

**Frances Langford Promenade at Lake Mirror**  
**Lakeland, Polk County, Florida**  
**Completed 1928**  
**Architect: Charles Wellford Leavitt (1871-1928)**  
**Builder: Kenneth Lynch, Sr. (1906-1989)**

Listed as a Local Historic Landmark by Lakeland City Commission Resolution #2681, February 1, 1982.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places January 27, 1983 (#83001437).

The Frances Langford Promenade at Lake Mirror (“Promenade”) is historically significant in the areas of Architecture, Community Planning, Engineering, Landscape Architecture, and Politics/Government.

**Statement of significance summary:**

The Promenade is Lakeland's most significant and recognizable landmark, having represented the image of this city for nearly a century. As a successful product of Florida's incredible real estate boom of the 1920s, the Promenade is a tangible representation of this important period in Florida's history. However, the Promenade represents much more than civic boosterism; the historical and architectural forces that created the Promenade include the City Beautiful Movement, City Efficient Movement, and Lakeland's strong local leadership during this period. As one of the most significant examples of the City Beautiful Movement in the State of Florida, it gains added significance through the prominence of its designer, Charles Wellford Leavitt, and its principal craftsman, Kenneth Lynch, Sr. Finally, this structure is also significant because it represents the determination of the City of Lakeland to pursue a well-conceived plan for civic growth despite the collapse of the state and nation's economy in the late 1920s.

**Statement of Significance:**

The Promenade is Florida's most significant example of the City Beautiful Movement architectural period and style. Designed by noted New York Landscape Architect Charles Wellford Leavitt, the Promenade is a striking example of the classic design principles employed by this country's leading architects from 1890 to 1930. This period, highlighted by Chicago's Columbian Exposition in 1893, radically altered the course of American architecture, and created modern American urban planning.

With its surrounding Civic Center, the Promenade is a portion of the Lakeland's comprehensive plan for civic improvements, conceived of and carried out in the brief economic boom of the period 1922 to 1926. The City of Lakeland, relying upon progressive leadership and an optimistic and active citizenry, set about to address the physical and cultural needs of a rapidly expanding community. Their success is an indication of the quality of their plan, and a tribute to their civic spirit.

The Civic Center development on Lake Mirror was designed and built as a government-

sponsored improvement during the years 1926 to 1928. It is located just east of the downtown business district and is encircled along its northern perimeter by Main Street, which was designated as the Dixie Highway. The original Dixie Highway was a major cross-American roadway which extended from Southern Florida through the United States to Northern Michigan. The road was also the major cross-Florida route from Tampa to Miami. The Promenade was built specifically to take advantage of this much-traveled route by visually accenting Lakeland as a burgeoning metropolitan city. When approached from the east, the series of walls, pylons, and lights are aligned with the multi-story buildings of Downtown Lakeland to present a sophisticated setting largely unknown to southern cities. The visual effect was so striking that the Lakeland newspaper, local merchants, and even the National Geographic Magazine used this view of Lake Mirror as symbolizing Lakeland and the developing state of Florida in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Thus, within Lakeland's first Civic Center and its Promenade, are a complex intermingling of national trends in planning, design, and government. These influences were transplanted to this small southern town by outside investors and tourists, as well as by an increasing level of marketing communication. But it was Lakeland's decision to hire a planning consultant from New York City, that brought fully to this community the goals and aspirations of the American Renaissance. It is a statement of America's emerging "Great Civilization," and of one community's desire to become a part of it. As a product of a unique period in the history of Lakeland, the state of Florida, and the country as a whole, the Promenade is a significant and meaningful achievement locally, regionally, and nationally.

The sudden growth of Lakeland's population during the 1920s Florida Land Boom, and the demands it brought upon local government, resulted from national trends in real estate investment and tourism. But two other important national trends in government and community planning, the City Beautiful and City Efficient, were particularly influential in determining the character and emphasis of Lakeland's Civic Program.

