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## Mysteries of Cold Spring Park

“Defending Jacob”<sup>1</sup> is not the only mystery involving the sociology of Newton and the ecology of Cold Spring Park.

Cold Spring Park was once known as Alcock’s Swamp<sup>2</sup> and is open space today partly because of the 1633 decree of the Great and General Court of Massachusetts that wetlands over 100 acres were to be held in common.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, much of it became private property, which the city gradually bought back, obtained as a gift, or took for taxes.<sup>4</sup>

The Cochituate Aqueduct, which runs along the east side of the park, was built 1846–48, egg-shaped with 8” brick walls, to bring water from Lake Cochituate to the Chestnut Hill Reservoir via a pumping station on Quinobequin Road. It was abandoned in the 1930s and the Newton section was bought by the City and converted into a sewer, which joins a trunk line in Nonantum. The Sudbury Aqueduct, more substantially built and horseshoe shaped, extends from Farm Pond in Framingham over Echo Bridge and parallels the Cochituate Aqueduct to where they nearly meet near the northeast corner of the park in Four Corners.<sup>4</sup>

The aqueducts, the installation of the drain, and the channeling of a portion of Cold Spring Brook subsequent

to the completion of Commonwealth Ave. changed the ecology of the swamp so that in 1907, Charles J. Maynard, a noted Newton naturalist and ornithologist,<sup>5,6</sup> lamented the disappearance of the white cedars, the black crowned night heron and the long-eared owl.<sup>4</sup>

Around 1916, Atlas Film Studios acquired much of Old Cold Spring Park, built a studio near the end of Alden St. (now 35–41 Chatham Rd.) and produced mainly westerns but also *The Place of the Honeymoons* in 1920.<sup>7</sup> One of their producers, Frank Howard, became a minor mogul in the film industry, opened the first movie theatre in Boston, and began the Boston Film Exchange.<sup>8,9</sup> Atlas Films employed locals as extras, including eventual Recreation Commission member and mayor (1954–59) Howard Whitmore.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1920s, the existence of a 100-acre swamp in the middle of Newton, even with a saturated solution of mud 5 to

54 feet thick, covered almost entirely with peat and heavily wooded in parts with swamp maples, tempted development. The swamp was ditched and the water drained into the brook, which was rechanneled, partly culverted and lowered five feet, causing the playfields between the Aqueduct and Kingston Road to emerge.<sup>4</sup>



Cold Spring Coat of Arms

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Helen King, Extra for Atlas Film Corp.

Pillon property was added to Cold Spring Playground as the entrance on Dunklee Rd.<sup>12</sup>

One of the surviving mysteries, probably from the 1930s, is the dam and embankment that can be seen on the east side of the exercise path, which was apparently made to form a skating pond. This curiously bears the more recently painted inscription: "This is to inform you that I did not die young." No doubt by somebody who is not now so young.

Another mystery is how the Cardinal's Coat of Arms arrived in Cold Spring Park. Boston's Cardinal William Henry O'Connell's was elevated to that rank in 1911 and reputedly had an ego only minutely smaller than St. Peter's Basilica. A number of his coats of arms carved in stone grace what is now the Lake Street campus of Boston College. Possibly he distributed others on buildings throughout his archdiocese, but how did this large cement one end up near a small path off the side trail to Beaconwood Road? If you bushwhack back to the edge of the swamp and inspect this version of his coat of arms, you may note that it is inscribed not with the usual three O'Connell shamrocks, but with three fleur-de-lis. Was this a defective coat of arms that the Cardinal had cast into the dump of Cold Spring Swamp?

In 1962, the Recreation Commission moved to acquire land adjacent to Cold Spring Playground for a municipal golf course and an ice-skating rink.<sup>13-15</sup> In 1967, the Commission recommended that vacant land adjacent to Cold Spring playground be purchased for the golf course.<sup>16</sup> In 1969, the Commission also requested that the Cold Spring parcels be transferred from the designation of "Park" to that of "Park and Recreation" and from City land to "Park and Recreation",<sup>17</sup> thereby putting the area under the control of the Recreation Commission instead of the Park Commission. The last parcels were added in 1971, when

Cold Spring Park began in 1930, when Playground Commissioner Ernst Herman purchased 21.6 acres in Cold Spring Swamp. Hermann expected that: "The swamp can easily be drained and turned into a large playing field. A number of small hills can be razed and will probably furnish most of the fill, which is needed to create other needed playing fields. Many of the existing trees can be saved, and with judicious planting a fine park can be created."<sup>11</sup> In 1939, the

a section east of the Beacon St. entrance was transferred from the School Committee along with undesignated land from the City.<sup>18</sup> However, it remains a mystery whether the wetlands on Beethoven Road adjacent to the Zervas School belong to the Park or to the School Committee (probably the latter.)

