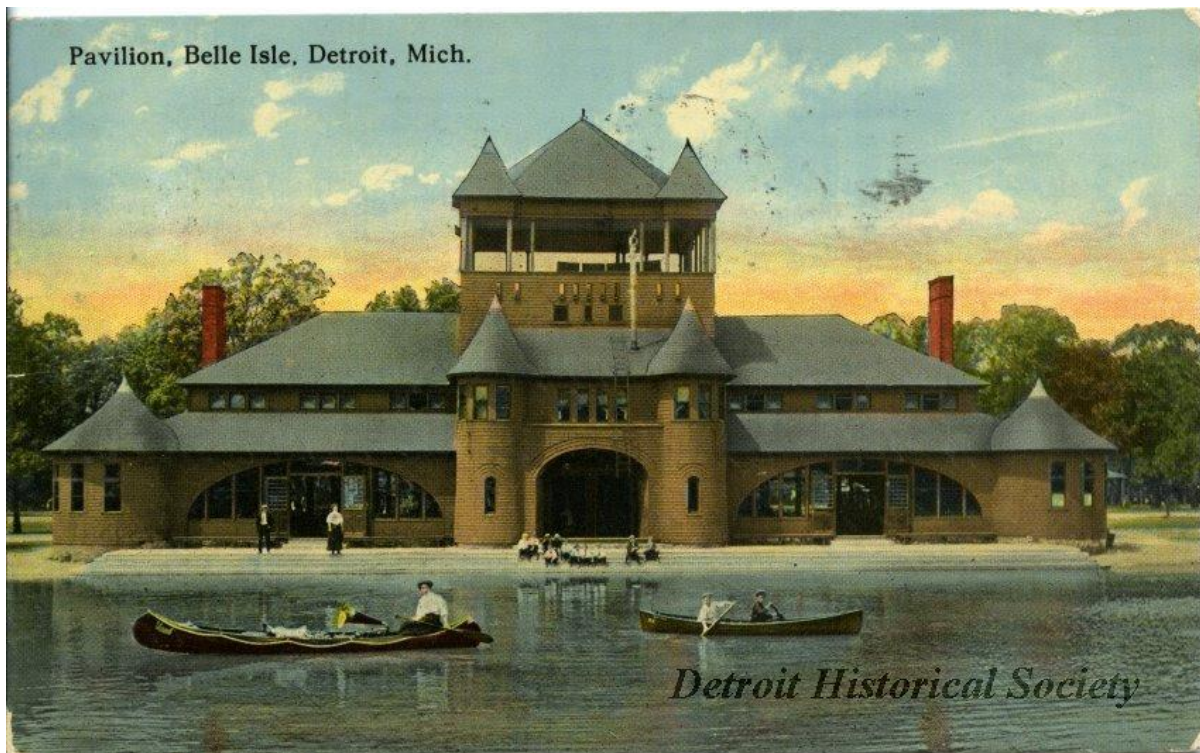


DETROIT'S SUMMER PLAYGROUND

Belle Isle has been the home to a number of buildings designed by the who's who of Detroit architects. While some of the buildings have vanished into the memories of time, many are still standing.



c. 1915 color postcard depicting the Skating Pavilion on Belle Isle, with two canoes on Lake Takoma in the foreground. Printed on verso: Pavilion, Belle Isle, Detroit, Mich. The Pavilion is the stopping place for canoes. Refreshments are served here at reasonable rates. During the Winter, Pavilion Lake is kept free from snow and is used by thousands for skating purposes. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)

Belle Isle is a recreational island park located in the Detroit River. The French who settled the island in the 1700s referred to it as "Hog Island," and allowed public use for keeping animals. The City of Detroit purchased the island from the Campau family in 1879 and opened it to the public the following year. The strains of an ever-growing urban environment inspired cities to designate space for relaxation and recreation, and Belle Isle, as it became known, was a popular choice to become a park. It is the country's largest city island park, and at 982 acres, it is larger than New York City's Central Park. Some elements from a plan

designed by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted were incorporated into the island.

THE
PARK FOR DETROIT:

BEING

A PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATION OF CERTAIN PRIME
CONDITIONS OF ECONOMY FOR THE

BELLE ISLE SCHEME,

DESIGNED TO FURTHER DETERMINATIVE DISCUSSION OF THE
LASTING INTERESTS OF THE CITY IN THE MATTER,
WITH A VIEW TO

A SETTLED POLICY;

WITH

A SUGGESTION OF THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF A
PARK ADAPTED TO THE LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES,
AND AN OUTLINE OF THE LEADING
FEATURES OF A SUITABLE

PERMANENT PLAN OF OPERATIONS.

