The Court Archive:
Montgomery Ward and the Chicago Lake Front

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Montgomery Ward is best known as a mail order entrepreneur, who recognized the high cost and poor quality of goods and supplies because of middle men in rural areas. Ward established his company in 1872 with direct mail shopping, a revolutionary business that spawned other giants such as Sears and Roebuck. Headquartered in Chicago, Montgomery Ward & Co. sent catalogs all over the world and changed how people shopped for merchandise.

Ward was keenly interested in preserving Chicago's lake front and successfully did so in four Illinois Supreme Court cases. The four cases were *City of Chicago v. Ward*, 169 Ill. 392 (1897); *Bliss v. Ward* (198 Ill.104 (1902); *Ward v. Field Museum of Natural History*, 241 Il. 496 (1909); and *South Park Commissioners v. Montgomery Ward & Co.*, 248 Ill. 299 (1910).

In the 1830s, Lake Michigan came nearly to Michigan Avenue, with only a thin band of beach between the lake and the street. In 1836, the State of Illinois began selling unsettled land in what eventually became the City of Chicago to help pay for the proposed I & M Canal. Three men were tasked with the job, and they created a map of available land in Chicago. The map noted that the land east of Michigan Avenue and between Madison and 12th Streets (now Roosevelt) was "Public Ground – A Common to remain forever Open, Clear & free of any buildings or other Obstructions Whatever." It was named Lake Park.

When the Illinois Central wanted access to the Chicago River, it ran its tracks along the lake front but to avoid the public land, they were allowed to build their tracks in the Lake to gain access the River. After the 1871 Chicago Fire, much of the rubble was dumped into Lake Michigan at Lake Park and filled the land to the Illinois Central tracks. Over time, more land was filled east of the tracks.

Where there is vacant, valuable land, people will want to erect buildings. In the late 1800s, the east side of Michigan Avenue saw several structures built on this public ground, including the Tri-State Exposition Building, a stadium for Albert Spalding's Chicago White Stockings baseball team (forerunner of the Cubs), and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ward was concerned over large plans to build additional buildings on Lake Park. He filed for an injunction against the City of Chicago to prevent it from allowing future construction. In 1897, the case went to the Illinois Supreme Court, which allowed the injunction but exempted the Art Institute of Chicago since all landowners consented to its construction. It also exempted plans for the National Guard to build an armory. Ward's second lawsuit also went to the Supreme Court. In *Bliss v. Ward*, the Court agreed with Ward that no armory or any other structures for the National Guard could be built on the land. In the third case, *Ward v. Field Museum of Natural History*, Marshall Field had left money in his will to construct a natural history museum and plans for its construction were for Grant Park, which became the name of Lake Park in 1899. Ward successfully defeated those plans when the Illinois Supreme Court again agreed with Ward's assertion of the public dedication doctrine. Lastly, John Crerar had left money in his will to build a public library, the Crerar Library, in Grant Park, but Ward scuttled those efforts. However, the South Park Commissioners, which oversaw Grant Park, attempted to remove Ward's influence by changing the definition of who could object to potential construction. At the Illinois Supreme Court, Ward won the case again and preserving Grant Park's unobstructed views into the Lake Michigan.

Montgomery Ward was a very private person, and his reasons for battling the City of Chicago to prevent construction in Lake/Grant Park are unclear. Perhaps his desire for a public, common ground in the busy and congested downtown streets of Chicago inspired him. Regardless of the reasons, without Ward's protracted efforts, Grant Park would not be "forever Open, Clear & free."