to retain their leases, but no more land was permitted to be sold. Colonial Common became locally known as "The Pond" and used for an array of activities. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Charlestonians used the lake for boating activities and fishing. They stored rowboats at the lake for their private use. The custodian would watch over the rowboats and bring them around to the landing steps located at the lakeside end of Queen Street.<sup>6</sup> Swimming was allowed in the lake until 1912.

Following the 1886 Earthquake, Charlestonians displaced from their homes used

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Behre, "Dusting off an old way of southern governance," *Post and Courier*. Charleston, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Nic Butler, "On Common Ground," *Charleston Magazine*. Charleston, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Charleston City Yearbooks. 1880-1950. Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston County Public Library, South Carolina Room.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, "On Common Ground."

<sup>6</sup> Butler, "On Common Ground."

Colonial Lake was used as a camping area. The earthquake caused around \$6 million in damages and destroyed almost 2,000 homes. Those whose homes were destroyed relied on “popup” camps in the local parks for impermanent lodging.<sup>7</sup> With most of the buildings having been severely damaged and the streets covered in rubble, parks like Colonial Lake were the only space of refuge. The parks became rally points, places to receive care, find missing loved ones, and identify the dead.<sup>8</sup> The 1887 yearbook noted damage done by the refugees to the park’s grass and plantings.<sup>9</sup> Most of the park’s flowers and vegetation had to be replanted.

Use of the lake slowly changed during the twentieth century. Due to the overflow of a sewage line during high tide, the lake became contaminated and two children contracted typhoid fever in 1912. City officials banned swimming afterwards. Many petitions were filed to have the sewage line removed to another location. No action was taken for thirty years. In 1931, long distance swimmer Anne Benoit obtained permission to train in the lake despite the contamination.<sup>10</sup> In the 1930s and 1950s low tides caused a fish die off. In the 1930s, locals reported a sea monster living in the lake. As stories circulated about the monster, visitors flocked to the lake to catch a glimpse of Charleston’s equivalent of the Loch Ness monster. The “monster” later turned out to be a lone alligator that had found its way into the lake.<sup>11</sup>

When the final lumber mill land lease expired in 1929, its site was converted into Moultrie Playground. The playground was named after General William Moultrie, a native of Charleston and one of South Carolina’s most notable American Revolutionary heroes. Moultrie led the successful defense of Sullivan’s Island against the British. Following the Revolutionary War, he became an important statesman and later governor of the state. In 1949, the land making up Moultrie Playground came under threat by developers. Ultimately, the city only allowed 7.4 acres located to the west of the present-day park to be sold to build the Sergeant Jasper apartments.<sup>12</sup> The 1970s saw significant changes for this playground. Tennis courts, an improved baseball field, and the addition of a fence around the play area provided new recreational facilities. A parking area and bathrooms were built along with a shuffleboard area for older visitors to the park. The remodeling of Colonial Lake in 2015 included Moultrie Playground. All of its amenities were updated and the area beautified with landscaping.

The park experienced few changes in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1972, three cast iron fountains were installed to aerate the lake to prevent fish die offs but were dismantled just five years later, said to be too rusty and too

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<sup>7</sup> Carlyle McKinley, *The Charleston Earthquake, August 31, 1886*. Charleston 1887.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Charleston City Yearbooks. 1880-1950. Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston County Public Library, South Carolina Room.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> David Farrow, “Colonial Lake Monster Reports Create Spectacle,” *Post and Courier*. 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Charleston County Public Library Online. “Colonial Lake”. Accessed January 20, 2017.

<http://ccpl.org/content.asp?id=15638&catID=6026&action=detail&parentID=5747>.

much trouble to maintain or replace.<sup>13</sup> The park nevertheless bustled with activities. Fishing remained a popular pastime as was sailing. Though large boats were no longer allowed on the lake, small model boats were brought for races. The lake acquired the moniker “Yacht Club” due to these activities.<sup>14</sup> One of the most popular continuing events is the annual lighting of the Christmas tree that is placed in the center of the lake.

The park at Colonial Lake remained relatively unchanged until the 2015 renovations completed by Wildwood Landscape Contractors Construction of Walterboro and the landscape architecture firm DesignWorks. The almost \$6 million renovations included improved walkways, landscaping, repairs to the seawall, the addition of benches and lighting, the construction of a sitting wall and granite coping around the edge of the lake. The new planting scheme by the firm Design Works adopted a different theme for each side of the lake. Azaleas, camellias, and maples along Broad Street recall the experience of a Charleston garden, while sustainable grasses attract birds, bees, and butterflies along Beaufain Street. Native species of grasses, shrubs, and palmettos, as well as historic Noisette roses and crinum line Rutledge Avenue. Palmettos and crepe myrtles shade Ashley Avenue.<sup>15</sup>

Though the appearance of the park has changed dramatically over the years, the need for public use has remained the same. What remains of the original 40 acres set aside by the Colonial Commons is representative of Charleston’s continuing need for a public urban retreat. The park has weathered Earthquakes, economic turmoil, and hurricanes and continues to provide a venue for fishing and shrimping, dog walking, exercise, and contemplation.