#### (Historical Context)

As early as 1860, Frederick Law Olmsted's design for Central Park in New York City began to stimulate local government interest in community beautification and planning. Major cities sought to develop urban parks and provide improved building and development regulation. But it was the Columbian Exposition of 1893 that "...changed the course of urban building in the United States and, because of its great popular appeal, led to the birth of modern American urban planning." This nationally popular trend became known as the City Beautiful Movement.

The City Beautiful Movement reflected America's impatience with unchecked growth and chaotic design and held that a community "must control unbridled individualism." Utilizing the American Baroque and American Roman building traditions, the architects and planners of this period, with great public approval, united site planning, architecture, and monumental magnitude to design large classical civic structures. Local governments frequently turned to the dominant professional - the architect/planner - for the design of

libraries, museums, terminals, lake-front beautification, and civic centers. Washington, D.C., Kansas City, St. Louis, Cedar Rapids, Madison, and Des Moines are just a few of the cities nationwide who willingly financed such improvements immediately following the turn of the twentieth century. The most noted planning professional of the period, Daniel H. Burnham, had, in concert with Olmsted and others, planned and designed The Columbian Exposition-1893, Washington, D.C.-1902, and Chicago-1909. Burnham's famous quote from this period in history characterized his influence in civic design: "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood."

The City Beautiful emphasized, above all else, classical order, symmetry, and uniformity, grouping public buildings around formal spaces for public use and appreciation. Leavitt, a contemporary of Burnham and Olmsted, clung strongly to these ideals in his design of Lakeland's first civic center. The Promenade is clearly an orderly repetition of classical design elements aligned to a strict axis formed by Main Street. The Promenade is strikingly similar to the City Beautiful's most famous design reference: The Court of Honor within The Columbian Exposition. The Court of Honor's formalization of natural land and water, ornate balustrade and seawall, and use of classical ornamentation are, without question, the model for the Promenade.

Along with the planning and aesthetic trends of the City Beautiful, the United States experienced the birth of the "City Efficient" during the 1910s and 1920s. The City Efficient envisioned community progress as the construction of public works and services with government regulation of private construction through zoning. Lakeland's city government set about to become a "City Efficient". The community voted in a Commission/Manager form of government in 1922. During the next four years, the bureaucratic structure was reorganized, an advisory board and planning board appointed, and zoning ordinance adopted. This increase in regulation and urban planning was complemented by the extensive civic improvement (public works) program.

Together, the City Beautiful and City Efficient movements influenced the desires of Lakeland's leaders. The tremendous growth of the local community during this period provided the means to finance and thus realize these desires.

During this divergent period, a California-born Central America-raised architect rose to prominence in Florida. Addison Mizner "viewed architecture as an incorporation of the structure itself, the landscape, and the interior decoration. Drawing on his Latino past, Mizner designed a number of "sumptuous" villas in his 'Hispano-Moresque Style' along Florida's southeastern coast during the 1920s. Thus, what became known as the Mediterranean Revival architectural style was associated with Florida and greatly influenced regional architecture.

Lakeland's plan was influenced by all of these trends. At the insistence of local leaders, the city retained Leavitt to assist in the comprehensive plan for public works and the design for its keystone project - the Civic Center. The City Administration's plan

consisted mainly of buildings endemic to the period. A number of the buildings - the City Hall, Mayhall Auditorium, Trammell Library, Morrell Memorial Hospital, and certain Civic Center Buildings - were designed locally and constructed in Mizner's Mediterranean Revival style. The Promenade itself, designed by City Beautiful advocate Leavitt, followed classical design themes. An older Landscape Architect from New York, Leavitt was not influenced by the styles popular in Florida during the 1920s.

