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Home of the Forest Park Highlands

1896-1963

“The Big Place on the Hill”

Once St. Louis’ largest and most popular amusement park, the Forest Park Highlands was a thrill-seeker’s delight and end-of-school-year destination for thousands of St. Louisans who paraded through the main gates.

Renowned for its roller coasters and rides, the park included a resort-style swimming pool – one of the biggest in the Midwest – vaudeville theater, ballroom dance club, beer garden, picnic area, shooting gallery, restaurant and Japanese Pagoda bandstand from the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis.

Five roller coasters graced its grounds through the years, ending with the famous Comet from 1941-63, then the country’s highest and longest roller coaster. Built by the Philadelphia Toboggan Co., for approximately \$70,000, the Comet had a 500-foot tunnel, nine drops – the highest at 80 feet – and a double dip.

A hand-carved carousel featured 58 animals, including four reindeer with real antlers. A popular story was that four of Santa’s reindeers vacationed at the Highlands during the summer.

Garner, Doug. “Forest Park Highlands.” 2009. www.forestparkhighlands.com

Tygard, Dolores B. “JCD to Remove the Comet on Oakland Avenue – Making Way for the City Campus Forest Park Community College.” Office of the President, Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County, 7 Feb. 1966.

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Fire Ravages the Highlands

Tragically, a fire in the restaurant whipped through the mostly-wooden amusement park on July 19, 1963, ravaging the historic Highlands and destroying most of the rides and buildings. Whipped by 20-mile-an-hour winds, the blaze was fought by 260 firemen for four hours.

When the smoke cleared, only the Comet roller coaster, the carousel and a charred Ferris wheel remained, along with two more remnants from the 1904 World's Fair – the Little Toot miniature train and a 148-foot tower topped by an eight-foot American flag made of electric light bulbs. Visible for miles, the flag tower was an iconic landmark along Highway 40 for many years.

The fire marked the end of an era for the beloved park which had been enjoyed by generations of St. Louisans and visitors from around the country.

It should be noted that the Highlands was not a fond memory for all citizens, however. Like many public facilities in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, the Highlands was a segregated park until the 1950s. Generations of African-American citizens were denied access to a park that later would become the site of one of the most diverse college campuses in St. Louis.

Archibald, John J. "St. Louis When: The Highlands." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 17 July 1983: 3D.

Garner, Doug. "Forest Park Highlands." 2009. www.forestparkhighlands.com

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A College Rises from the Ashes

Although the specific cause was never determined, the Highlands fire cleared the way for the newly created Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County to purchase the property on Oakland Avenue to build a community college in the city. Negotiations for the site had been under way since December 1962, but public sentiment had favored a comeback for the Highlands, which had fallen on hard times.

After the fire, both city newspapers came out in editorial support of the college. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote, "The college and not another Highlands should rise from the ashes."

While the city college rose from the ashes of the Highlands across from Forest Park, two sister colleges also were under construction as part of the master building plan of the new Junior College District: Florissant Valley Community College in Ferguson in north county, and Meramec Community College in Kirkwood, in southwest county.

The JCD was the first district in the nation to build three college campuses simultaneously, backed by a \$47.2 million bond issue – the most ambitious building program in the United States public higher education history at that time.

Tygard, Dolores B. “Junior College District Buys Forest Park Highlands.” Office of the President, Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County, 21 Jan. 1964.

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An Education for All

The Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County had its roots in a 1956 President’s Commission on Higher Education study, which spawned a Missouri Governor’s Commission on Higher Education. The state commission appointed a local subcommittee to study the needs of metropolitan St. Louis. Headed by Dr. Edward B. Shils, the subcommittee strongly recommended the establishment of a two-year college for St. Louis City and County to offer transfer and career programs for high school graduates.

The 1960 White House Conference on Education endorsed the Shils’ report and recommended that state legislation be enacted to permit the formation of junior college districts in Missouri. Business, labor, farmers, educators and civic groups united statewide to back what became known as “The Bill.”

Moments before midnight on the eve of the last day of the 1961 legislative session in Jefferson City, “The Bill” passed with only four nays. Local voters then approved the formation of a junior college taxing district by more than a two-to-one margin on April 3, 1962, and chose the first board of trustees.

The speed with which the Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County was organized astonished observers in the other parts of the country, but it did not surprise those who helped shape its history.

Office of Community Relations. "Annual Report 1982: A 20th Anniversary Commemoration." St. Louis Community College. Spring 1982.

"Information Bulletin." Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County. 1964-65.

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Building Programs from the Ground Up

With the first of the Baby Boomers coming of age in the 1960s, community colleges were sprouting across the nation – creating a national network of 457 colleges by the end of the decade.

