MacGregor Park, A Gift to Houston

By Jon Fairchild, Debbie Harwell, and Steph McDougal

Then people hear the name MacGregor Park they likely think of two notable Houstonians: Henry F. MacGregor, a businessman and philanthropist who helped shape Houston's development in the early twentieth century, and whose family donated the land for the park in his honor; and Olympian Zina Garrison, who became a world champion tennis player through the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program in the 1970s and later returned to Houston to encourage others to take

up the game. Today the park offers a welcome respite to residents of Southeast Houston by providing a safe, well-maintained park with recreational opportunities for the entire community.

A Grand Vision for Houston Parks

Henry F. MacGregor (1855-1923) was a native of Derry, New Hampshire, and a descendent of the Reverend James MacGregor, who emigrated from Londonderry, Ireland, around 1718. Henry attended the Pinkerton Academy in his hometown and graduated in 1871 from the Bryant and Stratton Commercial College in Manchester, New Hampshire, before spending two years traveling throughout North America and Europe.¹

MacGregor arrived in Galveston in 1873 and came to Houston, where he got a job checking cotton on Buffalo Bayou barges for the Houston Direct Navigation Company. At the time, the eighty-mile-long stretch of

bayou was Texas's only reliably navigable waterway, and as a result, much of the state's cotton crop came via Buffalo Bayou to Houston where it was transferred to barges or boats headed to

the port at Galveston.²

A few years later, MacGregor moved to Galveston and joined the Galveston City

Henry F. MacGregor came to the Houston region in 1873 and within ten years had become a co-owner of the Houston Railroad System streetcars.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

MacGregor Park, on the banks of Brays Bayou, was established in the 1920s thanks to the foresight of Houston businessman Henry F. MacGregor and the generosity of his family, which, after his death in 1923, gave the land and funds to the city to establish the park. Photo courtesy of Houston Parks and Recreation Department.



Railroad Company, which operated the city's streetcar system. He became its secretary and in 1883, with company president William H. Sinclair, bought out the Houston Railroad System streetcars. MacGregor returned to Houston, assumed the roles of vice president and general manager, and led an extensive expansion program. In 1903, he left the company to focus on real estate and other interests, which included lobbying for improvement of the Houston Ship Channel.³

Henry MacGregor married native Houstonian Elizabeth "Peggy" Stevens in 1885. She had attended Houston's first high school, graduated from the Huntsville Teachers' College, and taught in Kansas and in Houston before the couple married.⁴

Henry and Elizabeth, who never had children, played an active role in civic and social affairs. She became deeply involved with construction of the YWCA building in 1920. He be-

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longed to the Z. Z. Club, Thalian Club, Country Club, Caldeonian Society, and the Houston volunteer fire service (Hook & Ladder No. 1), and was a leader in the state Republican Party. Henry also served as a trustee of the



Houstonian Elizabeth "Peggy" MacGregor (1864-1949) fulfilled her husband's vision by donating land for the park.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas. George H. Hermann estate, which oversaw the development of Hermann Park and dedicated land for Hermann Hospital following Hermann's death in 1914.⁵

MacGregor invested in Houston real estate and had built several subdivisions in the South Main Street area by 1900. His Glen Park Company sold the land off North Main and just north of Buffalo Bayou for the Glen Park neighborhood, a community of eighty-five Craftsman bungalows constructed in the 1920s. He had plans to develop a forty-acre parcel in the Calumet-Binz area, just across Brays Bayou from Hermann Park, before he died on September 3, 1923, at his New Hampshire summer home.⁶

Elizabeth, with assistance from two relatives, spent the next eight years administering his estate. They selected a portion of the MacGregor land holdings in Southeast Houston, part of the Jessica Addition (reportedly named after Henry's cow), to be used for a city park. They sold the remainder of the addition to developers to realize

Henry's plans for new subdivisions.7

In 1924, the City Planning Commission retained the Kansas City landscape architects Hare & Hare to develop the Houston park system, first envisioned by Arthur Coleman Comey in his 1914 report, *Houston, Tentative Plans for Its Development.*8 Comey's report recommended creating parks along Houston's bayous, to use that land more productively, facilitate maintenance of the bayous' banks, and enhance property values. The MacGregor

estate's donation of land along Brays Bayou for MacGregor Park helped move the city toward that goal.

Kate Sayen Kirkland describes Mrs. MacGregor's dedication to seeing the plan fulfilled: "Working with city officials and the Park Commission, Peggy MacGregor agreed to furnish land and cash for improvements if the city would build the parkway, and she kept a close watch over the ensuing struggle between developers and park supporters to ensure that the city honor the spirit of her gift, announced April 4, 1926. Her vigilance secured nearly three miles of parkland right-of-way north and south of the bayou and 108 acres of 'naturalistic recreation,' the third largest forest preserve in the city at that time.





Members of the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program. For a list of participants, please visit the magazine website, Photo courtesy of Michon Benson. www.houstonhistorymagazine.org.