The idea for the Civic Center/Promenade is generally credited to Thomas Appleyard, Lakeland Chamber of Commerce Manager. The Lake Mirror Civic Center concept consisted of plans for the construction of a recreational and entertainment center adjacent to Downtown Lakeland. The facility would provide both passive and active recreation, including tennis, shuffleboard, lawn bowling, concerts, meetings and of course, just strolling. These improvements would conform in appearance to other public facilities, and as a whole, create an impressive entrance along Lakeland's major throughfare. The first step in building the Civic Center necessarily involved selecting and obtaining the site. Bonds to raise construction funds could not be issued prior to site acquisition. From the start, the property surrounding Lake Mirror seemed to generate the most interest. On June 12, 1923, the City Commission adopted a Planning Board Resolution recommending the purchase of the Sloan, Carter, and Jones parcels off of the lake. Sometime prior to July 1924, the City Commission made a determination to purchase the Lake Mirror site for civic center purposes. Rather than issuing bonds for its purchase, however, the Commission proposed to sell the main city park, originally dedicated by Abraham Munn and bearing his name, in order to raise funds for the purchase of the proposed civic center site. Although the City initially sold the park property to the Central Bank and Trust Company, several citizens filed suit for injunctive relief to invalidate the sale. The citizens succeeded, with Judge Andrews reasoning that Lakeland held Munn Park in its sovereign, not proprietary, capacity in trust only for use as a park. In order to purchase the Lake Mirror property, the City eventually had to sell a \$460,000 bond issue approved by ordinance and by special act of the 1925 State Legislature.

The City then hired Leavitt to design the civic center site. Leavitt and supported the idea of extending Dixie Highway eastward and then along the north shore of Lake Mirror to Main Street. This would balance the project aesthetically and provide a view of the center from Main Street. Extending the road to Main Street, however, would necessitate the demolition of the Chautauqua Auditorium. The Lakeland Chautauqua had been constructed in 1915 through the donation of private funds but had proved a financial failure. In December of 1925, Thomas Bryant, a lawyer, state legislator, and Lakeland civic leader, and others, saw the first cracks in Florida's economy as rail transportation broke down in part of the state and the pyramidal real estate boom began to falter. Extensive hurricane damage started a chain reaction of tax delinquencies and bank failures.

The City Manager, members of the City Planning Board, and the City Commission met with Leavitt several times from November 1925 through 1926. On April 11, 1926, the

City Commission endorsed Leavitt's plans and proposed a series of ordinances which included a bond issue of \$300,000.00 for the construction of the following;

1. Main Street extension;
2. Promenade on west side of lake;
3. Piers and terraces; and
4. Pavillion on west side.

This issue was approved by ordinance on April 27, 1926. Plans, but not funds, for the construction of an 8,000 seat capacity amphitheater were also approved. While speaking before the Rotary Club in support of the upcoming bond referendum, Leavitt argued for "the making of a city beautiful." Leavitt spoke for the need of a campaign for property beautification throughout the city. He also warned that the civic center plan should be closely followed, and that the city should resist the temptation to extend a street along the south shore of the lake, through the proposed park.

In spite of the growing economic collapse in Florida, the citizens of Lakeland validated the bonds through referendum by a four to one majority on June 1, 1926. The City continued to push the public works plan and the civic center throughout 1926. In July, the City was able to sell a \$1,068,000.00 bond issue for the construction of the civic center and additional public works projects. The City was also pleasantly surprised in December, when H.B. Trauger, contractor, came in with a low bid of \$132,740.00 for the construction of the first phase of the civic center. Trauger constructed the First and Second Phases, while I.B. Purdy and A. Logan eventually constructed the last phase for \$47,770.22. J.W. Bradner served as chief engineer.

Early in 1927, public concern over worsening economic conditions became evident. The expenditure of public funds while conditions were difficult caused the civic center project and certain public officials to become the target of some frustrated citizens. Bryant's influence was sufficient to keep the civic center on track. City Manager Schneider was not so fortunate, resigning his office in the Spring of 1927. Construction of the Lake Mirror Civic Center progressed during 1927. In March of 1928, a delegation appeared before the Commission requesting an additional \$150,000.00 to build the amphitheater. An ordinance authorizing the bond issue was adopted on April 18, 1928, and repealed seven days later in favor of a proposal to expand the new city auditorium.

