

# **Cal F. Johnson Park**

*"The Negro Park Bill was passed"*

September 21, 1922 - Present

Named in honor of one of the most successful Black men in Knoxville's history and was the first park to bear the namesake of a local member of the city's Black community.

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**Cal Johnson standing under the archway leading to Cal Johnson Park which was named in his honor, circa 1922. Courtesy of the Beck Archives.**

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On a breezy afternoon during the autumn season of 1922, an elderly yet dapper Black man took a stroll through East Knoxville. He traversed through the area peacefully, tipping his hat to any friendly face that passed his way whilst taking in familiar sights of the city he'd known so well since childhood. He headed towards the intersection of McKee Street and East Clinch Avenue until his eyes met a white marble archway that had been erected on the grounds of what used to be property owned by the late John S. Van Gilder. The grand structure stood tall above a short set of stairs as it beckoned visitors towards one of the City of Knoxville's newest projects, a public park built specifically for the Black residents of Knoxville.

Making his way up the stairs, the man stopped before the archway and looked above proudly at the words that had been inscribed in the marble for all to see...

"Cal F Johnson Park  
Erected By  
Cal F Johnson, 1922"

The man bearing witness to this incredible accomplishment nearly 100 years ago was none other than Cal Johnson himself, one of the most remarkable businessmen in Knoxville's history. Moving past the archway, Johnson continued his stroll through the park. He was not alone. Accompanying him was a photographer who wanted to visually capture this significant day so that it would be remembered for years to come. They walked until another marble structure came into view, a memorial fountain that Johnson had personally donated to the park. As he stood in front of the fountain, marveling at the bright marble which gleamed against the backdrop of several large trees, the photographer set up his camera and took a picture of the touching moment.



**Cal Johnson standing by the memorial fountain he donated for the newly built park named in his honor, circa 1922. Courtesy of the Beck Archives.**

From being born into enslavement to becoming one of the most successful Black men in the South by the end of the 19th century, the establishment of Cal Johnson Park was as a testament both to Johnson's achievements and to the dedication of the Black community. When talks of erecting a new park for the Black residents of Knoxville began gaining traction in 1920, leaders of the community were very active throughout the process. They formed their own delegations in efforts to see that city commissioners would listen to their demands. After Cal Johnson Park

was officially opened in July of 1922, it served as a primary spot for social gathering and recreational activities.

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The beginnings of Cal Johnson Park can be traced back to August 14, 1920 at the Tennessee State Capitol when former Senator John C. Houk introduced a bill permitting the city of Knoxville to issue \$50,000 in bonds to establish a "negro park." While Houk's announcement stirred little excitement at the Capitol, it did create buzz on a local scale. After the bill, officially named the Negro Park Bill, was passed on August 20th, 1920, two factors posed an issue for Knoxville's governing body: where would such a park be built and how much of the designated funds would the city be willing to spend on a plot of land? Through a series of property inspections and financial negotiations which took place in the summer of 1921, Ernest W. Neal, Knoxville's former mayor from 1920-1923, along with Commissioners Neal Adams and N.B. Kuhlman determined that the most ideal sites for a new park were East Knoxville properties owned by Judge Geo. M. Trotter and the late John S. Van Gilder.



The early stages of the Negro Park Act were frequently examined in various Knoxville Publications. Courtesy of *The Knoxville News Sentinel* and *The Knoxville Journal Archives*.

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On May 3, 1921, Black delegates met with the city commission and presented their thoughts as to which site should be purchased. Alonzo A. Felding and Joshua S. Cobb served as spokesmen for their respective delegations, with Felding in favor of the Van Gilder property while Cobb showed support for Trotter's property. Both men provided strong cases and their opinions on the matter were taken into great consideration by Mayor Neal and the commissioners. Those in favor of the Van Gilder purchase outnumbered the other party yet both sides showed camaraderie in that they agreed to "eliminate their differences and agree

upon one of the tracts.” (*Knoxville Sentinel*, May 3, 1921)

By June 9, 1921, Trotter rescinded his offer leaving Van Gilder’s property as the only remaining option for a park in East Knoxville. Although many Black residents preferred this option as it was a sizable amount of land in close proximity to a number of their homes and businesses, Black people living in Mechanicsville expressed desires for their own park in which distance wouldn’t result in safety and transportation problems. Around this time, commissioners were also eyeing a location in West Knoxville, a twenty-one acre site owned by the McGhee estate. It was an ideal spot as it was also close to a large population of Black residents. To satisfy both parties, the city opted to split the funding and acquired both properties. \$17,000 was spent on the McGhee property, formally established as the Leslie St. Park. The remaining \$35,000 was used to purchase the Van Gilder tract and was transformed into Cal Johnson Park on East Clinch Avenue and McKee street.



