WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION ◆ PARK & RECREATION DIVISION ◆ CITY OF ST. LOUIS

Bridle Paths of Willmore Park

A Field Map & Historical Record

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI ◆ WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION, PARK & RECREATION DIVISION

◆ ◆ ◆

SECTION I

Foreword

"A Park Born of Vision"

Among the lasting contributions to the civic life of St. Louis, few rival the creation of Willmore Park — a green expanse of 105.61 acres that stands today as the principal natural preserve of the city's southwestern quarter. Its origins trace

directly to the vision and generosity of Cyrus Crane Willmore (1889–1949), a developer of uncommon ambition who transformed the largely undeveloped floodplain south of Chippewa Street into one of the most desirable residential districts in the American heartland. Believing that quality of life demanded not merely fine homes and broad boulevards, but also the sustaining presence of open land, Mr. Willmore elected to donate some seventy acres of prime property along the River des Peres to the City of St. Louis. In 1947, this gift — combined with adjacent municipal acquisitions — became Willmore Park, named in his honor and in recognition of his enduring contribution to southwest St. Louis.

The park occupies a situation of uncommon natural interest. It is bounded to the south by Hampton Avenue, where the great arterial of the southwest city meets the park's principal gateway; to the east by Jamieson Avenue and the quiet residential precincts of St. Louis Hills; to the west by the winding corridor of the River des Peres; and to the north by the brick-faced neighborhoods that Willmore himself spent decades developing. Within these boundaries the land rises and falls across wooded hillsides, descends to placid fishing lakes, and opens into broad meadow flats — a landscape of surprising variety for an urban park. It is precisely this variety that gave the property its early character as an equestrian destination, for no terrain better suits the exercise of horse and rider than one that offers both the challenge of grade and the relief of open ground.

The era in which this park took form was one of extraordinary public investment in the American landscape. Beginning in 1935, the Works Progress Administration — the great engine of New Deal labor relief — directed the energies of hundreds of thousands of workers toward the improvement of parks, parkways, recreational facilities, and public grounds in cities and towns across the nation. In St. Louis, WPA labor shaped the contours of the River des Peres flood control channel, paved the muddy banks of that embattled waterway, and constructed the trail systems, stable facilities, and access roads that gave Willmore Park its original character as a place of healthful outdoor recreation.

The equestrian infrastructure documented in this field map stands as one of the finest surviving expressions of WPA park-building in the Gateway City.

The bridle path — a feature so commonplace in the great urban parks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that its absence from a park of quality would have seemed a deficiency — served, in this era, as far more than a recreational amenity. It was a civic statement. It declared that a city took seriously the physical and moral well-being of its residents; that access to nature, to landscape, and to the time-honored companionship of horse and open country was not a luxury reserved for the rural gentry but a right belonging to the citizens of a modern American city. In the spirit of the City Beautiful movement, which held that splendid public spaces were the outward expression of a splendid civic character, the bridle paths of Willmore Park were designed and maintained as a gift to all St. Louisans.

SECTION II

Map Description

"Reading the Field Map"

Orientation Note

The accompanying field map is oriented with **Northwest at the top**, reflecting the natural drainage flow of the River des Peres corridor as it descends southeastward through the city toward the Mississippi. This non-standard orientation was adopted by the cartographic team to align the map's principal axis with the river's course — the dominant physical feature of the park's western edge — and to permit the clearest depiction of the

bridle trail system in relation to its natural setting.

The field map illustrates six distinct features of the Willmore Park equestrian system, each identified by a numbered key and rendered in the conventions of WPA Federal Art Project cartography. The features are described below in the order in which they appear on the map, proceeding generally from south to north and west to east.

1. RIDING STABLES — HAMPTON & GRAVOIS

Map Symbol: Barn & Stable Icon ◆ Southwest Corner

The equestrian hub of the park system, situated at the southwest corner where Hampton Avenue meets the Gravois corridor. It was here that riders assembled in the early morning hours, that horses were saddled and inspected, and that trail excursions of every description — from the contemplative solo circuit to the organized club outing — had their origin and their end. The intersection of Hampton and Gravois served as the primary access point for the park's southern boundary, and the stable yard was visible from the streetcar line that served this quarter of the city, making it accessible to riders arriving from throughout St. Louis.

