

# Turtle sculpture in Reading's City Park gets a new head

The piece, sculpted in 1878, was recut and restored.



The Turtle sculpture in City Park by Herman Strecker has been restored. The head was missing for many years. (BILL UHRICH -READING EAGLE)



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After a century without a head, the marble turtle in Reading's City Park has a new one.

The turtle is part of statue replaced in the park this week after extensive rehabilitation by Kreilick Conservation, Springfield Township, Montgomery County.

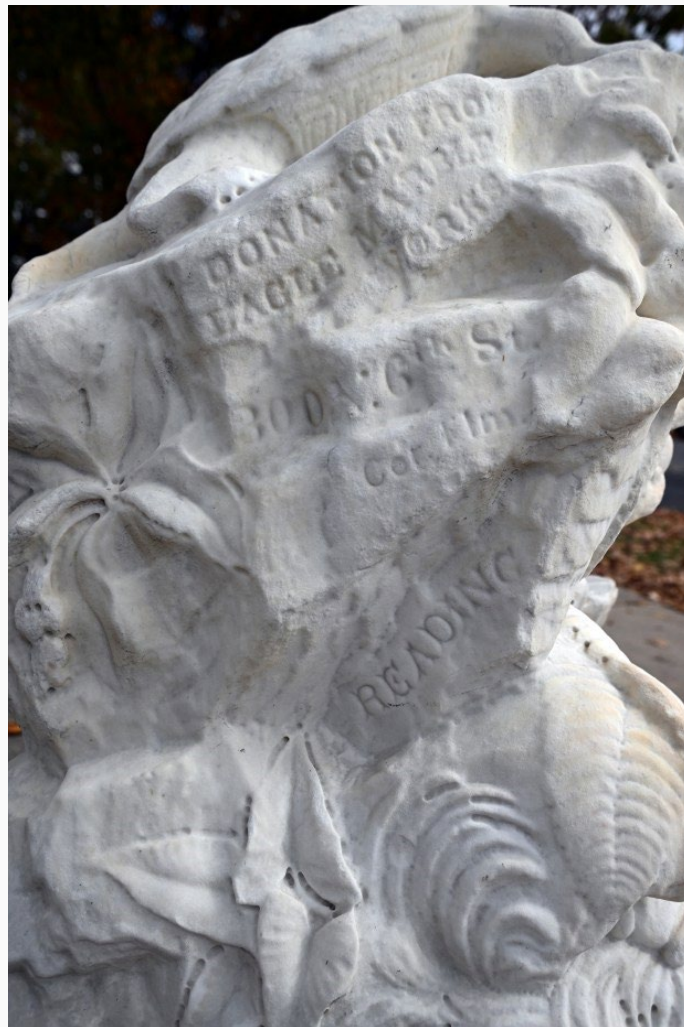
“A careful restoration process revealed intricate details, additional animal features, beautiful flowers and carved writings that had been hidden over the years,” the city

posted on social media. “The snapping turtle perched on top was re-carved and mounted, bringing the statue back to its full glory.”

Kreilick also renewed the park’s [Dove sculpture](#), which was unveiled at the annual Peace Walk this year.

City Council approved the turtle sculpture’s repair in April, awarding a contract for \$18,000 to Kreilick to refurbish the piece.

The project was funded from a pool of \$135,000 in unused capital improvement project monies.



Restoration of the Turtle sculpture has revealed intricate details, additional animal features, flowers and carved writings. (BILL UHRICH -READING EAGLE)

A slight yellow-orange hue that remains is the result of a biocide applied to remove biological growth from the marble, said Noel Acosta III, city communications coordinator. This will fade over time as it continues to work, he said.

In addition, the former water feature was deactivated and patched, Acosta said, and lead and ferrous objects were removed.

### **Remaining gift**

The sculpture at the corner of Hill Road and Perkiomen Avenue was given to the city in 1878 by Penrose F. Eisenbrown, owner of the Eagle Mable Works, 543 Elm St.

Originally a drinking fountain, it is the only one remaining of three ornamental fountains donated as gifts to the citizens of Reading by area businesses and intended to beautify City Park.

Before turning it over to the city, Eisenbrown exhibited the naturalistic sculpture at the 1879 Berks County Fair.

It was described in a report on the fair in the Oct. 1, 1879, *Reading Times*: “The fountain is carved out of a solid block of marble six feet high and represents a rock covered with ferns. On top of the rock is a huge turtle. On the side is a seashell, constituting the basin. Below is a huge crocodile (sic) and a frog is slyly hid under the leaves. It cost about \$1,000 and will make a splendid ornament.”

“Do you realize how much \$1,000 was at that time?” Berks County historian George M. Meiser IX asked. “You could buy a small Reading row house for \$900 in the 1890s. That gives you perspective.”



The Turtle sculpture in City Park by Herman Strecker dates to 1878. (BILL UHRICH - READING EAGLE)

The turtle's head went missing in 1923, according to antiquarian Charles A. Angstadt of Muhlenberg Township, as quoted in the May 13, 1976, *Reading Eagle*. If Angstadt was correct, the turtle had been missing a head for 100 years.

However, Meiser recalls that the head was reattached at some point, then disappeared again.

### **Sculptor, scientist**

The artwork was highly celebrated when first installed, Meiser said, noting it was carved by the Reading sculptor and scientist Herman Strecker.

Strecker, a self-taught entomologist, who specialized in butterflies and moths, or Lepidoptera, was awarded an honorary doctorate for his scientific work in 1890 from Franklin and Marshall College.

Strecker was born in Philadelphia in 1836 and learned the art of marble carving from his father. For a time, he owned and operated the former Moers marble yard in Reading. However, Meiser noted, Strecker preferred working for Eisenbrown to operating his own business as it gave him more free time to pursue his hobby of collecting and studying butterflies and moths.

From 1872 to 1900, Strecker illustrated and published several books on the subject, including *Butterflies and Moths of North America* in 1878, and identified and described 251 different species, according to the [Field Museum's website](#). The museum in Chicago acquired Strecker's collection after his death in 1901.

### **Court battle**

The turtle sculpture and two other fountains were installed in City Park, also known as Penns Common, as part of the beautification efforts instigated in the late 19th century by George F. Baer, attorney for and later president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad.

Despite the Penn family's wishes that the common remain a place for public recreation, Meiser said, the Berks County commissioners, who had control from 1800 to 1852, permitted several intrusions in the park. These included the county prison and fairgrounds, and the city waterworks.

Represented by its attorney and Baer, the city took the county to court over the land's use. Though the city lost in the local court, it won on appeal to the state Supreme Court in 1886.

Spurred by the highly influential Baer, improvements to the park began about eight years before the court ruling, Meiser noted.

The Oct. 23, 1878, *Times* notes the park's lawns were planted with rye, blue grass and red top grass to provide texture and color. Roads were laid out and fountains, donated by the Reading Hardware Company and John D. Mishler, a Reading promoter and owner of 16 regional theaters, were erected.

"The fountain contributed by P.F. Eisenbrown, which will weigh eight tons, is now on the way," the *Times* reported, referring to the turtle sculpture.

Eight tons seems excessive, Meiser said, pondering whether the newspaper got that right.

For years, the fountain went unrepaired and ignored, the historian said.

"I think it's wonderful that it's been repaired," he said. "It's a very significant piece of statuary."