

Columbia City Arts Commission Meeting Minutes

February 3, 2026

I. Call to order

Commission Chair Jennifer Romano called to order the regular meeting of the Columbia City Arts Commission (CCAC) at 5:01 p.m. on Tuesday, February 3, 2026, in the Common Council Chambers of Columbia City Hall, Columbia City, Indiana.

II. Roll call

The following people were present: Jennifer Romano (Chair), Greg Hockemeyer (member), Connie Boggs (member), April Frazier (member), and Chip Hill (staff). Mike Thomas (member), Doug Egolf (member), and Taylor Ford (member) were absent.

III. Approval of minutes from the last meeting

April Frazier moved to approve the January 6, 2026, meeting minutes as presented; seconded by Connie Boggs. The motion carried by voice vote.

IV. Open issues

- *Biennial Officer Election* – Election tabled to involve more of the members.
- *Artists' Studio Tour* – Tabled.
- *2026 Calendar Project*
 - Almost all have been distributed.
 - Commission will consider design, charging, and/or sponsorships for the 2027 edition.
- *Promotions*
 - Bones Theater Promotional Package – Tabled.
 - WJHS Underwriting
 - April Frazier is working on the underwriting form.
 - Spots will highlight historical creatives featured in the 2026 Calendar.
- *America 250 Collaboration* – Tabled.
- *Arts Pantry* – Tabled.
- *Baker Park*
 - Jennifer Romano shared copies of a piece she created describing the history and future design concepts for the space developed by Doug Egolf (attached).
 - She will continue to work with Superintendent Matt Heiden on the path forward, including the use of the site for the 2027 Artists' Studio Tour.
 - She also noted work needed for the buildings attached to the site, which are now owned by the City.
- *WCCS Creates (f/k/a Spring Fling)*
 - April Frazier noted the change of name to the annual CCHS Entrepreneurial Market and K-12 Art Showcase event taking place at the high school commons on Saturday, March 21, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
 - Organizers asked that one or two members of the Commission serve as judges on the afternoon of March 20, prior to opening on March 21. Greg Hockemeyer moved to

authorize Chair Romano to designate judges for the event; seconded by April Frazier; passed by voice vote.

V. Other Business

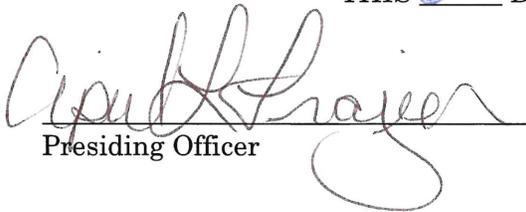
April Frazier asked that the Commission return to the subject of public art on local infrastructure for the upcoming meetings.

VI. Adjournment

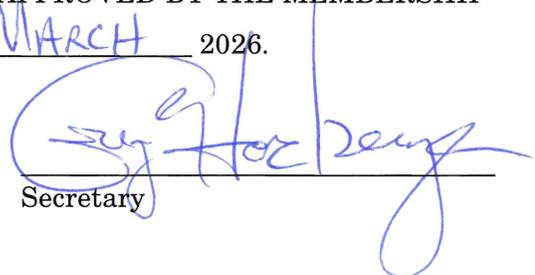
Connie Boggs moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by April Frazier, and passed by voice vote. The meeting adjourned at 5:39 p.m.

February 3, 2026, MEETING MINUTES APPROVED BY THE MEMBERSHIP

THIS 3RD DAY OF MARCH 2026.