---

2. LAKES BRIDLE LOOP

Map Symbol: Dashed Circuit Line ◆ Central Corridor

A scenic circuit encircling the park's two principal fishing lakes — the upper lake of five acres and the lower pond of three acres — this loop provided riders with a level, picturesque route through the heart of the park's central corridor. The lakes, set amid gently graded parkland and bordered by native willow and cottonwood, attracted waterfowl throughout the seasons and offered the rider a tranquil, unhurried passage quite unlike the more demanding circuits of the park's wooded uplands. The Lakes Bridle Loop was favored by riders seeking a

measured exercise of moderate duration and by those introducing younger horses to the discipline of trail work.

---

3. SOUTHWEST MEADOW RIDING GROUNDS

Map Symbol: Meadow (Open Grassland) ◆ Southwest Quadrant

The broad meadow terrain of the park's southwestern quadrant served as the principal ground for open-field riding, exercises, and informal equestrian activity. Unlike the structured trail circuits of the park's other quadrants, the Southwest Meadow Riding Grounds offered riders the freedom to move across open turf in any direction, permitting the extended cantering runs, figure work, and impromptu schooling exercises that the closed bridle paths could not accommodate. In spring and early autumn, when the turf was firm and the grass cut short, these grounds were among the finest open riding surfaces available within the city limits.

---

4. SOUTHEAST HILL CONDITIONING LOOP

Map Symbol: Contour Lines & Dashed Trail ◆ Southeast Uplands

The most demanding circuit in the Willmore Park system, the Southeast Hill Conditioning Loop traversed the park's wooded southeastern uplands, where the natural topography provided the varied footing and sustained grades required for the serious development of equine stamina and surefootedness. The contour lines depicted on the map in this area are closely spaced, indicating the relatively steep pitch of the hillside terrain — a pitch sufficient to test the wind and leg of any horse not regularly conditioned to such work. The loop was recommended for experienced riders on horses of proven soundness, and was customarily reserved for the cooler hours of the morning.

---

5. RIVER DES PERES RIDING CORRIDOR

Map Symbol: River Feature & Dashed Path ◆ Western Edge

A bridle path tracing the historic course of the River des Peres along the park's western boundary, this corridor followed the natural watercourse through riparian woodland before the river's WPA-era channelization transformed its banks from soft naturalistic margins to paved concrete. In the years before this improvement, the river corridor offered the longest uninterrupted straightaway in the entire trail system — a passage of nearly a half-mile through the shade of cottonwood and sycamore, with the sound of moving water accompanying horse and rider throughout. The path remains today as evidence of the original landscape that the park's designers sought to preserve.

---

6. WESTERN PERIMETER TRAIL

Map Symbol: Dashed Boundary Circuit ◆ Western & Northern Edge

The outermost circuit of the bridle system, the Western Perimeter Trail ran along the park's western and northern boundaries, forming the structural spine of the entire trail network. It was along this trail that riders traveling between the stables and the interior loops were most likely to find themselves, and it served reliably as both a warm-up route for horses departing the stables and a cool-down passage for those returning. The Perimeter Trail's consistent grade and well-maintained surface made it the trail of choice for new riders, rehabilitation exercise, and the slow, reflective circuit that seasoned horsemen reserve for the end of a long day's work.

Silhouette of riders on horseback along a bridle path, circa 1930s

Riders on a bridle path, circa 1930s — a scene characteristic of urban equestrian parks of the WPA era.

Map Legend

"Symbols & Their Meanings"

The cartographic conventions employed in this field map follow the standard symbology established by the WPA Federal Art Project for park and recreation maps. The following table provides a complete key to all symbols appearing on the accompanying illustration.

Symbol / Icon Name	Description & Field Notes
Bridle Path (Dashed Line)	Designated equestrian trail, unpaved, maintained for mounted use only. Dashed rendering distinguishes bridle paths from paved pedestrian walkways shown by solid lines.
Structure (Barn / Stable Icon)	Park building or equestrian facility. The barn icon denotes the principal stable complex at Hampton & Gravois; subsidiary structures are shown with a simplified building symbol.
Contour Lines	Lines of equal elevation drawn at five-foot intervals. Closely spaced contours indicate steep grades; widely spaced contours indicate gentle or level terrain. Critical for assessing trail difficulty.
Lake	Standing water feature, shown in solid fill. Both lakes — the 5-acre upper lake and the 3-acre lower pond — were stocked for fishing and served as scenic anchors of the central trail corridor.
River	Flowing watercourse, shown with parallel wavy lines. The River des Peres follows the park's western boundary; its depicted course reflects the pre-channelization natural stream alignment.

