

# Madison Town Park Downtown Development Authority of Madison City of Madison, Georgia



## Madison Town Park: idea

The creation of Madison Town Park began when the Downtown Development Authority of Madison (DDA), working with the City, embarked on a plan to create opportunities in an under-utilized area west of the downtown core. As initial planning progressed, it became evident that DDA's objective of generating commercial redevelopment and business investment dovetailed with the community's need for a civic openspace as well as a desire to identify a Bicentennial legacy gift.

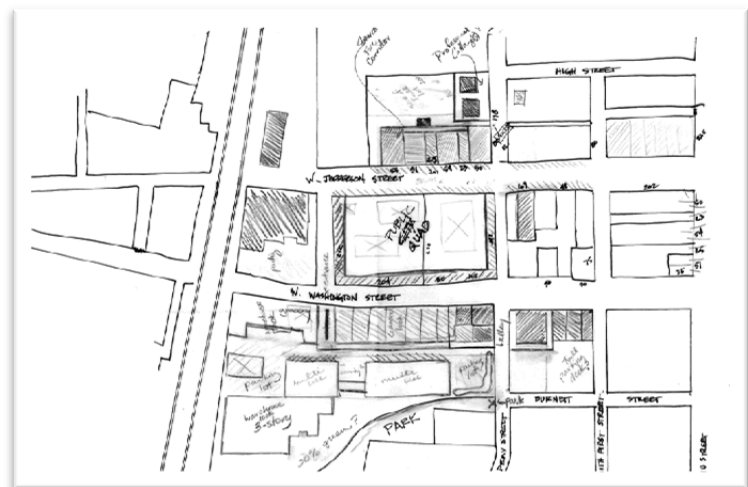


The original town square had long been the center of Downtown Madison. The site was the place of public gatherings both when the courthouse stood at its center and later as a greenspace (after the courthouse burned in 1916). Even so, once the the federal government purchased the property and built a post office, the community lost its downtown gathering spot.

Community activities were either relegated to the streets surrounding the town square or found accommodations away from the downtown. The traffic on Main Street, the route of several federal and state highways, further complicated attempts to gather downtown. The Main Street Madison Program was desperate for a solution.

Meanwhile, the Madison Bicentennial Committee was gearing up to celebrate the town's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Along with planned a weekly history series, a marker program, a ball, a definitive coffee table book, and other festivities, the committee desired some type of public improvement as an enduring gift to the community.

DDA's planning process for revitalization of the area identified the appeal of creating some sort of central amenity or greenspace as a catalyst for downtown expansion. Such an amenity was anticipated to create "beachfront property" and spur mixed-use development in the area. It had become obvious that the three groups had a common goal.



## Madison Town Park: acquisition

The first challenge was to acquire the four parcels comprising the selected site. DDA, using proceeds from a prior project, purchased a small parcel to gain a foothold for the future. Already, developers of surrounding properties were seeing the potential benefit of having a public asset bordering theirs. These individuals, in an effort to spur the plans forward, donated funds toward the purchase of another parcel. The two final and largest parcels proved far stickier.

One parcel, owner-financed, was headed toward default. To stave off the loss of opportunity, the City pledged an annual budgetary line item to the DDA to finance the parcel. After two years of negotiation, the DDA assumed the remaining seven years of the note and the owner agreed to allow the DDA to demolish the building prior to note satisfaction.

The last parcel, thanks to the writing on the wall, had a purchase price well above the appraised value. Again, the potential economic effect of such an amenity on surrounding property proved a boon as did the DDA's lead role in the project. A prospective developer purchased the final parcel for the asking price and sold it at a loss to the DDA. In exchange, the DDA sold surplus city property (adjacent to the park) to the developer for a new commercial block.

The entire cost for acquisition was \$1.4 million: \$525,000 from DDA proceeds, \$455,000 from private cash donations/sales loss, and \$60,000/year from the City to pay off the note of the owner-financed parcel. More important to the city fathers was the fact that eminent domain was not used, thereby avoiding any stain of antagonism at the start of the project.





