

# America's original Magic Kingdom

by Daniel F. Harrington

The buildings were engulfed in flames. A young woman, high upon a ledge, cried out for help. Finally, the firefighters arrived. They hastily spread a net as the blaze moved to consume her. The damsel then leapt through the smoke and landed safely in the net! Two thousand onlookers burst into cheers.

Meanwhile, across the way, a room full of glass structures housed a dozen premature babies. Nurses tended to their every need.

The babes would soon get used to the shrieks that surrounded them, non-stop, day and night. You see, just outside their habitat, boats full of human beings fell from the sky and landed in a man-made lagoon surrounded by 100,000 electric lights.

It was opening day, May 25, 1907, at America's original Magic Kingdom. All over New England, people dreamed of coming to the magnificent new amusement park called Vanity Fair in Riverside, Rhode Island.



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Proposed layout of Vanity Fair. Some attractions never materialized, the rest were less ornate.

Located on 40 acres of what is now the Silver Spring Golf Course, America's first theme park designed from scratch attracted 40,000 visitors on its first day- yet closed forever just five years later.

Billed as "the park triumphant," it didn't disappoint.

The fire rescue reenactment was a "masterpiece of realism." Dubbed "Fighting the Flames," it included a cast of 200 and a

life-size town square designed to burn. Acrobatic actors ascended and descended ladders to rescue their many victims, including children. (Think Cirque du Soleil.)

The falling boat ride was called "Shooting the Chutes," and its impressive edifice served as the park's centerpiece. All around it attractions abounded: An open air circus featuring Adgie the Lion Tamer, a Wild West show, a Rocky Mountain roller-coaster and a ride simulating an earthquake. A grand ballroom hosted the finest musical acts and guests dined at the exquisite College Inn.



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Vanity Fair's main entrance on Pawtucket Ave.

Notice that many postcards give the location as Providence rather than Riverside or East Providence

That summer, aviation pioneer A. Roy Knabenshue flew his airship "Imperial"



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The Infant Incubators were located in a separate building as part of the South Walk.

from Vanity Fair to the State House and back, dazzling hundreds of thousands of Rhode islanders.

But Vanity was doomed from the start. Three months after opening, the stock market crashed in the Great Panic of 1907, sealing the fate of the upscale park that dared charge a 10-cent admission fee. Standard Oil purchased the bankrupt property in 1915 and Vanity was forgotten.

But not before Joshua Daigneault changed the world.

Born in Providence in July 1907, Joshua was appallingly small at birth, weighing just one pound. Newspapers noted the hand of the world's smallest human being "could slide through his mother's wedding ring."

Shocked to see the baby breathing, an intrepid doctor named Crocker immediately summoned the Providence police to speed Joshua - in an open air motorcar- to the peculiar "Infant Incubators" exhibit at Vanity Fair. There, they hoped, the "tiny mite" might survive.

"Infant Incubators" was the brainchild of Dr. Martin Couney, a German-Jewish immigrant who specialized in caring for premature infants but couldn't secure funding for his endeavors from traditional hospitals. So he turned to the amusement industry, establishing functioning neonatal facilities in select parks like Vanity Fair. (Which means, of course, thousands of Rhode Islanders can credibly claim a grandparent who began life as a circus exhibit!)

At first Joshua rallied, moving from a diet of diluted brandy to mother's milk and nearly doubling his weight. The press cheered his progress, but after a few weeks, Joshua succumbed to the impossible odds.

Still, he captured the imagination of the world.

A British newspaper lovingly compared "Poor Little Joshua" to the biblical Joshua who made the sun stand still. Today, "Providence Joshua" is still worth a pause of reflection. More than 1,000 premature babies per year are cared for at Providence's exemplary Women and Infants Hospital. Each one owes a tip of his or her tiny cap to the pioneering boy who, long ago, perished at an enchanting place called Vanity Fair.

Learn more about the golden age of Ocean State amusement parks at "Midway Memories," hosted by the Rhode Island Historical Society, on May 10. ([www.springforwardthinkback.com](http://www.springforwardthinkback.com))

-Daniel F. Harrington ([danielfharrington@yahoo.com](mailto:danielfharrington@yahoo.com)), a monthly contributor, is president of Chartwell Wealth Management, in Rumford.



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"Shooting the Chutes", the park's centerpiece. Visible on the left is the "College Inn" and the "Grand Ballroom" on the right.