Presiding Officer



Secretary



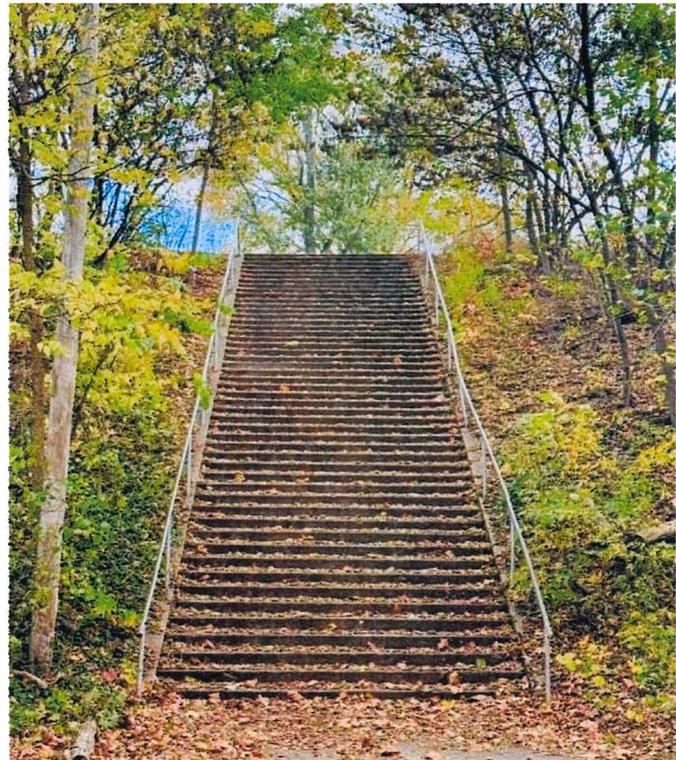
About John W. Baker Park

Baker Park is largely overshadowed today by the hustle and bustle of baseball and sledding at nearby DeVol Field or frenzied activities of children at the adjacent Every Kids' Dreamland, But, once upon a time, Baker Park was a hub of community activity.

Named for John W. Baker, a primary feature of the park was a large pavilion that was available for use by the public. A look in the society pages of the local newspaper shows just how frequently the site was used to host family reunions, class reunions, club meetings, picnics, anniversary parties, weenie roasts and more, making it a place almost constantly in use. Because the pavilion was open on the sides, this limited use to the nicer months of the year, however people were using the space from early spring to late fall every year.

In 1962, an article in the Commercial Mail newspaper noted that the City Council had approved new fees for the Baker Park Pavilion. It would be available for \$5 on Sunday afternoons until 6 p.m. The rest of the time, it was \$2.50. Previously, it had been \$2 on Sunday afternoons and 50 cents for all other times. It was advertised as being able to accommodate 70-80 people in the pavilion.

The same article announced that a new pavilion would be opening in 1963 in Morsches Park, a move that likely turned the course on big events being hosted in Baker Park going forward.

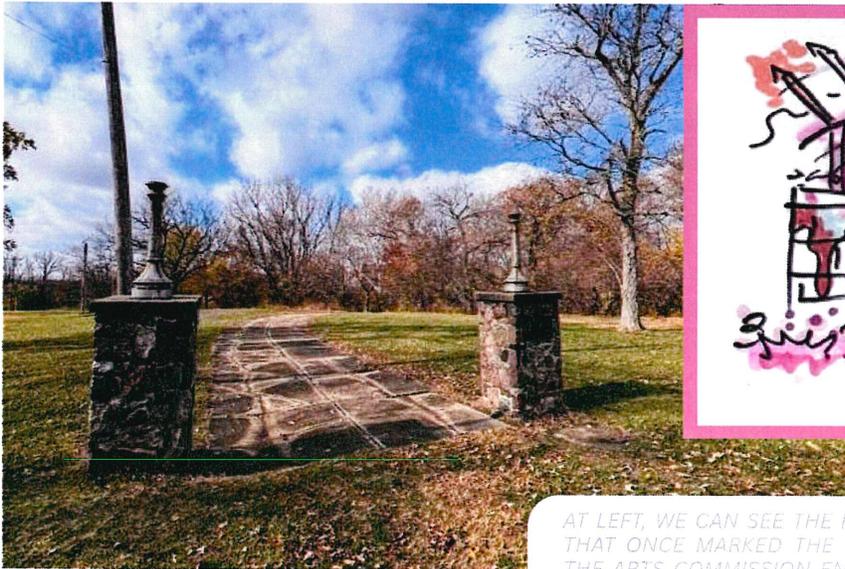


(Photo by Jennifer Zartman Romano)

DID YOU KNOW THIS STAIRCASE IN JOHN W. BAKER PARK IN COLUMBIA CITY FEATURES 50 STEPS? LOCAL RESIDENTS USE THIS STAIRWAY FOR CARDIOVASCULAR TRAINING.

