

From Tent City to Public Park

1900s-1920s

Tent City and the Birth of Oak Park

From 1905 through 1910, **Tent City** took shape on the land that would soon become **Oak Park**. Hundreds of canvas tents were pitched beneath the trees to shelter new arrivals drawn to Flint by the promise of steady work in the booming carriage and auto industry. Rapid hiring by **Buick** and other early auto companies outpaced Flint's ability to build housing, leaving many new workers with nowhere to stay. Tent City emerged as a stopgap – rough, improvised, and essential.

Most who settled here came from rural Michigan or nearby states, part of a growing wave of labor migration into the city. Families added wooden floors to their tents, cooked over open fires, and organized a functioning, if temporary, community beneath the oaks. Though short-lived, Tent City reflected the urgency and improvisation that defined Flint's industrial rise.

By late 1911, the land was formally donated to the city and established as **Flint's first public park**. As Tent City faded, the area around it soon became one of Flint's earliest industrial working-class neighborhoods. In the years that followed, as labor demand increased, people from all over the Midwest, the South, and Europe came to Flint to work in the factories. This diverse mix of people added new layers to the story of how Oak Park helped anchor a changing city.



Tent City, ~1910: A thousand people camped beneath the trees of Oak Park as Flint's factories outpaced its housing.

Photograph courtesy of The Sloan Museum Archives Photograph Collection, Flint, MI, record reference – Oak Park, 1970.103.196.

Oak Park: Flint's First Park and the Vision That Followed

The gift of **Oak Park** in 1911 marked a turning point in how Flint envisioned its public spaces. The land, donated by the **Durant-Dort Carriage Company**, became the first official park in the city's history, an act that reflected the growing civic ideals of **J. Dallas Dort**, one of Flint's most influential industrialists and philanthropists.

Dort, along with his partner **William C. Durant**, co-founded what began as the **Flint Road Cart Company** and evolved into the Durant-Dort Carriage Company, a national leader in carriage manufacturing and the launching pad for what would become **General Motors (GM)**. Durant's vision fueled Flint's industrial ascent, while Dort's steady leadership helped build that success – and then turned it toward the public good. Known as "**Mr. Flint**," Dort championed public health, the arts, worker welfare, and, most enduringly, Flint's public parks.

In 1907, Dort helped establish Flint's first Park Board and began donating land and funding for public recreation. Oak Park was just the beginning of what would grow into a citywide vision. That vision took shape in the **1920 Flint City Plan**, crafted by landscape architect **John Nolen**. Together, Dort's ideals and Nolen's design laid the foundation for a connected network of smaller neighborhood and larger parks and green spaces, grounded in Dort's belief that parks should be part of everyday life.

After Dort's death, Flint honored his legacy by naming its park system the **J. Dallas Dort Memorial Park System** in 1927. Today, that system includes nearly **1,800 acres of public land** and continues to reflect Dort's belief that every resident deserves access to nature, beauty, and spaces to thrive.



J. Dallas Dort, known as "Mr. Flint" donated the land for Oak Park in 1911 and championed the creation of Flint's public park system.

Photo courtesy of the Kettering University Archives, Flint, MI.

A Park in the Heart of Growth

1920s-1970s

Industry on the Rise

By the 1920s, the land just east of **Oak Park** had become the beating heart of Flint's industrial engine. **Buick**, by then a key division of **General Motors (GM)**, expanded across the rail lines, fueling a boom that would transform Flint from a carriage town into the vehicle capital of the world.

At its peak, the Buick complex sprawled across hundreds of acres and employed tens of thousands of workers. Flint's population surged in lockstep, from just 13,000 in 1900 to more than 150,000 by the 1950s. Entire neighborhoods were built for workers and their families, but none more closely tied to the plants than the **Oak Park neighborhood** that was located north and south of the park and steps from the factory gates. From shift changes to summer weekends, the rhythm of life in the Oak Park neighborhood flowed through the park.

Oak Park: A Community Anchor

As the factories roared, Oak Park became a central gathering space for workers and their families. After World War II, migration from the South swelled, further reshaping Flint's population. Modest homes, churches, and tree-lined streets surrounded the park. Children played pickup baseball and raced bicycles along shaded paths. On weekends, the smell of charcoal drifted through the air as families gathered beneath the oaks – laying out blankets, laughing with neighbors, and passing dishes brought from home. Nearby, music played from portable radios.

Charles Stewart Mott, a longtime GM executive and board member, became one of Flint's most influential philanthropists. He carried forward the civic legacy first championed by **J. Dallas Dort** by creating the **Charles Stewart Mott Foundation** – an organization dedicated to Flint parks, schools, and recreation, especially youth programming.

“Oak Park was the greatest place that a kid could grow up in. Charles Stewart Mott made sure that kids in Flint had what they needed.” – Glenn Key, who grew up just north of the park on Rankin Street in the 1960s and 1970s.



