

# George F. Johnson's Carousel Legacy

K. L. Small



**Ross Park Allan Herschell carousel.**

—NCA Photo Show,  
Susan Hudson

The Greater Binghamton area of New York's Southern Tier, also called the Triple Cities (Binghamton, Endicott and Johnson City), proudly calls itself the "Carousel Capital of the World" because it is the home of six Allan Herschell wooden carousels. All are on the New York State Historic Register and National Register of Historic Places. The region owes these treasures to the generosity of one man—a shoemaker named George F. Johnson.

Born in Milford, Massachusetts, on October 14, 1857, Johnson was the son of a shoemaker. He followed his father into the family business and learned the craft of making footwear. In 1881, at the age of 24, he was hired to supervise a work crew for a shoe and boot company in Binghamton, New York. Nine years later, he was promoted to superintendent of that company's new plant, in the community of Lestershire, New York (renamed Johnson City in 1916).

When the Lestershire Shoe and Boot Company ran into financial difficulty in 1892, Henry B. Endicott of Boston purchased the struggling operation and retained George F. Johnson as general manager.

In 1899, Johnson became co-owner of the business and renamed it the Endicott-Johnson Company. The name was often shortened to simply "EJ." The company grew, expanding to eight factories and up to ten thousand employees. Johnson started an employer-

employee partnership he called the Square Deal. He established a 40-hour work-week, built housing for employees, ran low-cost restaurants and donated community improvements such as medical facilities, libraries, parks and recreational amenities. He believed employers had a responsibility to provide for the workers' welfare. That belief included meeting the recreational needs of employees' children.

In his own childhood, George F. Johnson experienced the unhappiness of not having a nickel to ride a carousel. To ensure that his employees' children never repeated

his sadness, he donated six carousels to the community over the course of fourteen years, with the condition that the public was never to be charged to ride the carousels. All six "Country Fair Style" machines were produced by the Allan Herschell Company in North Tonawanda, New York.

## Ross Park

The first carousel donated was in 1920, for Ross Park in Binghamton. Records suggest the park may have had a carousel as early as 1897. The donated carousel features sixty jumpers, four-abreast, and two chariots. Its Wurlitzer Style 146-A band organ (late-style) is currently in storage. The ride is inside a sixteen-sided wooden pavilion topped by an eight-sided cupola. 2020 marked the centennial for this carousel at Ross Park.

## C. Fred Johnson Park

George F. Johnson's second carousel purchase, in 1923, would end up being the largest of all of his donations. This four-abreast machine is located at C. Fred Johnson Park in Johnson City, a park named after George's brother. It has seventy-two jumping horses—and no chariots—and is housed in an eighteen-sided, enclosed wooden pavilion topped by a six-sided cupola. The C. Fred Johnson Park carousel is the



largest surviving Allan Herschell carousel with all-wood figures, and features a “double-crown center” (inside panels both above and below the sweeps), rare for an Allan Herschell machine.

#### Recreation Park

The third carousel was installed at Recreation Park in Binghamton in 1925. Like the Ross Park carousel, this four-abreast machine includes sixty jumping horses and two chariots. In addition, it features a Wurlitzer Style 146-B band organ (late-style). This ride was the inspiration for an episode of Rod Serling’s television show “The Twilight Zone.” Renovations to this carousel recognize the Rod Serling connection with rounding board paintings by Cortland Hull.

#### En-Joie Park / Highland Park

A fourth carousel was installed at En-Joie Park in Endicott in the mid-1920s. The three-abreast merry-go-round has thirty-four jumping horses, two very rare Allan Herschell Company menagerie figures—a pig and a dog—and two chariots. It was relocated in 1967 to Highland Park in Endwell, making it the only one of the six Broome County carousels that has been moved. The machine is housed in a 16-sided, enclosed wooden pavilion.