### Madison Town Park: design

Each group brought certain programmatic needs, several of which overlapped, to the design table. DDA sought a space that would serve as public amenity for the businesses and residents that would eventually seek to occupy the redeveloped area. Connectivity to the established downtown core and additional parking were also identified as important.

Madison Main Street sought a space to serve as activity magnet, providing an outdoor event facility for the organization's own festivities as well as rental and private events. Restrooms were also a significant consideration, both for special events and to augment those of the Madison Welcome Center's many visitors. The Bicentennial Committee hoped for not only a legacy public improvement, but one with particular aesthetic appeal and aspects which celebrated the community's past.

In order to limit costs, design of the park was tasked to Madison's Main Street and Planning staff who sought aid from every quarter. The first conceptual designs were generated by developers of surrounding properties. Not surprisingly, each tended focus toward that owner's property. Nonetheless, these initial visual constructs provided an early starting point for the eventual design and certain aspects can be seen today. Staff augmented these ideas through visits to similar downtown center in other communities and informal consultation with landscape professionals to produce a plan to meet the stakeholders' needs. Madison's public service boards were also particularly helpful.

The site contained two challenges: a significant grade change from Jefferson Street to Washington Street and an below-grade, existing historic cottage. Both were turned to advantage with an eye toward the needs of a multi-use event facility. The final design divided the park into an upper and lower terrace, creating three outdoor "rooms," which could function separately or in concert. The historic cottage was a challenge given its lack of foundation, structural issues, and diminutive footprint; however, preservation was given the nod. The restored cottage was sensitively expanded to provide restrooms, and house a permanent tenant. Through a cooperative agreement, the Madison Artists Guild opens and staffs the downtown restrooms in exchange for the gallery space.

The community also sought to recapture elements lost from the original town square: the Cooke Fountain and a bandstand/gazebo. The gazebo was designed, based on historic photographs, as a close interpretation of the Victorian bandstand which once graced a prominent corner of the town square (historic photo available).

The 1908 Cooke Fountain, which had been erected by the Civic League to honor local philanthropist Sarah Cooke, once sat at the intersection in front of the Morgan County

Courthouse (historic photo available). It later moved to the center of the town square until the construction of the post office. Eventually, all pieces were lost except the crowning statue. As luck would have it, the original molds were still in existence and the fountain was cast anew, one hundred year later, for Town Park.

The history of the community is further commemorated with busts of James Madison and Daniel Morgan, the town and county's namesakes. Other statuary includes *Nature's Helpers* commissioned for the Children's Garden and *The Harvest Family* a 1939 piece by Stephen Thomas donated by his family. This public art along with chess/checkers tables, patio tables and chairs, drinking fountains for man and beast (dogs!), and the newly installed arbor swings create an inviting space which has drawn development to surrounding properties, neighbors to downtown, and visitors to the community.

Of course, a major objective was for Town Park to function as an event facility for Main Street and others. The classically-inspired pavilion serves as the park's main stage. It is fronted by the Great Lawn where folks can sit and enjoy festivities. The upper terrace with its patio and seating provides a space to fete sponsors or create a beer garden for concerts and festivals. As mentioned, the cottage provides needed restroom facilities. Finally, an attractive, low, cast iron fence surrounds the park creating a safe environment for children next to the state highway and allowing controlled access during ticketed events.

As part and parcel of the park development, the City extended the downtown sidewalks to and around the park, integrating the facility with the rest of the historic commercial area. Converting on-street parking to diagonal spaces increased the amount of parking. Negotiations with Georgia DOT resulted in the addition of parking on Washington Street (GA 83), adding addition parking but also calming traffic as it enters downtown.

The design of the park was a collaborative effort led and executed by Madison staff.

### Madison Town Park: fundraising

The Madison Bicentennial Committee took the lead in fundraising for the development of the park. Working for a legacy gift to future generations, MBC aimed to fund a majority of the park infrastructure through private donations. A lion's share of the work was done by fundraising chairs, Christine Lambert and Adelaide Ponder, whose personal contact with current and former residents of Madison netted much of the \$1.5 million in cash donations.

