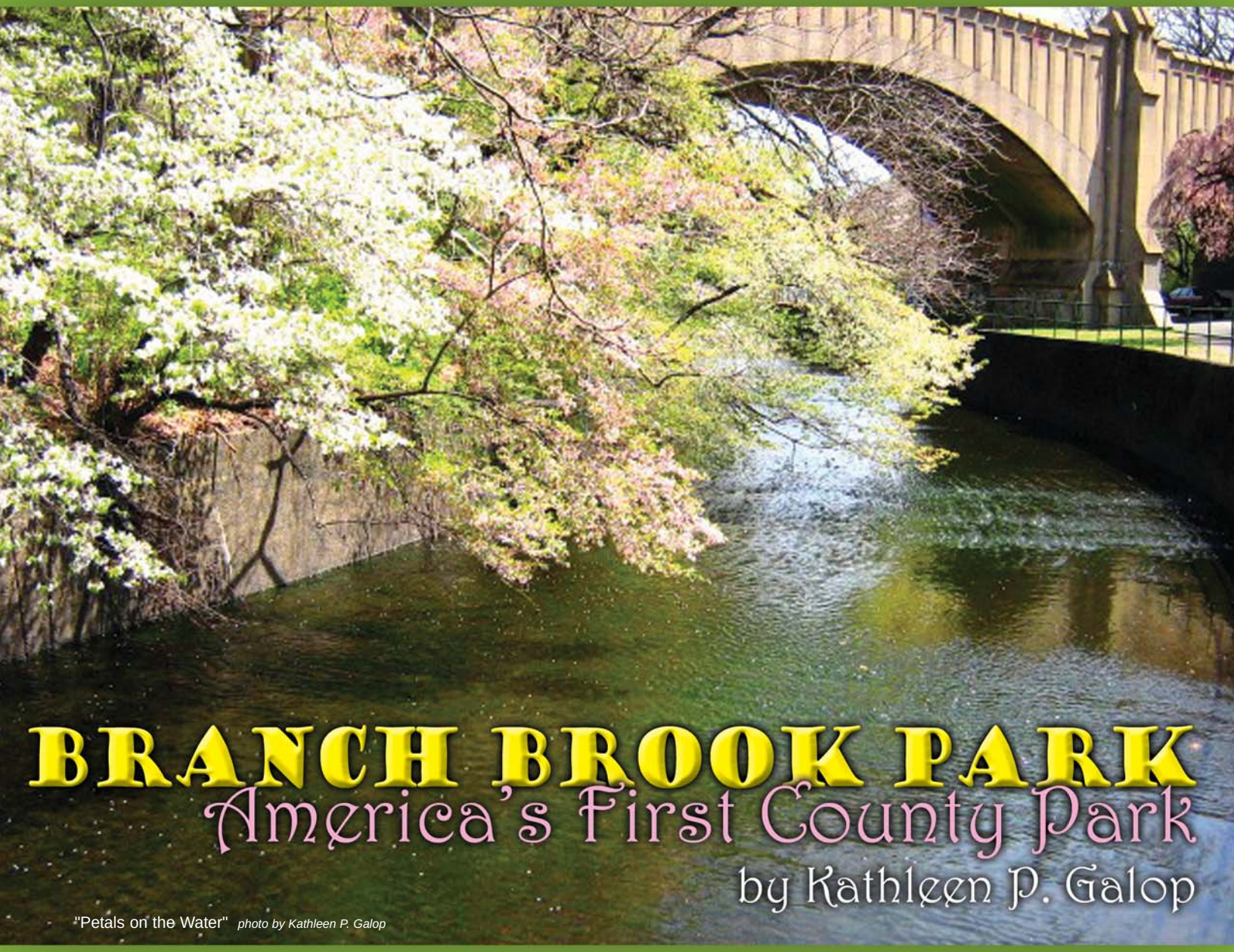


BRANCH BROOK PARK
America's First County Park
by Kathleen P. Galop

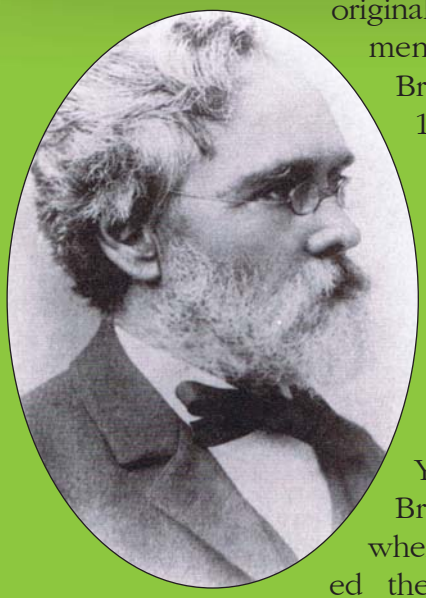
"Petals on the Water" *photo by Kathleen P. Galop*

At the time of the creation of America's first County Park Commission in Essex County on March 5, 1895, there were only 25 acres of land dedicated to park use throughout the entire county. This land consisted primarily of small plots of ground where monuments to national heroes or war dead were placed. No parks as we know them today existed anywhere in Essex County.

Branch Brook Park in Newark and Belleville, New Jersey did not just happen. Today it seems as if it were always there. However, as you enjoy its open meadows surrounded by century old oaks, fish in its tranquil lakes and stroll through a flurry of cherry blossom petals, it is important to note that that this magnificent urban park was put together with a vision and a design. Most popularly know for its magnificent and varied display of flowering Japanese Cherry Blossom trees, Branch Brook Park is recognized as America's first county park.

The vision for Branch Brook Park came in the 1860s from the City of Newark Park Commissioners who wanted to provide accessible public grounds for recreation and relaxation open to all citizens. The

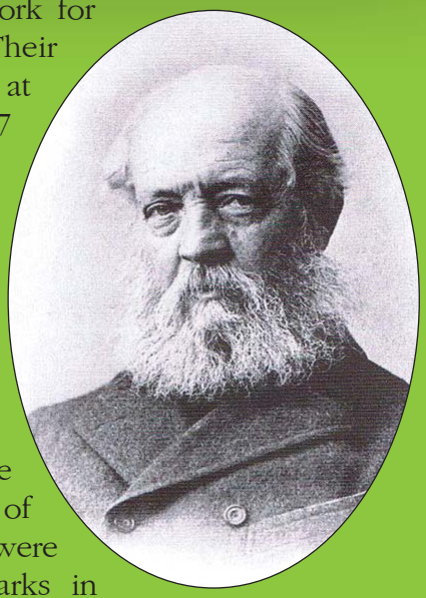
The abutments on the bridge over the Second River in winter. *photo by Kathleen P. Galop*



original design and the recommendation of the site for Branch Brook Park came in 1867 from the firm of Messrs. Olmsted, Vaux & Co. of New York, landscape architects extraordinaire.

