

## HISTORY OF THE “DETWEILLER PLAYGROUND” AS IT RELATES TO THE PROPOSED DIVISION OF PROPERTY AND SALE OF THE LAND BELONGING TO THE DETWEILLER TRUST

The notable Illinois Riverboat Captain Henry Detweiller (d1907) had a deep love for the river, navigating riverboats up and down the Illinois. Upon retiring from navigating the river, he opened an ice business at the foot of Caroline St. The Captain was a successful businessman and accumulated wealth he left for his children. After his death, his son Thomas noticed “industry” was quickly taking over the Peoria riverfront and there was no place for the community to recreate and play along the river. As a legacy from the Detweiller family, Thomas set aside a piece of property that would belong to “the people” and be used for “public recreation and playground purposes”, in perpetuity.

Upon Thomas’ death in 1947, he gifted the land, the location of the Detweiller’s former ice works business, to the ‘People of Peoria’ through a trust —the “Detweiller Playground” (& Marina). A board of trustees and a trust fund was established in 1948 for care and maintenance of the land.

In 2025, 78 years later, with no attempts made to inform the public of “issues”, ask for assistance, or accept help from the community, the board of trustees of the “Detweiller Playground” made the decision to sell a large portion (2/3rds) of the property and began legal actions to modify the trust as it was written by Henry Detweiller, “for the People of Peoria”.



