

## **Walton Park and Litchfield History**

### **June 2026 Litchfield Park District Celebration**

#### **Celebrate Walton!**

#### **Walton Park-Unnoticed Jewel**

In the decade of 1850s, a lot happened that resulted in a new city being raised up in the Illinois prairie. Litchfield Illinois became incorporated in 1853. Earlier settlers of the era who were also investors and planners of a new city sought to attract a major railroad line which, like many other Midwest settlers' efforts, would be the launching pad for new commerce and civilian life in the country's mid-section as the nation grew to the West.

With some help from a couple of railroad engineers, investors and businessmen, and some good fortune, they were successful. Electus Bachus Litchfield and Elisha Cleveland Litchfield, sons of Elisha Litchfield were instrumental in influencing the railroad's final location and donating land for a Litchfield terminal. Anticipating the location and completion of rail through the area, excitement grew and investments were made. The city got its name after Electus Bachus.

By November 1855 rail was completed and the growing little railroad community was off and running. Litchfield attracted expected new commerce as new residents settled here, excited about starting a new life with new opportunities. It was not long after that the city realized that it had a huge need for a dependable central water supply for homes, industry, and fire protection.

Like many prairie towns in those years, the community struggled with multiple fire disasters during the period of 1867-1873. When the Ida Russell school burned in 1872, the city came up with a plan to build a reservoir south of town. A dam was built up on what was then Long Creek, south of town, in 1874 the dam reservoir became filled. Litchfield now had an 85-million-gallon water supply and the beginnings of Walton Park history were in place.

As time went by and Litchfield quickly grew, water shortages appeared and the insufficiency of the lake's supply resulted in city leaders coming up with a new plan to dam up the West Fork of Shoal Creek to the north and east of town. After some time contracting with a private group of businesses who had started with a small timber dam on Shoal Creek to the north of town, the city created the lake that is known today as the Old Reservoir with a capacity of almost 4 times that of the Long Creek Reservoir in 1925. Walton's role as the city's primary water source was over but its service to the city was not.

A bit of research and one can discover a good many businesses that were located south of town and the rail lines that served them during Litchfield's early years. The Long Creek Reservoir must have been the host to more than a few.

Much is said of a brick plant located perhaps on or right adjacent to the park which would ultimately manufacture the brick for city roads. Others remember manufacturing business sites and light rail lines running to the south of town.

Accounts of an ice storage and delivery business located at or adjacent to the Walton Park property is clear from the 1953 centennial book on the city. Historical accounts talk of the ice storage business built in 1883 and operated at least until the plant burned in 1903 after which it changed hands and was rebuilt. The plant had a capacity for 40,000 tons of winter ice that supplied ice for the old kitchen ice boxes long into the summer season. Other history includes post-depression WPA projects, National Youth Programs and Navy construction training that took place at or near the Long Creek reservoir.

In August of 1905, the first Chautauqua event was held at Walton Park, then called Reservoir Park, or Litchfield Lake. Chautauqua events were incredibly popular multi-day cultural events attended by locals and visitors alike in the early 1900's. Perhaps it is best that we describe a Chautauqua as an event which is a cross between a state fair, a religious awakening revival, a university lecture series, and an outdoor music festival all in one. It featured a set of attractions and shows carried on by both local and traveling artists, local bands, musicians, and entertainers. Just about every piece of the fabric of early American life and culture was put on display there for participants.

The 1905 inaugural Chatauqua event hosted at Walton was incredibly successful. Such success made it very clear that the park would not be sufficient in size and facilities to be the permanent site for these gatherings. So then later occurrences took place at campgrounds acquired and developed between Hillsboro and Litchfield and connected by interurban trolley. Walton would not repeat as Chatauqua host.

Many remember and the Litchfield sesquicentennial book speaks to the Chamber of Commerce Tourism committee staging a two-day community reenactment of the 1905 Chautauqua event at its original site, Walton Park, in June of 1989.

As the city was moving its water supply, Long Creek Reservoir got its new assignment. In 1925, the city passed an ordinance giving the local chapter of the Isaak Walton League control of the reservoir area for the purpose of making the area a municipal park and fishing reserve.

The local chapter was part of a league which had its origin with a group of Chicago-area sportsmen and conservationists originally organized to protect Illinois waters and fishing opportunities for future generations. They got their name from seminal fishing enthusiast named Izaak Walton, an Englishman who had published a book called *The Compleat Angler* in the aftermath of the English Civil War. The book has been republished several times and can still be purchased today from retailers.