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<sup>13</sup> Robert White, “Fountains May Rise in Lake Again,” *Post and Courier*. Charleston. 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Marshall, “Colonial Lake home of ‘Yacht Club’,” *News and Courier*. Charleston 1983.

<sup>15</sup> Behre, “Dusting off an old way of southern governance.”

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Historians: Kristina Poston and Mary Fesak  
Master of Science in Historic Preservation Students, Clemson University

Faculty Sponsor:  
Carter L. Hudgins, Director  
Clemson University & College of Charleston  
Graduate Program in Historic Preservation  
Department of Planning, Development and Preservation  
701 East Bay Street  
Charleston, SC 29401

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Honorable Mention Recipient - 2017 HALS Challenge: Documenting City or Town Parks. Part of a Clemson University School of Architecture, Master of Science in Historic Preservation group effort to document the parks of Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina: Cannon Park HALS SC-15; Colonial Lake HALS SC-16; Marion Square HALS SC-17; Washington Square Park HALS SC-18; and White Point Gardens HALS SC-19.



Figure 1. Native species and Noisette roses planted along the east, Rutledge Avenue, side of Colonial Lake, as well as the walkways (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).



Figure 2. Restored landing located at the end of Queen Street (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).



Figure 3. Roman cement with oyster shell aggregate retaining walls with granite coping along Beaufain Street, northern, boundary of the park (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).



Figure 4. Sustainable plantings selected for the north, Beaufain Street, side of the lake (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).



Figure 5. View of Colonial Lake facing southeast (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).



Figure 6. View of Colonial Lake facing east (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).



Figure 7. The southeast corner of the lake with the Roman cement retaining wall, walkways, street furniture, and plantings (Mary Fesak, February 26, 2017).

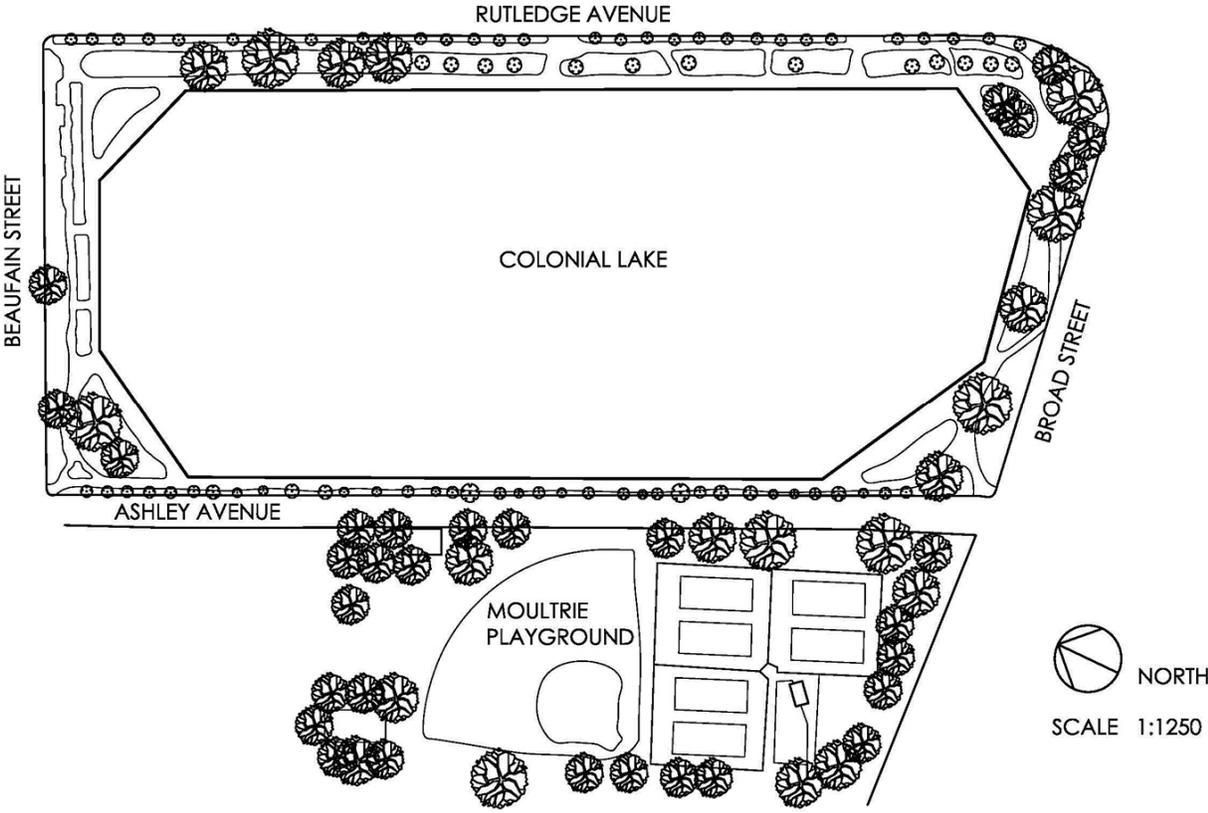


Figure 8. Colonial Lake site plan (Drawn by Mary C. Fesak, 2017).