STEPS IN TIME
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In 1785, tribal leaders from the Chippewa, Delaware, Ottawa and Wyandot met with representatives sent by Congress to sign the Treaty of Fort McIntosh (above). The treaty surrendered control of Native American lands in southern and eastern Ohio to the U.S. government. Today, Treaty Line Road in Sand Run Metro Park delineates the eastern section of the treaty-imposed Native American territory—and the western boundary of the United States. The Portage Path, the trail used by Native Americans to portage between the Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas rivers, also became a part of this boundary line.
I f history is the thread that connects one age to another, I owe my first thanks to the Boston Township trustees who, in 1921, took some good advice and asked the courts to create a metropolitan park in Summit County. Had it not been for them, none of the rest of this would have been possible.

In that vein, I also want to give credit to pioneering director-secretary Harold S. Wagner, whose imprint continues to be felt throughout this park system and parks throughout the country. From the system’s farsighted plans, to its meticulous maintenance, to its bedrock mission of preserving this county’s blessings of open space, I could see the origins in Wagner’s letters and feisty, single-minded attitude. I also have special gratitude for pioneering naturalist Bert Szabo. In 1991, Szabo left full-time employment with the park district to volunteer nearly full-time sorting and organizing Wagner’s voluminous correspondence. His devotion and attention to detail made my job as a researcher infinitely easier. And his example of service lights a path forward for us all.

I couldn’t have asked for better help than I received from the brainy and conscientious folks who tend the Special Collections Department at the Akron-Summit County Public Library, led ably and affably by Judy
James. They safeguard Akron’s historic heartbeat; they know it and do it with great pride. And the librarians at the Akron Beacon Journal were always eager to share their piece of this historic jigsaw puzzle.

So, too, do I appreciate the many hours Metro Parks Naturalist Mike Greene spent showing me each of the parks, pointing out nooks and crannies that word folk like me might miss. Greene, and his colleagues in Interpretive Services, also offered valuable guidance in shaping the manuscript. This is not to slight any of the other Metro Parks staff, from division chiefs down, who have been very tolerant of my comings and goings, making sure I had access to whatever material I might need. And I must acknowledge the earlier park history, 75 Years of Treasures and Pleasures by the late Patricia Zonsius. Her work is the foundation on which Steps in Time is built.

Of course, I thank current director-secretary Keith Shy for being approachable, open and who let this book unfold as it did. Thanks also to the Board of Park Commissioners of Metro Parks, Serving Summit County, for giving me this opportunity. Although Rainy Stitzlein is no longer a commissioner, her personal encouragement at crucial moments gave me a needed boost. I count Frances Seiberling Buchholzer as a personal friend; she honors her family legacy with her service. And Carol Curtis’ stories of her personal connection to these parks only underscored something my research made clear to me: People love these parks and will work tirelessly on their behalf. I also want to thank former chief of communications, Susan Fairweather, and her successor, Nathan Eppink, for offering me this unique opportunity and for shepherding it through to completion.

This book isn’t so much the history of a physical entity as it is a history of the relationship between the public and their parks. As with any relationship, things have not always gone smoothly or easily. The key has been tenacity and, at least at the outset, faith in the new concept of public parks. It is impossible to imagine Summit County without its magnificent green islands, yet things could have turned out very differently. What tipped the scale was the spirit of service that Wagner inculcated, which lives on in today’s park staff and officials, and the people’s unmistakable affection for their parks. It is an enduring and unbeatable combination.

Sarah Vradenburg
History is made every day in the Metro Parks. People meet. Children learn. Families reunite. It’s the natural setting of the Metro Parks that attracts them.

Since the beginning, the Akron Metropolitan Park District—now Metro Parks, Serving Summit County—has preserved wild places for exploration and conservation. Harold S. Wagner, the park district’s first director-secretary, stressed the importance of natural-area parks. In that respect, though much has transpired, little has changed in ninety years.

Visitors, volunteers and park employees share in the legacy of early visionaries like Wagner, the Olmsted Brothers—whose land-acquisition plan set the course for decades—and F.A. Seiberling, an early park commissioner who helped jump-start the formation of Sand Run and some of today’s most visited Metro Parks. As stewards of the park district’s natural resources, we all continue to write its history.