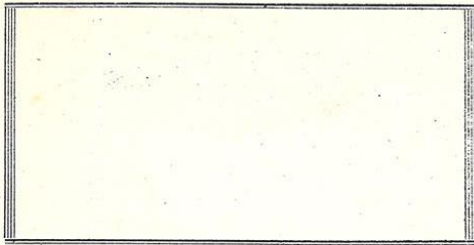


**A home formerly located at 1006 East Clinch Avenue. This area was a popular consideration for the Cal Johnson Park because many Black families lived there.  
Photo in the Beck collection courtesy of Cindy and Mark Proteau.**

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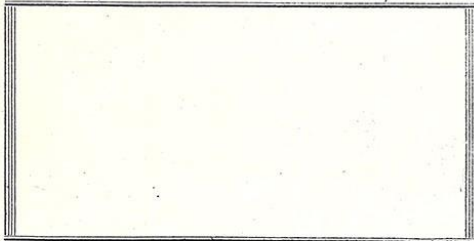
The decision to name the park after Cal Johnson came at the request of Commissioner Kuhlman during a meeting on July 5, 1921, stating that Johnson was one of the “best known and most highly respected colored citizens in Knoxville...” His suggestion was received unanimously and Black people that were in attendance that day celebrated with joyous applause. Although there had been other local parks that Black citizens frequented prior, never before had one carried the namesake of a member of their community who was upstanding in every regard.

The following months were busy with eager citizens volunteering their time to assist with tidying up the site. On August 3, 1921, an official "clean-up day" was held and 500 people were in attendance. Black men and children participated in removing debris from the property while the women prepared meals. During that time, a committee had been put together to oversee future park operations, mapping out their vision for the park, and making preparations for the upcoming dedication ceremony. They continued working with the city in hopes that the park would be equipped with courts for tennis and croquet, fountains, swings, and other desirable features. Once all plans were completed, the official dedication of the Cal Johnson Park was announced to the public, taking place on September 21, 1922.



Committee of Management of Cal. F. Johnson Park:

Mrs. G. W. McDade, Sr., Pres.  
Mr. Jas. G. Beck, Sec.  
Mr. John Penn, Treasurer.  
Mr. A. A. Felding.  
Dr. H. M. Green.  
Mr. M. S. O'Neil.  
Mr. W. S. Hannum.



DEDICATION  
OF  
CAL. F. JOHNSON PARK

AND

*Memorial Fountain*

AT THE PARK

THURSDAY, SEPT. 21ST,  
1922

Gleaner Print—205 E. Vine

PROGRAM

Music - - - - - Knoxville Jubilee Chorus  
Invocation - - - - - Rev. J. H. Henderson  
Music - - - - - First Batallion Band  
Presentation of Park to the Colored People, - - - - -  
Mayor E. W. Neal  
Accepting of Park on behalf of Colored Citizens, - - - - -  
Rev. J. A. Pickett  
Music - - - - - First Batallion Band  
Presentation of Memorial Fountain to the City of Knoxville -  
Mr. Cal. F. Johnson and Rev. S. A. Downer  
Accepting of the Fountain for the City, and presenting it to the  
Colored People, - - - - - Commissioner Neal Adams  
Accepting of the Fountain on behalf of the Colored Citizens -  
Mr. W. S. Hannum  
Music - - - - - First Batallion Band

Remarks:—Mesdames McDade, Sr., Beck, Singleton, L. Carter,  
C. Burke, Wood, Floyd; Profs. J. H. Leeper, C. W.  
Canster, W. M. Brooks, W. D. S. Bradley, Drs.  
W. R. Settle, D. W. Crawford, W. F.  
Flack, C. A. Davis, H. M. Green,  
J. J. Johnson, M. L. Boyd,  
Atty. W. F. Yardley and  
Rev. J. H. Hen-  
derson

Music - - - - - Knoxville College Quartette  
Reading of an original Poem, composed by Mr. Anderson Grigsby  
and Dedicated to Mr. Cal. F. Johnson,  
Miss A. V. Pickett  
Turning water on the Fountain - - - Mr. Cal. F. Johnson  
Lowering of the Flag - - - - - Prof. A. B. Reid  
Music - - - - - First Batallion Band and Audience  
You are cordially invited to an all day picnic. Dinner spread at  
12 m. All persons are asked to bring baskets  
and give free dinner.  
Tournaments immediately after the exercises. Prizes given  
Tennis, Croquet, Horseshoe pitching, Etc.  
Mr. Jas. G. Beck, - - - - - Master Ceremonies

Program for the dedication ceremony of the Cal Johnson Park and Memorial Park that was held on September 21, 1922. Courtesy of the Beck Archives.

