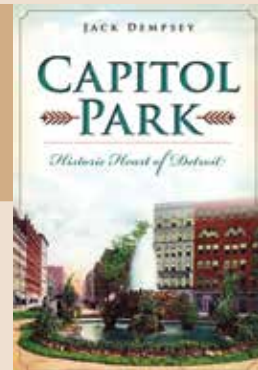


Capitol Park: Historic Heart of Detroit

By Jack Dempsey, published by The History Press (2014), softcover, 158 pages, \$19.99
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Reviewed by Frederick Baker Jr.

Jack Dempsey is a distinguished lawyer, chair of the Michigan Historical Commission, and a prolific author of, among other works, *Michigan and the Civil War: A Great and Bloody Sacrifice* (The History Press, 2011) and *Ink Trails: Michigan's Famous and Forgotten Authors* (Michigan State University Press, 2012). But *Capitol Park* is different, because it really was not his to write. Dempsey's son Michael, to whom it is dedicated, passed away four days before the manuscript was solicited. Jack took up the work, completing it in his memory, and perhaps as a form of therapy.

Capitol Park tells the tale of the place where Michigan's first capitol once stood, in the heart of present-day Detroit. It also tells the story of Stevens T. Mason, Michigan's "Boy Governor," who was appointed by Andrew Jackson at the age of 22 to the position of acting territorial governor, and who, after statehood was achieved, went on to be elected Michigan's first governor, at the age of 24. He remains to this day the youngest state chief executive in American history.

The book traces the record of Mason's accomplishments, from his leadership during the Toledo War to his central role in the adoption of Michigan's first constitution. It was Mason's appointment of Douglass Houghton as the first state geologist and the exploration and cataloging of the new state's mineral resources in the vast Upper Peninsula, which Michigan acquired in exchange for Toledo, that led to the United States' first great mining boom. Mason's early support for the University of Michigan set a course that led it to become one of the greatest state universities. But *Capitol Park* also traces Mason's sudden political downfall, the result of a general financial panic

in 1837 that brought the state to the brink of ruin because of its heavy indebtedness for public improvement borrowings. It was this debacle that led to the inclusion, in 1850 and in each subsequent Michigan constitution, of categorical prohibitions against state financing of internal improvements and the extension of state credit to private interests. Unfairly blamed for the consequences of these early excesses, Mason decided to abandon his political career and returned to New York to practice law. He was dead by the age of 31.

But he was not forgotten. In 1905, his remains were exhumed from the grave he had occupied in New York's Marble Cemetery and ceremoniously reinterred in Capitol Park, the site of the state's first capitol, beneath a newly commissioned statue of the Boy Governor. This was the culmination of the park's redevelopment after fire destroyed the old capitol building in 1893. But events soon overtook the park: With the advent of the automobile industry, Detroit underwent explosive growth. The park was redeveloped as a bus transportation hub. In the process, in 1955, Mason's crypt was relocated, in a manner so abrupt that its precise location could not be determined when, in 2010, the city undertook to restore the park after it ceased to be a hub of the city's bus system. Eventually, after much excavation, his remains were found. After lying in state at the "new" capitol in Lansing, they were reinterred beneath the restored Mason statue, in the center of Capitol Park.

These are the bare bones of the story Dempsey tells, but for anyone with an interest in Michigan history, the book holds much more: Dempsey weaves into the matrix of the story of Capitol Park and Michigan's first governor an account of the growth,

decline, and the current renaissance of the historic city of Detroit. Founded in 1701, Detroit predates New Orleans and Savannah. Dempsey traces that 300-year history, recounting how Augustus Brevoort Woodward, the young lawyer Jefferson sent to administer the new Michigan Territory after Detroit burned to the ground in 1805, used the opportunity to rebuild anew to impose on the soon-to-be-reborn city the same daring radial design that Pierre L'Enfant conceived for the nation's capital. It was that original design—later abandoned and replaced by the grid that defines much of the outer city—that produced Campus Martius, Grand Circus Park, and Capitol Park. Dempsey weaves into his account names like Ford, Hudson, Kahn, Parducci, Spier & Rohns, Tiffany, Frederick Law Olmstead, Bonnah, Whitney, Parke-Davis, Donaldson & Meier, and Houdini—all of whom figured in the city's explosive growth and colorful history. The reader learns who the men were whose only remaining memorials are the streets and places named for them.

The book is lovingly written, by a man in love with Michigan's history, as a memorial to his son. Truly, it is a labor of love. ■



Frederick Baker Jr. served 28 years on the State Bar Publications and Website Advisory Committee, the last 24 as its chair. He continues to contribute occasional reviews of books by Michigan authors or on Michigan law-related subjects. Formerly a Supreme Court commissioner, he retired in May 2013 to rejoin his former partners at Willingham & Coté in an of-counsel role.