

The Fox in the Park: State Senator John E. Fox and the Capitol Park Extension

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, America was a nation looking to revitalize itself after being battered by rapid industrialization, massive immigration, and uncontrolled urbanization.¹ Led by its dynamic young president, Theodore Roosevelt, the country sought to reinvigorate its spirit. Roosevelt had been introduced to the plight of the inner city through the 1890 publication *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis' exposé of the living conditions within the lower tenement dwellings of New York City immigrants. As New York City Police Commissioner during the 1890s, Roosevelt was taken on tours of the area by Riis. As president, Roosevelt wanted to do for the inner cities what he had done for the country's forests through conservation legislation. Roosevelt's national activism was reflected on a smaller scale by cities and towns throughout the continent.² The "City Beautiful" movement was a microcosm of the Roosevelt influence, and its reach would extend to the Pennsylvania state capital.

The rebirth of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was stimulated by several factors. The old State Capitol, built in 1822, was destroyed by fire on February 2, 1897. A movement prompted by Philadelphians urged the transfer of the state government from Harrisburg back to the City of Brotherly Love. Harrisburg, they argued, was not cosmopolitan enough to serve as host of a state government. Its facilities were no match for the city on the Schuylkill. The residents of Harrisburg were alarmed at the possible loss of prestige the town would face if the capital should return to the eastern metropolis.³ Among the residents of Dauphin County in a position to fight the move was the Harrisburg state senator, John E. Fox, a member of a prominent local family.

1 This paper was edited by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, webmaster of *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward*, found at <<http://www.old8thward.com>>.

2 Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979), 131.

3 George P. Donehoo, *Harrisburg: The City Beautiful, Romantic and Historic*, (Harrisburg: E.J. Stackpole, 1927).

His father, Dr. Thomas George Fox, served in the Pennsylvania General Assembly during the Civil War, acted as prothonotary and clerk of the Dauphin County courts in the 1870s, and was a bank president and member and president of the county's Board of Prison Inspectors. John became a member of the county's bar association in 1888 and was elected to the state senate in 1900, to which he was reelected in 1904 and 1908.⁴ Fox was among the legislative leaders in the effort to pass an appropriations bill for the new State Capitol on the same site as the old brick and wood structure. George Donehoo writes:

Out of the ashes of the old Capitol there arose by magic the beautiful Capitol of today and out of the old town of Harrisburg at the same time there arose the present "City Beautiful" with its wonderful river front, fine streets, modern buildings, parks, and playgrounds⁵

Despite the construction of the new statehouse, the efforts of the Philadelphians continued to plague the residents of inland Pennsylvania. Allegations of graft in the building of the new Capitol may have added to their collective sense of anxiety. In response, Fox introduced a measure in the Senate during the 1905 session authorizing the appropriation of funds for the extension of the grounds of the Capitol and the condemnation and demolition of the real estate encompassing the area to the east of the structure within Harrisburg's Eighth Ward. The expense of the project made state participation necessary; the sale of the enterprise was beyond the means of the city's budget. Five-hundred and forty-one separate parcels of real estate composed the targeted area.⁶ Fox was able to guide the Capitol Park Extension through the Senate by the overwhelming margin of forty-one to one with eight senators recorded as not voting.⁷ The bill's

⁴ Frederic A. Godcharles, *Pennsylvania: Political, Governmental, Military and Civil*, (New York: American Historical Society), 534-535.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶ Ernest Morrison, *J. Horace McFarland: A Thorn for Beauty*, (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1995), 253-255.

⁷ Senate Bill #57, file folio 451, in Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's *Smull's Legislative Handbook and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania: The Legislative Record for the Session of 1905*, vol. III, (Harrisburg: 1905).

fate in the House of Representatives was a different matter. The chairman of the House Appropriations Committee reported the bill (House Bill #876) on April 13 with a negative recommendation. As this action came at the end of the legislative session, the Park Extension bill was dead.⁸

Fox did not give up the fight. During the 1907 legislative session, the Capitol Park Extension was reintroduced in the Senate. Again, the bill was passed by a wide margin: thirty-five yeas, seven nays, and eight absent or not voting.⁹ House records show no action taken on the bill. A page-by-page search of the House calendar turned up no information apart from the Senate Bill's referral to the House Appropriations Committee.¹⁰ Once again, the House of Representatives had frustrated the Harrisburg renewal project.