Their efforts were supported by a continual effort to keep the park – and donation opportunities – in the public eye. Articles in the local newspapers, and even prominent mention in a New York Times piece on Madison, continued to pique the public's interest. A power point presentation was developed and showcased for many civic groups, public forums, and board rooms. The presentation was converted to a DVD with a voiceover by Jim McManus, retired CBS correspondent. Anyone willing to listen was provided a myriad of opportunities to be a benefactor.

Donations were not limited to cash – flexibility included stock donations, multi-year pledges, and use of DDA’s 501c3 to channel \$250,000 in donations. In fact, donated in-kind services got the ball rolling. These included surveying, engineering, and architectural services. Morgan County provided the equipment and labor to grade the entire site. A local nursery donated the street trees; a local contractor provided the labor to install the shake roof on the Town Park cottage; and sod was provided by a local seed company.

Civic groups joined the effort. The Colonial Dames, the Magnolia Garden Club, the Three Seasons Garden Club, the Madison Ladies Garden Study Club, and the Rotary Club all contributed. Ms. Laura Still’s first and second grade math classes of 2006 & 2007 raised a combined total of \$1276.28!



Many of the donations were for a specific aspect so that folks can proudly point to a piece of the park and say, “We helped fund that!” Sponsorship opportunities came in all sizes for all budgets from the Pavilion, Cottage, Arbor Swings, and Gazebo to trees, benches, patio furniture, and light standards. One of the more serendipitous donations was the funding of the replicated Cooke Fountain by Mr. Stephen Cooke – no relation to the original honoree. More than a few had small parties to celebrate the placing of the plaque on their sponsored element. Those honored on the plaques provide an interesting window into Madison’s past and present.

Several foundations – often with some connection to Madison and Morgan County families – provided funds for some of the more ambitious elements of the project. The Harris Foundation, the Bryans Foundation, the Georgia Power Foundation, and the Conrads Family Foundation all made significant contributions. Several individuals contributed via membership in various foundations as well. A substantial grant was obtained from the OneGeorgia Authority, funding in part the event stage and restrooms.

Of course, donations were achieved over a period of time not necessarily concurrent with the actual construction. Bank of Madison provided DDA a \$1.4 million line of credit at a community interest rate to execute construction. That debt currently stands at \$1 million and was initially planned to be retired through funds gained from future DDA ventures before donation of the facility to the City.

Meanwhile, the facility is leased to City of Madison and Main Street Madison in exchange for maintenance and management respectively. This year, City opted for a SPLOST ballot in order to expedite the transfer of ownership of this wonderful asset to the City of Madison. The City was acquire the \$4.5 million facility for \$1 million.

## Madison Town Park: construction

Due to nature of the financing, heavily dependent on private donations and grants, the process of creating Town Park was one of fits and starts all with the goal of dedicating this legacy on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town. Though land acquisition began in 2001, demolition did not occur until 2004. Asbestos abatement slowed this process as well. Finally, the lot was cleared and grassed. Progress was visible. An official groundbreaking ceremony was held December 9, 2005.



However, the ground breaking was purely ceremonial. Actual construction would not begin until 2007 when DDA and the Madison Bicentennial Committee hoped to have \$1.5 million in hand so as to not begin in a deep hole. Meanwhile, the lot was being used by Main Street as a venue for several events, such as the Chili Cook-off and concerts. Those attending could gaze at the “coming soon” sign complete with the park plan – and hope.



The summer of 2007 was when the transformation began again. The DDA chose to contract with various firms to complete different aspects and elements of the park while retaining Heery International, Inc as project management to coordinate all the moving pieces. This spread the wealth. Every effort was made to hire local firms for the construction, resulting in the Cottage, the Pavilion, the landscaping, and the installation of the fencing being completed by Morgan County contractors.