In the fall of 1962, Dr. Joseph P. Cosand, a California educator, flew in to St. Louis with a daunting task: to build a community college from the ground up in a town where the concept was unknown.

With just a few short months to accomplish this task, Cosand, aided by six newly hired staff members and a dedicated board of trustees, raced the clock to build programs, hire faculty and open classes by the 1963 spring semester.

St. Louisans quickly embraced the concept of collegiate level career and technical programs, along with traditional transfer programs. Advisory committees in health, business and public services as well as engineering technology were set up to develop curriculum for each career program and determine the caliber and experience needed for the faculty.

"From the very beginning, we did everything we could to avoid conflict between academic and career programs," said Cosand. "We felt there was no difference in importance, and therefore, there should be no difference in status."

Students lined up for hours to register for the first night classes, which opened in January 1963 at Roosevelt and McCluer high schools, with approximately 700 students.

Office of Community Relations. "Annual Report 1982: A 20th Anniversary Commemoration." Louis Community College. Spring 1982.

Office of Community Relations. "Forty Years: A Light to the Community, A Reflection of its People," St. Louis Community College. Spring 2002.

"Community Colleges: Past to Present." American Association of Community Colleges.
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/history/>

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In the Shadow of the Comet

In January 1964, the JCD board approved the final purchase of the Highlands property from the St. Louis Arena Corporation, for a total of \$2,340,000. Construction began in July 1965 in the shadow of the Comet roller coaster, which was demolished in February 1966.

The hand-carved carousel, however, was saved by a local businessman, Howard C. Ohlendorf, who purchased the ride and donated it to the St. Louis County Parks in 1965. The ride was operated during the summer at Sylvan Springs Park until 1980, and then restored and installed in a climate-controlled building in Chesterfield's Faust Park in 1987.

Overcrowded from the start at the temporary locations at Roosevelt and McCluer high schools, the new junior college rallied community support to pass the \$47.2 million bond issue in 1965, to build the three colleges simultaneously.

On Oct. 11, 1965, JCD President Joseph P. Cosand dedicated the cornerstone at Forest Park Community College, amidst the construction on the site of the old Highlands.

By the following March, all three colleges were under construction, aided by a “cutting edge” computer at McDonnell’s Automation Center which helped the district achieve 80 percent space utilization, saving 64 classrooms and \$3 million. These efforts were lauded in *Forbes* and *Time* magazines, with the latter asking, “How do you give an honorary degree to a computer?”

St. Louis County Parks and Recreation. “St. Louis Carousel at Faust Park.” 2010.

<http://www.stlouisco.com/ParksandRecreation/ChildrensFun/StLouisCarouselatFaustPark>

Tygard, Dolores B. “Junior College District Buys Forest Park Highlands.” Office of the President, Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County, 21 Jan. 1964.

Tygard, Dolores B. “JCD to Remove the Comet on Oakland Avenue – Making Way for the City Campus Forest Park Community College.” Office of the President, Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County, 7 Feb. 1966.

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What’s in a Name

When it came time to name the city college of the JCD, the first campus director, Dr. R. William Graham, was democratic. He simply polled the faculty and students and presented the top three vote-getters to the JCD Board of Trustees.

Topping the list was Forest Park Community College, followed by St. Louis City Community College and St. Louis City College. Other suggested names were more reflective of the times: Kennedy Community College, after the late president; Lewis and Clark Community College, after the explorers; and Saarinen Vista Community College, after the designer of the new Gateway Arch, which was then under construction.

Mildred E. Bastian, Board of Trustees president, said the trustees felt the name “Forest Park” had great meaning to the citizens of the St. Louis area, given the college’s location across Highway 40 from the iconic park. Bastian had been one of the earliest advocates for the junior college, having served on the original White House Conference on Education. In August 1978, less than four months prior to her death, the Forest Park theater was renamed the Mildred E. Bastian Center for the Performing Arts.

Graham, R.W. "Proposed Names for City Campus." 9 July 1964.

Tygard, Dolores B. "Junior College District Board Names City Campus." Office of the President, Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County. 14 July 1964.

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Location, Location, Location

From the start, location was a strength for the city college. While it lacked the rolling woodlands of the Florissant Valley college, and the sprawling spaciousness of the suburban Meramec, its central location along the highway was a draw for urban students, many of whom rode several buses to get there. It also served as a much-used community resource center, fulfilling one of the original visions of the JCD Board of Trustees.

Several other sites had been under consideration for the city college, including the small arms plant on Goodfellow, south of Highway 70, and the Carter Carburetor building on North Grand. But JCD trustees were enthusiastic about the idea of locating the city college near other cultural institutions in the renowned Forest Park, foreseeing future educational partnerships.