With the growth of other parks in Columbia City, however, Baker Park has become more of a passageway than a true destination. The pavilion was showing its age and was torn down in the early 2000s, though a concrete pad still remains.

St. John's
ART PARK



(Photos by Jennifer Zartman Romano)



(Drawings by Doug Egolf)

AT LEFT, WE CAN SEE THE REMNANTS OF A HISTORIC ARCHWAY THAT ONCE MARKED THE ENTRANCE TO BAKER PARK. ABOVE, THE ARTS COMMISSION ENVISIONS TURNING THIS INTO A NEW ENTRYWAY WITH VISUAL APPEAL, MELDING NEW AND OLD ELEMENTS.



ABOVE, A VIEW FROM THE CEMENT PAD WHERE THE SHELTER HOUSE ONCE STOOD IN BAKER PARK. AT RIGHT, THE ARTS COMMISSION ENVISIONS USING THIS CONCRETE AREA AS A FLEXIBLE AREA FOR SEATING AND STAGING FOR LIVE MUSIC AS WELL AS AN AREA TO CREATE ART – COMPLETE WITH A FOUNTAIN FOR WATER. ADDITIONALLY, WROUGHT IRON LATTICE AND VINES MIGHT MAKE THIS AREA VISUALLY APPEALING.

ART PARK

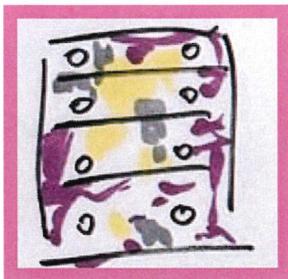


(Photos by Jennifer Zartman Romano)

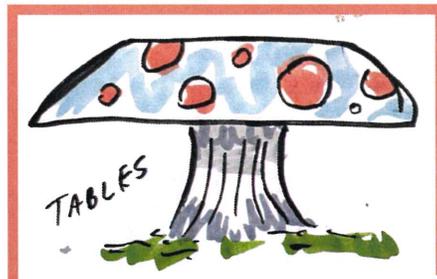


(Drawings by Doug Egolf)

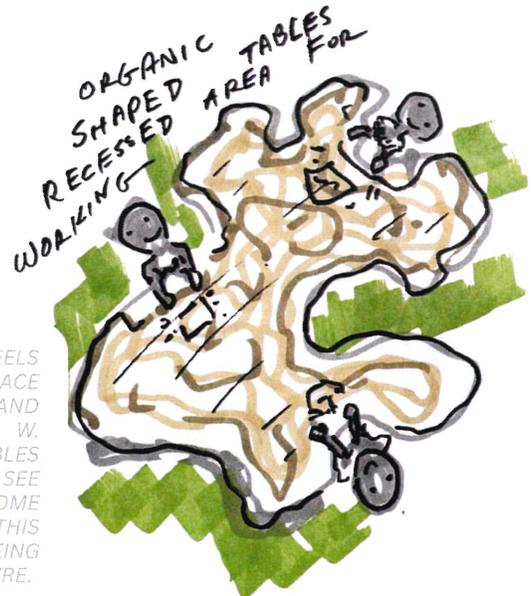
THIS OLD STAIRWAY, ABOVE, IS A GREAT FEATURE OF THE PARK AND IS USED BY MANY TO ACCESS DIFFERENT AREAS. SEEING THIS STAIRWAY BRINGS BACK MEMORIES FOR MANY PEOPLE. THE ART COMMISSION MIGHT ENVISION ADDING A HIDDEN MURAL TO THE BACK OF EACH STEP WITH A VERY ORGANIC LOOK THAT MAKES THE STAIRS APPEAR AS A WATERFALL AS YOU LOOK UP, BUT IT WOULD BE INVISIBLE WALKING DOWN THE STAIRS.

