

# Moncus Park Spotlight

## By Mary Allie Hebert—Lafayette, LA

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*[Editor's Note: This article is the third in a series of preview pieces for the Azalea Society of America's Annual Meeting in March 2022.]*

As the crisp Fall air cools the property, towers of radiant light cloak Moncus Park's nearly 100-acre green space. The park is lively with sounds of beeping construction trucks, laborers, and staff working to finish Phase 2 construction and gorgeous, colorful landscapes before their grand opening later this year.

With already existing azaleas and perfect soil composition for more, Moncus Park decided to plant nearly 186 azaleas this spring with hopes that their 2022 blooms with dazzle new park visitors. Three varieties of azaleas were planted: 'Mrs. G.G Gerbing', 'George Lindley Taber', and 'Purple Formosum'. As these azaleas grow, they will create a wave of vibrant color easily noticeable from the Johnston St. view. In addition to these new varieties, Moncus Park has planted native azaleas to act as a buffer zone to adjacent neighborhoods.

"It's our own version of a horticultural Welcome to the Park," said grounds manager Mark Hernandez. "These blooming azaleas draw the eye to the entrance of the park and leave a remarkable first impression."

The park has planted nearly 500 new trees and 10,000 various plant species in the past five years. Moncus Park's bloom season will start with these azaleas, transition into the native Louisiana iris, with summer blooms including the coneflowers and *Aga-panthus*, and then wildflowers blooming late summer and into fall along with Pink Muhly grass. As the park grows in, those color palates will become increasingly more prominent. What a visitor might see this year, they can expect to see in tenfold as the years progress.

Moncus Park is located in the geographical center of the City of Lafayette and has been in development since its origins began with the "Save the Horse Farm" movement in 2005. When news broke about the potential loss of the property formerly known as the University of Louisiana-Lafayette's Equestrian Center (nicknamed the "Horse Farm"), a few students—led by Elizabeth "EB" Brooks and fellow student Danica Adams—recognized the treasure for what it was and jumped into action to preserve this space. The women planned and publicized a community meeting to discuss the best plan of action to save this 100-acre green space. More than 60 people, including community leaders and several media outlets, attended this



meeting to voice concerns and show support. One of those leaders includes Mrs. Cheryl B. Perret, a Scenic Lafayette Board Member and LA Chapter of Azalea Society of America member, who was one of the first community members to publicly advocate to save the "Horse Farm."

Saving the "Horse Farm" became a community-wide movement as hundreds of yard signs and bumper stickers dotted the Lafayette landscape. More than 4,000 residents signed the petition, hundreds sent letters to leaders, and the community donated \$10,000 for the cause. It was clear that the Lafayette community wanted to see this beautiful show of nature preserved for generations to come.

As awareness grew and people began to envision the possibilities, more leaders became involved. Joey Durel, then City-Parish President, negotiated with University of Louisiana at Lafayette's President Dr. Ray Authement until 2008 when Dr. E. Joseph Savoie became the president. Together they devised a plan that preserved the "Horse Farm" and enabled it to become Moncus Park, nature's central hub.

In June 2007, the City Parish Council passed a resolution reaffirming their constituents' desires to create Moncus Park. On July 3, 2012, the council passed an ordinance allowing for the purchase of the property by the city. The trail of success has been blazed by the support of many more public officials and community leaders, including David T. Calhoun, who served as Lafayette Central Park's first executive director from 2013-14. As one of the early key voices of support, Calhoun engaged the Community Foundation of Acadiana, which assisted in exploring the many possibilities of how the land could be purchased, developed, and maintained as a public park.

Following the purchase of the "UL Horse Farm," local leaders created an independent 501c3 non-profit,

Lafayette Central Park, Inc. (LCP). LCP's mission is to build and operate a world-class community park. Under the direction of the Board of Directors, various committees and LCP staff were tasked with overseeing the work involved with bringing this park to life, including planning, designing, fundraising, and public relations.

Throughout the community, 7,400 people participated in 27 public workshops and five surveys in 2013-14 to craft and create the vision for our community's tribute to nature, Moncus Park. In 2018, the vision began to come to life as construction started on the unique and notable elements that make the park special and unique. The onset of construction also triggered the 99-year lease between Lafayette Consolidated Government and LCP, charging LCP with maintenance and management of the park. LCP is governed by a Board of Directors, a diverse group of community leaders whose mission is to develop and facilitate a transparent process for park development.