As construction neared completion, the Chamber of Commerce and the City made plans for a large celebration on the Fourth of July. The celebration was timed to coincide with the Orange Growers Clearing House Association meeting with Governor Doyle E. Carlton and Congressman Herbert J. Drane invited to speak. The Chamber of Commerce arranged the dedication program, receiving \$1,000 from the City to assist in its execution. An additional \$500 raised privately provided the remainder needed to pay for the celebration including \$750 for fireworks. The schedule of events for July 4, 1928, occurred as follows:

10:00 AM - Industrial Parade  
11:00 AM - Dedication Ceremony and Growers Meeting  
12:00 PM - Private luncheon in Leavitt's honor  
1:00 PM - Boat Races on Lake Hollingsworth  
2:30 PM - Ball games  
3:30 PM - Flying Circus  
6:30 PM - Sundown Flag ceremony  
8:00 PM - Evening meeting  
8:15 PM - Address by Governor Carlton  
9:00 PM - Fireworks Display

In dedicating the Promenade and Civic Center, Mr. Sam Farabee, editor of the Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star Telegram, stated, "It is the most distinctive piece of architecture in America. It is a combination of art with nature to develop a beautiful picture where one may rest, or play, or dream, or think."

During the 1930's, it was customary for Florida cities to advertise in the Florida Municipal Record, a publication of the Florida League of Municipalities. Lakeland was no different. Most of the advertisements resemble a blatant form of 1920's boosterism in form and content. It is significant to note, however, that all of Lakeland's ads during the period 1930-1934 promoted the Lake Mirror Civic Center; it was touted as one of Lakeland's most outstanding achievements:

"The city purchased approximately twenty-seven acres, including Lake Mirror and bordering land, in the heart of Lakeland. The old buildings were torn away to make space for one of the most remarkable civic centers to be found. It is a safety playground for tourists and home folks, where every recreational facility is installed."

At least one other major publication of the day mentions the Lake Mirror Civic Center. The National Geographic Magazine, in its 1930 article on Florida, contained a full-page picture of the lake improvements, looking from east to west across Lake Mirror. The picture is captioned: "LIKE THE ORNATE ENTRANCE TO SOME VAST VENETIAN PALACE LOOMS THE CIVIC CENTER OF LAKELAND."

The Promenade came to represent Lakeland's image in the minds of residents and visitors alike. City Government, the Chamber of Commerce, private organizations and even commercial enterprises adopted the "Civic Center" skyline as their image and logo. It was with this pride in Lakeland's most important public landmark that, in 1946, it was renamed the Frances Langford Promenade in honor of the city's then most famous Resident.

No less significant than the overall design concept was Leavitt's early use of reinforced concrete as the major structural and ornamental component. Although reinforced concrete has been known in theory since the 1850s, the structural basis for its general

architectural use was not established until about 1890. But Leavitt was not only working with a still experimental material, he was forming it into complex, angular shapes when others were learning to pour rectangular beams, columns and slabs.

The firm of Charles Wellford Leavitt & Son, Landscape Engineers designed the Lake Mirror Promenade and Amphitheater in 1925 and 1926. In addition, Mr. Leavitt personally provided consulting assistance to The City of Lakeland in matters concerning land acquisition, land use and comprehensive community planning. Mr. Leavitt died within three years of his Lakeland engagement.

There is little doubt that Mr. Leavitt was a highly qualified and successful Landscape Architect, known at least within the New York Metropolitan area, and perhaps nationally. The firm of Wellford Leavitt & Son referred to themselves as Landscape Engineers and supported a large practice, employing nearly fifty professionals. At the time the Lake Mirror Project was in the firm's office, they occupied an entire floor of the Lincoln Building on 42nd Street in New York City. As a prolific Landscape Architect during the 1920s, Mr. Leavitt is known for the many large private estates he designed on Long Island, including projects for The Rockefeller Family. Being involved in "...99 percent of the major estate work", Mr. Leavitt was considered by some to have "inherited the Crown from Frederick Law Olmsted" during the 1910s and 1920s.

