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Delivered March 27, 2018 at the corner of Cleveland Avenue and Broad St. on
the occasion of the ground-breaking ceremony for The Washington Gladden
Social Justice Park, dedicated to all the brave women, men and children who
built First Congregational Church since its beginnings on September 26, 1852
and to all who have sustained it through the years, to my friends and members
the late Tad and Nancy Jeffrey and their family and friends and to The Rev. Dr.
Washington Gladden and his family/friends and always to the glory of God!

**“GROUNDBREAKING AND EARTH SHATTERING:
THE FIRST SOCIAL JUSTICE PARK IN AMERICA”
BY REV. DR. TIM AHRENS**

Welcome to the FUTURE Washington Gladden Social Justice Park!

Believe it or not, this property once was a 10-acre estate with stables, barns, orchards, rose gardens and a greenhouse. Ten years ago, the Platt Family, landowners since 1852, made a big decision to sell the remaining 1.61 acres of their property. As a church, we also had a big decision to make. Would we have the vision and determination to buy this property? The answer was yes. We launched a successful capital campaign in 2010 and bought the land.

I need to share a “proud papa” moment – the first gift given to purchase the land was \$50 given by my youngest child, Sarah Ahrens, then 10 years old. She made and sold Buckeye Necklaces to raise money for the park – in 2008. Two years before we bought the land. Thank you, Sarah.

From the very beginning, we considered that part of the lot could become a park. Through amazing illustrations made by Dr. Larry Walquist, distinguished emeritus professor of the Knowlton School of Landscape Architecture at The Ohio State University, my friend of 28 years and an active member of First Congregational Church, we could envision what it would mean someday to build a park along Broad St.

A study group reviewed best uses for the land and proposed building a community social justice park. For a church that was founded by abolitionists and has always advocated for the poor and the oppressed, it was not surprising that the recommendation was to create not just a park, but a park with a purpose, and that purpose being social justice. With the advice of consultants from across the country, it was urged that the park be named after a significant leader of social justice from our local Columbus community.

The natural choice was Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden.

At the turn of the 20th Century, Dr. Gladden was known locally, nationally, and internationally both as the Father of the Social Gospel movement and as a keen advocate for social justice. The Social Gospel was a religious movement that grew out of the industrial revolution of the late 19th Century. It was a movement in which salvation was seen as the symbiotic relationship between the personal and the social. One could not separate one's own personal salvation from the salvation of the world. Dr. Gladden embraced this premise as the calling of the faithful to bring the Kingdom of God to life by serving others in need. He was the leader of this movement!

Born in Pottsgrove, Pennsylvania (just outside Lewisburg) on February 11, 1836, and raised on a farm in Owego, New York, Solomon Washington Gladden was an abolitionist by the age of 13. He was named for General George Washington, our first president because Gladden's great-grandfather, Azariah, was Washington's body guard during the Revolutionary War.

Gladden attended Williams College and following graduation, he taught for a year before becoming ordained in the Christian ministry in Brooklyn, New York in 1860. Although most ministers of the day sought converts based upon the fear of God, Dr. Gladden always focused on the love of God and the "Golden Rule." When living in New York City, he became the editor of the New York Independent that had a circulation of one million. Gladden garnered a national following as he confronted religious and social issues of the day including his attacks on Tammany Hall that helped dethrone "Boss" Tweed.

Dr. Gladden served as the Minister of the First Congregational Church of Columbus from Christmas Eve, 1882 to 1914 when he became our first Emeritus Pastor. Locally he was active in building our congregation while working tirelessly on justice for this city. He led local and national causes for civil rights, workers' rights, voting rights, school integration, and the needs of the poor and oppressed. U.S. Presidents, interfaith and race leaders called him their friend; the Ohio State Journal Headline on the day after his death, July 2, 1918 read, "Columbus Has Lost its First Citizen."

Dr. Gladden preached two sermons each Sunday. The morning service focused on living the Christian life. The evening service, attended by the wider community, addressed social concerns. Each *Monday* morning The Ohio State Journal *printed* his *Sunday* night sermon on page 1.

Dr. Gladden wrote at least 91 articles and published 66 books and pamphlets in his effort to modernize Christian thought and promote social justice. I have calculated that he preached over 3,000 sermons JUST at First Church. He also was a hymn-writer whose most famous hymn was "O Master Let Me Walk With Thee."