The opening day was a jubilant occasion and the five acre park was filled with excited guests. The committee had planned a long list of events including a basket dinner, musical acts, various sports games, remarks and addresses, and the highly anticipated presentation of the Cal Johnson Memorial Fountain. Johnson donated the fountain as a form of gratitude to the city and especially to his community. The concrete marble featured one large urn and four smaller urns with each spraying water, the standout feature of Johnson's gift. The marble archway was also erected in his honor, another likely investment made by Johnson along with the street lamps, swings, and benches he'd donated to help beautify the surrounding community. His gifts to the park were among his last grand contributions before his passing on April 7, 1925, nearly three years after the ceremonious dedication.

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With a new recreational venue in their vicinity, Black residents of East Knoxville could finally host a variety of events within close distance. During the 1920s, some of the highlighted events that took place at Cal Johnson Park were picnics, annual tennis tournaments, field days, story hours, and holiday celebrations including the 8th of August and Labor

Day. J.H. Branch, a librarian for the Carnegie Library and author of *A Social Study of the Colored Population of Tennessee* wrote in his 1926 study that weekly attendance at the park had reached 1445 guests by that year.

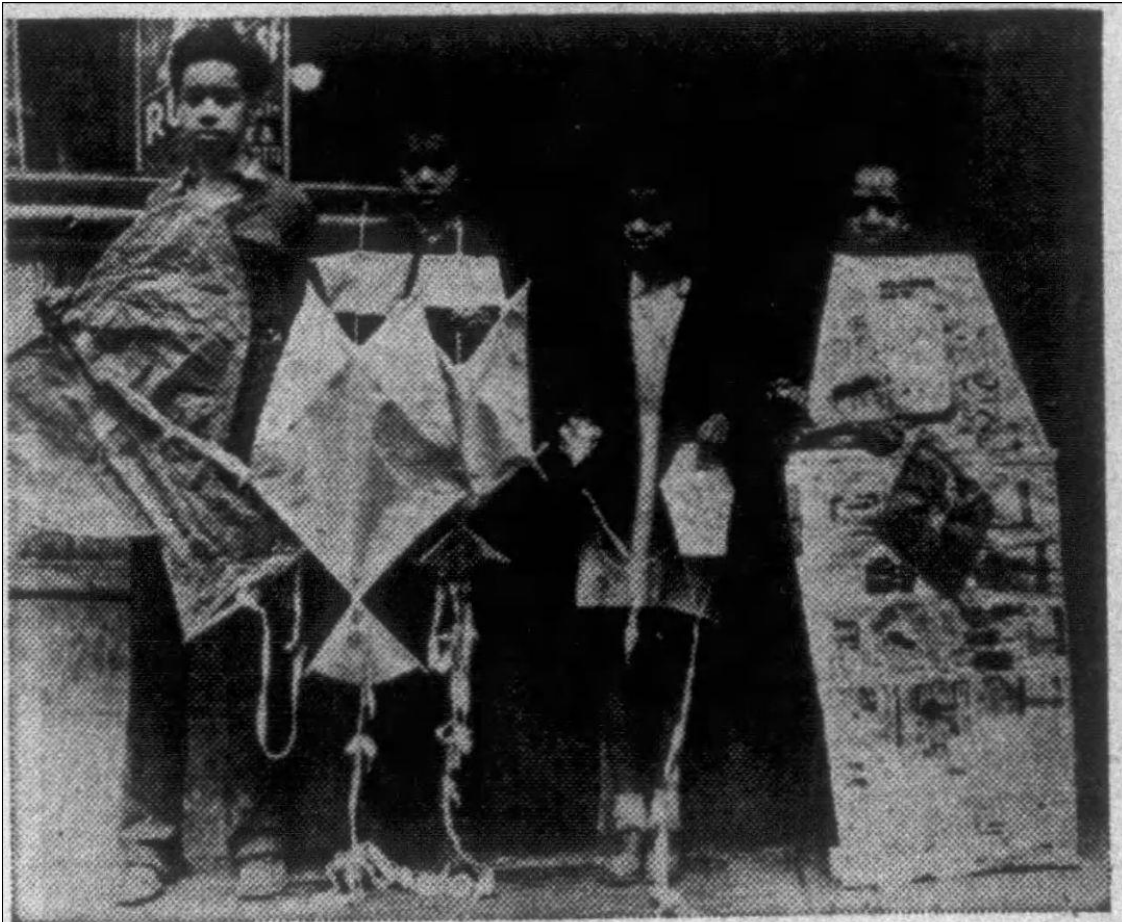


**Mrs. Ethel Beck and company taking pictures by the memorial fountain at Cal Johnson Park. Mrs. Beck served as Playground Director for the Cal Johnson Park Advisory Committee from 1925 to 1929. Courtesy of the Beck Archives.**

Branch also mentioned in his study that the park was struggling with unoccupied space and lack of attractive amenities. Since much of the city's funding had been used to purchase the tract, little money was left to properly equip the entire park. Members of the community made suggestions for the creation of new infrastructure in place of the extra space. Dr. James H. Presnell had proposed in 1925 that some of the site be used for the creation of a new high school for Black students. In 1927, a team of Black doctors including Dr. Henry Morgan Green and Dr. W.F.