A graduate of Harvard University, Mr. Leavitt was very much influenced by the professional trends in the northeast at the turn of the twentieth century. Firms such as McKim, Mead and White (Boston Library-1888, Columbian Exposition-1893, Plan for Washington, D.C.-1902) created a national trend in design and planning - one that emphasized a return to grand scale classical architecture. Even Olmsted, who earlier deplored formality, participated in the "Classical Renaissance." This national concern with creating grand civic spaces and buildings in a classical motif was at a peak during Leavitt's developmental years. It is of no surprise then that, as an older man, Leavitt clung to these traditions - on the wane throughout the 1920s - in his design of the Promenade and overall civic plan for Lakeland. The project was completed at the end of America's architectural renaissance, just prior to the Great Depression and fully in the midst of Florida's Land Boom Crash. As a grand formalization of land and water, creating a truly "City Beautiful" image at Lakeland's major highway entrance, the Lake Mirror Civic Center Complex is perhaps the last great monument to an important forty-year period in the history of modern American planning, design and municipal government.

Kenneth Lynch, Sr. was a craftsman of the early 20th century, active through the 1970s. As President of Kenneth Lynch & Sons, Mr. Lynch oversaw the only surviving custom hand-crafted architectural ornament production facilities in the country. Known as The Craft Center Buildings, in Wilton, Connecticut, the company provides space for craftsmen to work in wrought iron, lead, bronze, stone and other materials. It is a unique and renowned organization, so much so that it was supported in part by grants from The Rockefeller Foundation.

Begun in 1872, this organization provided statuary, fountains, clocks, urns, ornamental stonework and countless other elements to compliment the many great buildings built prior to 1930. Mr. Lynch himself repaired the Statue of Liberty in the late 1920's. Mr. Lynch was, for forty years, a consultant to the New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. Mr. Lynch had a long-term business and professional relationship with Charles Wellford Leavitt. This relationship included the Promenade, for which Kenneth Lynch provided the ornamental stonework; including urns, lighting standards, pylons and column capitals. In an interview for the National Register nomination of the Promenade, Mr. Lynch recalled the job, and related the design and construction process:

"First, each element would be numbered for identification. The Chief Architectural Modeler for that job would meet with the Architect to discuss the type and character he wanted in the hand-crafted elements. Then, an ornamental draftsman would make a full-scale drawing of each item and submit the drawings for review and approval. Once any changes were incorporated, a clay model would be built of usually half the element, and once again reviewed. Finally, a full plaster model would be built, and a mold made of the model. We could then cast the item many times in various materials. I think the work (for Lake Mirror) was cast in Florida from Florida materials but that our molds were used."

It has been pointed out that the Promenade and overall Civic Center project is a significant example of the Florida Boom, The City Beautiful and City Efficient Movements; no less significant is the designer, Leavitt and principal craftsman Lynch. These men were leaders in the creation of significant architectural achievements in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. The Promenade is, therefore, a significant example of the work of these professionals.

The story of Lakeland's first civic center is varied and multi-faceted as the period in which it took place. The Lake Mirror Civic Center, with its striking promenade, symbolizes the energetic, well-conceived growth of a small Central Florida town into a thriving southern city. Spawned against the background of boom-time Florida in the mid-1920s, with its thriving real estate, citrus, mineral, and tourist industries, the Civic Center served as the keystone of one community's plan to satisfy public needs for utilities, roads, recreation, culture, and entertainment.

The Lake Mirror Civic Center is clearly a product of a unique period in the history of Lakeland, the state of Florida, and the nation as a whole. Incredible growth pressures, desires to become a "great" city, national trends in local government and civic design; all coalesced and produced a surviving monument to a people, and to the time in which they lived.