

## HD 23-01 LOWER CASCADES PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT

### Staff Report

### Bloomington Historic Preservation Commission

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The property, located at the stream bottomland bound by and surrounding old State Road 37 to the east and the steep slopes to the west, qualifies for local designation under the following highlighted criteria found in Ordinance 95-20 of the Municipal Code 1(a)(c), 2(g)

- 1) Historic:
  - a) **Has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state, or nation; or is associated with a person who played a significant role in local, state, or national history; or**
  - b) Is the site of an historic event; or
  - c) **Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historic heritage of the community.**
- 2) Architectural:
  - a) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural or engineering type; or
  - b) Is the work of a designer whose individual work has significantly influenced the development of the community; or
  - c) Is the work of a designer of such prominence that such work gains its value from the designer's reputation; or
  - d) Contains elements of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or
  - e) Contains any architectural style, detail, or other element in danger of being lost; or
  - f) Owing to its unique location or physical characteristics, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the city; or
  - g) **Exemplifies the built environment in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style**

### Case Background

The Lower Cascades Park (the Park) is one of three distinct geographical areas within the Cascades Park along with the Upper Cascades Park and the golf courses, in the northern region of Bloomington. The Park is located at the bottom of a valley, along the Cascades Creek and Old State Road 37, bounded to the north by Griffy Creek, and by a steep rise in the land to the east and west.

“The district’s hydrology centers on Cascades Creek which is located in the bottomlands. The stream flows north and drains into Griffy Creek approximately a half-mile north of the district. The stretches of Cascades Creek that are within the district have been channelized and its bottom is primarily bedrock. The creek’s minor tributaries drain the uplands and valley slopes, and cut to the bedrock resulting in outcroppings and small waterfalls (NRHP 2021).”

The HALS Survey describes the geology of the Cascades Park as follows. “The geological history of the Cascades Park Historic District created the natural and scenic landscape features that became an early twentieth century recreational attraction for Bloomington residents. The district is located in the unglaciated Highland Rim Natural Region that is characterized by karst topography, cliffs, and rugged hills. The park’s landscape is representative of the Mitchell Karst Plain Section of this region that is further characterized by level upland, steep slopes, and stream bottomland. Oak, hickory, and sugar maple are the dominant tree species, and ash would have historically been prevalent (HALS 2021, 4).”

The Cascades Park contains three large shelters built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s. Two of these shelters, Sycamore and Waterfall Shelter are located within the proposed district area. The Lion’s Den Shelter, although designed as part of the same master plan, is located in the Upper Cascades, falling outside of the proposed district.

In addition to the shelters, the Park also contains a WPA era retaining wall on the stream embankment, 24 picnic tables, a well house, a concrete ford, various bridges, a campfire, and three wishing well fountains. Most of the structures were built using rusticated limestone ashlar (NRHP 2021).

The following is an extract from the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) performed in 2021 which describes these resources in more detail. “Landscape features, especially uplands and bottomlands, divide Cascades Park Historic District into two distinct sections: Upper Cascades and Lower Cascades. Both sections contain Works Progress Administration (WPA) constructed resources: stream retaining walls, shelters, a well pump house, picnic tables, a fire ring, and wishing well drinking fountains. The WPA resources are primarily constructed with rusticated limestone ashlar (e.g., blocks) laid in a common bond. The use of limestone is representative of the Administration’s integration of regional materials into its projects. WPA constructed wishing wells and picnic tables are located in both the upper and lower sections of the park. The wishing wells are drinking fountains constructed of a circular limestone block base with two limestone block pillars that support a timber roof. The circular base contains a shallow concrete basin with a drinking fountain and a drain. A horizontal

timber threads through the upper portion of each pillar and supports a gable roof. There are three wells in the park: near the Lion's Club Shelter, near Sycamore Shelter, and along the trail between Waterfall Shelter and the concrete highway bridge. There are several types of WPA constructed picnic tables. Generally, the tables are constructed with a rectangular (approximately 3 x 10 feet), horizontal, smooth, single limestone slab tabletop supported by three limestone block pillars. The tabletop has rounded corners. The tables have between one and four benches (some benches are missing and some have been moved to accommodate wheelchairs). The benches are constructed of a horizontal, smooth limestone block with rusticated ends (approximately 1 x 4 feet) supported by pillars of limestone blocks. The benches on the long sides of the tables are composed of two limestone slab sections on three pillars. The end benches are comprised of a single limestone slab on two pillars (HALS 2021)."