Nathan Eppink, Chief of Marketing & Communications
Metro Parks, Serving Summit County
It takes a broad brush to paint a picture of Summit County’s park district. It’s not just a portrait of land or people, animals or wildlife. It’s all of that, and more. It is a story of vision, timing and the coming together of people and movements that created something priceless that continues to grow in value.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the nation was beginning to realize the importance of saving natural resources. There already were several national parks and monuments, thanks largely to visionaries such as John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt. Congress created the National Park Service in 1916 to hold lands that were coming into federal control. Still, there were few protections for local preserves. As cities grew and industrialization shifted people from the countryside to urban areas, state and local natural resources faced a serious threat.
Cleveland Metroparks commissioners and park planners review drawings for their Brecksville Reservation in 1920. Courtesy of Cleveland Metroparks
William A. Stinchcomb, Cleveland’s self-taught surveyor and engineer, saw this clearly. He hounded Cleveland officials and the Ohio General Assembly tirelessly to save regional open space, even though most of the space he sought to save was not within city limits. He said, as early as 1905, if something was not done, housing and industry would eventually devour priceless natural treasures.

In 1911, state lawmakers eventually gave counties the power to create metropolitan park districts that were neither city, state nor federal. They did not, however, give those districts any power other than the ability to accept donations of land and cash and to manage what they were given. These districts had no taxing authority, and as creatures of county commissioners they were vulnerable to political whims. Still, that legal go-ahead spurred Cleveland—always led by Stinchcomb—to hire Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect of New York’s famous Central Park. Olmsted drew up a map of lands in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County worthy of preservation. All was set to go forward until a lawsuit challenged the limited authority of the park districts. The courts ruled that because park commissioners were not elected officials, they had no right to spend public money.

Stinchcomb flew into action, prodding the legislature—even drafting the bill—to make needed changes. In March 1917, the Ohio Legislature gave oversight of the districts to a county’s elected probate judge, who then would appoint three park commissioners, satisfying one of the court’s objections. Even more important, the new law gave districts taxing authority. Within three months, Cuyahoga County had a park system. Summit County followed four years later.

The year 1917 was also when Harold S. Wagner, then twenty-four, stepped off the train from Boston at Union Station. Trained at Harvard’s Arnold Arboretum, the slight landscape architect had been brought to Akron by Warren Manning. Manning, long an associate of Central Park’s Frederick Law Olmsted, had discovered Wagner laboring gratis
for Olmsted’s firm. Seeing his talent, Manning put Wagner on his own payroll. He had a specific client in Akron in mind for Wagner’s horticultural knowledge and attention to detail.

Manning was knee-deep in landscape design and construction for F.A. Seiberling’s newly-built country estate, Stan Hywet. Actually, Manning had other Seiberling projects in mind for Wagner. Goodyear’s founder, Seiberling, had just proved his critics wrong with the success of the workingman’s neighborhood, Goodyear Heights, which he created up the hill from his East Market Street tire factory. After the grounds of his own home were complete, Seiberling turned his sights to building an upscale version of Goodyear Heights for the well-heeled residents of the area, many of whom were his junior executives at Goodyear. He gave the job to Manning, who in turn gave the job to the able Wagner, who was
already busy building another of Manning’s many Akron-area landmarks, the Fairlawn Golf Club.

Wagner set to work in the wooded knolls near the golf course, an ideal natural setting for Fairlawn Heights, Akron’s exclusive neighborhood of rambling, elegant homes and curving, tree-shaded streets.

Once those jobs were complete, Seiberling was loath to let Wagner return east. He persuaded Akron officials to hire him as superintendent of the city’s parks. As such, Wagner was at the table during talks about how to take advantage of the new state law that allowed the formation of countywide park districts.

The first step to create a district required a petition from a governmental unit to the county’s probate judge. Boston Township—with Cleveland’s Stinchcomb pointing the way—made such a petition to Summit County Common Pleas Probate Judge Lewis Slusser in 1921.