Designed by the eminent Chicago architect, Harry Weese, the long wings of red brick were considered outstanding examples of modern linear layout. In 1994 it won the first 25-Year Award bestowed by the American Institute of Architects, St. Louis Chapter, for buildings that have "withstood the test of time."

Said Stan Allan, then chairman emeritus of Harry Weese Associates: "The student union, library, classroom and theatre buildings are models of how well buildings can be designed. Really virtuoso performances of structural/architectural spatial configurations, superb natural lighting and well-appointed materials, and the brick cladding is beautifully detailed."

Weese is best known as the designer of Washington D.C.'s 100-mile Metro system, which the *New York Times* dubbed one of the "most powerful public spaces of our

time.” Interestingly, Weese was a close friend and classmate of Eero Saarinen, designer of St. Louis’ Gateway Arch, completed in October 1965.

With a view of the Arch on the horizon, classes began in fall 1967 in Phase I of the Forest Park campus in the Library building and C-Tower. Phase II added the rest of the east wing, along with the gymnasium, theater and student center. Phase III, from 1970-72, completed the west wing.

The exterior campus footprint remained unchanged for 27 years, before a \$5 million Hospitality Studies Center was added behind the Student Center in 1999. A three-story garage was added in 2002, on the site of the original tennis courts.

Allan, Stan. “A Man of Many Words and Works, Harry Weese Retrospective.” *Inland Architect*. http://www.inlandarchitectmag.com/pdf/Harry_Weese.pdf

Muschamp, Herbert. “Harry Weese, 83, Designer Of Metro System in Washington.” *The New York Times*. 3 Nov 1998. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/03/arts/harry-weese-83-designer-of-metro-system-in-washington.html>

Sharoff, Robert. “On the Life and Work of Chicago Architect Harry Weese.” *Chicago*. 7 July 2010. <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/July-2010/On-the-Life-and-Work-of-Chicago-Architect-Harry-Weese/>

Teck, Beth. “From amusement park to community college,” *The Scene*, 17 Apr. 2007, page 6.

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Opening the Door to Higher Education

Key to the immediate success of the new junior college was the “open door” policy. Unlike four-year universities and colleges, the JCD board adopted the rule of open admission to anyone 18 years or older, with a high school diploma or GED. Accessibility was the mantra; exclusivity was not.

The JCD was dedicated to the Greek principle – “Know Thyself” – helping students discover and develop their talents to the fullest capacity, in order to advance their

careers, enrich their lives and give their best to the communities in which they dwelled.

The original program was flexible and geared to the varying needs of people who wanted to continue their education beyond high school while recognizing that those who enrolled differed in their abilities and objectives.

To meet the challenge of such a heterogeneous student body, a curriculum was developed that could be divided into four basic parts:

- **College Transfer Program**
For those who expected to study at other institutions after successfully completing two years of work at the junior college.
- **Technical Program**
For those who sought technical training to enable them to find suitable jobs in an increasingly complex society.
- **Developmental Program**
For those who had limited success in high school and did not realize their potential.
- **Community Service Program**
For those who wished to enrich their lives, advance their careers or acquire new ideas.

It was hoped, moreover, that students who enrolled at the JCD would discover that learning is a never-ending process, stimulating them to continue their quest for knowledge through the rest of their lives.

This curriculum philosophy is still in practice more than 50 years later.

“Information Bulletin.” Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County. 1964-65.

Forest Park Matures

At the Forest Park location, nursing and allied health programs became a main focus, with some 15 medical specialties eventually offered—many not available elsewhere in the state. An Automotive Technology program offered hands-on training in a campus garage, and a Hotel, Restaurant Management program gained national prominence by graduating elite classes of future chefs.

Minority recruitment programs, international business and global education flourished in this urban environment with the most diverse student population of the three JCD colleges at the time. Ironically, a location that for decades stood on exclusion, was now actively embracing inclusion for all races and cultures.

With fees of just \$100 per semester for full-time students, and \$10 per credit hour for part-time students, higher education was becoming a reality for thousands of first-generation college students.

By 1967, enrollment at the newly opened Forest Park location had grown to more than 3,700 students; by 1970 to 6,195 students; and by fall 1977, to an all-time high of 9,100 students.

From a segregated amusement park in the 19th and 20th centuries, to a diverse, multicultural, international college campus 100 years later, the former Highlands had come a long way.

Office of Community Relations. "Annual Report 1982: A 20th Anniversary Commemoration." Louis Community College. Spring 1982.

Tygard, Dolores B. "Junior College District Buys Forest Park Highlands." Office of the President, Junior College District of St. Louis-St. Louis County, 21 Jan. 1964.