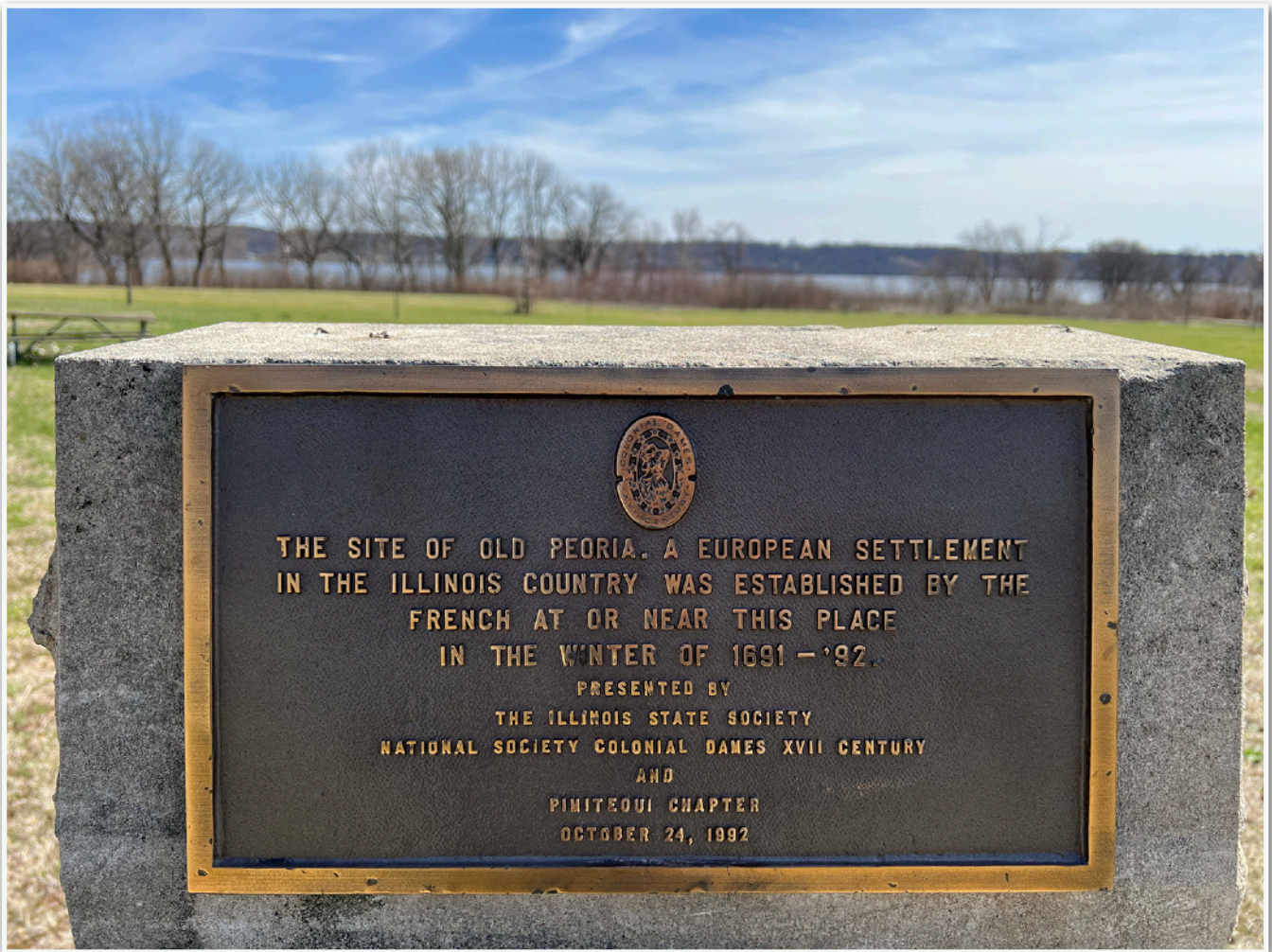


The board claims “the charitable use restriction is impractical and wasteful, and the sale is “necessary” to advance the charitable intent of Thomas Detweiller.” To enable the sale, the board successfully removed the long-time intended use restriction which provided that the property shall be used for public recreation playground purposes (filed 9/10/25).

To justify the sale, the Board of Trustees claims “the property is surrounded by industry resulting in the property becoming isolated, difficult to access, and poorly suited for family or community recreation. They claim selling a portion of the property will preserve “meaningful public access” to the Illinois River and ensure continued recreational utility of the portion of the property to be retained.”

Due to the Board’s beliefs, the Trustees made the decision to divide the peoples’ property into parcels, reduce the size of the park down to one-third of its original size, and sell the land that was gifted to the People of Peoria. This decision eliminates Peoria’s history, monuments, and the historical land on parcels to be sold, increases the industrial footprint by 11 acres, decreases citizen safety and use by isolating the publics portion to a small parcel in the furthest corner of the property, accessible only on foot, and eliminates use for people with disabilities by closing off vehicle access.

The peoples’ park has been reduced to a large grassy area, devoid of any history, interest, or entertainment. What’s left is a small remnant in full sun with limited winter views of the river and



*The site of old Peoria, a European Settlement in the Illinois Country was established by the French at or near this place in the winter of 1691-92.*

*Presented by the Illinois State Society  
National Society Colonial Dames XVII Century  
and Pimiteoui Chapter.*

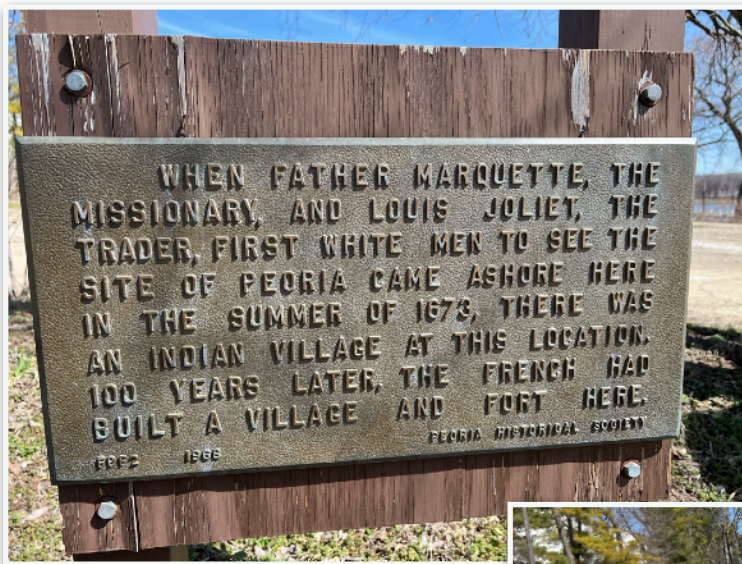
*October 24, 1992*

a new view of a paved parking lot with steel beams and industrial noise where a playground, trees, and history once stood.

The historical significance of the property that was gifted by Detweiller has been completely overlooked by the Board. Peoria was founded by the French in 1691 and is the oldest European city in Illinois, continuously occupied. Three significant markers in the park designate this land as a French Settlement and an Indian Village. The Peoria tribe of Native Americans were located here before the French fur traders

established cabins, which were followed by a French Fort and Mission. These settlements were located on the entire property, not just the small parcel left for the “people”. This is Peoria’s only historical site of the city’s beginning and it is in imminent jeopardy of being erased by the takeover of industry. Henry Detweiller mentioned its historical significance in his will and his wish to commemorate its history. Locals and history buffs visit this historical site, which carries as much significance as other historic sites in communities along the Illinois River.

The Board claims the property is isolated and difficult to access. In fact, the property is easily accessible by car and offers ample parking. The property is not isolated. It’s connected by a multi-use trail and offers two access points by car with ample parking. Visitors can easily drive from one side of the park to the other. The park



*When Father Marquette, the missionary, and Louis Joliet, the trader, first white men to see the site of Peoria came ashore here in the summer of 1673, there was an Indian Village at this location. 100 years later, the French had built a village and first fort here.*

*—Peoria Historical Society, 1983*

### ***Detweiller Playground***

*A Gift to the People of Peoria*

*Thomas H Detweiller*

*May 13, 1947*



is consistently used by the public, especially runners, bikers, walkers, families, individuals, and historians.