Following requests by the Newton Community Development Foundation to utilize parts of Cold Spring Park, Hunnewell Park, and the Stearns School playground for housing in 1970,<sup>19</sup> the Commission opposed using any of Cold Spring Park for housing.<sup>20</sup>

An unusual death occurred in Cold Spring Playground in 1976 when a young man somehow fell out of a tree and ruptured his aorta.<sup>21</sup>

A development plan for Cold Spring was proposed in 1979, which included a new entrance on Beacon Street, renovation of two existing softball diamonds, the construction of a third softball field, one regulation and at least two youth soccer fields, and six tennis courts.<sup>22</sup> The estimated cost was \$500,000, which was provided by a bond issue with reimbursement of half of that amount supplied by federal funds.<sup>23</sup> This development constituted "New Cold Spring Park," where the Farmers Market in began on July 8, 1980.<sup>24</sup>

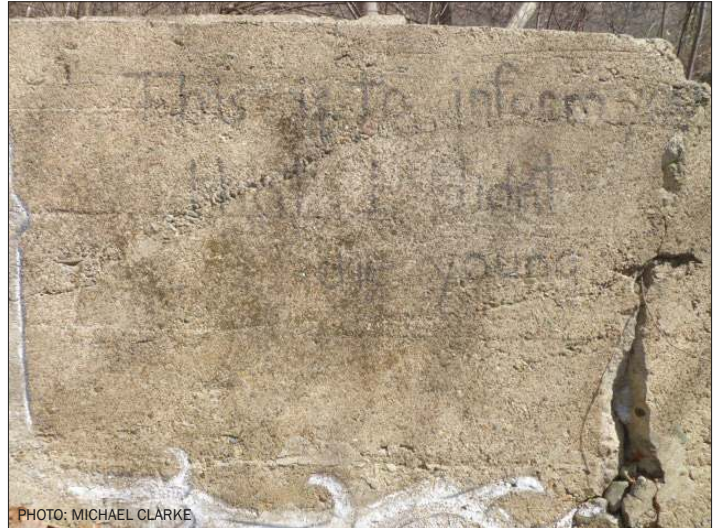


PHOTO: MICHAEL CLARKE

*This is to inform you that I did not die young*

The exercise life course in Cold Spring Park was named in honor of a Savannah Georgia police officer, Leonard Adelman, who was raised in Newton in a home adjacent to the park and who was killed in the line of duty.<sup>25</sup> Officer Adelman's parents paid for the signage.<sup>25</sup>

In response to a 1993 request by Newton Youth Soccer, the Commission agreed with open-space advocates, who

felt that Old Cold Spring Park (Dunklee Road) should be reserved for passive recreation but did allow soccer in New Cold Spring Park.<sup>26,27</sup>

In 1995, the City considered taking parklands, particularly in Cold Spring Park, for a new middle school, which was needed in the same area where the Warren Jr. High had just been closed. Following strong objections from the Parks and Recreation Commission,<sup>28</sup> the Newton Conservators, and other open-space advocates, criteria for transferring parklands were developed by the Commission,<sup>28</sup> and the site was shifted to the Oak Hill School in south Newton.

Because of the continuing controversy arising from the 2009 designation of a field in Old Cold Spring Park as the city's first off-leash dog park, the Parks and Recreation Commission hired Jason Roberts as its first "Off-Leash Recreation Specialist," which means he can politely cow canine cohorts but not yet issue citations.

Cold Spring Park entered literature when a mystery novel, *Defending Jacob* by local author William Landay sited a child's murder within both the park and the milieu of Newton's suburban culture and was published last year.<sup>1</sup>

So, the next time you walk around Cold Spring Park, reflect on silent films, the Cardinal's vanity, the long-eared owl, recreational politics, the dammed ditches, altered ecologies and hope that you do not die young. ■

Michael Clark

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### List of Figures

1. Helen (Sheehan) King of 6 Seldon St. as an extra standing in front of the Atlas Film Corp. studio building around 1922-23, when she was about 16.
2. "This is to inform you that I did not die young" inscribed on the dam near the exercise path on the east side of Cold Spring Park.
3. Cardinal O'Connell's Coat of Arms in Cold Spring Park.