Following the grading and the creation of the upper terrace, work began on the Cottage. This was soon followed by the beginnings of the Pavilion. The Gazebo was the last structural undertaking. As these buildings took shape a coping wall, the base of the cast iron fence, surrounded the future park. With this in place, a construction fence was erected which was draped with a canvas printed with the information about Town Park.

The next two years felt both like Christmas and the days leading up to Christmas. For days and months, it would seem as nothing was progressing and then a shipment of granite would arrive, or the fountain would roll in on a flatbed truck, or a crane would

lift the massive columns of the Pavilion into place. By July of 2009, Town Park was ready for a soft opening. The Bicentennial Street Dance was held in Town Park, and even though the fencing was not in place and there were no dedication plaques set, there was a stage, and restrooms, and gazebo, and a patio (finished 10 minutes prior to the dance!). Town Park felt real.

A formal dedication was held on a rainy December 12, 2009, two hundred years to the day after Madison's incorporation. It was a day to remember the long journey and to be thankful for all those who made it possible. Although the park still had work to be done, everyone welcomed as done. Since then the fence has been completed, all dedication plaques have been placed, the arbor swings have been constructed, and, as of this spring, the secondary walks have been installed making the entire park accessible.



### Madison Town Park: impact

The creation of Town Park had three major goals: to serve as a legacy gift for the Madison Bicentennial, to provide an event venue for downtown primarily for Main Street Madison but also available for rent, and to act as a catalyst for development in an under-utilized section of downtown. That Town Park succeeds as a Bicentennial gift to future generations was immediately apparent by the overwhelming

number of donations, large and small, made to the project. One of the 28 Bicentennial Markers placed throughout the town is at Town Park and documents the history of the project.

As soon as the Town Park concept was announced, interest piqued on surrounding properties. The vacant historic Icehouse complex was rehabilitated into a mixed use development. Vacant lots on Jefferson Street became Jefferson Square Parkside, essentially a new commercial block. On Washington Street the James Madison Inn, a three story boutique hotel, was constructed. Associated with the Inn is the Madison Markets complex with included rehab of historic and non-historic warehouse building along with new construction resulting in an interiors market, a restaurant, a conference center, condos, and additional shops. Most recently, the historic Mapp building on Washington Street has sold and rehabilitation is beginning this month.

This redevelopment activity has been an economic boon for downtown and the community. An economic study conducted in 2008 documented this. The tax base on

the three blocks mentioned above grew tenfold from 2004 (\$2.1 million) to 2008 (\$20.2 million). During that time, these three blocks grew from 6% of the Downtown tax base to 25%. In addition to increase in ad valorem tax income, funds generated from these properties through the Special Tax District, which can only be spent downtown, jumped from \$1000 to \$5,500 per annum.

Redevelopment around the Town Park has created, either through rehab or new construction, 68,000 square feet of residential space (27 units) and 107,000 square feet of non-residential space (36 units). Occupational tax data show 150 jobs are now located in this area which previously consisted of vacant buildings and vacant land. The job mix for the area is 26.5% retail, 31.0% professional/other, 18.5% service/hospitality, and 24.0% restaurant. This mix of jobs along with downtown residences, exactly what the DDA was striving for, is attributable in large part to the presence of Town Park.

The most visible success is Town Park as an event facility. Madison Main Street's Signature Events have seen continued growth since moving to Town Park. Concert nights find the Great Lawn crowded with dancers and listeners, the patio tables spread with tasty fare for their friends, teenagers gathered on the arbor swings, and youngsters dipping their fingers in the fountain. During the winter holidays carolers take to the stage and everyone makes s'mores around the Great Roaster.

Events that had taken place elsewhere have now gravitated to Town Park and downtown. The elementary school now holds their fall fundraiser in the park. On Memorial Day, 1,200 motorcycle riders join the American Legion and town folk to honor our heroes. A local church has held several movie nights. Town Park witnessed its first wedding this month – with 40 attendants!

A more than ten year investment of time, money, and leadership, Madison Town Park is paying the dividends planned and anticipated.

