

Garfield Park / Burton Heights

A Brief Overview and
Suggested Walking Tour

1. Jefferson and Burton:

One aspect on this tour will be the consideration of race and how it has affected this neighborhood. We will walk through distinct racial neighborhoods all intersecting at the park. The racial diversity in this neighborhood is more or more less a recent development in history. Until the 1970's African Americans could not own any land south of the railroad tracks that run along the Kendall furniture company. With concerns lingering over the race riots of 1967 when homes below the tracks were open to "blacks" there was a mass exodus of "white" home owners. Some owners were so concerned they actually left their homes before they were sold.

North on Jefferson

Left on Dickenson

2. Dickenson and Division:

Division Street is now mainly comprised of small Latino owned business with a Mexican grocery store and several authentic Latino restaurants.

Left on Division

3. Burton and Division:

Burton Heights is one of the early neighborhoods that extended outside the downtown area. The land being higher than surrounding areas (hence the name "heights") was good for farming. Initially only used for farming, in 1891 the city limits extended to Burton St. and more importantly in 1893 street cars began running down Division to Burton Heights. Around the Burton and Division intersection small business began to emerge.

Left on Burton

Right on Francis

4. Community Garden and Nature Center:

This plot of land was donated by Charles W. Garfield (who the park is named after).

“Teacher, horticulturist, farm editor, conservationist, legislator, banker, philanthropist, and nature lover supreme, Garfield did more than any other to shape the course of the physical city over the 40-year span from 1894 to 1934. Garfield’s life was an answer to his father’s deathbed request to “remember always what the people have done for you and give yourself and your service to the people without thought of remuneration.”¹

Born in Milwaukee in 1848 Charles moved with his father Samuel Garfield at the age of 10 in 1858. At the time of their arrival the city was only at a population of 6,000-7,000. Samuel Garfield bought the Burton farm to plant orchards.

The young Charles quickly became an early environmentalist. A Graduate of the Michigan Agricultural College in 1870, in college his passion was further developed. Concerned with the amount of land being cleared (the nature center was then cleared farm land) Charles planted all the trees in the Nature Center. Later in his life he became a banker by vocation and was the head of the City Planning Commission when the concept of city planning was still new. The entire park is a land donation to the city by Mrs. Julia A Fletcher and Garfield. Originally only the playground area was given. But later Garfield gave the remaining land including the Nature Center. This donation was given with a stipulation that the land always remain the property of the city and that it always be used as a recreational park. Still, even with this stipulation the city tried in 1960 and 1968 to sell the land for housing development to compensate for budget problems. However, the Garfield Park Neighborhood association quickly came to the defense of the park and Mr. Garfield’s wishes. Preventing their sale and leasing the park so as to help maintain it with the city.

Through the Nature Center

Left on Jefferson Dr.

Through South end of Garfield park

5. The pool house:

The pool house constructed in the 50’s – 60’s (it was officially proposed to be built in 1952) and has recently been the subject of a neighborhood controversy. The pool has been close do to a reduction in the city’s budget for its parks. With these abandoned facilities existing in a prime urban location the Salvation Army proposed to purchase the land and construct a community center in the park. The

¹ Z.Z. Lydens, *The Story of Grand Rapids*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1966), 528.

center was to be funded by Joan Kroc the wife of McDonald's founder Ray Kroc. She would provide \$7.5 million and the Salvation Army would be responsible to raise \$7.5 million to match her donation. The proposal called for 8 of the 22 acres of the park to be sold. The center would have included an indoor pool, gym, media center and worship center. This proposal however drew the reaction of several community members, particularly members in the South end of the park. They pointed to the stipulation in the park's deed by Mr. Garfield and raised concerns over the loss of green space. In response the Salvation Army reduced the amount of land to be purchased to 6 acres, and decreased the size of the building. Still, the proposal was rejected and now the location of the center is being moved to another location.

North through the park

6. The Garfield Lodge (334 Burton):

Approaching Burton a history of the Burton family would be appropriate. Barney Burton born in 1807 purchased all of the land South of Burton St. to 28th street and from Madison to the East to Division St. on the West. He purchased 320 acres of land for \$1.25 an acre from the U.S. Government. He married Harriet Barney in 1834 at the age of 27, she was 21. This was actually the first "white" marriage in the settlement.

The Garfield lodge was built by Charles' mother Harriet Garfield in memory of her husband. The home was meant to be used as a community center where classes and community events would be held with the maintainer of the park living in the upstairs. In 1970 the Neighborhood association bought the home and still uses it for community events. The purpose of the Neighborhood association according to their creed at the time of the purchasing of the Lodge was:

"to foster acceptance of all people regardless of race or creed into the neighborhood in a spirit of Christian understanding, in accordance with the natural movement of people as they seek a home and to provide a forum for an exchange of ideas for neighborhood improvement."

West through the park

7. Burial ground of Charles Garfield:

Charles Garfield died in 1934. Some possible questions to be asked when considering a personality like Charles Garfield:

Does this personality still exist into today's society?

How does it inform your purposes in your life?

Consideration of the park.

How does the park function to serve the three races surrounding the community?

West on Burton

8. The home of Charles Garfield:

The home was built in 1860 by Charles and served as his home until 1920 when he moved to 2007 Jefferson St.

Return bus from Jefferson and Burton

Prepared by Lance Kraai, tour given on April 19, 2007.

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