#### West Endicott Park

In 1929, the fifth carousel was erected at West Endicott Park in Endicott, just across the street

from the Endicott-Johnson Company factories. Like its sister machine now at Highland Park, this ride includes thirty-four jumping horses, a pig, dog and two chariots. It has a 16-sided, enclosed wooden pavilion.

#### George W. Johnson Park

The final donated carousel was placed in Endicott’s George W. Johnson Park (named after George F. Johnson’s son) in 1934. Located in a neighborhood of typical “EJ” worker homes, this carousel has thirty-six horses, three-abreast, and two chariots. A glass enclosure was added in 1999.



Above left,  
C. Fred  
Johnson Park.  
Above right,  
Recreation Park.  
Below, Highland  
Park (note rare  
Allan Herschell  
pig).

—Photos:  
Daniel Robinson



**Left, West Endicott Park (note rare Allan Herschell dog). Right, George W. Johnson Park.**

—Photos: Daniel Robinson (left), NCA Photo Show, Jean Bennett (right)

These six carousels were a collective gift to the community. When George F. Johnson died on November 29, 1948, in Endicott, thousands attended his funeral. The community had lost a generous benefactor, but he had made the Triple Cities the “Carousel Capital of the World.” George F. Johnson would likely be happy with this centennial carousel legacy.

The continuation of his legacy is tied to the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of these rides. Different municipalities budget for the carousels located within their jurisdictions. Skilled artisans and craftspeople such as Susan Germain of Syracuse, New York, and WRF Designs (formerly R&F Designs) of Plainville, Connecticut, have over time restored various elements of these carousels.

Susan Germain, who operates as Red Hot Restoration, restored the horses for two of the carousels in the early 2000s. In 2019, she did complete maintenance on the West Endicott Park horses, which she had previously repainted. The chariots were slated to be restored in 2020, but work was delayed by Covid-19.

The Village of Johnson City has ensured regular maintenance of the C. Fred Johnson Park carousel, retaining Germain to conserve its scenery paintings.

The City of Binghamton commissioned a full restoration of the Recreation Park carousel by WRF Designs in 2011. This included the figures and scenery panels. The goal was to maintain the carousel as close as possible to its original appearance. WRF Designs has a contract with the city for the ongoing maintenance of the carousel.

Gabe Finkenstein of WRF Designs views restoration of these treasures as a responsibility to the next generation. A forward-looking thinker like George F. Johnson would likely have agreed.

Under normal conditions, the carousels are available for the public at no charge, typically running between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Riding all six carousels is known as “riding the circuit” and earns the rider a button proclaiming the accomplishment.

**Endicott-Johnson Shoes rounding board (“For the Entire Family ... For Real Service”) at Recreation Park. This painting and others by Cortland Hull were added during restoration.**

—Photo: Daniel Robinson





Left, Recreation Park.  
Below, signature  
panel, West  
Endicott Park.

—Photos:  
Daniel Robinson (left),  
NCA Photo Show,  
Adrienne Cecero (below)



## *Membership Renewal Reminder*

Thank you to all who have renewed their NCA memberships. Your continued membership is very important and helps us to help our beloved carousels. For those of you who have not yet renewed, there is a form included on the back of the address label insert in the plastic mailer. We hope you will use this and send in your renewal as soon as possible. You can send in your membership by U.S. mail or by PayPal. If you want to use your PayPal account or pay by credit card through PayPal, there is a form on our website, [Carousels.org](http://Carousels.org). The form also includes an area where you can include a donation to the NCA's Preservation Fund if you wish to help us even more with our preservation efforts.

Just a reminder, our membership year runs from January 1 to December 31 each year, and that membership includes four *Merry-Go-Roundup* print issues (or digital when a print copy is no longer available). This spring issue of the quarterly *Merry-Go-Roundup* journal is the first one of the membership year.

If you know someone who is interested in carousels or as you visit carousels throughout the U.S. and the world, please let them know about us. We would love to have them as members. An NCA membership makes a great gift for your favorite carousel fan.

— Karen VanSant, Executive Secretary