Symbol / Icon Name	Description & Field Notes
Forest	Wooded area, rendered with stylized tree symbols. The park's woodland is primarily oak-hickory association on hillside terrain, with riparian cottonwood and sycamore along the river corridor.
Meadow	Open grassland, shown with fine horizontal hatching. Maintained for passive recreation and equestrian use; represents the Southwest Meadow Riding Grounds in the map's lower quadrant.
Compass Rose	Map orientation indicator. **Northwest is positioned at the top of this map**, following the natural axis of the River des Peres corridor. True North lies to the upper-right of the map field.

SECTION IV

Historical Notes

"The River des Peres & the Equestrian Tradition"

Before the concrete channel that now carries it in engineered tidiness to the Mississippi, the River des Peres was a living stream — meandering, willful, and seasonally unpredictable. Named in honor of the French Jesuit priests who established a mission near its mouth in the colonial period, the river wound through the southwestern precincts of the growing city in a broad natural valley that resisted development and, by that resistance, preserved open land in a city steadily covering itself in brick and pavement. The open valley of the River des Peres provided, for generations of St. Louisans, the most accessible naturalistic riding ground available within city limits. Its flat bottomland and wooded

margins were ideally suited to equestrian exercise, and it was no accident that the park which eventually formalized this tradition was laid out along the river's course. The channelization project carried out by the WPA and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 1933 and 1940 — prompted by catastrophic flooding and a devastating 1933 outbreak of St. Louis encephalitis traced to mosquitoes breeding in the river's open, stagnant pools — permanently altered the character of this corridor, lining its banks in limestone and concrete. The riding terrain that remained was a memory of something wilder and more generous.

The tradition of the urban bridle path is older than the automobile and nearly as old as the American park movement itself. When Frederick Law Olmsted laid out the network of carriage drives and riding paths in Central Park in the 1850s and 1860s, he established a template that park designers across the continent would follow for the better part of a century. The City Beautiful movement, which reached its apogee in the years following the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and left its mark on St. Louis's own 1904 World's Fair, held that the well-designed park must provide for the full range of healthful outdoor activity — and equestrian recreation, available to a broad swath of the middle and upper-middle class by the early twentieth century, was foremost among these. Bridle paths were accordingly included as standard features of serious park design in cities from Boston to San Francisco, and St. Louis — a city that prided itself on the quality of its public institutions — was no exception.

The decades following the Second World War brought sweeping changes to the character of urban recreation in American cities. The rapid spread of automobile ownership and suburban development drew residents — and their horses — away from city parks toward the expanding ring of suburban stable yards and rural riding clubs that appeared beyond the municipal boundaries. The equestrian infrastructure of urban parks, which required constant maintenance and a stable population of city-dwelling riders to justify its upkeep, fell into disuse and eventual abandonment. By the 1960s, the bridle paths of most American urban parks had been converted to pedestrian trails, paved over, or simply returned to

nature. Willmore Park was no exception to this national pattern, and the elaborate trail system documented in these pages passed from active use in the postwar decades as the last generation of city riders dispersed to the suburbs.

Willmore Park today endures as one of the great green anchors of southwest St. Louis — its 105.61 acres intact, its two fishing lakes still frequented by catfish and waterfowl, its disc golf course and soccer fields busy with a new generation of urban recreationists. The woodland trails that wind through the park's southeastern uplands follow, in part, the courses once traced by the bridle paths of an earlier era, and the lake circuit that draws joggers and dog-walkers on any pleasant morning traverses ground that horses and riders knew well. Though the stables are gone and the equestrian tradition has passed, the landscape itself endures — a testament to the foresight of Cyrus Crane Willmore, the labor of WPA workers, and the civic generosity that made this park possible.

SECTION V

Trail Notes for Riders

"Conditions & Recommendations"

Field Notes — WPA Park & Recreation Division, St. Louis District

The following observations are offered as practical guidance for riders using the Willmore Park trail system. They are based upon direct field inspection conducted by park staff during the seasons of active use. Conditions may vary; riders are advised to consult the stable master before departing on any but the most familiar circuits.