"With this intent in view, I may, I think, hope to move you, I do not say to agree with all I urge upon you, yet, at least, to think the matter worth thinking about." — WILLIAM MORRIS.

RICHMOND, BACKUS & CO.,
PUBLISHERS,
DETROIT,
1883.

Detroit Historical Society

c. 1883 booklet, "The Park for Detroit: Being a Preliminary Consideration of Certain Prime Conditions of Economy for the Belle Isle Scheme, Designed to Further Determinative Discussion of the Lasting Interests of the City in the Matter, with a View to a Settled Policy; with a Suggestion of the Distinctive Character of a Park Adapted to the Local Circumstances, and an Outline of the Leading Features of a Suitable Permanent Plan of Operations" by Frederick Law Olmsted. The front cover features black text indicating the title, followed by a quote from William Morris reading "With this intent in view, I may, I think, hope to move you, I do not say to agree with all I urge upon you, yet, at least, to think the matter worth thinking about." Text at the bottom of the cover reads "Richmond, Backus & Co., Publishers, Detroit, 1883. The booklet consists of a preface, followed by two parts containing a total of 19 sections concerning various proposals for Belle Isle. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)

The oldest continually running conservatory in the United States, the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory opened in 1902. Designed by Albert Kahn and George Mason, it was built in the European Modernist style, with many of its elements inspired by Thomas Jefferson's Monticello home. Originally constructed with glass and a wooden frame (the wood frame was replaced with a frame made of steel and aluminum in 1949), it contains an extensive collection of rare and exotic plants from around the world, including palms, tropical plants, cacti, ferns and one of the country's largest orchid collections.



c. 1910 color postcard depicting the Conservatory on Belle Isle, with a woman walking in front. Printed on verso: Horticultural Bldg. and Aquarium, Belle Isle Park, Detroit, Mich. The Horticulture Building at Belle Isle is well worth seeing. It is stored with rare and beautiful shrubs and flowers, which has taken the Park and Boulevard Commission years to collect. It is situated near the center of the island and is thronged with visitors the year around. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)

Opened in 1904, the Belle Isle Aquarium is the oldest public aquarium in the continental United States and, at the time of its opening, the third largest in the

world. The aquarium was designed by architect Albert Kahn. Glass sea-green tiles line its walls and ceiling to give it an “underwater” feeling. According to the Belle Isle Conservancy, Kahn intended for the fish to be like art hanging on the wall in a gallery.



c. 1915 color postcard depicting the interior of the Aquarium on Belle Isle lined with tanks of fish. Printed on verso: The Aquarium at Belle Isle Park houses of collection which includes every species of fresh water fish found in Michigan's lakes and streams and species from other inland water throughout the country. In addition there are tropical fish, alligators, turtles, sea lions, otter and South American beaver. An educational exhibit shows the hatching of fish eggs of different species. It is considered one of the finest aquariums in the United States exhibiting fresh water fish. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)

For time immemorial, Detroiters have bathed and played in the Detroit River. The first Belle Isle Bath House was built in 1894, designed by William “Buck” Stratton. It boasted 100 changing rooms for men and women (mostly for men), a bathing suit rental service (suits were rented for free), and restroom facilities. By 1906, over 85,000 bathers were visiting the beaches on Belle Isle annually. To accommodate the throngs, a new bath house was opened in 1909, designed by Marcus R. Burrowes of the Stratton & Baldwin firm. The new bath house had 800 changing rooms, and in the summer of 1921 reported over 530,000 visitors.



c. 1910 color postcard depicting the Bath House on Belle Isle, with swimmers and the Detroit River in the foreground. Printed on verso: The New Bath House on Belle Isle is the most beautiful building of its kind in the country. It was erected in 1908 at a cost of about \$50,000 and has accommodations for 1,300 people. A minimum charge is made and patrons are supplied with suits and towels. The scene here depicted is a common occurrence on a warm summer's day. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)

The Belle Isle Police Station on Belle Isle Park was constructed in 1893, in the style of a fieldstone farmhouse with a red shingle roof. Architects George Mason and Zacharias Rice designed the building to compliment the island's landscape. Created long before motorized traffic was allowed on the island, its grand doors allow for easy passage of police horses.



