

Chavis Park Carousel
Landmark Designation Report
Prepared for the Raleigh Historic Districts Commission

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Physical Description

The Chavis Park Carousel stands in the center of Chavis Park on Chavis Way. It is sheltered within a frame pavilion on the south side of Park Road, an internal street within the park. The twenty-three acre park is located in southeast Raleigh between East Lenoir Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The carousel was installed in the park on July 2, 1937. Experts estimate the date of manufacture of the carousel to be between 1916 and 1923, because it closely resembles a documented 1916 Herschell Carousel¹.

Carousel: The carousel, known as a "No. 2, Special Three Abreast, Allan Herschell Carousel, was purchased from the Allan Herschell Company of North Tonawanda, New York, for \$4,000 in 1937. The carousel had been designed and used for traveling shows originally, and was refurbished prior to its sale to the City of Raleigh. The Herschell Company catalogue describes this model as a forty-foot carousel containing:

thirty-six hand-carved horses (outer row studded with jewels) and two beautifully carved double-seat Chariots. Passenger capacity 48 persons. All horses are jumpers. Horse Hanger pipe and platform hanger pipe is encased in polished Brass. The Cornice, Shields and panel Picture Center are highly decorated works of art and are wired for 196 lights. Oil paintings and hand carvings combine with bright colors to produce a beautiful and practical machine. Standard equipment includes: Wurlitzer Military Band Organ with Drums and Cymbals...²

The round carousel structure has a wooden frame, a center iron pole, and a plank floor. Horses are mounted with an iron pipe through the center of each, connected to the engine mounted in the center. Bare electric light bulbs outline the lower edge of the outer cornice and each of the oval vignettes in the picture center. The entire structure is painted red.

The horses, of five styles, arranged in twelve rows, are of hand-carved wood, with glass eyes, and are painted in black, dapple gray, or tan. Each horse has a blanket and saddle on its back and a bridle, those of the outer row studded with jewels. One row contains four tiny cast aluminum horses for small children. During restoration in 1982 a team of conservators carefully cleaned many layers of park paint from the horses and repainted

¹ The 1916 Herschell Carousel is owned by Charles Walker, a carousel authority of Atlanta; Rosa Ragan, Restoration Report, 1983, copy in the designation file.

² Allan Herschell Co., Inc. Catalogue, copy in the designation file.

them in the original colors and patterns, based on color matching using the *Munsell Book of Color*.³

The more ornate of the two chariot seats contains sides contrived about the curves of a carved female figure wearing a bathing costume. Chariots are painted bright yellow, with red upholstered cushions. Fourteen rounding boards of tin with wooden moldings form the outer cornice, with fourteen shields covering the seams where the boards meet. The wooden shields contain cast aluminum figureheads of a maiden, a buccaneer, an Indian, and an animal, with metal moldings. As the original paintings on the rounding boards had not survived beneath later repainting, the restoration team painted them in 1982 with seascapes and landscapes based on subject matter from Herschell catalogue photographs. The ornate moldings around each board consist of an egg and dart design at the top and a flower design at the bottom.

The "panel Picture Center" section that forms the interior cornice contains fourteen oval paintings with decorative wood frames. The originals, found beneath layers of paint, were in very poor condition and were stored for conservation at a later date. A restoration artist painted copies of the originals onto new ovals. The subjects include lake views, a windmill, waterfalls, snowscapes, and scenes of farm life. One of the ovals contains the company name "Allan Herschell Co., Inc. N. Towanda NY."

The band organ, located in the center adjacent to the motor, contains an ornately carved and decorated façade, complete with the Herschell company name in the top shield.

A report detailing the completion of the restoration in 1983 notes that, "The Chavis carousel today is a sparkling, gay and fun little machine. The animal figures, the paintings, the masked shields, the tiny kiddie horses and the 'bathing beauty' chariot all work together in a somewhat gaudy harmony."⁴

Carousel Pavilion: The carousel was originally protected by a canvas tent. Later the present polygonal pavilion was built. It has considerable age, and perhaps dates to the 1940s. (The Pullen Park Carousel pavilion is of similar construction. Both were probably built at the same time.) Concrete piers support large wooden posts that in turn support the roof trusses. Between the piers is brick infilling. The polygonal roof features a center wooden finial, exposed rafter tails, and a set of four eight-pane casement windows in each side. These have metal screens, indicating that they could originally open for ventilation. Below the casements, a cantilevered pent roof extends around the building

³ Ragan, Restoration report.

