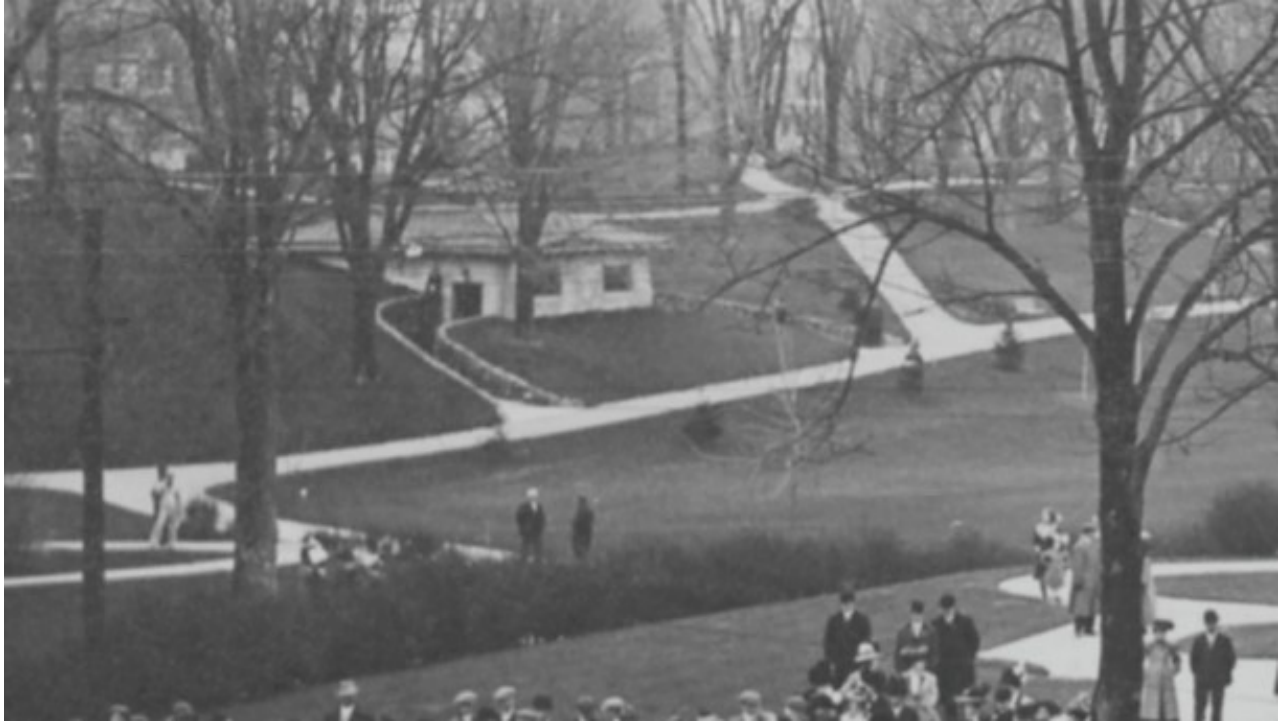


The Comfort Station in Wilcox Park

Wilcox Park is often referred to as a “gem in the heart of downtown Westerly.” There is an array of notable trees, impeccably maintained blooming gardens, and swaths of natural habitat. The park was designed as a Victorian strolling park, and today it still invites all to enjoy its pristine beauty.

Walking along the numerous paths one passes historical monuments, a quaint cottage, a unique bandstand, and an impressive barn. But there’s another surprise structure! Literally hidden within the west hillside of Wilcox Park and often overlooked is the Comfort Station. Typical of Victorian sensibilities, “comfort station” is a euphemism for a bathroom (or a “rest room,” as we might call it today). Though no longer in service, this structure should not be dismissed as it abounds with architectural features worth noting as you walk by.



Built in 1910–11, the structure itself is ingeniously designed to be discreet by having the building blend into the existing rolling hill. Utilitarian as it may be, the building was not short-changed in the construction materials department. Barrel-style clay roof tiles were used to match those in the Westerly Library (presumably with a 75- to 100-year use lifespan, one of the longest lasting options available). The roof structure is not a simple design but one that incorporates an operable cupola, where slats are opened to allow light and air circulation. The outside sheathing is thick stucco (presumably over concrete), a better option than wood siding since the building is in direct contact with the ground.

The entrance doors seem to incorporate different styles: the lower wood half has a geometric pattern that leans toward an Arts and Crafts style, while the glass upper half has a multi-faceted diamond pattern, which may be a last nod to the Victorian era. There is a windowsill of considerable heft at each elaborately grated window.





A beautifully patinaed copper fascia surrounds the perimeter roof line. Look for the thirty-plus copper corbels gracing the roof line. Appearing first to be a simple rectangular shape, there is the detail of a block scroll on the underside. Curved masonry stone walls lead to each entrance (men's and women's). At one time both entrances sported a small but elaborate enclosed portico. Be sure to stop and look at the information plaque in front of the Comfort Station for vintage photos. Only one of the entrance gates that once graced this curved pathway remains.

A recent informal survey of strolling Wilcox Park patrons yielded some interesting comments. Asked if they knew what the Comfort Station structure was actually used for, newer patrons guessed that it had always been for storage. But our more seasoned park patrons, myself included, delighted in sharing memories of the Comfort Station in its heyday.

Many remembered the attendant, who graciously provided a hand towel to those who used the facilities, and who kept the facility tidy. One patron remembered how warm it was inside after an afternoon of skating on the pond. I have vivid memories of the white subway tile walls and how tall the stall dividers seemed to be. I didn't appreciate then that the dividers were actually 1 1/4" thick white marble!

The Wilcox Park Comfort Station is indeed a grand place for a respite.

By Mary Jo Girard, Westerly Library & Wilcox Park Board of Trustees Secretary and Park Committee member