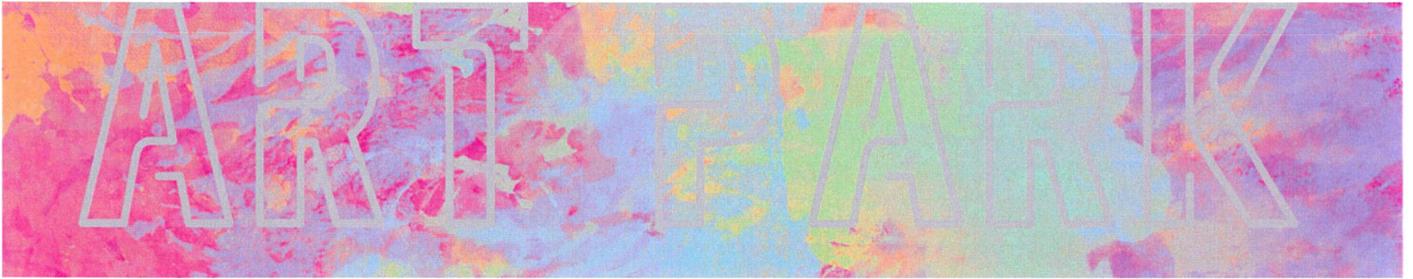


A REPURPOSED OLD DRESSER OR CABINET COULD BE PAINTED AND RESTYLED FOR USE AS A FREE COMMUNITY ART SUPPLY CLOSET, PROVIDING ACCESS TO ART SUPPLIES FOR ANYONE AND EVERYONE.



THE ARTS COMMISSION FEELS STRONGLY THAT WE SHOULD EMBRACE THE SOOTHING NATURAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF JOHN W. BAKER PARK. WHEN CHOOSING TABLES AND SEATING, WE'D LIKE TO SEE CREATIVE CHOICES THAT FEEL AT HOME IN NATURE. PART OF THE CHARM OF THIS SPACE IS THE FEELING OF BEING COMPLETELY SURROUNDED BY NATURE.



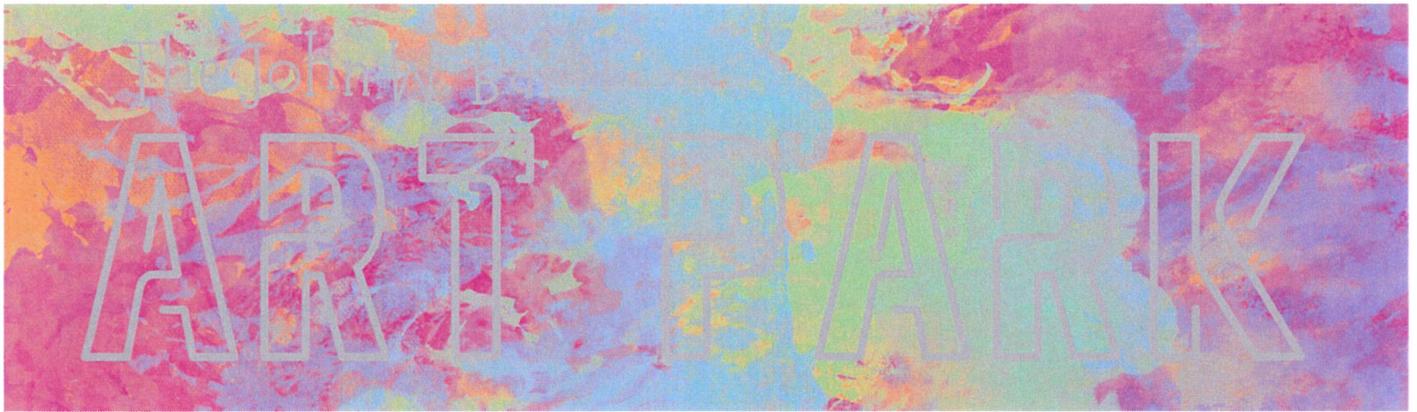


(Drawings by Doug Egolf)

THE TUNNEL TO DEVOL FIELD IS VERY UTILITARIAN NOW, BUT THE ARTS COMMISSION BELIEVES IT COULD BE BEAUTIFIED WITH NATURAL PLANTINGS THAT REQUIRE LITTLE TO NO MAINTENANCE AS WELL AS MURALS ON THE CONCRETE. ADDITIONAL PLANTINGS WITH NATIVE SPECIES COULD BE INSTALLED ALONG THE MAIN EXISTING CEMENT WALKWAY.

