

# HARP LAMPS DESIGNATED LANDMARKS

By Betsy Brayer

At its August meeting, the Brighton Historic Preservation Commission designated the "Harp Lamps/Luminaires within the Town of Brighton as local landmarks. Jerry Ludwig, chairman of the commission, noted, "One subtle, though significant, feature of our town is the 'harp' lamp. These graceful fixtures which light many neighborhoods are as much a part of Brighton's past and present as the Twelve Corners, Corbetts Glen, and the examples of period architecture that grace our streets.

"Not only are the harp lamps indigenous and unique to the Rochester area, they are synonymous with Brighton and an integral part of its development and growth as a suburb."

2 The town board and supervisor expressed support for the designation. "These unique streetlights add to the historic aspect, beauty and character of many of our neighborhoods and districts," Sandra Frankel wrote.

Today, at least 883 harp lamps can be found in the Brighton districts of Bel-Air, Council Rock Estates, Dunn & Paul, East Avenue, Houston Barnard, Ferndale Manor, Home Acres, Malvern, Meadowbrook, Penfield-Landing Road, Roselawn, Struckmar, and Sunnymede. At least 60 streets in these districts still have harp lamps.

At one time, there were thousands of harp lamps in the area but unfortunately many have been removed from Rochester city streets. The Commission seeks to avoid this fate for Brighton's harp lamps.

In 1962, for example, RG&E had about 30,000 light poles of which 11,000 were



concrete poles with harp fixtures and 12,000 were the even older wooden poles with metal fixtures. At that time, 7,000 taller metal standards had already replaced the concrete poles and that number has continued to grow as harp fixtures are replaced. Replacements are usually black fiberglass poles with high-pressure sodium bulbs.

Since original replacements of the harp fixtures may be difficult to obtain, the town board "supports the use of quality reproductions when replacements are required."

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Poured concrete poles were developed about 1915 to replace wooden poles and designed so that wires could for the first time be laid underground. The elimination of the wires was a major design feature in the creation of such subdivisions as Home Acres and Browncroft.

(Browncroft was developed by Charles Brown as a residential setting for his nursery grounds as one of the earliest planned residential subdivisions in the country and probably the first in Monroe County. It is

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partly in Brighton and mostly in the city. Browncroft harp lamps, “many still entwined with the wisteria the Brown Brothers planted, lend to the overall character of these streets because they are architecturally contemporary to the homes,” a 1984 newsletter stated.)

Several different metal fixtures were placed atop the concrete poles, the most attractive of which was shaped like a lyre or harp. The poles themselves were originally square but later became octagonal. The octagonal concrete poles were then fluted to create ribs that evoked the bark of trees.

The globe style luminaire atop a concrete pole, of the same vintage as Colonial Revival architecture, was geographically widespread.

The fluted concrete pole topped by a harp fixture is believed by historians to be unique to this area, commissioned in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the height of the City Beautiful movement.

The City Beautiful movement was named and given focus by Charles Mulford Robinson, for whom Robinson Drive run-

ning through Highland Park is named. The movement began with the Columbian Exposition of 1893 and its handsome and beautifully planned “White City.” The movement that emerged from that World’s Fair extolled excellence in city planning and the splendors of ancient Greece, Rome and Renaissance Italy in architecture.

Robinson was secretary of the Municipal Arts Commission, which sponsored a new city plan in 1911 and selected the harp fixture for street lights in 1916. Although some famous architects have used lamp posts as vehicles for their talents—Antonio Gaudi designed some for his native Barcelona in Spain and Stanford White created a set to stand before the home of the New York mayor—the designer of Brighton’s harp lamps remains anonymous. Many residents see the concrete lights erected with their houses in the 1920s as in proper scale and keeping with period architecture. **3**

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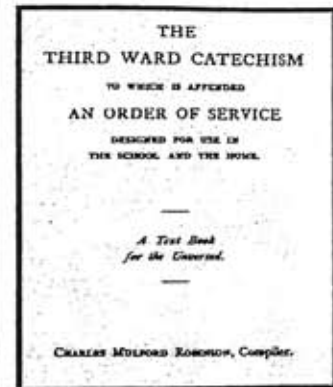
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# CHARLES MULFORD ROBINSON

In addition to being the father of “The City Beautiful” movement, Charles Mulford Robinson (1868-1917) was the first professor of civic design in the country. According to art historians, Robinson “emerged from obscurity in upstate [sic] New York, where he had graduated from the University of Rochester with a liberal arts degree and then worked for a local newspaper.” In 1899, Robinson wrote three articles for Atlantic Monthly entitled “Improvements in City Life” that popularized and staked out his territory in civic art. This was followed by several books, including *The Improvement of Towns and Cities: The Practical Basis of Civic Aesthetics* (1901); *Modern Civic Art: The City made Beautiful* (1903); and over 100 articles.



*Sketch of City Hall Tower on Main St. in the 1911 City Plan and Robinson's "Third Ward Catechism."*

The lovely Robinson Drive that wends its way through Highland Park has a plaque dedicated to “Charles Mulford Robinson—in his honor, pioneer city planner, loyal citizen, and Christian gentleman. He inspired the city to acquire this park and planned the drive.”

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF AREA STREET LIGHTING

**1834:** Citizens venturing out at night carried pine torches to ward off thieves; the well-to-do had porters carry the torches. Carriages had lanterns and houses, gatepost and porch lights, either closed candles or kerosene.

**1847:** Whale oil and kerosene lamps mounted on sparsely spaced wooden posts provided dim illumination at a cost of \$12.50 each a year.

**1848:** Rochester Gas Light Company organized with capital of \$100,000. “In a well-lighted city fewer scenes of depravity and crime will occur,” said Mayor Joseph Field. The gas company put up 50 to 60 posts for gas lamps, lit and put then out daily at a cost of \$25 each a year. Ye olde lamplighter became a picturesque and romantic figure.

**1881:** The area, especially the city, went electric, and for a time folks rushed to the windows to see whether the nightly miracle would repeat. The new lighting, noisy, sputtery arc lights, was more

brilliant than gas but required carbons that burned out in 10 to 12 hours and had to be trimmed and replaced daily. The arc lamp was improved to burn 120 hours but gave way to the incandescent lamp with a capacity of 500 to 600 hours

**1912:** The Municipal Art Commission composed of prominent Rochesterians including George Eastman and Charles Mulford Robinson helped city planners design artistic lampposts. Three results were the double-globed beauties that lined Main Street until 1963, the harp-shaped fixtures on fluted concrete poles, and harp-shaped fixtures clamped to utility poles holding trolley car cables.

**1932:** A third of streetlights (6,000 out of 18,000) were turned off for three years of the Great Depression.

**1950s:** Overhead, high-arc mercury vapor lights were installed on expressways and major arterials.

**1980s:** Rochester Gas and Electric Corp. embarked on a streetlight replacement program.