

Approximate boundaries:
N-W. Howard Ave; **S**-W. Layton Ave;
E-I-94; **W**-S. 27th St

SOUTH SIDE *Wilson Park*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Wilson Park is a neighborhood of moderate population density. There are many older Tudor-style houses in the eastern section of the neighborhood. The home architectural styles for the rest of Wilson Park include Cape Cods, Colonial, and ranch houses. Most of the streets are winding, with only a few following a rectangular grid. The business corridors are on South 27th Street and along Layton Avenue.

The major green space for the neighborhood is a 76-acre park, also named Wilson Park. The park includes a pavilion, baseball diamond, tot lot/play area, and a little league diamond. Just west of the park is an additional recreational area that houses the Wilson Ice Arena, Wilson Recreational Center, and the Wilson Pool. There are other green spaces in the area that are associated with businesses or municipal services.

HISTORY

Wilson Park is named after its park, which was named after Woodrow Wilson. It is one far southside neighborhood among many that makes up today's Garden District. The boundaries of the Garden District are those of the 13th Aldermanic District. All Garden District neighborhoods were once part of the unincorporated Town of Lake, with boundaries of Lake Michigan to South 27th Street and Greenfield to College Avenues. By the mid-1950s, the City of Milwaukee had annexed the areas that today encompass the Garden District.

Early populations

Many of the far southside neighborhoods that comprise today's Garden District owe a debt to the dreams of a local Norwegian named John Saveland. Saveland owned a booming business on Water Street that provided provisions for fishing boats, steamships, and schooners that sailed from Milwaukee. And he also had an interest in real estate. In 1887 Saveland organized a group of investors that purchased 30 acres of land bordered by today's Bradley, Howard, Whitnall, and Howell. The group hoped to attract upper middle-class home buyers to their project—people who would work in the city and retire to their county estates at the end of the work day.

But despite a convenient Milwaukee streetcar with stops along Howell Avenue, few lots were sold in the early days. Saveland ultimately turned some of the land into a recreational venture, with an amusement hall and grounds. It wasn't until the time of Saveland's death in 1909 that the area was finally beginning to attract settlers. These were not the upper middle-class professionals that Saveland had expected, but south side working-class people—mostly Poles.

It wasn't until the end of World War II that the housing market really began to boom and new and improved streets emerged. Newly arriving settlers were migrating mostly from Near South Side and Historic South Side neighborhoods.



Today's neighborhood—
Site of community gardens/
Garden District
Farmers Market

The importance of the park

Before there was a Wilson Park neighborhood, there was a Wilson Park. The initial land acquisition was in 1930. No doubt the Polish migration to the area played a role in the naming of the park. President Woodrow Wilson was a key leader advocating for Polish independence after World War I. In 1918, Wilson made a speech to Congress outlining Fourteen Points for a lasting peace and the end of the war. Point number 13 stipulated that Poland would become a free country, after over 100 years of partitions of Poland beginning in the 1770s under Russia, Austria, and Germany/Prussia.

Curiously, the City of Milwaukee had actually owned the park while it was still located in the Town of Lake. By late 1936, the land fell under the domain of Milwaukee County, and by 1938, work was completed on the park's grade by the Works Progress Administration.

The park became an important site at the end of World War II, when returning GIs and their families needed housing. In late 1946, the state legislature enacted the Veteran's Housing Project that allowed Milwaukee County to enter the field of housing where the park commission could now handle land acquisition and site development. To meet the need for immediate housing, the commission put trailers in parks that offered swimming pools, such as at Kosciuszko Park. In addition, the commission purchased hundreds of prefabricated homes. From the late 1940s into the mid-1950s, over 900 trailer homes and over 700 prefabricated structures were placed in Wilson Park, serving approximately 5,000 families.

Neighborhood population growth

The Wilson Park neighborhood was also gaining residents outside the park. By 1949, the area of Wilson Park that had already been annexed by the City of Milwaukee had nearly 250 residences, with many homes under construction. Most of the settlers were Polish, with some Germans, and a scattering of Irish, Greeks, Canadians, Serbs, Bohemians, and Norwegians. See the randomly selected resident profile below.

By 1949, no commercial corridor had emerged in the neighborhood. Some businesses were operating on West Layton Avenue. See list below.

