

History of Newton Parks, Playgrounds & Recreation:

1. The Prequel

Editor's Note: This article begins a series to be run in the newsletter in the coming year about the history of Newton parks. The references for this article will appear in the online version. Be sure to look at the Parks, Playgrounds and Recreation chronology elsewhere in this issue to review the scope of this history.

Parks and playgrounds in Newton have their roots in several waves of immigrants involved in the German gymnastic movement beginning in the early 1800s. These influences blend with both the aesthetic parks movement of the late 1800s and the child-centered playground movement of the early twentieth century, which in Newton culminates in the formation of the Playground Commission in 1912.

The story begins in 1806 during Napoleon's incursions into Prussia. A young linguist, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, happened to see the defeat of Frederick William III at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt.¹ Consequently Prussia was humiliated, lost half her territory, and fell under the hegemony of France.² Jahn wrote an influential book on *German Nationality* expressing his passion for the German culture and the desire to see the various German states independent of Napoleon and unified as a nation.¹ Jahn saw gymnastics as a way of developing men fit for a resurgent military Prussia, which gave rise to the German gymnastics (Turnverein) movement.^{3-4, 5-7}

After the fall of Napoleon, the King of Prussia no longer agreed with Jahn, who became a political prisoner. Prisoners as well were three of his followers, Charles Follen, Charles Beck, and Franz Lieber, who (with the help of the Marquis de Lafayette) emigrated to New England in 1825. Charles Beck was hired as the first teacher of physical education in the US at the Round Hill School, Northampton, MA.^{2,10} Charles Follen became the first German Studies professor at Harvard and initiated the first college gymnasium in the US and first outdoor public gymnasium in Boston. Franz Lieber succeeded Follen as director of the Boston Gymnasium and established the first swimming school and the first public swimming pool in the US.^{11,12}

The post-Napoleon German immigration to the US brought many Turnvereiners, who established gymnastic societies all over America.^{8,14,4} After the Civil War, the



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Youngsters performing a Turnverein-style gymnastic feat at Victory Field, 1935

movement evolved into more of a physical education culture interacting with other immigrant groups, particularly the Swedish around Boston, who brought their own systems of exercises.³⁻⁴ The new Turners persistently advocated for physical education and fitness and successfully lobbied local school boards to include physical education and

school gymnasiums in the curriculum. Turner instructors served as PE directors in many school systems in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.^{2,4,14}



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Arbor Day at Nathaniel T. Allen's English and Classical School in West Newton.

not already physically fit, including women, at Nathaniel T. Allen's English and Classical School (today's Allen House)¹⁵ in West Newton. The next year, Lewis founded the first school for training physical education teachers, the Normal Institute for Physical Education, in Boston.¹⁶⁻²⁰ The second was that of the North American Turnerbund, which opened in New York in 1866.¹⁷ In 1889, Mrs. Mary Hemenway founded the Boston Normal School for (Swedish) Gymnastics, which taught female public school instructors¹⁷ (with nine exceptions, one of which we shall see) and eventually became part of Wellesley College.²¹⁻²²

Note: Sources and tables for this article can be found below after Parks, Playgrounds and Recreation Chronology.

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Parks, Playgrounds and Recreation Chronology