### **Historic surveys rating and designations:**

The Lower Cascades is currently going through the nomination process to be included in the National Register of Historic Places as part of a larger district that also includes the golf courses and the Upper Cascades.

The following ratings are based on the HALS survey and the National Register of Historic Places Nomination prepared by Christopher Baas and J.P. Hall for the Parks and Recreation Department in 2021.

### **Contributing:**

- Monroe County Bridge # 413, 1926.
- 4 Metal/Concrete Pedestrian Bridges, c. 1960's.
- 24 limestone picnic tables, WPA Rustic, c.1936.
- Wishing Well Drinking Fountain, WPA Rustic, 1936.
- Waterfall Shelter, WPA Rustic, 1936.
- Well House, WPA Rustic, 1936.
- Limestone Benches, WPA Rustic, c. 1936. Contributing. (structure)
- Concrete Pedestrian Bridge, c. 1935, Contributing. (structure)
- Sycamore Shelter (Previously the Cascade Park Bath House), WPA Rustic, 1938
- The Slide (Cascades Creek ford), concrete, date unknown

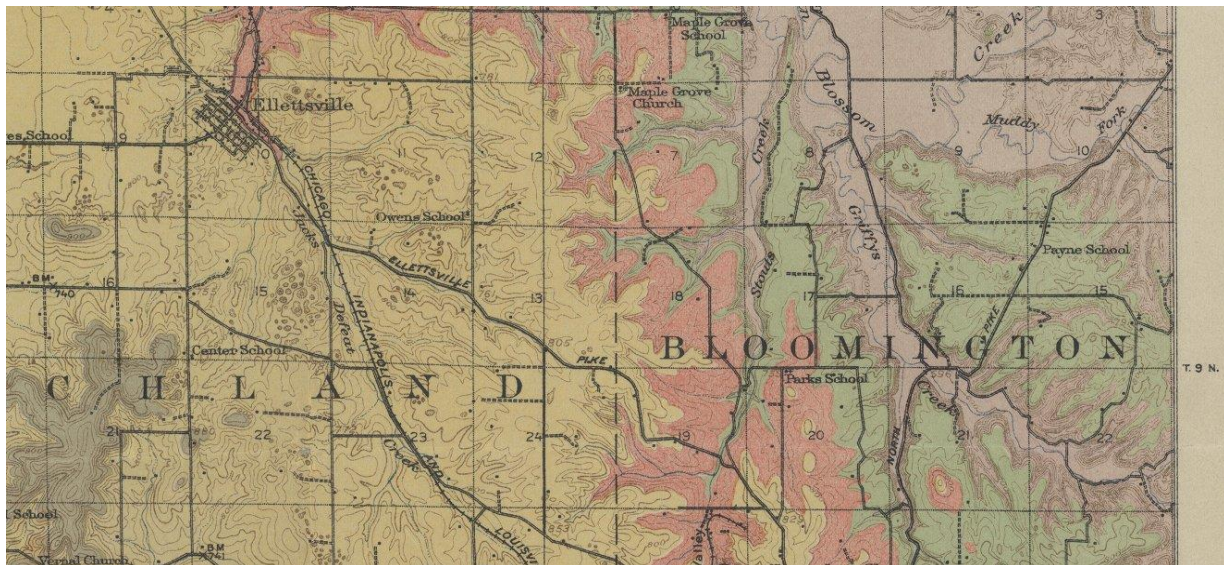
### **Non-Contributing:**

- Pedestrian Bridge, 2000s.
- Playground (southeast of the Sycamore Shelter and west of the Cascades Creek), c. 1980s.
- Playground, modern east of Cascades Creek and Old State Road 37. 2006.