THE ARTS COMMISSION WOULD LIKE TO INSTALL SEVERAL FREESTANDING, DURABLE, CHANGING ARTWORK DISPLAYS IN THE PARK AS WELL, HIGHLIGHTING THE WORK OF LOCAL ARTISTS IN A SPACE THAT CAN BE ENJOYED 24 HOURS A DAY, 265 DAYS A YEAR WITHOUT BARRIERS, BELOW. ESSENTIALLY, AN OUTDOOR ART GALLERY.





History of John W. Baker Park

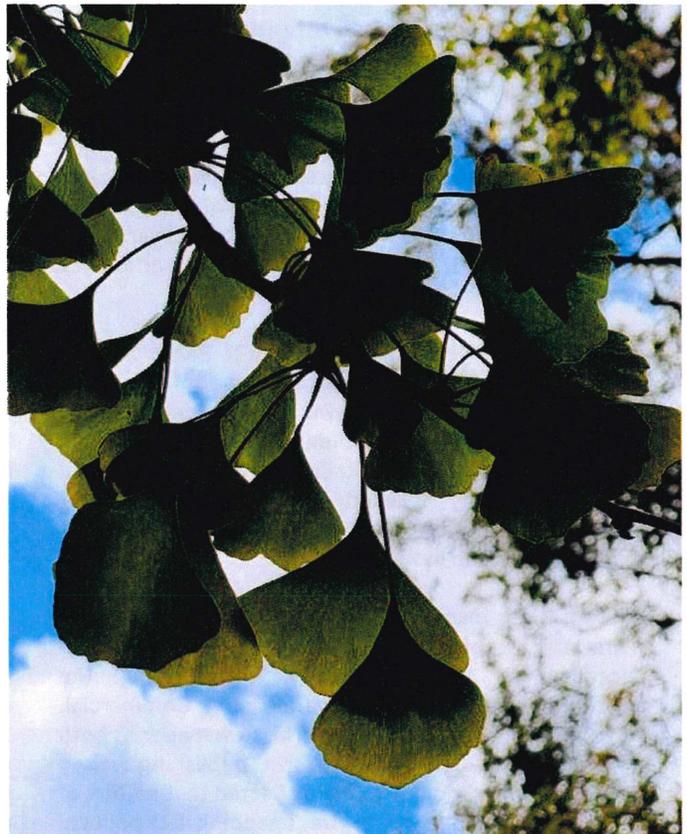
A portion of the land where John W. Baker Park is now located was once owned by John W. Baker and his wife, Sarah. In 1906, Baker purchased a five-acre parcel of land on McDonald Hill on the west side of Columbia City. The parcel was purchased from Colonel I. B. McDonald. At the time of the purchase, Baker planned to build a new residence on the lot and fashion a large portion of the property into "a poultry park for raising fine fowls."

A \$33,000 bond was issued in 1935 to fund the development of the park that would eventually be named in his honor, securing one of the last remaining large parcels of natural wooded land in the city and retaining it for public enjoyment.

The park was initially 10 acres, but later expanded to cover an area of 40 acres. Much of the early work for the park was completed as part of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) which provided jobs for laborers during the Great Depression. The Baker Park Shelter House, where the remaining cement pad and water access is today, was razed more than 15 years ago. This former structure was a significant part of the WPA project.

In the fall of 1939, two years after the John W. Baker's death, a Sunday afternoon ceremony was held to officially dedicate the John W. Baker Memorial Park on the west side of Columbia City. In addition to many friends and associates who attended the ceremony, several of his grandchildren and great grandchildren were there as well.