Flack urged for the city to put a hospital in place where they could cater to Black patients. Both suggestions received mixed opinions and were ultimately refused on the grounds that such institutions would ruin the original vision of the park.

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Here are the prize winners at the Negro Kite-Flying Contest held yesterday at Cal Johnson Park. They are (left to right): David Beatty, 15, of Temple Avenue; Charles Snapp, 13, of 209 1-2 Langland Street; Glynda Freeman, 10, of 507 East Clinch Avenue, and Robert Freeman, 9, of 507 East Clinch Avenue. They were awarded tickets to the Bijou Theater.

The 1939 Negro Kite-Flying Contest Winners. The event was held at Cal Johnson Park as part of a city wide event that many children competed in.

*Courtesy of The Knoxville News-Sentinel.*

From the 1930s to 1960s, Cal Johnson Park remained one of the hosting sites of various holiday celebrations and recreational activities even though Black residents in East Knoxville began attending other parks for special occasions. Along with tennis, baseball and softball games were

popular monthly events that brought in hundreds of spectators to the area. In addition, children were frequenting the park in high numbers to play games with friends and enjoy a sense of freedom without the prying eyes of adults. In 1934, The Knoxville Journal reported that 200 children had flocked to Cal Johnson Park in the late week of June despite the staggering heat. In 1940, the WPA\* opened the Cal Johnson Park Playground as part of the city's initiative to decrease delinquency amongst young adults and improve the state of the park which was still being affected by empty space and lack of resources.

\*Works Progress Administration





More scenes like this in Knoxville would mean fewer cases on the dockets of Juvenile Court, City Judge Williams said yesterday at the opening of Cal Johnson Park under supervision of WPA recreation supervisors.