Frederick Law Olmsted (right) and Calvert Vaux (left) had already completed the design for New York's Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park when the City of Newark selected their landscape architecture firm to lay the ground work for Branch Brook Park. Their "Report on a Site for a Park at Newark" (hereinafter "1867 Report") is contained in a 36 page detailed handwritten document which was submitted to the City on October 5, 1867.

This "1867 Report" discusses how the design intent behind the great public parks of Europe influenced the work of Olmsted & Vaux. They were committed to creating parks in



Lake looking north towards the Park Avenue bridge. *photo by Kathleen P. Galop*

America as magnificent as the public parks in European cities, such as Hyde Park in London, the Phoenix in Dublin and the Prater in Vienna. They stated that, "the central idea of a large public park is manifestly that of a work of art...designed at the outset as all other works of art are designed with the intention of producing, through the exercise of the natural perception, a certain effect upon the mind and the character of those who approach it." There was a grand intent here–a desire to provide all citizens with the opportunity to inhabit and enjoy a totally planned cultural landscape experience.

The seeds were sown not only for Branch Brook Park, but also for the creation of the magnificent system of parks in Essex County which we enjoy today. Totaling almost 6,000 acres, the Essex County Park System began with the creation in June 1895 of Branch Brook Park from a donation of 60 acres of land which had comprised the old Newark City Reservoir.