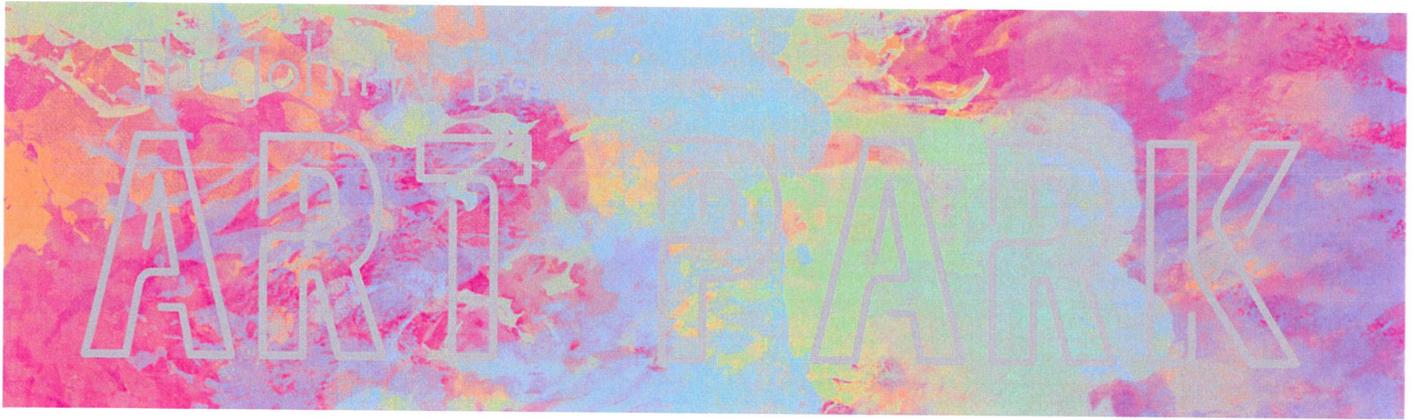
Another delightful feature of John W. Baker Park is the large, vibrant ginkgo tree in the park that was one of several planted in the community by well-known artist and entrepreneur Shinzo Ohki. This personal connection to Ohki's passion for art and nature makes this project even more meaningful.



(Photo by Jennifer Zartman Romano)

LOOKING UP THROUGH THE LEAVES OF THE GINKGO BILOBA TREE IN JOHN W. BAKER PARK IN COLUMBIA CITY. DID YOU KNOW THAT GINKGO TREES ARE ONE OF THE VERY FEW TREE SPECIES THAT ARE EITHER MALE OR FEMALE? THIS PARTICULAR TREE, PLANTED BY RENOWNED LOCAL ARTIST AND ENTREPRENEUR SHINZO OHKI, IS FEMALE. EACH AUTUMN, TYPICALLY AFTER THE FIRST FROST, THE TREE DROPS TINY, YELLOW-ORANGE PLUM-LIKE FRUITS THAT ARE PUNGENT. WHILE THE EXTERIOR FLESH OF THE FRUITS IS ACRID AND INEDIBLE BECAUSE IT CONTAINS BUTYRIC ACID, THE NUT INSIDE, WHEN PROPERLY PREPARED, IS CONSIDERED A DELICACY IN PARTS OF ASIA.

GINKGO TREES ARE THE REMAINING SPECIES OF AN ANCIENT ORDER, WITH FOSSILS DATING BACK OVER 270 MILLION YEARS. KNOWN FOR THEIR RESILIENCE, THEY ARE HIGHLY RESISTANT TO DISEASE, PESTS, AND URBAN POLLUTION. THEY ARE DISTINCT FOR THEIR UNIQUE, FAN-SHAPED LEAVES, BRILLIANT YELLOW FALL FOLIAGE, AND EXTREME LONGEVITY, WITH SOME TREES LIVING OVER 3,000 YEARS



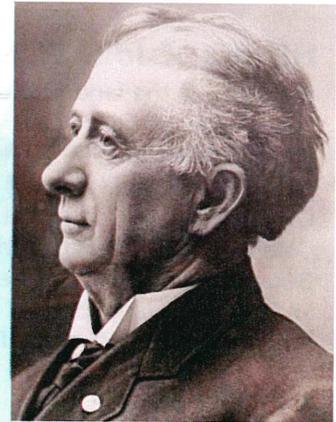
Who was John W. Baker?