Ongoing upkeep has been an issue. Volunteer help has been offered and refused. Opportunities for grants have been offered and ignored. The community would welcome the opportunity to work together to preserve this park for present and future generations.

Thomas Detweiller stated in his will the property “will be operated and maintained so that it will afford a place for clean and healthy recreation and playground purposes.” The trustees have a maintenance agreement with a contractor to provide upkeep on the property. Visitors to the park today will find overflowing trash cans,

miscellaneous debris, and trash littering the park. The far end of the parking lot is stockpiled with bricks, concrete blocks, and broken concrete. Piles of tree debris have been used to barricade visitors from entering the park. The lackluster maintenance that has been entrusted to the Board has been concerning to the public.

One citizen in her 80’s has been using the park since her childhood. She offered her expertise on native tree root systems protecting slopes from erosion. She believes she was chased off by suggesting the groundskeeper destabilized the slopes by cutting down the native trees. It is concerning that the board may not be performing their due diligence in selecting an experienced groundskeeper.



Safety and access have been a concern by several elderly citizens who are regular park goers who were discouraged from using the park. They claim they were harassed and chased off by the groundskeeper, who explained they were trespassing.

The large green space with grass, beautiful mature shade trees, and walking paths is in great shape and is relatively low maintenance. At a great loss to citizens of Peoria is for the majority of the tree filled grassy park space with benches and a shelter to be consumed by O'Brien Steel.

The playground, parking areas, and ease of access to the harbor and will be eliminated

from the public's use. Children will no longer be able to play on the playground equipment; it will be paved over. Birds will no longer be able to nest in the trees. Most will be cut down. Citizens will no longer be able to sit in the shade under the large cottonwoods that overlook the harbor and enjoy unobstructed views of the river, sit near the shaded shoreline, or rest in their car in the shaded parking lot. Those areas are off limits. Trail users will no longer be able to run along shaded walkways. The trail will be rerouted.

The park will be taken over by industry—the exact reasons T. Detweiller wanted the land to be protected and the people to have lifetime access to its use. The board intends to use the proceeds of the sale to enter into a long-term lease for another property that is more "well suited for the public".

**Detweiller Playground & Marina  
PROPOSED PUBLIC PARCEL**



*The public wants to retain the riverfront property the Detweiller family left for the “People of Peoria” due to its historical significance, ease of access, river views, and natural green space—not a replacement parcel somewhere else that offers no historical significance to the citizens of Peoria.*

**Detweiller Playground & Marina  
PROPOSED PUBLIC PARCEL**



*Entrance road to the park will be closed off and the Riverfront Walkway will be REROUTED. **The Peoria Park District owns the easement for the trail and were not formally notified** of this proposed sale and modification to the Detweiller Playground & Marina until months after documents were signed.*

*The remaining remnant left for the “People of Peoria”, isolated to the furthest reaches of the park. A wide open empty space with walk-in access only, often inaccessible during seasonal flooding.*



**Volunteer organizations such as non-profit community service organizations, neighborhood associations, “Friends of” groups, environmental organizations, and experienced naturalist volunteers can offer planning assistance, guidance, manpower, and expertise to maintain and beautify the park, raise funds, coordinate volunteers, and schedule work days to help get the park back in shape and improve its’ ambiance and usability for the people of Peoria.**

## Excerpt from the Last Will and Testament of Thomas Detweiler

May 9, 1947

“In former days there was a great deal of land around on the Illinois River in the City of Peoria, vacant and available for the enjoyment of the community as for play and recreation purposes, but during the years business, industry, railroad, residential, and other construction have to a large extent encroached and taken over the land adjoining the Illinois River in the City of Peoria, so that at the present time there is very little access to the riverfront for the community, and very little ground along the river available for recreation and playground purposes. It is my desire and purpose to have the land that I own along the Illinois River in the City of Peoria made available for playground and recreation purposes for



the Peoria community and from the assets in this trust additional land be acquired for the same purpose, and that necessary funds in this Trust shall be used for the purpose of making said land into a public playground and recreation spot, beautifying the same for that purpose, and that said land the be

used for such public recreation playground purposes for the Peoria community, same to be known as “The Detweiler Playground”. It is my desire and wish that there be a suitable and appropriate bronze memorial tablet erected on said grounds; and it is my wish and I so provide that no intoxicating liquors of any kind or character shall be sold or used on said playground, likewise, no gambling or boisterous conduct permitted on said playground, and it be operated and maintained so that it will afford a place for clean and healthy recreation and playground purposes.”