To celebrate his friend's generosity, Will [Hogg] provided two hundred live oak trees on North MacGregor Drive to form a War Mothers Memorial commemorating Harris County's World War I casualties."9

R. O. Bosworth of Howe & Wise, Engineers surveyed the land in 1926, and three years later, Hare & Hare, which carried out much of Houston's park development through the 1950s, drew up preliminary plans for the park. In the mid-1930s, Hare & Hare produced a revised plan and map of the North and South MacGregor roadways, along with a planting plan for the parkway between them from Scott to Calhoun Street. These drawings show a marked change from a mostly natural space with trails and picnic areas to a design that called for construction for recreational facilities.¹⁰

During the early- to mid-twentieth century, suburban subdivisions were built around the park, including Riverside Terrace, an affluent neighborhood of large homes occupied by some of Houston's most prominent business professionals. By the 1950s and 1960s, affluent black families were moving out of historically black inner city neighborhoods toward the suburbs. Although both white and black residents of Riverside Terrace favored an integrated neighborhood, by 1960 the section north of Brays Bayou was ninety-five percent black. According to historian Stephen Fox, selling these homes "coincided

with the expiration of deed restrictions in these sections, which allowed strip shopping centers, garden apartments, churches, and motels to be constructed on the sites of many of the larger houses. The southern sections succumbed to real estate pressure during the 1960s."11

Even as these neighborhood transitions occurred, the city expanded MacGregor Park's amenities to include a recreation center building, pool and bathhouse, baseball field, and two tennis courts. In 1961, the architecture firm of MacKie & Kamrath was asked to add eight additional tennis courts (with space for three more), and a new clubhouse, allowing for future expansion of the recreation center.12

The park includes a stone memorial to Henry MacGregor, designed by Houston architect William Ward Watkin, and a statue of Elizabeth MacGregor that once stood in the Peggy's Point Plaza Park, named for her, at the corner of South Main Street and Richmond Avenue. Henry's will called for a statue of his wife, and Gutzon Borglum was commissioned to create it in 1927, just before he started work on his most famous sculpture, Mount Rushmore. The *Peggy* statue depicts Elizabeth as a young woman with an outstretched hand, in bas relief bronze mounted on rough white granite. The Houston Municipal Art Commission restored the statue and moved it to MacGregor Park in 1997.13

In 2005, MacGregor Park received a \$1 million makeover, thanks to a grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Division, and an additional \$600,000 in improvements in 2009 as part of Houston's Parks To Standards program. Park facilities today include a community center building, playground, tennis center, lighted sports field, swimming pool, weight room, meeting room, eighteen-hole disc golf course, 1.25-mile hike and bike trail, picnic areas, and an outdoor basketball pavilion.¹⁴

Reaching out to Neighborhood Youth

Perhaps MacGregor Park's most powerful legacy from the 1970s and beyond is the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program. The program, founded by John Wilkerson, touched the lives of thousands of young Houstonians, perhaps none more emphatically than professional tennis legends Zina Garrison and Lori McNeil. From 1993 until 2011, the Zina Garrison Academy carried the torch of the Junior Tennis Program, reuniting these three Houston tennis figures as they shared their passion with the next generation of youngsters.

For all its grand success, the MacGregor Park program had decidedly humble origins. John Wilkerson first picked up a racquet in high school but got his break in tennis as an enlisted man in the U.S. Army. His commanding officer, a colonel, placed him on the Army team so the colonel would have someone to play tennis with during his lunch hour. Wilkerson spent the rest of his Army years playing in Germany. When he returned to the United States, he enrolled at Texas Southern University, where he qualified for the U.S. Open.¹⁵

After graduation, Wilkerson got a job coaching tennis at MacGregor Park. Though at first he charged a fee to coach, he was unsatisfied working with the "professional" kids and decided to open up a free program. That decision was not without its detractors at tournaments



John Wilkerson, John Sewing, and Michon Benson with tennis great Arthur Ashe at the Homer Ford Tennis Center in Photo courtesy of Michon Benson.

because his players had some of the best coaches in the area. When Wilkerson's Junior Tennis players, armed with talent and dedication, began winning tournaments, the parents of other players (many of whom were paying coaches hundreds of dollars each month) wondered why the MacGregor players were so successful.

The secret was in the training regimen: practice under Coach Wilkerson was intense. Junior Tennis program alumnus Leon Belcher recounted the year-round schedule, "Every minute. Every day. Sunup to sundown." 16 Sessions began every summer morning with a three-mile run, followed by hours of endless practice and drills, before ending with another three-mile run at sundown. But the intensity paid off, both on and off the court. These young men and women paid their dues in blood, sweat, and tears – and forged an unbreakable bond. Larry Thomas, another Junior Tennis alum, recalled the camaraderie, saying, "We ate together, argued together, smiled together, fought together."17

Through all of the hard work of their regimens, the young men and women of the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Club learned perhaps their most important lessons, lessons that took them far beyond the courts: accountability and personal responsibility. Universally, the alumni heralded the efforts of Coach Wilkerson in teaching both mental and physical discipline through his program. Though Garrison and McNeil were his most famous pupils, Wilkerson noted, "Everybody talks about the tennis program, they speak of Zina and of Lori, but I tell them that is not the success of the story. The success of the story is these guys here who are lawyers, doctors, professionals. People don't hear about that. That's what it's all about."18