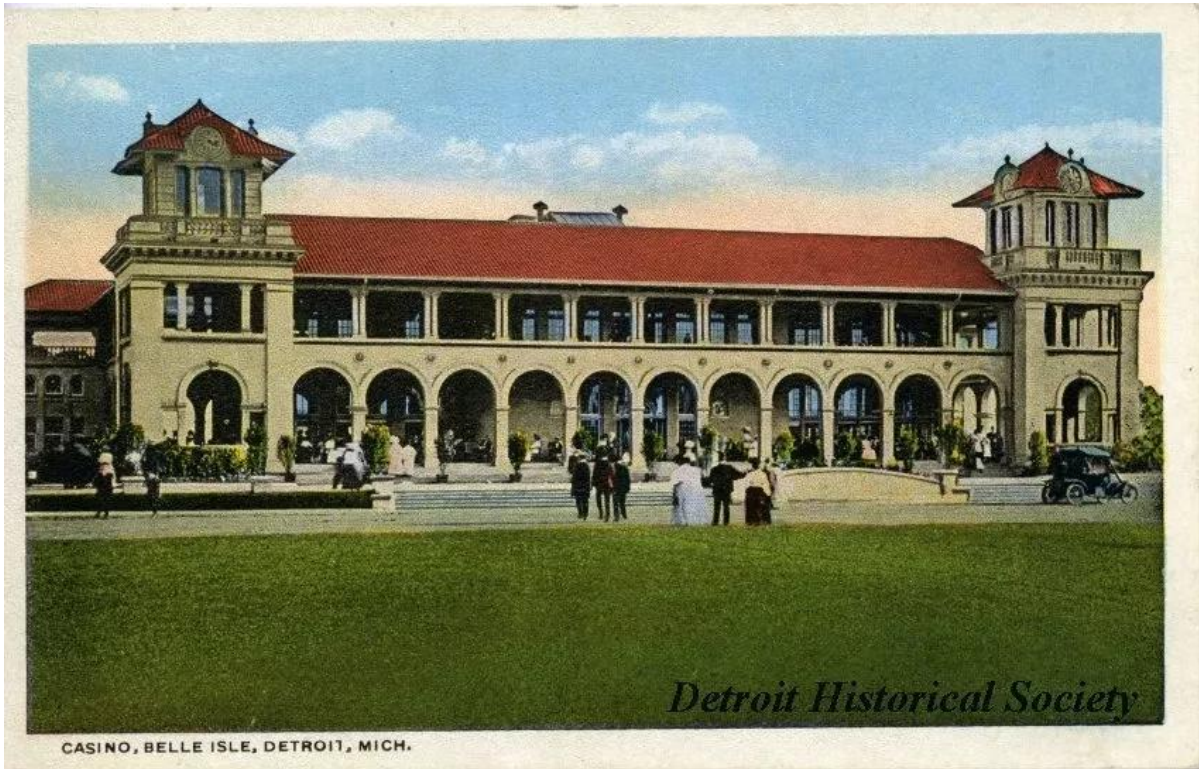
Detroit Historical Society

c. 1920s sepia-toned photo showing the front of the 3-story police station building on Belle Isle. The building has a central arch passageway that leads to a rear yard area and the exterior walls are mostly covered with ivy. On the front lawn area, four policemen are standing beside their bicycles and one policeman is seated in a "Police Dept." squad car. The car is a right-hand drive vehicle with the steering wheel located on the right side. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)

Belle Isle has been the home of two buildings with the name casino. The casinos on Belle Isle did not host gambling, but were rather club houses, where visitors could rest in the shade, purchase food and drinks, or find respite from inclement weather. The first such building was designed by the firm of Donaldson & Meier and opened in 1888. Soon after the turn of the century, it was determined that the building was in significant need of repairs, and also needed a substantial expansion to accommodate the crowds that visited Belle Isle. A new casino, designed by the firm of Van Leyer & Schilling opened in 1908.



c. 1907 color postcard depicting the Casino on Belle Isle, with a road and bridge extending into the foreground. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)



c. 1910 color postcard depicting the Casino on Belle Isle, with many people and a parked car in front. Printed on verso: Casino, Belle Isle, Detroit, Mich. The Casino, where Luncheons are served afford an ideal resting place where you can view the passing freighters and excursion boats. It is located on the lower end of the island and commands a beautiful view of the main canals and thoroughfares. [Detroit Historical Society collection](#)