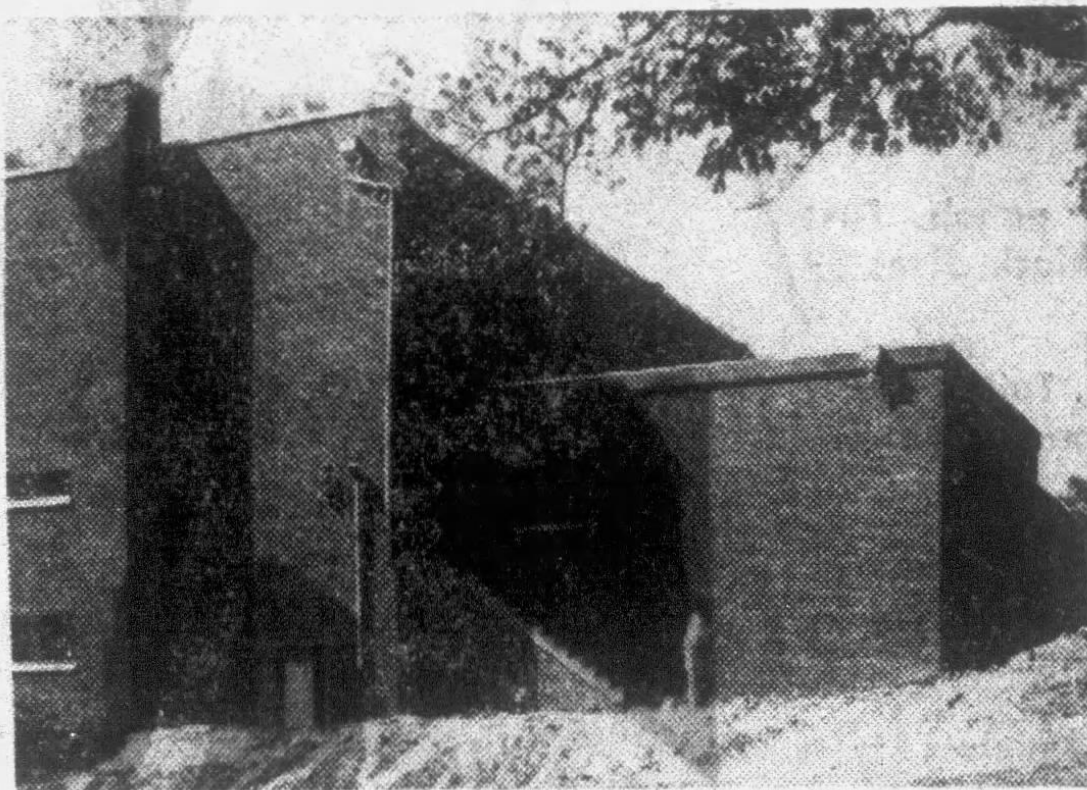


An instructor at Cal Johnson Park drew an interested crowd of children to watch him draw pictures at yesterday's opening of the playground.

**Exciting scenes from the opening of the Cal Johnson Park Playground on behalf of the Works  
Progress Association, May 20, 1940.  
Courtesy of the The Knoxville News-Sentinel.**

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In 1955, the Knoxville City Planning Commission was looking to acquire the Payne Avenue Recreation Center and sell the facility to the Board of Education for the use of a new school. This caused quite a commotion due to the center, which could seat nearly 1,000 people, being the largest of its kind to cater to Black people in East Knoxville. In return for the center, Black citizens demanded that the city build another one of equal capacity. The commission agreed and \$45,000 was used to construct a recreation center at Cal Johnson Park. Today, the center is known to many as the Cal Johnson Recreation Center which remains nestled in the heart of downtown Knoxville.



**'FINEST IN SOUTH'**—The new \$130,000 building at Cal Johnson Park, which Recreation Director Maynard Glenn says is the best of its kind he has seen in the South, is nearing completion. It is expected to be ready to open about Nov. 1.

Early image of the newly established Cal Johnson Recreation Center, September 23, 1956.  
Courtesy of The Knoxville News-Sentinel Archives.

By the 1960s, much began to change since the days when Cal Johnson once walked the grounds of the park that still bears his name. When the KHA\* began the first stages of the Mountain View Urban Renewal project in 1964, East Clinch Avenue and the surrounding area were among KHA's primary targets. They razed all buildings and uprooted practically

all of the Black population. As a result of Urban Renewal, Cal Johnson's archway and fountain were demolished along with other amenities including the tennis courts, streetlamps, and swings. Although Cal Johnson Park was spared from total destruction, much of its charm had been taken in the process.

\*Knoxville Housing Authority

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## **Cal Johnson Park in Knoxville, Tennessee**

"My favorite spot is no longer there.  
Just the memory

of a Street that has the same name but none of the same  
memories. I sometimes wonder

if the people living on Mulvaney  
Street have any idea

of the history they are living over. I wonder

if in the middle of the night they hear cries of "Leroy! Don't cut him. Leave  
that man alone. That's between him and your Mama." Or the Ice-man

Get Your Ice Here or the woman in the park

who sold Hot Fish! Good Hot Fish.

Or us runnin across Cal Johnson Park

to see what Grandpa had bought

us. 400 Mulvaney Street.

Just like the house next door. And the one next door. All three  
sitting on a hill that has been taken down. Across the street from a park that  
remains.

So let's salute Cal Johnson Park.

Without it I would have no guide to my Grandparents' home."

- *Cal Johnson Park in Knoxville, Tennessee*  
featured in *Quilting the Black-eyed Pea*  
written by Nikki Giovanni, 2002.

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