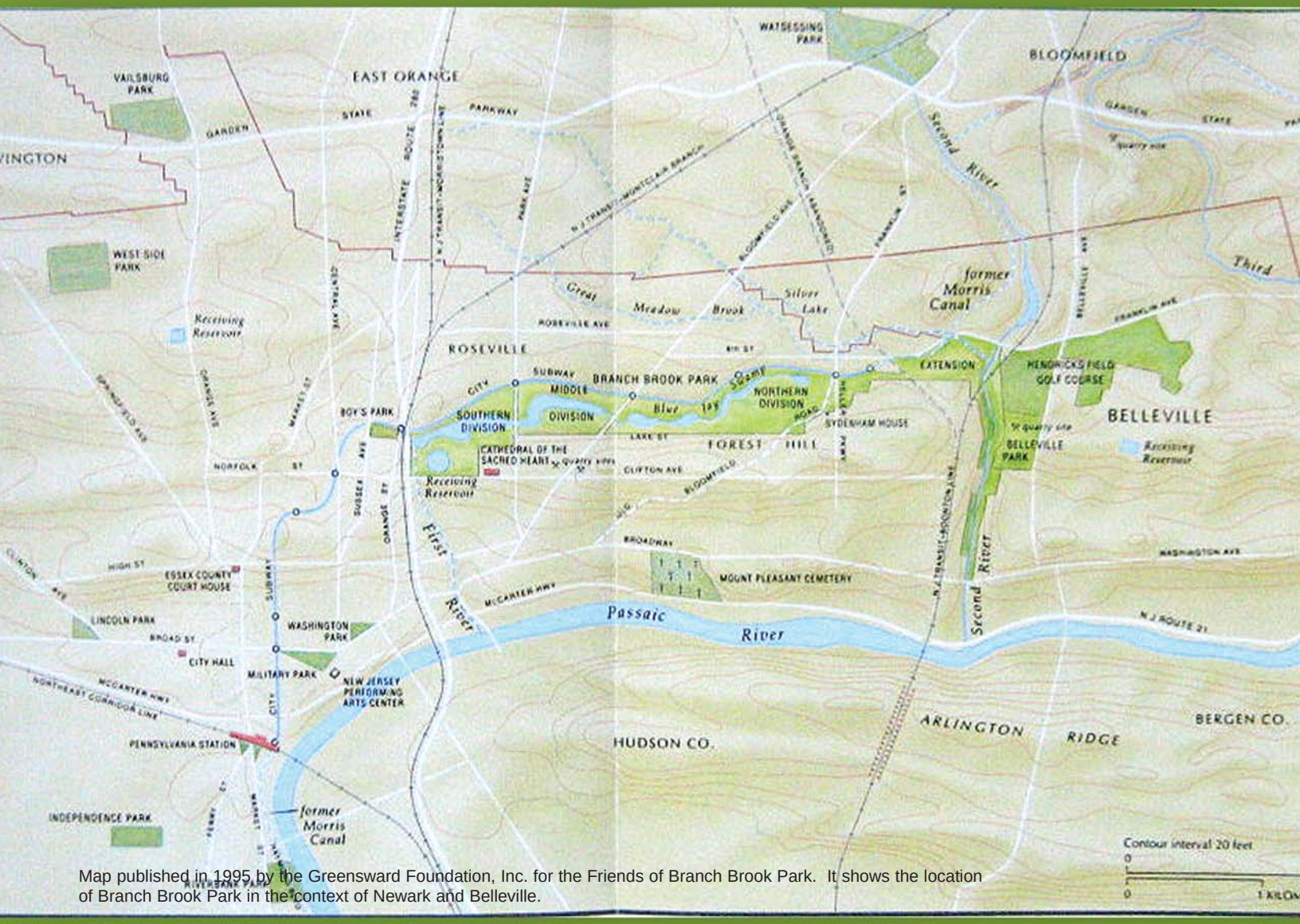
The beginnings of Essex County's Park System were not easy. After accepting the Olmsted & Vaux report, Newark's business leaders recommended purchasing 700 acres in the northern section of the City for over $1 million. Such a large expenditure required the approval of the New Jersey State Legislature–which didn't come for almost 28 years! Securing acceptance for the idea to set aside land for an open public park and to move the plans for Branch Brook Park off the drawing boards and into action was long in coming. But it was an idea–a *concept*–worth waiting for.

