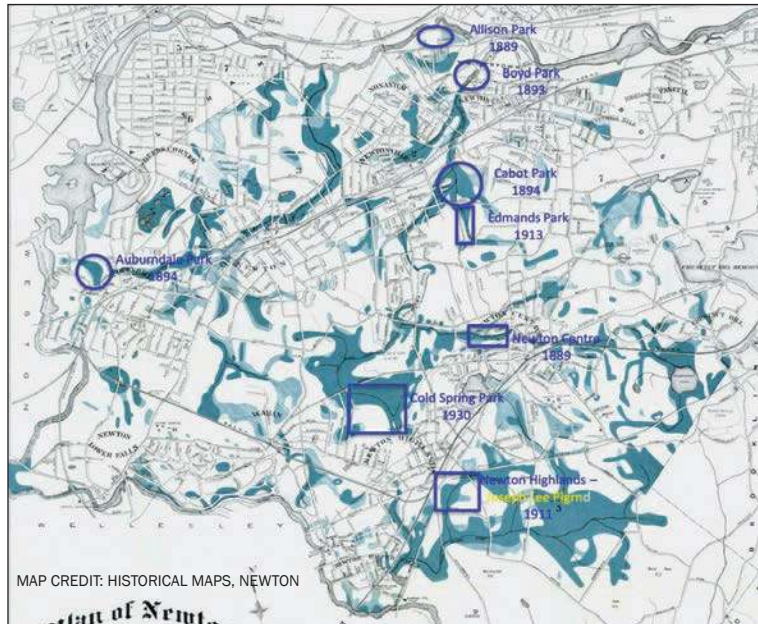


History of Newton Parks, Playgrounds & Recreation: Part 2. The Back Story

Editor’s Note: This is the second in series of articles by board member Michael J. Clarke about Newton parks, playgrounds & recreation. The extensive references and a list of Newton parks and playgrounds prior to 1912 is available on the Newton Conservators’ website <https://newtonconservators.org/newsletters>.

By the 1890s, the early and later waves of German Turnvereins, Swedish gymnasts and other groups had fostered an environment for physical education and gymnasia throughout the country.¹ Middle and upper class residents also sought to stave off the undesirable aspects of expanding cities, such as crime, congestion, and poverty,² by preserving natural landscapes and establishing playgrounds. In Newton, parks and playgrounds rose from both the aesthetic Parks Movement of the late 1800s and the child-centered Playground Movement of the early twentieth century. As we shall see in subsequent episodes, these merged partly in the Playground Commission in 1912 and finally into the Parks and Recreation Commission in 1982. This segment of our serial history of Parks and Recreation in Newton reviews the



1892 map of areas requiring drainage showing coincidence of many parks with earlier wetlands

early acquisition of land for parks and playgrounds prior to 1912.

The Parks Movement followed the construction of Central Park in New York and resulted from the desire to maintain green open spaces, often landscaped, as cities expanded.³ Indeed, between January of 1883 and June of 1884, there was considerable debate in Newton about establishing a “Central Park” that would have included Bullough’s Pond.⁴ Another outstanding example is Boston’s Emerald

Necklace of parks. The children’s Playground Movement derived in Europe from Rousseau’s ideas that interacting with the natural world through play was necessary for the development of children and allowed their ‘natural inclinations’ to emerge.⁵⁻⁶

In Boston, the first playground structures were sand piles inspired by the visit of Dr. Marie Zakerzewska, a Boston physician, to Berlin in 1895,⁶⁻⁸ but these were soon followed by swings, slides, and climbing structures.^{6,9-10} By the early 1900s, the increasing popularity of baseball^{7,11-12} and later football provided stimulus for playing fields. Similar to today’s Community Preservation Act, the landmark 1908 Massachusetts Playground Law required every city, which accepted its provisions, to have and maintain at least one playground.¹³⁻¹⁴

Early Years. The oldest park in Newton is Newton Centre Green, which was set aside in colonial times (~1726). The next oldest is Grafton Park (1859), a street triangle at the intersection of Homer and Grafton Streets. Kenrick Park, a 0.72 acre street oval in Newtonville was constructed around 1845, which was followed by the Walnut Park and Waban Park ovals in 1847.¹⁵ The next is another street median, Washington Park in Newtonville, which is about one acre

