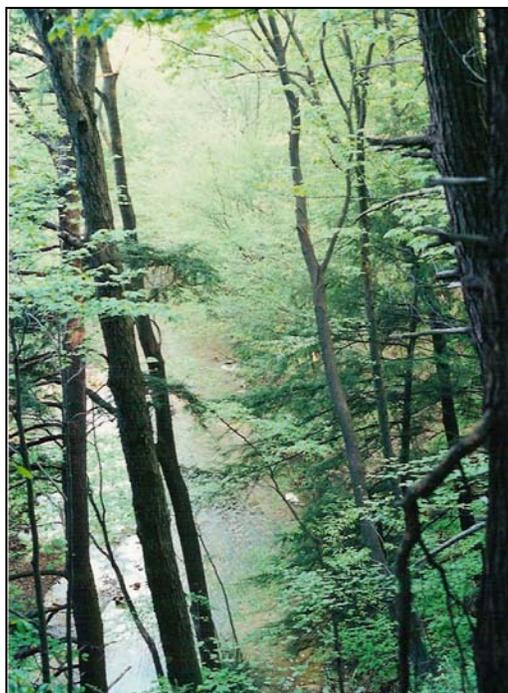


5. Duff Park's Native Wildflowers and Trees – Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania

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Turtle Creek

Less than 20 miles east of Pittsburgh, Duff Park is an extraordinary place. As Murrysville's first community park, this 147-acre conservation-oriented park occupies a forested hillside above the stretch of Turtle Creek that runs parallel and very close to Pennsylvania State Route 22. Situated behind this commercial corridor, Duff Park is separated from the businesses along the south side of SR22 by a railroad line and the creek itself. In spite of its location not far from a busy highway, the park is a sanctuary of great natural diversity and beauty.

Duff Park came into being via a partnership between the state, Murrysville, community organizations, and various individuals. Franklin Township, Murrysville acquired the park's land in 1968, making use of Pennsylvania Project 70 ("the conservation bond project") funding matched by the Municipality. Three parcels were combined to form the park, which was named for the Duff family who owned the largest of the parcels. The park's development as a nature reserve immediately followed, thanks to the effort and contributions of many community organizations (including the Lions Club, Garden Club, Jaycees, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts), the high school, community businesses, and plenty of volunteers. Over the years, additional parcels and rights-of-way have been donated to extend the park.

Today Duff Park is many things to Murrysville: a reminder of our community's history, a nature preserve containing an important old-growth deciduous forest, a popular destination for walkers and hikers, a refuge widely recognized for the abundance of its wildflowers and birds, and from time to time a rallying point for community attention, investment, and effort.

Overlooking the forest, around the park pavilion, is a grand old white oak tree that has lived through all these events; its height exceeding 107 feet and its age estimated at over 300 years. In addition to this venerable tree, Duff Park contains one of Pennsylvania's few remaining deciduous old growth forests; its age estimated at 215 to 240 years.

Over five miles of trails have been developed in the park, most of them hiking trails built with minimal impact upon the land, situated to permit access without disturbance to the park's many colonies of wildflowers. Some trails cross steep slopes and provide thrilling views over hillsides. Park improvements

have been limited to these trails - discreet signs, benches, a pavilion with picnic tables, a drinking fountain, and one trail of crushed limestone running alongside Turtle Creek.

This trail, the William Funk Bikeway, was named for the individual who built much of it. It is wider than Duff Park's other trails, as it was built to accommodate cyclists and larger numbers of walkers. In 1990, the upgrade of two Bikeway crossings over Turtle Creek was executed in dramatic fashion when the Air National Guard made use of a helicopter to set new bridges in place. With Turtle Creek running along one side of most of the Bikeway and a steep forested hillside on the other, this inviting trail is now Murrysville's most-used recreational facility unrelated to organized sports.