The Walton League Chapter was successful, raising the money and completing the project to re-purpose the area. In 1927, Reservoir Park was renamed Walton Park and opened with its new in-lake sand bottom swimming pool, bathhouse, guard tower, fishing spots and playgrounds. With the kickoff, the reservoir area would settle into its new role and would be known as Walton Park.

In the early 1940's, the community started discussions about creating a park district and building a new swimming pool was a big part of that conversation. A referendum ballot taken in 1941 became successful and the tax levy is then added to community tax bills.

The Litchfield Park District is launched in 1944 and Walton is now under its jurisdiction.

Writings from the 1953 Litchfield Centennial book record activities of the city and many of them recount stories of gatherings at the park. Throughout the years, the park has hosted many recreational and professional gatherings for families and community groups.

Interestingly, the Litchfield Elementary Teachers association met at the park on September 28, 1939 for a get acquainted party and on that day formed an organization "for the purpose of promoting growth and fellowship among elementary school teachers in Litchfield, Illinois".

In 1952-1953, the Kiwanis Club raised money for a concrete wading pool built at Walton. Many locals have memories of the pool. In the mid-1950s the community is eager to construct a nicer full-size swimming facility. A project to raise money and build a modern swimming pool begins. By 1966, Memorial Pool is completed and Walton is once again finished as the local swimming hole but continues as a park to today.

The park district has maintained and improved the park through the years to the point it is today. Improvements such as the playground and main Pavillion and related facilities have been added. The district added a maintenance building on the southwest end of the property in 2000.

The decade of 2000-2010 saw a lot of park repairs and rehabilitation. There have been added pavilion and ballfield repairs, a new miniature car racetrack added, basketball courts, horseshoe pits, and updated playground equipment.

The main dam and spillway underwent replacement after the heavy 100-year rains of 2009 washed out the dam and took the road with it. City officials declared it a disaster area. Work on federal disaster relief funds commenced immediately.

Commuters and travelers alike drove long detours for two years. With help from the disaster funds, the repair was completed, the spillway and dam rebuilt and Niemanville Trail road reopened.

The events were good timing for the park district to do more work restoring and upgrading the park. A lot of shoreline clearing, lake work, dredging followed the 09 disaster. In 2010 a covered bridge was constructed to replace the old walking bridge and handicapped accessible observation decks and fishing decks were added. The park district finished the new covered bridge before the road had re-opened, creating some frustration among officials as citizens were anxious to take a walk on it.

With help from Hands Across America, students volunteering their time were helpful restoring playground equipment, cleaning shoreline, and updating the horseshoe pits and basketball courts.

In 2012 dredging of the lake was launched, and the lake was cleaned. A tree planting and bench program was put in place and with the help of local organizations and families. Sitting benches were replaced and a handicapped walking path was added. In 2013 the pavilion received a face lift, and the park opened an archery range. A stage was later added and electricity improvements completed around the facilities.

A new fountain has also been a nice addition to the Walton Lake scenery and makes for good viewing.

The lake has been re-stocked with fish after being drained low for the dam repair work. Fishing is good with repeated stocking from Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Anglers and the IDNR site directory tell of good size Largemouth Bass, Black croppie, Channel cat, Bluegill, Redear and some carp over by the rail trestle.

Walton might well have the least crowded good fishing in the county! Boating requirements at Walton are for small trolling motors only.

The park now plays host to popular outside summer concerts, baseball and softball games and tournaments, family reunions, graduation parties, church picnics, organizational get togethers and kids play dates.

Walton has benefited often from the memorials provided from families and friends who loved and cared for the park. You will find at the park a number of dedication plaques. There are also multiple memorials for the pavilion and benches throughout the park.

The entrance to the park includes a memorial to Bill Pastrovich who lived next door to the park for 50 years and farmed the area south of the park after coming to Litchfield in 1948. Newer additions include memorials to the late Todd Laird from friends and family and Jaunita's trail, a walking trail built in 2014 in memory of the late Jaunita Young and her parents.

Mac and Pat Ritchie endowed the park at their passing with a trust fund which yearly provides funds for park improvements. The trust is now always helpful for park improvements as it was in building of the bridge covered in the Walton Memorial and signage on the north bank near the Lake. The Ritchie family has roots that reach back to the City's founding and extend forward to their son Andy Ritchie's service as City administrator for almost 8 years. You will find many mentions of the Ritchie heirs in the Litchfield Centennial book of 1953.

When you visit Walton Park, you should realize that you are walking through a site which is synonymous with the history of Litchfield. Her story is about helping a new city make life work on the Midwest prairie. Though her roles have changed over her 150 years, she continues today as a jewel of a place where memories are made.

She was first a water reservoir. And soon she completes her first 100 years as a dedicated park. Let's celebrate with her!

**Litchfield Park District**

**June 6, 2026**