⁴ Ragan, Restoration report.

to shelter the large wall openings and to shade the audience watching the carousel. The pent has heavy timber trusses and exposed joists. Enclosed beneath the east side of the pent are the replacement entrance and exit doors. The wall openings are secured with original screen wire on the outside and with interior metal rolldown doors added in 1982. Walls are clad with German siding; the roof is covered with composition shingles.

Inside the building, all construction is exposed and painted with green paint. An intricate set of roof trusses, of heavy timber with criss-crossing steel tie rods, support the dome-shaped roof. The dirt floor is covered with sawdust. Around the perimeter is a spacious area for walking. The pavilion is not being considered for designation.

Historic Significance

The Chavis Park Carousel, manufactured in the late 1910s or early 1920s and installed in 1937 as one of the main attractions of the new Chavis Park in Raleigh, created by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for African Americans, has a dual significance. The carousel, finely restored in 1982 and still a treasured attraction of the park, has artistic significance as one of a small number of vintage carousels that still operate in the United States. Raleigh has the unusual distinction of retaining two historic carousels; the other is the Dentzel Carousel (c. 1900) at Pullen Park (National Register and Raleigh Historic Landmark, 1976).

The carousel also has historic significance as a prominent feature of one of North Carolina's first urban parks for African Americans. Under the initiative of the Works Progress Administration WPA, Chavis Park was created to give black families access to similar recreational opportunities to those white families enjoyed. Chavis Park was not only an oasis for summer relaxation and recreation for Raleigh's blacks, but served blacks throughout the state. The park was such a novelty that black families from throughout North Carolina, who had few recreational facilities during the Jim Crow years prior to integration in the 1960s, visited the parks in cars and buses on the weekends from the late 1930s to the late 1940s.

Historic Background

The construction of Chavis Park was a major accomplishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of the most important relief agencies of the Depression era, in Raleigh. The park, to be situated on a twenty-six-acre tract formerly occupied by the State's School for the Negro Blind, was authorized by the State WPA in December 1935. By June 22, 1937, the park's playgrounds, baseball diamond, and picnic grounds were completed. Workers from Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania set up the new carousel just in time for the Fourth of July holiday. The grand opening of the carousel took place on July 4, 1937, and was attended by nearly 2,000 people. The swimming pool and refreshment stands were also in place by this time. Up to this time the unnamed park had been referred to as the "Negroes' park." The Negro Citizens Committee composed of F. J. Carnage, W. K. Johnson, and J. W. Yeargin, decided to name the park for famous local African American John Chavis. In March 1938 Mayor George A. Iseley and the city commissioners adopted a resolution naming the park in memory of John Chavis, a free black preacher and one of the most prominent teachers in Raleigh during the nineteenth century.⁵ An all-jubilee dedicating the John Chavis Memorial Park, called "a Federal and city gift to Raleigh Negroes," took place on May 10, 1938 and was attended by over 3,000 spectators. The State WPA Administrator, George Coan, Jr., presented the park to Raleigh's Mayor Iseley. Public Works Commissioner Roy Williamson in turn presented the park to Raleigh's black citizens.⁶

Providing recreational facilities for children and adults was a priority of the WPA program. Officials called the new Chavis Park "one of the finest in the South." Three other WPA parks for African Americans were built in North Carolina cities. The locations are unknown, but were likely in Fayetteville, Winston-Salem, Durham, or Charlotte, which had large black populations.⁷

Once the park was complete, WPA funding paid its operation costs. The park closed in winter, reopened on spring weekends, and operated full-time during the summer with a staff of approximately twenty-five. All Raleigh recreation facilities offered a much broader program than would have been possible without WPA assistance. At this time Raleigh had only one paid employee in its recreation department. The rest of the staff was paid from WPA funds. The WPA office was in the Montague Building on East Hargett Street, in the heart of the black business district. The WPA staffed recreation centers in six black communities in Raleigh. The agency operated Chavis Park from its

⁵ Murray, *Wake: Capital County*, 188-189.

⁶ Mary A. Young, City of Raleigh News Release, June 2, 1983; *Raleigh News and Observer*, December 3, 1935; June 22, 1937; July 6, 1937; May 19, 1938; *Raleigh Times*, March 19, 1938.