**1(a) Has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state, or nation; or is associated with a person who played a significant role in local, state, or national history; or**

The Lower Cascades Park is part of a national movement towards the preservation of natural resources and enjoyment of outdoor spaces that was popularized in the early 20th century. Frederick Law Olmsted designed and popularized public parks and their use for a myriad of recreational uses throughout the United States including Central Park in New York City during the 19th Century. The National Park Service was instituted in 1916. The state park movement was on the tail of the national park efforts. Indiana's first state park was founded just up the road at McCormick's Creek in 1916. The Bloomington City Council created a local parks board in 1921, just five years later. The natural geographic beauty of the area led to the creation of the Cascades Park by the City of Bloomington in 1924. James Coffman wrote in his thesis titled *Cascades Park : a preservation and recreation development plan, Bloomington, Indiana* "The original intent was to preserve a naturally beautiful site."

In 1916, the road that runs through the Lower Cascades into Bloomington known as "North Pike" became a part of the "Dixie Highway", an interconnected road system that was promoted as a leisure travel alternative from Chicago to Florida in a national road trip campaign. A 1839 map featuring the Post Roads used by the United States Postal Service and prepared by David H. Burr, labels the north south road in Monroe County as a "4 Horse Mail Post Coach Road" (Burr 2021, 14).



**Image 1:** “North Pike” Topographic map. 1914. (Courtesy, Wells Library Map Collections, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana)

North Pike connected Bloomington to Indianapolis (Image The “highway” consisted of a map that highlighted a map with stops along the way. Thomas Taggart, owner of the French Lick Springs Hotel, led a fierce campaign to have the proposed touristic highway diverted from Columbus to Bloomington so that his own hotel could be included. The historic highway was eventually replaced by multi lane highways as the preferred method of interstate travel and the term “Dixie” has gone out of favor throughout the United States due to its association with the confederacy. In 1927 the road was renamed State Road 37 when Indiana instituted a road numbering system.

**1(c) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historic heritage of the community.**

The Lower Cascades Park has been maintained by the City of Bloomington and enjoyed by both its residents and visitors alike for almost 100 years. During this time countless memories, picnics, races, and peaceful days have been enjoyed by community members. The history of the Cascades Park has been documented in different articles, documentaries, and even a masters thesis in 1984. In 1997 *BRI News* published an article providing information on the history of the Cascades Park stating that “In 1921, however, the owners of the stone and gravel quarry at the southern edge of the cascades planned to expand it northward, along the highway and creek bed. In response, the city’s first park board was established and chartered to protect the “beauty spot of the southern part of the state (BRI 1997, 1).”

The landscape has been maintained in its majority with minimal intervention, except to ensure its continual care. There have been changes over time. The park expanded through land purchases in the 1920’s and 1930’s. For a time there was a pool and tennis court, which were first leased and then purchased from then neighboring property to the north (1997, 2). The pool and court were eventually closed. More recently playgrounds have been installed in the last few years as well as a large bank stabilization project that was done to the Griffy Creek, replacing some of the original WPA stone retaining walls with a stepped system. The WPA structures and other landscape features such as benches, tables, and bridges remain mostly intact.





**Image 2:** Assortment of photos from a family trip to the Cascades Park dated to October 5, 1925. Courtesy of the Monroe County History Center