John Wesley Baker (1845–1937) was one of Columbia City's most influential early citizens – a newspaperman, politician, and civic builder whose life intertwined journalism, public service, and party politics for more than half a century. An early resident of Columbia City, Baker served as mayor, postmaster, state representative, newspaper editor and was a founder of Old Settlers Days. He also attended Indiana's first Republican State Convention in 1871, remaining active in party affairs for more than six decades.

Born March 7, 1845, in Ohio to Henry D. Baker and Eve (Switzer) Baker-Crawford, Baker moved with his family to Indiana as a child. After his father's death in the 1850s, Baker helped shoulder responsibility while attending school in Kosciusko County. His first job with a printing company sparked a lifelong passion for newspapers, and by 1862 he was working for the Northern Indianian in Warsaw.

In 1864, Baker married Sarah Elizabeth Thornburg. Five years later, he purchased the Columbia City Post and relocated to Whitley County, transforming the newspaper into the Republican-leaning Commercial. From 1869 until 1905, Baker used his newspaper as both a journalistic and political platform, publishing weekly and later daily editions. He later reflected that editors of his era were expected to be unapologetic political partisans—and he was. "Politics were the important interest from the start," he wrote, eventually setting aside journalism to pursue public office more directly.

Baker became a tireless Republican advocate, often running as an underdog. He served as a director of the Indiana State Prison in the late 1870s, was appointed Columbia City postmaster in the 1880s, and won election to the Indiana House of Representatives in 1898, representing Whitley and Kosciusko Counties. Though repeatedly mentioned as a candidate for higher office—including Congress and lieutenant governor—he narrowly missed several nominations. A Fort Wayne Journal Gazette editorial once praised Baker as a man who had "devoted his whole life to the service of the Republican party without reward."



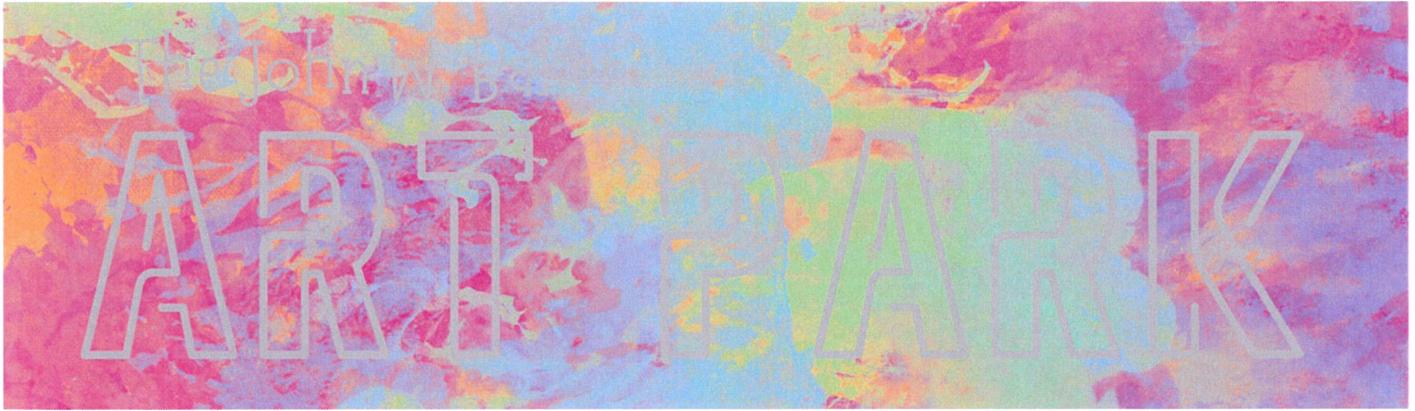
Compiled by Jennifer Zartman Romano, Whitley County Historian

Political rivalry defined much of Baker's career, most notably his long-running feud with rival editor Walter W. Williamson. That rivalry ended dramatically in 1905, when Baker agreed to suspend *The Commercial* in exchange for reappointment as postmaster, effectively ending Republican newspaper competition in Columbia City. The appointment proved lucrative and stable, and Baker was reappointed again in 1910.