There was more to Boston Township’s request than pure civic altruism. Trustees were fed up with Akron polluting the Cuyahoga River, which flowed through the township’s heart at Peninsula. Akron, the township’s upstream neighbor, had nearly tripled its population between 1910 and 1920, and its small sewage treatment plant on Cuyahoga Street was no match for its nearly 210,000 residents and burgeoning industry. After several official complaints from the trustees to the state health department, the township agreed to petition for a Summit County park district, thinking, wishfully it turned out, that a countywide conservation movement focusing on the vast and storied Cuyahoga Valley might force Akron to clean up after itself. The trustees’ petition was granted December
31, 1921, and the Akron Metropolitan Park District was formed, but only after Hudson and Twinsburg Township opted out.

(Akron would open a new sewage treatment plant in 1928 at Botzum. Sadly, the city’s hasty building boom commingled storm runoff and sanitary sewage, a problem that plagues the Cuyahoga River to this day.)

When the park district was created, the county did not suddenly sprout forest preserves overnight. It took nearly three years before Judge Slusser appointed commissioners. In 1923, James Shaw of Colonial Salt, community leader, educator and environmentalist Maude Milar and Charles Raymond of B.F. Goodrich, were named the district’s first commissioners. But even that was not enough to get things moving. Most of the first two years were spent creating studies of recreational opportunities at Springfield Lake and whether it was feasible to build a parkway between Akron and Medina. With the area growing fast, the commissioners did not seem to think that the first order of business ought to be preserving land.

By 1925, with the park district spinning its wheels, Slusser shook up the board, replacing two of three commissioners. He replaced Shaw and Raymond with F.A. Seiberling, who by this time had created and was running Seiberling Rubber, and Edmund Eckroad of the Northern Ohio Traction and Light Company—forerunner of today’s FirstEnergy. Seiberling again turned to Wagner, still in charge of Akron’s city parks. Wagner, in turn, suggested the board hire the Olmsted Brothers—sons of Frederick Law Olmsted—to survey the area. He went as far as to guide his former colleagues throughout Summit County. Their report was complete in three months.

It is no surprise that the beautiful Cuyahoga Valley headed the Olmsteds’ list. They were impressed with its expanse and, for industrial Northeast Ohio, its relatively unspoiled condition (while noting the “present obnoxious and dangerous condition of the river”). While the Olmsted Brothers strongly advocated a system of scenic easements to preserve
the landscape and scenery, they advised against making the entire area into a park. Such a park would be larger than the population of Summit County would ever need, they believed. More, they said it would be too hard to police and maintain, and would take too much productive land off the tax duplicate.

Second on the list, after the Cuyahoga Valley, came the Cuyahoga River Gorge in Cuyahoga Falls, dammed in 1910 by the Northern Ohio Traction and Light to generate hydroelectricity for its streetcars. Among other places the Olmsteds believed warranted preservation were ravines surrounding Mud Brook, on the eastern slope of the Cuyahoga Valley; Sand Run, the Yellow Creek Valley, Boston Run, Brandywine Creek and Furnace Run. They placed great emphasis on overlooks, and made note

Dressed in their finest, this group poses for a portrait in 1910 by the Cuyahoga Falls on the Cuyahoga River. Today, the falls are under water.
of the Wintergreen Ledges, in what is now the Rolling Acres area, the Ritchie Ledges (later part of Virginia Kendall State Park), the Twinsburg Ledges (now part of Liberty Park), Turkeyfoot Reservation (excluding the remainder of the Portage Lakes), Springfield Lake and the canal and lake system between Akron and Barberton. They also suggested using the Cuyahoga River north of the Gorge for boating and canoeing, and Lake Rockwell and the Barberton Reservoir for recreation.

A final and less successful element of their report was devoted to advocating for a significant network of parkways throughout the county. Even at that time, the Olmsteds understood the value of the remaining canal lands and urged the construction of a parkway along the canal route from the Tuscarawas Valley south of Barberton—with perhaps the creation of an elongated park along the canal lands—north to the Little Cuyahoga and Cuyahoga rivers, connecting with Sand Run and Yellow Creek. Their ultimate goal was to connect with the growing Cleveland Metroparks system through Hinckley and the Rocky River Valley and Furnace Run, north to Brecksville Reservation, the Cuyahoga River Valley at Brandywine to Tinkers Creek and north to the Chagrin River Reservation.