⁷ *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 22, 1937; May 11, 1938.

opening in 1937 until 1941 when the federal government ended the WPA program. The city of Raleigh assumed responsibility for Chavis Park at this time.⁸

An aerial photograph of the park taken in the early 1950s shows two long barracks south of the ball field. Pecolia Jones, who lived in the Chavis Heights housing project and worked at Chavis Park from 1939 to 1976, recalls that these were Civilian Conservation Corps barracks. (The CCC barracks possibly housed construction workers for the new park). Negro troops were quartered here in 1941 -1942. Two of them served as apartments in the later 1940s, and there was a third that functioned as the Recreation Center for the park from about 1950 until about 1953. In anticipation of the construction of a new Recreation Center, the city of Raleigh demolished the barracks about 1953. The interim Recreation Center occupied a building in the adjacent Chavis Heights housing project (now demolished) until the new center was completed in 1961.⁹

The new park was hugely successful. In interviews conducted during an African-American oral history project in the early 1990s, prominent black citizens who grew up in Raleigh reminisced fondly about the impact of Chavis Park on their lives in the 1930s and 1940s. Raleigh's principal park, Pullen Park, located on Pullen Road in west Raleigh adjacent to the campus of North Carolina State College, was a much-larger park that primarily served the white race. Blacks visited Pullen Park, but had limited privileges. They could hold picnics and outings, but could not use Pullen's swimming pool (the earliest pool opened about 1891) and some of the other facilities. When Chavis Park opened, blacks had their own recreational facility. Recalling his Raleigh childhood, Clarence Lightner remembered that "Back in the late 1930s, most of our recreational programs were at Chavis Park. We taught swimming. We had water pageants in the summer, ball clubs, and ball teams in the ball park. The merry-go-round was there. That was popular. I worked on the carousel and in the locker room before I was a lifeguard."¹⁰

The park was the focus of activities for sisters Audrey V. Wall & Norma Wall Haywood seven days a week.

At Chavis Park there was a merry-go-round. We went there every summer because there were no jobs for blacks like you have now ...Swimming pool and day camp. We would get up in the morning and go and they would have activities. They would have arts and crafts, music, dance, and swimming instruction. Teachers would get jobs as counselors during the summer....We were

⁸ *Ibid.*; Pete Wilder interview, 1993, Raleigh Historic Properties Commission files.

⁹ Pecolia Jones telephone interview, December 14, 2000.

¹⁰ Lightner interview, *Culture Town*, 62-63.

there every day, five days a week. Then on Saturday and Sunday, you would go again and stroll around that pool and you would walk back home.¹¹

The ball field was used not only by adjacent Ligon High School for its athletic activities, but by the two local black colleges, Shaw Institute and St. Augustine's College, for football and baseball games, and by minor league baseball clubs as well. Rev. David Forbes Sr. recalled that the annual Shaw-St. Augustine's football game was one of the major social events in black Raleigh:

It really was much more like an event. I mean people dressed up. It was like a reunion, a lot of excitement ...I do not know of anything that goes on in Raleigh now that relates to black people that is as massive and heavy with social solidarity as were the high schools [Ligon and Washington] and Shaw and Saint Aug.¹²

Putting Chavis Park's significance into a broader civil rights context, Rev. Forbes stated:

That was a really major meeting ground of black folks, not only from South Park but from all over Raleigh, all over the state, I imagine even from out-of-state. During the summer, there must have been thousands of people at Chavis Park because it was one of the nicer parks for blacks. People would bring picnic baskets, and we were one of the few cities in the state that had a carousel and swimming pool and later on a train that the kids used to ride in. But that was basically it. It was not terribly different from the way it is now but it just seemed awfully big. There was not very much that you were going to find anyway that was better developed that was available to black people. It was not as well developed as Pullen Park, but it was better than most cities you went to...¹³

The park was the center of black sports in Raleigh for Pete Wilder, sports editor for the black Raleigh newspaper, the *Carolina Tribune*, for many years, as well as manager of a number of baseball clubs. Wilder worked at Chavis Park during its early years. He estimated that from 2,000-3,000 people came to the park on weekend days, including several dozen busloads from cities such as Durham, Greensboro, Wilson, Rocky Mount, and Wilmington. Wilder's ball clubs, the Raleigh Tigers and the Raleigh Grays, played

¹¹ Wall sisters interview, *Culture Town*, 83-84.