In the 1880's, he joined Rev. James Poindexter of Second Baptist Church in suing the Columbus Public Schools to allow for school integration. As a result, the Columbus school board voted to integrate schools some 74 years prior to Brown v. Board of Education. Also, he joined W.E.B. DeBois

in condemning the disenfranchisement of Black voters and advocated for equal rights for those of color.

As a friend of unions, he supported workers rights and profit sharing. He mediated strikes in Columbus and Cleveland calling on both sides to end the war of labor and capital that he claimed was “social suicide.”

As an advocate of women’s rights, Dr. Gladden in 1912 called upon his friend, President Teddy Roosevelt, to support a constitutional change in Ohio that would give women the right to vote. Gladden also called on Booker T. Washington to join the cause, who responded with a letter of support.

Bishop John Watterson and Dr. Gladden were close friends. Gladden condemned corporate leaders who fired workers for attending Catholic services.

He was the first non-Catholic to be awarded an honorary degree by the University of Notre Dame. Dr. Gladden received 35 honorary doctorates by the time of his death.

Locally, Dr. Gladden, in 1895 formed the Civic Federation of Columbus with the help of Bishop Watterson, Rabbi L. Weiss, James Kilbourne, Joseph Jeffrey and Ralph Lazarus. Later, he helped form and served as President of a local inter-faith council involving 20 Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations to tackle difficult social issues (the fore-runner of BREAD). From 1900-1902, from age 64-66, Dr. Gladden served one term on City Council as an Independent. He spent **nothing** on his election campaign and left city politics after one-term. In 1905, Dr. Gladden and Ms. Celia Jeffrey founded a settlement house on the west side that later became known as the Gladden Community House.

Now you can understand why a social justice park should be named after Washington Gladden. One of Columbus’ Greatest Citizens and one of Ohio’s recognized, named and claimed GREAT Ohioans.

So, let’s recap the history of the park idea. First Congregational UCC bought the 1.61 acres on the corner of Broad and Cleveland Ave. We had a great idea for the park. We even had a name for the park. Next, we needed to identify the resources to develop the park.

What came next was a wonderful conversation initiated by our members and my friends, Tad and Nancy Jeffrey. As great supporters of MetroParks where Tad served as a trustee, they envisioned an urban park on this corner. When considering the incredible links between the Jeffrey family, the church and Washington Gladden, it seemed natural to them to want to support this initiative. Soon after Tad’s death in February 2016, Nancy contacted me and asked what she could do to make Tad’s vision come true. Her commitment to a lead gift for the project in honor of Tad launched plans for developing The Washington Gladden Social Justice Park.

In the last two years, much has happened. The church agreed to designate 18,000 square feet for use as a community park dedicated to social justice. By this act, we join the community in supporting the development of

this first-of-its-kind park. A community fund has been established at the Columbus Foundation to support the park and its programs. Many of the trustees of that fund are here today.

A website was launched last week and a fundraising drive will begin soon. Demolition work is complete and construction of the park is about to begin. With the help of the community at-large, the park will open in August of this year and offer a focal point for awareness, dialogue, and engagement on important social issues that honor our past, shape our present, and reveal our future.

The vision for this FIRST EVER Social Justice Park in the great city of Columbus, Ohio will only prosper and flourish if we work together. My friends, we need all your help to make this vision come alive! Our friendship will bring this project to full fruition.

I commend to you once more, the vision of a visionary for making change in this world. It is based on Friendship. In 1909, Dr. Gladden penned these words in his autobiography, Recollections.

I am fain to believe that the time is drawing near when the Christian Church will be able to discern and declare the simple truth that religion is nothing but Friendship, friendship with God and with all people. I have been thinking about it in these last days, and I cannot make anything else, so far as I can see it, this is all there is to it.

Religion is Friendship - friendship first with the Great Companion, of whom Jesus told us, is always nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and whose inspiration and help is the greatest fact of human experience. To be in harmony with God's purposes, to be open to his suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him - this is religion on its Godward side.

Then, turning manward, friendship sums it all up. To be friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this, that the wisest and best of Men (and women) can hope to do?

My friends, today is a great beginning for a glorious future of justice in our city. This effort is blessed by God. And it will be fulfilled by all of us working together for justice and peace. In the words of the Hebrew Prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Thank you, my friends, for coming today.