Branch Brook Park and its cherry blossoms. *Photo by Eric Koppel.*

Members of the Newark Board of Trade worked closely with the Board of Trade of the Oranges to keep alive the idea for a "Park at Newark" and to encourage the creation of a county park system which would preserve for public enjoyment the views from the first range of the Watchung Mountains. They worked diligently in the spring of 1894 toward this effort and communicated almost daily with members of the New Jersey State Legislature to formulate legislation to achieve this objective. On May 8, 1894 Governor George T. Werts signed the bill (Chapter CLVI, *Laws of 1894*) permitting the creation of a Temporary Commission to "consider the advisability of laying out ample open spaces for the use of the public . . . in such county" and to "make a report in writing of a comprehensive plan for laying out, acquiring and maintaining such open spaces." Less than a year after it was established, the Temporary Commission for Essex County unanimously recommended the creation of a countywide park system.

Upon receipt of the Report of the Temporary Commission, the New Jersey Legislature acted promptly and enacted precedent-setting legislation which provided for the creation of County Park Commissions and empowering such Commissions to create a countywide park system. Governor Werts signed the County Park Act into law on March 5, 1895 (Chapter XCL, *Laws of 1895*).

Language in the County Park Act of 1895 required that its provisions be submitted to the voters of the county for approval. The referendum in