◆ SEASONAL CONDITIONS

- **Spring (April–May):** Generally the finest season for trail riding. Footing firms rapidly after the winter thaw, temperatures remain moderate, and the park's woodland is at its most handsome. Early spring riders should expect some softness on the lower trails near the lakes and river corridor following heavy rains.
- **Summer (June–August):** The park's wooded circuits offer welcome shade, but riders are advised to limit exertion during the afternoon hours when temperatures along the open meadow and lake circuit may become severe. Early morning departures from the stables are strongly recommended throughout July and August. Water should be carried for both horse and rider.
- **Autumn (September–October):** Excellent riding conditions throughout. Cooler temperatures, firm footing, and the brilliant color of the park's oak-hickory woodland make this the season most favored by experienced riders. The Hill Conditioning Loop is best undertaken in autumn, when the ground has dried from summer but before the first rains of October soften the grades.
- **Winter (November–March):** Riding is not recommended following periods of sustained rain or snowmelt. The hill loop and river corridor become dangerously slippery when wet, and the low-lying meadow grounds may remain boggy for several days following any significant precipitation. Riders who choose to exercise horses during winter months should confine themselves to the Perimeter Trail, which drains most reliably.

◆ **FOOTING CONDITIONS BY TRAIL**

- **Southwest Meadow Grounds:** Soft, deep turf in spring; firm and excellent in autumn. Avoid after heavy rainfall; footing becomes deep and may pull at a shod horse's foot.

- **Southeast Hill Conditioning Loop:** Loose, friable soil on the upper grades; can become slick when wet. Firm and fast in dry summer and autumn conditions. Walk all horses on the steepest pitches until the animal is well acquainted with the terrain.
- **River des Peres Riding Corridor:** Potentially boggy near the water's edge, particularly in spring and following any significant rain. The path surface some distance from the bank is generally sound. Riders should exercise caution where the trail descends to the riparian margin.
- **Western Perimeter Trail:** The firmest and most consistent surface in the park system. Well-drained in all seasons; suitable as a warm-up and cool-down route in conditions that would render the interior trails inadvisable. Recommended for all riders as the first and final portion of any excursion.
- **Lakes Bridle Loop:** Level and generally firm, except at the northern tip of the upper lake where seasonal seeping may soften the ground. The most accessible circuit in the system and the one most frequently shared with pedestrian park users; reduced speed is expected throughout.

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT & TACK

- Riders should present at the stables in proper equestrian attire: a well-fitted hat or helmet, sturdy boots with a modest heel, and appropriate riding breeches or trousers. Loose clothing unsuited to mounted work will not be accommodated.
- All horses should be tacked in properly fitted and maintained equipment. The stable master reserves the right to decline trail access to any horse whose condition or tack is deemed unsafe.
- A halter and lead rope carried beneath the saddle or attached to the saddle strings is recommended for horses of uncertain temperament on the more demanding circuits.

TRAIL ETIQUETTE

- **Yielding:** Mounted riders shall yield the trail to pedestrians at all times. A horse in motion is a more readily managed object than a startled pedestrian; the rider bears the responsibility of accommodation.
- **Passing:** When overtaking a slower rider, announce your intention at a distance sufficient to allow the horse ahead to be prepared. Pass on the left where the trail permits; slow to a walk before closing within twenty feet of another horse.
- **Tight Turns:** Walk all horses through the sharp turns of the Hill Conditioning Loop and any blind corner on the Perimeter Trail. A horse that rounds a blind corner at speed may startle a walker around the bend; the consequences of such an encounter are the rider's responsibility.
- **Keep Right:** Maintain the right-hand side of the trail in all circumstances. Two-way mounted traffic is common on the Lakes Loop and the Perimeter Trail; discipline in keeping right prevents confusion and collision.
- **Waste:** Riders are responsible for ensuring that stable waste deposited on the trail does not accumulate in areas of heavy pedestrian use. A rake is maintained at the stable yard for this purpose and may be borrowed upon request.

SECTION VI

Acknowledgments

---

*This field map and record was prepared under the direction of the **St. Louis***

Park & Recreation Division *in cooperation with the* ***Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project****. Cartographic work and historical research were conducted by park staff and WPA-assigned artists and writers operating under the supervision of the Division's Chief Superintendent of Parks. The City of St. Louis gratefully acknowledges the generosity of* ***Cyrus Crane Willmore*** *(1889–1949), whose donation of seventy acres of land along the River des Peres made this park — and the recreational amenities it contains — possible for all citizens of St. Louis. His vision for a neighborhood of quality, anchored by green space and civic dignity, has been amply realized in the streets and landscapes that bear his name.*

"A city is known by its parks as surely as by its public buildings. The park is the great democratic institution — open to all, enjoyed by all, and improved by all who choose to use it well."

Bridle Paths of Willmore Park ◆ A Field Map & Historical Record ◆ St. Louis, Missouri

Works Progress Administration ◆ Park & Recreation Division ◆ City of St. Louis ◆ 1940