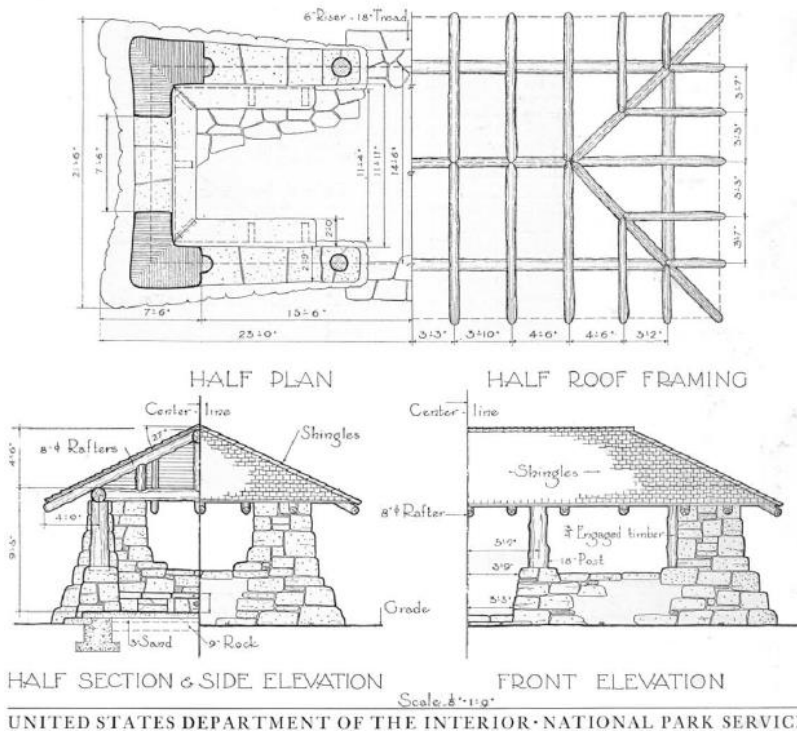
**2(g) Exemplifies the built environment in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style**

The WPA structures including the two shelters, picnic tables, and wishing wells were built during the 1930's as part of the federal initiatives to alleviate the economic hardships affecting the entire population during the Great Depression. The City of Bloomington qualified for funds due to the economic impact felt directly by the quarries and other industries. Funds were requested for different initiatives throughout Bloomington but a sizable portion was allocated to the construction of various structures in both the Upper and Lower Cascades including the two main roofed activity structures, picnic tables, and wishing wells, amongst others.

The designs were based on the National Parks Service Rustic designs, sometimes known as "Parkitecture". This design typology emphasizes use of localized materials, and designs fitting an open aired, natural aesthetic that begins to blend into the landscape.

Shelter - Turner Falls State Park - Oklahoma

This carpenter critic may well skip this subject unless he would merely pause for breath. The free hand lines of the shingle courses, doubled every fourth or fifth course for scale and accent, the well-sealed pole rather ends, the rugged informality and textural quality of the stone work, the pattern of the wall - all combine to the success of this structure.



**Image 3:** National Parks Service shelter template (NPS Website)

Each design feature was created to facilitate passive recreation, mainly consisting of picnics and gatherings along with interaction with the natural features such as the cascades and creek.

### Recommendation: Approvals

Staff recommends approval for the nomination of the Lower Cascades to be designated as a local historic district based on both its the Historic(a)(c) and architectural(g) merits as it has significant character, interest, and value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, exemplifies the cultural, political, social, and historic heritage of the community, and exemplifies the built environment in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style.

The Lower Cascades has provided the community of Bloomington and beyond with a unique natural, cultural, and social space for over a century. The Lower Cascades will celebrate its hundredth anniversary as an officially recognized park in 2024. The combination of highly intact WPA structures built in the 1930's, its history as part of an early touristic interstate highway, and its unique natural features would each on its own be more than enough to qualify the site for designation.