¹² Rev. David Forbes Sr. interview, *Culture Town*, 99.

¹³ Rev. David Forbes Sr. interview, *Culture Town*, 98.

at the Chavis ball park in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁴

In 1950 a benefactor financed the installation of a miniature train in Pullen Park.¹⁵ The new attraction was quite popular, and Raleigh's African American citizens lobbied for a train for Chavis Park. After much effort, a miniature train was installed at Chavis Park about 1952. The tracks ran around the periphery of the park, and the train was housed in a metal tunnel beside Chavis Way. Although the Chavis Park train was also quite popular, it was never as much of an attraction as the carousel. Periodic maintenance problems kept it out of service, and it was removed after a relatively brief number of years.¹⁶

The integration movement of the early 1960s opened up Raleigh's formerly white recreation facilities to African Americans, causing attendance at Chavis Park to begin a gradual decline. At the same time, black families' increasing affluence and mobility caused changes in the traditional black neighborhoods around Chavis Park. Families moved to new suburban developments. Integration spelled the end of the black baseball clubs' use of the Chavis ball park. This occurred because Ligon High School was closed down and no longer used the field, the black colleges ceased to use it, and the Little League teams were integrated and ceased to play there. Many of the patrons of Chavis Park began to use the Pullen Park swimming pool. Chavis Park's pool received less maintenance, gradually deteriorated, and was closed in the 1960s.¹⁷

In order to re-attract Raleigh citizens to Chavis Park, the city hired landscape design firm Jerry Turner & Associates to create a master redevelopment plan in 1971. The Turner firm made the following recommendations: (1) the principal street through the park, Chavis Way, be rerouted behind the ball field to connect with Holmes Street; (2) parking lots be expanded; (3) existing tennis courts be replaced with basketball/volleyball/badminton courts; (4) existing swimming pool be replaced with a new pool; and (5) the carousel be restored. During the mid- 1970s these improvements were carried out, and the current swimming pool, tennis courts, ball fields, parking areas, and landscaping are the result of this redesign.¹⁸ The carousel pavilion was remodeled in 1975.¹⁹ The carousel, suffering from decades of insensitive maintenance,

¹⁴ Pete Wilder interview, 1993, Raleigh Historic Properties Commission files; City of Raleigh, City clerk's Office file on Chavis Park, Raleigh Municipal Building. An interview with Howard B. Pullen, who grew up in Raleigh and worked in the Recreation Department in the 1950s and 1960s, confirms Wilder's memories of the regional attendance at Chavis Park (Pullen interview, *Culture Town*, 149.)

¹⁵ Elizabeth Reid Murray, "100 Years of Pullen Park History," 1987.

¹⁶ Pecolia Jones interview.

¹⁷ Wilder interview, Pullen interview, Jones interview.

¹⁸ Jerry Turner and Assoc., Chavis Park Master Development Plan, 1974. Copy in Chavis Park file, City Clerk's Office.

¹⁹ John Hoppe, Parks & Recreation staff member, interview, Aug. 31, 2000.

underwent a careful restoration in 1982 by a conservation team headed by nationally-known carousel conservator Rosa Ragan of Raleigh. At a final cost of \$145,000, every element of the carousel was documented and restored as closely as possible to its original appearance.

In 1993 the city commissioned a second master development plan for Chavis Park from Edward D. Stone and Associates, planners and landscape architects. Their recommendations to construct an addition to the Recreation Center, add a new children's pool, rearrange parking facilities, and change the park entrance from East Lenoir Street on the north to the new Martin Luther King Boulevard on the south, have been accomplished in the past five years, using about \$2 million dollars generated by the 1995 Parks and Recreation Bond Issue.²⁰

Chavis Park stands today as a landmark to the city of Raleigh's pioneering effort to provide separate but equal recreational facilities to its black citizens during the Jim Crow era. Built with WPA funding in 1935-1937, the park was one of the first parks built for African Americans in North Carolina. With a fine Herschell carousel at its center, a large swimming pool and a professional baseball stadium, as well as shady groves and picnic shelters, Chavis Park functioned as a statewide attraction for African American families from 1937 to the 1960s. In retrospect, it is obvious that the park developed as a miniature model of Pullen Park. Pullen Park had a carousel, pool, and miniature train; so too did Chavis Park. Chavis Park's greatest distinction was the baseball stadium, whose professional ball club games and games between rivaling black high schools and colleges made Chavis Park Stadium the center of black Raleigh recreation in the 1940s and 1950s.