The legislative session of 1909 saw a marginal advance for the Extension Bill. For the third time, the Senate passed the bill. Finally, the House gave its approval, but the seeds for the Park were not sown. A 1911 House floor speech of Mr. Tunis of Dauphin County reported that Governor Edwin Stuart vetoed the bill on the thirtieth day after passage in the House due to the high cost of the measure.¹¹

When the 1911 session of the General Assembly met, Senator Fox again introduced the bill (Senate Bill # 159) authorizing the Capitol Park Extension. The final Senate vote on the measure was: thirty-four yeas and seven nays.¹² In the House, the legislation (Bill #1280) again received approval of the representatives by a margin of 116-72. Governor John Tener's signature signaled the official sanction of Senator Fox's long struggle for the Park.

8 Ibid., 3967, 3999.

9 Senate Bill # 41, file folio 163, in Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's *Smull's Legislative Handbook: The Legislative Record for the Session of 1905*, vol. I, (Harrisburg: 1911), 516.

10 Ibid., 792.

11 Ibid., *The Legislative Record for the Session of 1911*, vol. I, 3326.

12 Ibid., 545.

Over the course of four state legislative sessions spanning six years, a common theme was used to support the Capitol Park Extension Bill. Legislators consistently referred to the potential setting for the Capitol and its surroundings in bucolic terms, in direct contrast to the squalid environs of the Eighth Ward. The primary descriptor used was “beautiful” and its variations and synonyms, “beautify,” “beautiful view,” “pleasant surroundings,” “magnificent,” “aesthetic citizens of this city,” “public improvement,” “grandest temple in this nation.” One representative, Mr. Shreve, claimed:

The people are clamoring and insisting that the State of Pennsylvania surround this beautiful building with a fitting and appropriate beauty such as it deserves. This is a statewide proposition; it is not a Dauphin County proposition. This is a proposition that every man and woman in this State is interested in. I want to assure you that you have no conception of that sentiment and of the feeling that is coming from the people They insist that this improvement shall be made.¹³

In his rebuttal to a Dauphin County representative who supported the legislation, Representative Rockwell noted, “none of the people of the state have sent petitions to any member of this House to vote for this bill.”¹⁴ Regional pride of one’s home state may have gotten the better of Pennsylvania’s elected officials. Not only did senators and representatives compare Harrisburg to larger state capitals, but hope was expressed that Pennsylvania and its Capitol might emulate the grander buildings of Paris, Rome, Berlin, and Vienna.¹⁵

What was the ultimate motivation for John Fox in sponsoring the Capitol Park Extension? Perhaps it was just a matter of surrounding the new State Capitol with an extensive expanse of grounds that the citizens of the Commonwealth might enjoy. Yet, when one considers the graft scandal surrounding the Capitol’s construction in tandem with the graft

13 Ibid., 3328.

14 Ibid., 3327.

15 Ibid., 544.

surrounding Philadelphia's City Hall and the existence of the Republican Party machine that controlled state and city politics for years after the Civil War, the possibility of base motives exists. In his fruitless oration of 1911, Representative Rockwell observed, "I understand the Pennsylvania Railroad wants it [the Capitol Park Extension Bill]; possibly they do, but it seems to me that the members [of the House] ought to vote it down."¹⁶ Was it civic pride or government corruption that motivated the project? How close to the truth Rockwell came, we may never know. However, the influence of Roosevelt's progressive ideals did impact the nation, inspiring widespread modernization and beautification of towns and cities during the early twentieth century. These reforms caused the destruction of many neighborhoods that were objectionable to reformers, such as Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3327.