A year later, Seiberling persuaded his fellow commissioners to hire Wagner away from the city parks to direct the fledgling, floundering park district. The native Bostonian accepted the position of director-secretary, using the Olmsted report as his guiding light for the next thirty-two years.
JUST BECAUSE THE Olmsteds didn’t think it wise to preserve the entire Cuyahoga Valley didn’t mean there weren’t vast stretches of land that needed to be saved, and quickly. Akron and Cleveland were growing. The opportunity might slip away.

Park commissioners had already looked at the Gorge longingly, particularly after the Olmsted report placed it so high on its list of priorities. Residents of Akron and Cuyahoga Falls were familiar with it, not for its scenic beauty, but as the home to Riverview Amusement Park and Old Maid’s Kitchen, or Mary Campbell Cave. The Gorge would have to wait.

With Sand Run figuring prominently in the Olmsted report, F.A. Seiberling took the lead, offering a massive chunk of his estate as the district’s first major acquisition.

Seiberling’s lifelong passion for healthful living had spurred him to move his family from their home on East Market Street to a hilltop overlooking
the Cuyahoga Valley. Their city address was more convenient to his work, but it was downwind of the soot and grime spewed by the city’s iconic rubber companies. His move heralded a population shift in Akron to the west.

Within the more than three thousand acres Seiberling amassed for his country estate was Sand Run, a Cuyahoga River tributary cloaked in virgin forests. It was through its lush ravines and along the creek’s meandering path that Wagner, in his role as Warren Manning’s boots on the ground, had already built the bridle paths used by Seiberling’s many famous guests.

The park board already had a nugget of a park nearby in tiny, .176-acre Courtney Park, donated in 1925 as part of Akron’s centennial. It was not so much a donation to the park board as it was an acknowledgement of the importance of the Portage Path in ancient history.

Joseph Courtney’s dairy farm hugged the west side of that Indian pathway, and he wanted people to remember the area’s importance. He donated a tiny chunk of land which was all but useless to him. The Daughters of the American Revolution commissioned a bronze plaque which was attached to a boulder in the park in honor of Akron’s 100th birthday. The Courtney Park boulder and plaque—or its replacement after the original plaque was stolen—remain at the southwest corner of the intersection of North Portage Path and Merriman Road. Subsequent road improvements have placed the park much closer to the Portage Path than its original location.

Courtney’s opening move put Seiberling on the spot. Despite leasing some of his land at no cost to the park board for a tree nursery, the neighborhood’s largest landholder had been upstaged.

“It was then F.A. Seiberling, a little irked by the irony of the park board possessing less than an acre of land, donated the first strip of what is now Sand Run (Metro Park)” said Akron Beacon Journal reporter Mabel Norris, in a brief 1936 history of the park district.

Seiberling’s first donation was nearly five hundred acres, stretching from Merriman Road to what is now Ghent Road near Summit Mall,
following the stream and bridle path and encompassing what had been the Portage Game Preserve. Using that as leverage, Wagner and his colleagues on the board approached the remaining thirty-one local landowners, either to donate rights of way along the future Sand Run Parkway or to sell their land outright. By the time the parkway opened to the public in April 1929, it comprised close to seven hundred acres, with a perimeter of about twelve miles.

Setting this area aside as a park accomplished two major goals: It preserved a magnificent landscape rich in its potential for hiking, education and family recreation. It also saved this area’s link to the nation’s history, both through the Portage Path and to the War of 1812.

Still, Wagner’s mission was far larger than saving one piece of property, no matter how large, beautiful or historical. The time was ripe to make good on the Olmsteds’ vision. There were a lot of people or companies with land on the Olmsted wish list. At the same time Wagner was
gathering land for Sand Run, he and Seiberling were wooing the son of Cleveland inventor and industrialist Charles F. Brush for several hundred acres at the headwaters of another Cuyahoga tributary, Furnace Run.

Brush Sr. had invented the electric arc light, making Cleveland the first city in the nation to have electric streetlights. He purchased the 2,100-acre Richfield farm of Everett Farnham, one of the township’s first settlers and an avid conservationist. The Brush family regularly spent their summers and holidays there, sharing it generously with Richfield residents, continuing Farnham’s tradition of opening his farm to his Richfield neighbors for hiking and recreation.