After retiring from the post office in 1915, Baker turned to auctioneering before launching one final public chapter. In 1917, at age 72, he was elected mayor of Columbia City. During his term, he oversaw the construction of a World War I soldiers' monument and introduced the city's first motorcycle police officer. He lost his reelection bid in 1921. Sarah Baker died later that year, and John spent his remaining years living with his daughters, faithfully returning to Columbia City for Old Settlers Days each year – an event he helped establish. In 1932, he was honored as the oldest delegate at the Indiana Republican State Convention, having first attended 62 years earlier.

John Wesley Baker died on November 25, 1937, at age 89. He was buried beside his wife in South Park Cemetery following a large funeral procession from Ohio to Columbia City.

Two years later, the city formally dedicated John W. Baker Memorial Park, preserving a large wooded tract on Columbia City's west side for public use. Funded initially by a 1935 bond and developed in part through WPA labor, the park stands as a lasting tribute to a man whose influence shaped Columbia City's political, civic, and journalistic life for generations.



Who is the Columbia City Arts Commission?

The Columbia City Arts Commission was formed by an act of the City of Columbia City in 2022 with the purpose of promoting art and creativity in Columbia City and beyond. The commission includes seven members, each representing a different area of the arts, including visual artists, musicians, dancers, educators and performing artists. The commission meets on the first Tuesday of each month. Current Columbia City Art Commission members include Doug Egolf, Greg Hockemeyer, Taylor Ford, April Frazier, Jennifer Zartman Romano, Connie Boggs and Mike Thomas.

Since its inception, the Columbia City Arts Commission worked to connect creatives of all ages in the community in meaningful ways – hosting Spark, an arts camp for at-risk youth, hosting an annual studio arts tour, hosting a winter art market in collaboration with the Whitley County Historical Society and supporting arts endeavors in the community such as the Columbia City High School Band program, Columbia City High School performing arts program and Columbia City High School's Spring Fling event which helps young creatives market and showcase their art.

What do we envision?

The Columbia City Arts Commission envisions supporting the revitalization of John W. Baker Park in Columbia City – specifically the ravine area with adjacent stairway, concrete pathways and the underpass area to the north of DeVol Field. In this area we would like to see:

- Freestanding areas to feature local art that can be viewed and enjoyed day or night, year round.
- Small to medium plantings of native species plants that would require little to no maintenance, but that would attract and support pollinators.
- We would like to embrace all of the existing landscape and all remaining historical features of the park.
- We would like to consider the installation of murals with natural colors and themes in the park's vicinity.
- We would like to install benches, tables and seating that is complimentary to the natural environment and that is also conducive to viewing the art as well as able to be used by artists to create art in the space.
- We would like to have easy access to electric and water in the basin area of the park to host outdoor concerts and arts-related events which might include dance and performing arts, art markets and more.
- We would also like to install a community art supply closet in the vicinity of the existing FOP lodge where we will distribute art supplies, free of charge, to the community. The commission would manage the stocking and organization of this feature.
- We would also be interested in using the FOP lodge as a meeting and event space and a location where we might be able to host community art classes year-round.

How do we plan to achieve funding for this?

The Columbia City Arts Commission plans to seek funding from a variety of sources to make this possible, including:

- Indiana Arts Commission (a previous CCAC funder)
- Whitley County Community Foundation (a previous CCAC funder)
- Columbia City Arts Commission funds
- Private donations
- Other potential grant opportunities through OCRA, Indiana Humanities, etc.