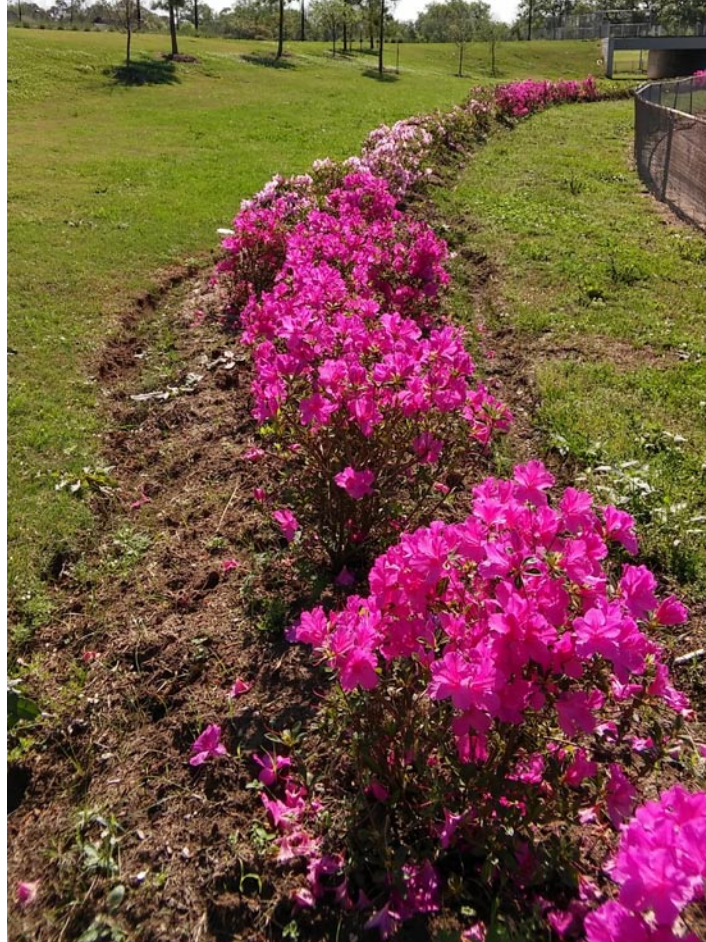
Since breaking ground in 2018, Moncus Park has completed a new 4-acre lake, a great lawn, over two miles of new trails, a dog park, hundreds of tree plantings, as well as much of the infrastructure and utilities for future developments. Moncus Park is currently constructing six new features to the property. These features, including an amphitheater, veterans memorial, inclusive playground, interactive waterplay area, bathrooms, and treehouse will complement the park's Phase One additions.

The amphitheater, generously sponsored by Iberia-Bank, a division of First Horizon, is a 3,000+ person open-air stage and event lawn that will host many different types of events throughout the year, from live music to movies in the park, theater and dance performances, private events, and more.

The Veterans Memorial at Moncus Park will feature a flag court, flanked by large tablets that commemorate American military participation in key conflicts throughout history. The memorial also includes inscriptions in brick pavers and seat walls that have been sponsored by local veterans and their loved ones in honor of their service.

The Ochsner Lafayette General Inclusive Playground features nature-inspired structures and interactive pieces, all surrounded by a custom rubber groundcover that mimics features of a swampy landscape. The playground includes separate areas for younger and older children, as well as a swing set. Inclusivity and accessibility make this creative and dynamic playground accessible and enjoyable for all visitors.

The Our Lady of Lourdes 5,100 square foot interac-



tive waterplay area is centered around a large alligator sculpture staring back at a pirogue play structure. The alligator has "breathing" water arches for its abdomen, and children in the pirogue are so frightened by the alligator stalking them that the boat is shaking, creating "waves" made with custom jets, even though this feature has no standing water. Throughout the large wet deck, another set of custom jets shoots up water that mimic bald cypress "knees."

Moncus Park's Treehouse designed by Pete Nelson, of Nelson Treehouse and Animal Planet's Treehouse Masters, will be built this September. "When I arrived at Moncus Park, I was quite surprised to see more than three or four possibilities for a treehouse... the live oaks are beautiful. They're sacred trees," said Nelson. Since their visit, Pete and his team have been working diligently to design and construct a treehouse like no other and are expected to finish late this fall.

Moncus Park is expected to open in late 2021 for a large, multi-week, "Christmas in the Park" festival featuring Southern live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) illuminated by 300,000 Christmas lights, local eats, live music, and more. To stay up to date with Moncus Park, visit their website at [www.moncuspark.org](http://www.moncuspark.org) or on any of the social media platforms.

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