Although the throngs of people who walked to the park from surrounding neighborhoods and the busloads of visitors from out-of-town, no longer fill up Chavis Park, the park is poised to serve the city of Raleigh for another generation. Currently, in the year 2008, the carousel continues to be a prominent attraction of Chavis Park.

Artistic Context

The city of Raleigh's Parks and Recreation Department has demonstrated a long and constant commitment to the maintenance of their two carousels. The fact that the two oldest city parks, Pullen Park and Chavis Park, both retain historic carousels indicates the department's unusual sensitivity to tradition and artistic craftsmanship. Although thousands of carousels were manufactured in the United States in the late 1800s and

²⁰ Interview with Jack Duncan, Director of Parks & Recreation Department, November 20, 2000.

early 1900s, fewer than 280 historic carousels survive in the United States.²¹ Raleigh is privileged to contain two of them.

The Dentzel Carousel (c. 1900) at Raleigh's Pullen Park is the oldest carousel in its original site in North Carolina, and the only remaining "trolley park" carousel. From 1912-1915 the carousel resided in Bloomsbury Park, at the end of the Glenwood Avenue trolley line. The City of Raleigh purchased it in 1920 and moved it to Pullen Park.²² The Dentzel Carousel has fifty-two animals, including horses, ostriches, pigs, rabbits, cats, giraffes, and other animals, as well as two chariots. It underwent a careful restoration by Rosa Ragan and her team from 1977 to 1982.²³

Depression Era Public Works Projects for African Americans in Raleigh

Chavis Park has statewide significance as one of the first and best-preserved African American public parks constructed in North Carolina. The park is also important as one component of a larger public works ensemble. The federal public housing program began in 1933 as a New Deal program to alleviate the effects of the Depression. Following a state act authorizing cities to establish local public housing programs, Wilmington was the first city to establish a housing authority, in 1938.²⁴ Other cities including Raleigh quickly followed suit. Following completion of Chavis Park, the city constructed a model public housing project and an elementary school for African Americans on land adjoining the park acquired by urban renewal. The old wooden Crosby-Garfield Elementary School at 568 E. Lenoir St., located just north of the park, was replaced by a Moderne style stuccoed building designed by the innovative local architectural firm of William Henley Deitrick & Associates in 1938. The school provided grades one through eight. Chavis Heights Housing, was a Moderne-style complex of detached two-story brick buildings containing 299 apartments, was built in 1939 from a design by Deitrick & Associates. Chavis Heights Housing was demolished in late-twentieth century and has been replaced by new construction. The City of Raleigh built a housing project for whites on the north side of the business district, at Halifax Court.

Chavis Park, Crosby-Garfield Elementary School and the Chavis Heights Housing project (demolished), represented a planned residential, educational and recreational complex for African Americans constructed at the end of the Depression Era in Raleigh. The large-scale, destructive urban renewal projects of the 1960s and 1970s in African

²¹ Draft designation report for Chavis Park Carousel, 1993; copy in designation report file.

²² Murray, "100 Years of Pullen Park History."

²³ Pullen Park Carousel National Register Nomination, 1976; Carol Jones, parks manager, leaflet on Pullen and Chavis carousels; copy in designation report file.

²⁴ Kristin Szylvian, "Public Housing Comes to Wilmington, North Carolina," *North Carolina Humanities*, 3, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1995), 52-53.

American neighborhoods are well-known. Yet the Chavis Park-Chavis Heights ensemble dates from the Depression era, the very beginning of public housing construction. The Chavis complex may have been the first example in the state of a multi-purpose complex. The presence of the school and park, with carousel, retain the integrity and historic significance of the community.

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Boundary Description and Justification

The significant property is the carousel and it is being designated as an object irrespective of its location within the park.



Carousel Pavilion (not designated)



Horses Mounted With Iron Pipe Through Center & Oval Vignettes



Double-seat Chariot & Tiny Cast Aluminum Horses



Dapple Gray Hand-Carved Horse with Blanket, Saddle, and Bridle



"panel Picture Center" Oval Painting



Wurlitzer Military Band Organ



Wooden Shield with Cast Aluminum Figurehead of a Buccaneer



Carousel Structure with Wooden Frame, Center Iron Pole, and Plank Floor