Seiberling knew about the land because several years earlier he had tried to buy some of it from the elder Brush. Had he succeeded, Stan Hywet might now be in Richfield Township or bulldozed by the Ohio Turnpike and Interstate 77. Luckily for Summit County, Brush turned him down.

Although Brush Sr. was still alive, he had given the farm to his son and namesake by 1927. Still, Wagner and Seiberling called on the elder Brush first. Seiberling reminded the Cleveland inventor of their previous meeting. “We have met before,” he told Brush Sr. “At that time I tried to buy this land from you for myself. Now, sir, I am asking you to give it to the county.”

Eventually, Seiberling’s powers of persuasion convinced Brush Jr. that a donation of 450 acres, including the virgin beech forest, would be a boon to the county and a feather in his cap. However, in May 1927, just two weeks after reaching an agreement in principle with the park board, Charles Brush Jr. died during a blood transfusion, in a vain attempt to save his daughter Jane, who was dying of pneumonia.

His wife, Dorothy Hamilton Brush, grieving the near-simultaneous loss of husband and child, did not immediately follow through with her late husband’s donation. Thankfully, she also didn’t follow her father-in-law’s $50,000 monetary lead and offer some of her land as a camp
for children with tuberculosis. Instead, she performed a unique social experiment, testing the public’s readiness for a park. Against family and legal advice, she threw open her farm to everyone, not just Richfield residents, with this invitation on a signpost near the entrance: *Dear Public: They say if I let you picnic here you will ruin my property. I don’t believe it, so will try my experiment for a year. Please back me up by building no fires and disposing of all your rubbish. If you pick the wild flowers there will not be any another year. This is a game preserve, so do not shoot. Mrs. Charles F. Brush Jr., Brush Farm*

A year later, she had proved the naysayers wrong and extended the public invitation for another year. She also eventually offered some of her land as a camp for ailing children, naming it the Jane Brush Camp. In the meantime, she decided her husband’s original impulse was sound, and quietly donated 275 acres to the Akron Metropolitan Park District. The deed was finalized in 1929.

The property was long and skinny, running north and south along Furnace Run, the beginning of what the park board envisioned as a
parkway linking the Cuyahoga Valley to the Cleveland Metroparks system, either in Brecksville or Hinckley, as suggested by the Olmsteds. At some points the park was six hundred feet wide, sometimes two thousand feet wide. It encompassed the Furnace Run headwaters and the beech woods across from what was then sleepy U.S. Route 21. It also included the area of Furnace Run in the Cuyahoga Valley, crossed by the Everett Road covered bridge, which the park board turned into its main tree nursery.

As a condition of the sale, Mrs. Brush asked that a boulder be placed near the park entrance that paid tribute to her late husband. A granite boulder was found soon enough, inscribed and installed. Later, the placement put it directly in the path of improvements to U.S. Route 21. The boulder eventually found a permanent home in the park on Old Mill Trail. Hikers who pass it can still read the inscription, which comes from *God of the Open Air* by Henry Van Dyke, one of Brush Jr.’s favorite poets.

Even as they were finalizing details with Mrs. Brush, board members were pursuing other property. In 1929, the board took reluctant nearby
property owners Townsend and Rice to court in its first test of eminent
domain powers. It would be years, but eventually the forty-two acres
controlled by the Townsend family would become part of the park.

By 1929, there was much bustle in the park board’s office on the
second floor of the Summit County Courthouse. In addition to building
Sand Run Parkway, accepting several parcels near Springfield Lake from
the family of Minnie Acker (eventually returned to her heirs) and final-
izing the deed for the core of the Furnace Run Reservation, the board
and Wagner were also finally negotiating to acquire the Cuyahoga River
Gorge in Cuyahoga Falls.

Its wild beauty—most spectacularly its 105-foot waterfall and many
caves—made it a popular tourist attraction, even before the Civil War.
Later, the High Bridge Glens resort, built in 1878 by L.W. Loomis and
Harvey Parks, not only had a very popular two-story dance hall, but also
what its owners boasted as the nation’s first roller coaster. With a popular
amusement park alongside the magnificent falls, boat companies sold trips
from the city’s downtown to the falls and back for a dime.