If trail names such as Violet, Trillium, and Hepatica conjure up images of idyllic settings, it is rightfully so, for Duff Park bears a collection of wildflowers exceptional in variety and numbers (*see photos below*). In 2001, Murrysville's Environmental Advisory Council published a list of over 60 wildflowers in Duff Park and their approximate times of bloom. Early volunteer activities in the park included planting trees, shrubs, and flowers, but today the park is maintained strictly as a nature reserve, with volunteer efforts directed to maintaining trails and removing invasive plants. Led by a staunch champion of native plants, every year dedicated individuals devote hundreds of hours to this work to protect the park's wildflowers.



Indian Pipe, Virginia Bluebells, Trout Lily, and Red Trilliums are just some of the many native plants found in Duff Park.

Over the years, Duff Park has drawn the people of Murrysville together – first to acquire it, then to develop it, catalogue and document its many resources, enjoy it, and when necessary protect it. Shortly after it was acquired, the park was vigorously defended by many in the community against the prospect of its loss to a rerouting of SR22. Subsequent threats to the park's natural preservation have included consideration of logging, construction of gas lines, and the intrusion of invasive plants.

Duff Park has provided immeasurable benefits to Murrysville, but its maintenance is not without challenges. Intense deer pressure has led to a visible reduction in the population of many wildflowers and an increase in the presence of exotic invasives, some of which spread every year in spite of the hard work of park volunteers. From time to time there are conflicts between groups of park users, with those protecting native plants worrying about the potential damage walkers, cyclists, and dog owners may inflict on the vegetation. Turtle Creek carries pollution from upstream mine drainage, and over the years the creek has shifted, occasionally flooded, and significantly eroded its banks as its channel has been narrowed and straightened with surrounding development. With a busy highway nearby, it is not known whether airborne pollution from exhaust fumes may eventually harm the park environment. Finally, maintenance costs for the Bikeway are high, mostly due to streamside erosion, at a time of increasingly tight Municipal budgets.

In spite of – *or maybe because of* – these challenges, Duff Park continues to draw people together. Controlled hunting in the park has helped to contain the deer population. Conscientious volunteers continue to nurture and protect the park, and ongoing efforts are made by Murrysville’s Parks and Recreation Departments to accommodate park users in ways that do not threaten native plant populations. For bank mitigation and pollution abatement, the Turtle Creek Watershed Association has coordinated many corrective initiatives.

In some ways, the grand old oak near Duff Park’s pavilion is similar to the park itself. The oak’s height and the spread of its branches reveal that it once grew alone, and that the forest grew up around it. Likewise, the land of Duff Park witnessed the early history of Murrysville, and the community grew up all around it. Just as the old oak is appreciated for its beauty and age, Duff Park is valued for its beauty and the age of its forest.

Over the years, the great oak has encountered stress, possibly due in part to the proximity of a gravel trail and park pavilion. Correspondingly, Duff Park has met stress from surrounding development, manifest in such things as today’s deer pressure and waterborne pollution. For the white oak, in 2002 an attentive Murrysville resident recognized a need and stepped forward to sponsor its trimming and professional care. This effort, in the best tradition of community spirit, is representative of that of so many since Murrysville’s acquisition of the park, with many organizations and individuals contributing to the conservation of this great natural resource for the enjoyment of all.

Looking to the future, prospects are good for Duff Park to be joined to a larger greenway running along the Turtle Creek corridor. Development of a Greenway Plan for Westmoreland County is now underway. The Westmoreland Heritage Trail chapter of the Regional Trail Corporation is planning a trail that will pass through Murrysville, which is likely to run along the Turtle Creek corridor. This trail will serve as a link in a regional trail that will run from Saltsburg, northeast of Murrysville, to Trafford, to the southwest. Its construction will connect Murrysville with neighboring Export, Salem Township, and Monroeville. These plans bring the likelihood of enhanced access to Duff Park. The park will serve as a fine diversion for trail users, who will also delight in this extraordinary sanctuary of sylvan grace.



Turtle Creek, flowing through Duff Park.