## Bibliography

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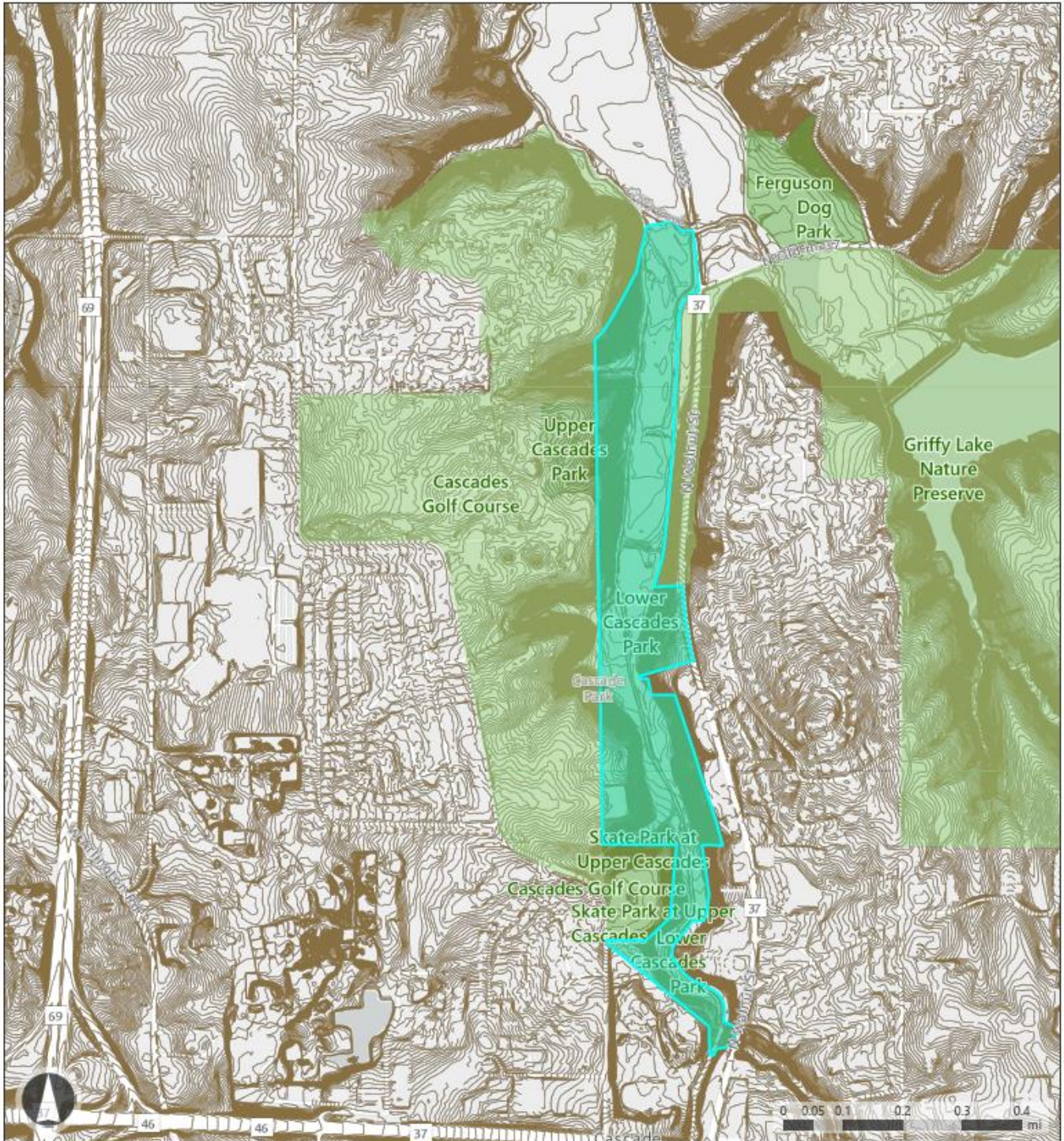
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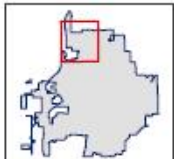
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**Map Legend**

- Park Boundary
- Other Park Properties
- Contours 2005





Photographs from the National Register of Historic Places Nomination taken by Chris Bass on May 26, 2021



**Image 4:** Waterfall Cascades (Sycamore) Shelter House, looking southwest.



**Image 5:** Sycamore Shelter





**Image 6:** Well House, looking southwest.



**Image 7:** Limestone bench southeast of the Sycamore Shelter, looking east.





**Image 8:** Concrete Pedestrian Bridge, looking southwest



**Image 9:** Stone Picnic Tables