<i>Addresses on W. Layton Ave. in Wilson Park area in 1949</i>	<i>Name of business or organization from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
551	Bernard W. Krakow Market Gardener
560	Town of Lake Yards
703	Mrs. Estelle S. Rehm Tavern
841	George J. Everett Carpenter Contractor
929	Ceille Poultry Inc.
945	Reinhold R. Ahnert Iron Works
959	Paul Gyura Market Gardener
1206	Torvald M. Sother Poultry

Notes:

- Technically only those businesses on the north side of Layton (even numbers) were within the Wilson Park boundaries.
- The presence of the market gardeners and the poultry companies demonstrates how rural the area still was in 1949.

Random family--Wilson Park

*Resident randomly selected from 1949 Milwaukee City Directory
(Information and photo from public records at [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com))*

The Smogoleskis

Sometime in the 1940s, the Smogoleski family moved to 3961 South 5th Street in the Wilson Park neighborhood. The parents, Edwin and Sylvia Smogoleski (nee Cinchorowski), were children of Polish immigrants.

Like many Milwaukee Poles, the Smogoleskis had previously lived in the Lincoln Village neighborhood, at 2625a North 12th Street, possibly above the residence of Sylvia's parents, Andrew and Dora Cinchorowski. Sylvia had grown up in , while Edwin was a transplant from Michigan. By 1940, the couple had two daughters.

Edwin was a plumber and Sylvia a homemaker. Edwin did well enough in his work to move the family to their own home in the Wilson Park area. The 1940 census has Edwin's annual income at \$1,700, well above the Depression era median. Records suggest that the family remained on South 5th Street until at least the 1970s, when Sylvia died at age 67.

Edwin later moved to South Rutland Avenue and remained there until the late 1990s. Just before his death in 2000, Edwin returned to his family home in Michigan. However, when he died, his body was transported to Milwaukee where he was buried next to Sylvia.



By the mid-1960s there were thousands of small ranch houses and Cape Cods extending to and beyond the Wilson Park neighborhood. The Wilson Park Recreational Center opened in 1970 and featured a skating facility that accommodated speed skating, special features for families, and, for a time, a home for the Milwaukee Admirals. One year later, an Olympic-size pool opened adjacent to the ice facility. The pool offered lessons, public swimming, and special aquatic events. During its first year, events at the pool attracted over 100,000 people.

The population of Wilson Park would gradually become more diverse. This happened for two reasons. First, Milwaukee Latinos continued migrating south from the Near South Side in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, the founding of the Islamic Center of Milwaukee in 1982 attracted Muslims from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, Wilson Park has just under 3,000 residents. Nearly 7 in 10 are European Americans (most still of German and Polish ancestry). Just over 2 in 10 are Latinos (mostly Mexican and Puerto Rican, with a fair number of Central Americans; and approximately 1 in 15 are African Americans. There is also a scattering of Asians (most Pakistani, Filipino, and Asian Indian), Arabs, Palestinians, Egyptians, American Indians, and people of multiple backgrounds in the area.

The median household income in Wilson Park is approximately \$35,000 a year, placing the neighborhood in the lower middle-income stratum. The largest number of occupations claimed by residents are in the fields of administration, production, sales, and management. Over two times the number of residents work in science or farming than the proportions in other Milwaukee areas.

Gardening (or as some Wilson Parkers apparently call it—farming) is a major hobby among Wilson Park residents—a tradition carried over from the time when the neighborhood was part of the unincorporated Wilson Park. In 2008, the Common Council approved a resolution to name all the neighborhoods in the 13th Aldermanic District the *Garden District* of the City of Milwaukee, capitalizing on a long tradition of gardening among residents and businesses. At the time, Alderman Witkowski said, “Residents and businesses here have worked hard to solidify this identity. We have had perennial exchanges and gatherings, lectures by noted gardeners, and even awarded area businesses landscaping awards to encourage and foster the character of our area.” The idea for the Garden District grew from discussions between the alderman and residents about the interest in and tradition of gardening and landscaping within the district. The effort began in earnest in early 2007, when a group of individuals formalized a garden committee and met regularly to create a vision for the 13th Aldermanic District that focused on gardening and landscaping to beautify and improve quality-of-life.

Wilson Park has two neighborhood associations: the Wilson Park North Neighborhood Association and the Wilson Park Neighborhood Association. Contacts for both can be found at <http://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccCouncil/2013- PDF/13NeighborAssocMap20141.pdf>.

RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS (Health conditions permitting)

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browsers display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

GARDEN DISTRICT FARMERS MARKET			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Jun. through mid Oct., Sat.'s 1-5pm	Just south of Howard on 6th St.	Market of fresh vegetables and other vendors.	Free

GARDEN DISTRICT CRAFT FAIR			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Apr., Sat. 9am-3pm	3333 S. Howell	Fair of over 25 vendors, concessions, prizes, bake sale, and more.	\$1

JULY 4TH CELEBRATION--WILSON

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
July 4, 9am-10pm	Wilson Park, 1601 W. Howard Ave.	Parade, Doll Buggy, Bike & Trike, and Coaster judging, music, games, fireworks.	Free

GLOW SKATE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Dec., Fri. 7:30-9pm	Wilson Park Arena, 4001 S 20th St.	Skating, glow-in-the-dark necklaces, holiday lights, music, prize drawings and a gourmet hot-chocolate bar (skate rentals available).	\$5

BUDDY SQUIRREL ANNUAL EASTER OPEN HOUSE—ST. FRANCIS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Mar., Sun. 9am- 3pm	1801 E.Bolivar Ave., St. Francis,	Opportunity to see how Milwaukee's "Original Whipped Crème Eggs" are made, meet Mr. & Mrs. Easter Bunny and "Buddy Squirrel."	Free

ST. ROMAN'S ANNUAL FESTIVAL

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jun., Thu. 6-11pm, Fri. 6-11pm, Sat. 2-11pm, Sun. 12-9pm	1710 W. Bolivar Ave.	Festival of continuous music, food, rides, raffle, other cash prizes, and more.	Free

LATINO FAMILY EXPO & FESTIVAL

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Oct., Sat. 12-6pm	St. Anthony's High School, 4807 S. 2nd St.	A Health, Education, and Employment Fair to honor Latinos/as, featuring social services, entertainment, immigration counseling, trick or treats, consumer products, and more.	Free

Most of these outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing. To access the book that provides nearly 600 outings—all priced under \$10—for the entire Greater Milwaukee area, go to <http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

Quotes from an ongoing oral history of the Garden District by Urban Anthropology Inc.¹—about THEN

“When I moved into the area, there was still veteran’s housing on 24th Street which is now where the Wilson Park Senior Center is. There was barracks’ housing on 16th and Cleveland and [inaudible]. It was a time in post-World War II when the city starts to grow. Part of what is today the Garden District was Town of Lake at that time and was annexed by the city—about the time I moved into the Garden District.”

“Educationally, my parents did not complete high school. It was somewhat common because you didn’t need high school to work in the factory.”

Quotes from an ongoing oral history of the Garden District by Urban Anthropology Inc.—about NOW

“[The alderman’s] goal was to create an identity for his district. The Town of Lake did not have a lot of identity – just a lot of farms. So when people moved in, they kept to their families. People don’t live very far from their family. In Wisconsin – families do not move away from each other.”

“Well, the touches we put on the streets, for example, with the landscaping, security in the area. Crime went down 40 percent in the area, which is something amazing. People were like, ‘Are you serious?’ And it happened between neighbors and business and the neighborhood associations. The area is now clean, safe. People ask me what I love about Milwaukee and I say ‘green, clean, and friendly people.’”

“You can afford to marry and raise a family in the Garden District. Bay View is getting very pricey. Wilson Park [has] places where people convene and play, with the hockey rink, pool, etc. That is probably the largest area for community fun.”

“There are the satellite neighborhood associations and working with the Garden District. It’s kind of like a club to do good for the neighborhood. It’s very evident along 6th Street that things are happening.”

“The UW-Extension is a big presence in Garden District.”

¹ Urban Anthropology Inc. complies with human subjects requirements of formal research and asks informants to sign informed consent forms that stipulate anonymity, hence names are not provided with the quotes.

PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-Houses on 10th St.

Today's neighborhood-
Wilson Park



Today's neighborhood-Wilson Park (2)



Today's neighborhood-
5th Pl., tower in the background
(Milwaukee Dept. of Neighborhood Services)



Todays neighborhood-
Houses on 5th St.



Todays neighborhood-Houses on Tennessee Ave.



Todays neighborhood-
Tower Chicken Farm Poultry



Today's neighborhood-Site of Garden District Farmers Market

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* and Jill Florence Lackey's and Rick Petrie's *Germans in Milwaukee: A neighborhood history*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to:

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