Buick complex in 1967. Parking has encroached into Oak Park (outlined and labeled) and north of the park.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey (1967-04-03 - 1967-04-13) provided by historicalaerials.com by NETR.



Buick complex in 1952, with Oak Park (outlined and labeled) just west of the plant, nestled in the working-class neighborhood that grew up around it.

Photo is from the private collection of Leonard Thygesen, a GM retiree who created a documentary about the history of the Buick complex. This image was shared publicly by Leonard and featured on Flint history blogs including Buickman2 and Buick City. Used here for educational purposes under fair use, based on its historical significance and limited public availability.

Church groups hosted summer picnics. City recreation programs brought organized play and special events, made possible in large part by the sustained support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. For many nearby residents, the park was not just a place to relax – it was the emotional and social core of the neighborhood.

In a city shaped by rapid expansion and booms, Oak Park offered a stable space to breathe, gather, and grow up.

Pressures of Growth

Even at the height of its prosperity, Buick's growth came at a cost. Bordered by the railroad to the east and residential neighborhoods to the west, the complex was running out of room to expand. As its workforce grew, so did the need for parking and access. Little by little, Buick pushed into the neighborhood north of the park and into the eastern edge of the park itself, sacrificing homes, streets, and green space to make room for expanded operations.

By the late 1970s, those pressures were becoming harder to ignore. While children still played in Oak Park, their families began to worry that Buick's growth might cost them their homes and neighborhood.

Forgotten, Remembered, Reborn

1980s-2025

Turning Point

By the early 1980s, the **Oak Park neighborhood** was gone — replaced by parking lots and access roads to support the Buick plant. In 1984, Flint voters approved a ballot proposal to vacate and sell the park to **General Motors (GM)** — a decision many believed would mark the end of **Oak Park**. But the sale was never completed, and the park, no longer surrounded by the neighborhood that sustained it, remained in public hands.

The following year, GM launched a major modernization effort. Backed by a \$350 million investment, the newly renamed **Buick City** was promoted as a national model for streamlined production and industrial renewal. For a time, it fulfilled that promise. The plant earned high marks for quality and brought renewed pride to Flint's manufacturing legacy.

But the momentum faded. In the 1990s, production slowed, and layoffs mounted. Buick City's assembly plant closed in 1999. In the early 2000s, most of the buildings were demolished, leaving behind hundreds of acres of concrete and silence. When GM filed for bankruptcy in 2009, Oak Park stood alone — unused, surrounded by emptiness, and nearly forgotten.

Memory and Resistance

In the early 2000s, former residents of the Oak Park neighborhood began returning to the quiet, overgrown park — sharing stories, pointing to where houses once stood, and remembering childhood games and summer cookouts. These informal visits kept the memory of the neighborhood alive, even as the city moved on.

In 2013, Flint's new Master Plan proposed selling the long-vacant and isolated park as part of the eventual redevelopment of the former Buick City site. That moment made clear what was at stake.

In 2014, the group of former residents organized and named themselves **The Brothers and Sisters of Oak Park**. What began as memory became action. They adopted the park and returned every August with growing numbers of friends, family, and former neighbors, many no longer living in the city but returned to remember what it once was. They brought lawn chairs, music, food, and determination — reasserting their place in its story and refusing to let it be forgotten.

"Oak Park has been neglected for over 60 years. This is hallowed ground here in Flint. We won't let our history be erased!"
— John McFadden, President of the Brothers and Sisters of Oak Park, who grew up just north of the park on Rankin Street in the 1960s and 1970s.



Buick complex in 1988. The neighborhoods around Oak Park (outlined and labeled) have been replaced.
Photo courtesy of National High Altitude Photography Program (NHAP), Phase 2 (1988-06-21 - 1988-06-29) provided by historicalaerials.com by NETR.



Celebrating the reactivation of Oak Park in August 2025.
Photo courtesy of the Brothers and Sisters of Oak Park, Flint, MI.

Oak Park: A New Chapter

In 2024, their story came to the attention of **Ashley Capital**, the company redeveloping the former Buick site into the **Flint Commerce Center**. At first, the developer suggested moving the reunion to another park. But the Brothers and Sisters of Oak Park refused — no other place held their roots.

Moved by their conviction, Ashley Capital and the city collaborated with the Brothers and Sisters of Oak Park to find common ground. Together, they preserved one acre of Oak Park still used for their annual gathering. The rest was sold as part of the broader transformation of the former Buick City site. The preserved space was brought back to life with new amenities and renewed purpose. Oak Park was reactivated in August 2025 — just in time for their annual reunion.

Rooted and Resilient

Today, Oak Park remains, not by accident, but by effort. What could have been erased was reclaimed. The old oak trees still stand. The memories endure. A park born of tents, toil, and transformation begins its next chapter. Oak Park is once again a place where a new generation can plant their roots.