One of the program's most important elements was in the service it provided to the community along Brays Bayou. As word got out that the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program was pumping out prodigies such as Zina Garrison and Lori McNeil, mobs of kids swarmed the park in the summer to try their hand at tennis. The older, more experienced members of the program assisted Coach Wilkerson and his staff as mentors. When a single summer could see thousands of youths taking advantage of the free program, it was all hands on deck! John Wilkerson always said his main goal was to use his program to develop good people, good citizens here in Houston. Tennis was only the byproduct. Many earned full scholarships through their dedication, paying for their education beyond the court.

Only two decades before the Junior Tennis Program got started, Althea Gibson had broken the color barrier in professional tennis, crossing from the black American Tennis Association (ATA) into the previously segregated United States Tennis Association (USTA). In 1951, Gibson became the first black woman to compete at Wimbledon and went on to become the first black champion in July 1957.¹⁹ Arthur Ashe followed in her footsteps as one of the best African American tennis players in the United States, peaking at a world ranking of number one. He was the only black man to win singles at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the Australian Open.²⁰

Despite the efforts of black tennis players in tear-

ing down barriers in the 1950s and 1960s, very few blacks played tennis. Professional tennis continued to be a mostly white world. and racism remained an ever-present issue. On multiple occasions attending tournaments, the organizers questioned the credentials of Zina and Lori. Were they really tennis players? Were they cheating? Were they actually young enough to play in the junior level? But play they did. The exposure brought by Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe — and increasingly, from Zina Garrison,



Zina Garrison, John Wilkerson, and Lori McNeil at the 2013 "Story of Love" gala benefiting the Zina Garrison Tennis Academy.

Photo courtesy of Dave Rossman.

Lori McNeil, Coach John Wilkerson, and the rest of the Junior Tennis squad — led the Houston community to realize that something special was going on in MacGregor Park. 21

The story of the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program rippled out far beyond the local. Indeed, Zina Garrison was the first black woman since Althea Gibson to make it into the top ten, and the first black player, male or female, since Arthur Ashe. The park was immensely popular during this heyday, hosting celebrity fundraisers that included Arthur Ashe, Houston Oiler Earl Campbell, comedian and actor Bill Cosby, and baseball great Joe Morgan. 22

Wilkerson recalled the moment he realized he had something special on his hands. His ambitions to develop a healthy outlet in the community had grown into something far beyond that. "I didn't start out to develop any kind of champion. I just wanted to develop some good tennis players, and Zina and Lori, those guys had gotten so good. I knew nothing about national tournaments. And one of the coaches asked me, 'Are you going to the national tournament?' I said, 'What?' [He said,] 'Are you going to the national tournament?' I said, 'What?' He said, 'Your girls are one and two, they haven't contacted you?' I said, 'No, no way.' I finally called the Houston Tennis Association, Texas Tennis Association and you know what their response was? 'We didn't know if you wanted to go!"23

Though he did not set out to develop champions, the hard work, dedication, and ambition of the Junior Tennis Program participants gained him two superstars. The moment Garrison went pro, she was already ranked

number twenty-six in the world. She rose all the way to number four in the world, and Lori McNeil (daughter of former NFL player Charlie McNeil) was close at her heels at number eight. Lori McNeil played tennis for

Oklahoma State University before going pro in 1984. She won thirty-two doubles titles and in 1994 upset defending champion Steffi Graf during a first-round match at Wimbledon. Since retiring in 2002, McNeil has served as a U.S. Tennis Association coach and was appointed assistant coach to the U.S. Olympic team in 2004.²⁴ In 2012, McNeil joined the staff of the Zina Garrison Tennis Academy.

Zina Garrison's career began with strong performances as a junior player, she won her first national title at the age of fourteen. In 1981, she won the junior titles at

Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. Garrison played professionally for fifteen years, winning at least one singles or doubles title each year. She also captured a gold medal in women's doubles and a bronze medal in women's singles at the 1988 Olympics.²⁵ In 1993, she established the Zina Garrison Tennis Academy in Houston. John Wilkerson serves as the senior director of tennis, and Lori McNeil serves as the director of tennis.26

In the 1920s, Henry MacGregor's family sought to improve the quality of life for Houston residents by giving the land for MacGregor Park. Little did they know that the greenspace they so lovingly offered would not only provide a welcome respite for Houstonians, but it would also nourish the minds and bodies of generations of young people through the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program. The lessons that John Wilkerson taught his tennis squads over the years rang true in all aspects of life, "You are stronger, you are better than you think you are. You are unlimited. There's nothing that you can't accomplish if you put your mind to it."27 Inspirational words that changed the lives of the thousands of children who came up through the MacGregor Park Tennis Program, words that continue to shape their lives as adults guiding the next generation of southeastern Houstonians.

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