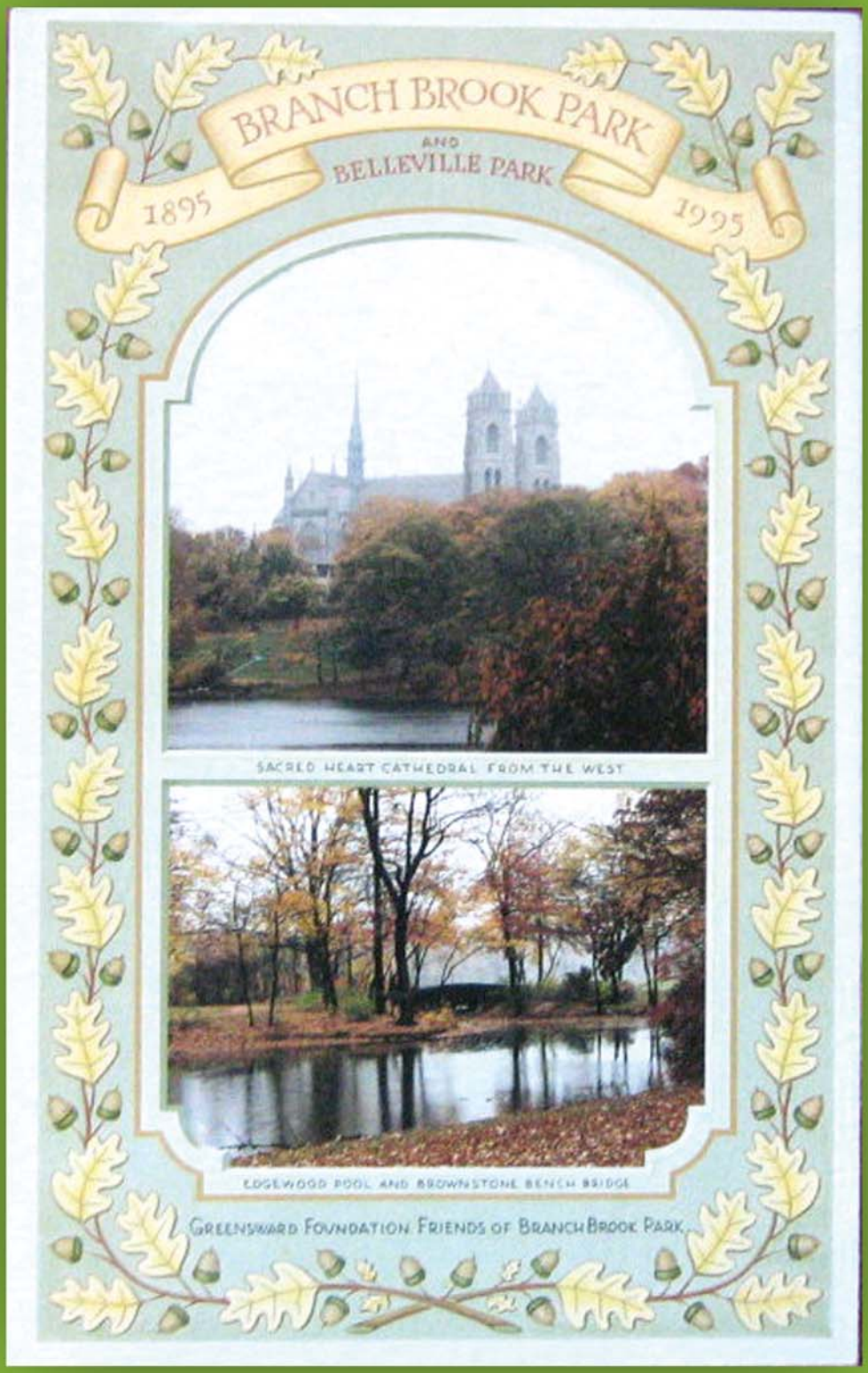


Map published in 1995 by the Greensward Foundation, Inc. for the Friends of Branch Brook Park. It shows the location of Branch Brook Park in the context of Newark and Belleville.

Essex County was conducted on April 8, 1895 and the voters approved it by large margin. Approval of this referendum also carried with it authorization for the expenditure of $2,500,000 of county funds for the development of the park system. Following passage, the permanent Essex County Park Commission was appointed on April 18, 1895 by The Honorable David A. Depue. The first Park Commissioners were Frederick W. Kelsey, Stephen J. Meeker, Franklin Murphy, Cyrus Peck and Frederick M. Shepard. Subsequently, Franklin Murphy resigned from the Essex County Park Commission in 1902 when he was elected Governor of the State of New Jersey.

One of the first actions of the Commission was to plan the groundbreaking for a "Park at Newark" (Branch Brook Park) on June 15, 1895–the park whose time had now come–and to move forward to develop a park system to serve all of Essex County. This pioneering action was widely lauded and today Essex County's creation still maintains the distinction of being the first county park system in America. It's first creation, Branch Brook Park, was placed on the National (1981) and the New Jersey (1980) Registers of Historic Places upon the completion and submission of the Nomination documents prepared by Kathleen P. Galop under the aegis of The Newark Cherry Blossom Festival.

The unique advantage of creating a countywide park system allowed for inclusion of lands within the park system based upon the geography and the particular characteristics of the landscape, without the restrictions that municipal boundaries would place



Map of Branch Brook Park published by Greensward Foundation, Inc. in 1995 for the Friends of Branch Brook Park.

on park designers and creators. These advantages are particularly evident in properties like the 2,047-acre South Mountain Reservation and the 408-acre Eagle Rock Reservation, which span several municipalities and which have preserved the First Watchung Mountain and its spectacular views for all to enjoy.

The Essex County Park System played a pivotal role in the development of large scale park systems throughout the country. This was the first time in the United States that a law permitted the creation of a county-wide park system and it served as a model for states across the country. Previously, park systems were developed only along municipal boundaries. The Essex County Park System changed that practice and enabled park developers nationwide to think and plan on a broader scale.

(Information for this article was obtained from the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress; the "Report on a Site for a Park at Newark" prepared by Olmsted & Vaux; the Annual Reports and Minutes of the Essex County Park Commission; the historical files of the Essex County Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs; the Nomination of Branch Brook Park to the State and National Registers of Historic Places; The Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center at The Newark Public Library; and The Star-Ledger.)

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