- 1726:** Newton Centre Green established.
- 1811:** Friedrich Ludwig Jahn founds the German Gymnastic Movement. Beck, Follen & Lieber were followers of Jahn.
- 1825:** Charles Beck hired as first teacher of physical education in US at Round Hill School, Northampton, MA.
- 1826:** Beck establishes first outdoor gymnasium in US at Round Hill School.
- 1826:** Charles Follen becomes first teacher of German and starts first college gymnasium in US at Harvard and first outdoor public gymnasium in Washington Gardens in Boston.
- 1827:** Franz Lieber succeeds Follen as director of the Boston Gymnasium and establishes the first swimming school and first public swimming pool in the US.
- 1845:** Kenrick Park established in Newton Corner.
- 1847:** Walnut Park established in Newton Corner.
- 1848:** First Turnverein (German Gymnastics Association) formed, in Cincinnati.
- 1851:** First YMCA formed, in Boston.
- 1852:** Newton Tree Club organized by J.F.C. Hyde – first improvement association in US.
- 1860:** Dioclesian Lewis develops and teaches gymnastics for women at the Nathaniel T. Allen house in West Newton.
- 1861:** Edward Hitchcock appointed director of hygiene and physical culture at Amherst. Develops the Hitchcock system of gymnastics.
- 1861:** Boston Normal Institute for Physical Education founded by Diocletian Lewis.
- 1864:** Catherine Beecher and Dio Lewis collaborate on further developing calisthenics at school for girls in Lexington, MA.
- 1868:** Washington Park constructed in Newtonville.
- 1875:** August Hemenway gives the Hemenway Gymnasium to Harvard.
- 1875:** Newton Board of Park Commissioners formed at the behest of the Newton Horticultural Society to lay out city parks.
- 1879:** Dudley A. Sargent is appointed assistant professor of physical training at Harvard and becomes director of the Hemenway Gymnasium.
- 1881:** Sargent becomes director of the Normal School of Physical Training in Cambridge, Ma. In 1916, this becomes the Sargent School for Physical Education.
- 1882:** Newton City Council establishes first standing committee on parks. State Legislature authorizes Newton to take land for parks and squares.
- 1883:** Farlow Park donated to Newton.
- 1883:** YMCA Training School started at Springfield, Massachusetts.
- 1885:** Boston Women's Club establishes Boston Sand Gardens for children following suggestion by Dr. Marie Zakrzewska after her visit to Berlin.
- 1889:** Newton Centre Playground established.
- 1889:** Mrs. Mary Hemenway and Baron Nils Posse introduce Swedish Gymnastics and establish the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics.
- 1889:** Boston Conference in the Interest of Physical Training decides on calisthenics for schools.
- 1890:** Newton Centre Improvement Association and City provide funds for Newton Centre Playground.
- 1891:** Edward M. Hartwell, the first historian of physical education, is named supervisor of physical education for Boston. Develops calisthenics for schools.
- 1891:** Basketball invented at YMCA College in Springfield, Massachusetts, now called Springfield College.
- 1893:** Ernst Hermann enrolls at Boston Normal School of Gymnastics.
- 1894:** Auburndale, Lower Falls and Cabot Parks established. Moses G. Crane of Newton Highlands invents Pushball for the Newton Athletic Assoc.

- 1896:** Volleyball invented at YMCA in Holyoke, Massachusetts.
- 1898:** Joseph Lee, a Boston philanthropist, creates the Columbus Avenue model playground and documents its use and benefits.
- 1906:** Playground Association of America formed with Joseph Lee as its president.
- 1908:** First “traditional playground” with gymnastic equipment was installed in Boston, on Tremont Street (formerly Washington Gardens).
- 1908:** Massachusetts Playground Law passed through leadership of Joseph Lee.
- 1908:** Newton Forestry Department created.
- 1909:** Upper Falls and West Newton Playgrounds added.
- 1912:** Newton Playground Commission formed.
- 1912:** Ernst Hermann becomes first Superintendent of Playgrounds in Newton.
- 1913:** Edmands family donates Edmands Park.
- 1916:** Ernst Hermann begins teaching at the Sargent School for Physical Education.
- 1924:** The Newton Playgrounds’ “American League” adult baseball league starts.
- 1929:** Sargent School for Physical Education becomes part of Boston University with Ernst Hermann as its first director and, later, dean.
- 1929:** Newton Theological Institution donates Thompsonville (Bowen) Playground.
- 1930:** Crystal Lake Bathhouse completed. Cold Spring Park purchased. Claffin Park formed.
- 1930:** Playground Association of America becomes the National Recreation Association.
- 1939:** Newton Playground Commission becomes the Newton Recreation Commission.
- 1941:** Albemarle Park developed from the defunct Albemarle Golf Course.
- 1952:** Newton North Little League chartered by Little League Baseball.
- 1954:** Newton Parks Commission formed.
- 1961:** Newton Conservators founded to advocate for open space in Newton.
- 1962:** Handicapped Day Camp begun.
- 1964:** Gath Pool constructed.
- 1964:** The National Recreation Association merges with four other organizations to form the National Recreation and Parks Association.
- 1973:** Newton’s Arts in the Parks started.
- 1975:** Newton Special Needs Program begun.
- 1980:** New Cold Spring Park (Beacon St. side) developed.
- 1980:** Farmer’s Market begun at Cold Spring Park.
- 1981:** Newton Commonwealth Golf Course formed.
- 1982:** Newton Recreation Commission absorbs the Parks Commission to become the Parks & Rec Commission. The Forestry Dept. is absorbed into the new Dept. of Parks & Rec.
- 1982:** Kennard Park and house donated.
- 1987:** Nahanton Park formed from the Almshouse and Working Boys Home properties.
- 1990:** Newton Tree Advisory Task Force (Tree Commission) created.
- 2001:** Newton accepts the Community Preservation Act (CPA).
- 2008:** CPA funds used to buy 0.2 acres and conservation restriction on Crystal Lake.
- 2009:** Newton’s first off-leash dog park designated in old Cold Spring Playground.
- 2017:** Newton Highlands (Joseph Lee) Playground renovated with CPA funds.
- 2019:** Newton Parks and Recreation Department renamed Newton Parks, Recreation and Culture Department. ♦

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History of Newton Parks, Playgrounds and Recreation Footnote References

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