Current Name	Year	Acres	Original Name
Farlow Park	1883	3.76	Farlow Park
Richard J. Forte Memorial Park	1889	5	Allison Park Playground
Newton Centre Playground	1889	17.9	Newton Centre Playground (16.41 acres)
Boyd Park	1893	6.06	Boyd Park Playground
Cabot Park	1894	11.6	Cabot Park Playground (14 acres)
Auburndale Park	1894	28.81	Auburndale Park (9.53 acre, 1914)
Lower Falls Park	1894	46	Lower Falls Park
Claflin Playground	1906	6.43	Claflin Field Playground
West Newton Commons Playgrnd	1909	3.63	West Newton Playgrnd, John Weeks Playgrnd
Offr. Robert Brace land Playgrnd	1909	6.93	Upper Falls Playground
Joseph Lee Playground	1911	4.28	Newton Highlands Playground
Lower Falls Playground	1911	8.57	Lower Falls Playground

Taken from Johnson, C.F. Minutes of the Playground Commission April 24, 1912

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and was donated in 1868. Carpenter Park, 0.3 acres at the junction of Crafts and Waltham Streets, was donated in 1869.¹⁶ Islington Park was acquired¹⁷ in 1872, and land around it was donated for an Auburndale park in 1873, but the City failed to develop it, and it was reclaimed by the donors.¹⁸ Loring Park, a parcel of about 0.69 acres, opposite Boston College on Centre St., was acquired in 1884.

Improvement Associations: In 1852, The Newton Center Tree Club, one of the first neighborhood improvement associations in America, was formed to plant trees to beautify the city including the planting of Newton Centre Green. At its formation in 1878, the Newton Centre Improvement Association was charged to “improve and ornament the streets and public grounds of the locality.”¹⁹ Similar associations arose in Newton’s villages^{2,20} to preserve the ambiance of their communities and market them by presenting their villages as desirable home sites for people working in Boston. Newton’s Improvement Associations planted trees and donated street triangles, public parks, and playgrounds such as Lowell Park, Newton Centre Playground and Upper Falls Playground.

Farlow Park: In his address to the City Council in 1881, Mayor Royal M. Pulsifer referred to prior efforts, when Newton was a town, to establish a system of public parks and to his 1880 recommendation that the City Council do the same. As a result of this effort, John S. Farlow communicated to the City Council his desire to donate a tract of land described as “a wretched and unsightly bog”²¹ in the populous part of Ward 1 for public uses.²² Although much of the survey work had been done, because of difficulties in working out the enabling legislation with the state legislature, establishment of the park was delayed until 1885.²³⁻²⁵

Hill and West Newton, the committee recommended the acquisition of almost 400 acres extending from Valentine to Centre Streets, between Beacon Street and Bullough’s Pond, for a single “Central Park.”²⁵

Playgrounds: In 1889 Mayor Heman M. Burr noted that the enabling state act of 1882 for Newton to take land for parks did not include playgrounds.²⁹⁻³⁰ Recalling a time when every vacant lot and pasture was a playground, Burr remarked that the boys of Newton were then “driven from one field to another by the steadily advancing tide of increasing population, until there is little left to them but the public streets.”³⁰ In 1888, the President of the Massachusetts

Newton Centre Playground 1897



From 1897 Newton Centre Map

Senate, Robert R. Bishop, proposed a playground to the Neighbors’ Club at Newton Centre,³¹ and the Newton Centre Improvement Association later provided funds for the city’s first public playground.³² Newton Centre Playground was initially designed by the landscape firm of Frederick Law Olmsted in 1890,³³ but a member of the firm, Herbert J. Kellaway, took over the design when he established his own firm and submitted a revised plan in 1908.³⁴ The playground was later named the William C. Brewer Playground after the organizer and first chair of the Playground Commission.³⁵ The City Council subsequently provided \$10,000 for the Newton Centre Playground,³⁴ and the mayor encouraged the development of other playgrounds.³⁶ The half acre at Centre and Bowen Streets was added in 1897.

The state Metropolitan Park Commission was established in 1892 to develop parks, especially along the rivers in and around Boston. The first land acquired by that commission was Hemlock Gorge in Newton Upper Falls.²⁵

In 1893, Newton acquired four separate areas for parks and playgrounds: 1) Cabot Park, 14 acres in Newtonville containing Laundry Brook;³⁷ 2) Auburndale Park, 30 acres

Parks Movement & Farlow Park



Farlow Park around 1900, photo courtesy of Jackson Homestead. Painting from Newton Free Library (M.J. Clarke)

In 1882 under the auspices of the City Council, Newton established its first standing committee on parks,²⁶ which submitted a report two years later.²⁵ As a result of this movement, the state legislature passed a law authorizing the City to take land for parks and squares.²⁷ In 1884, Lincoln and Walcott parks were donated to the city.²⁸ Expanding on a previous proposal for a series of parks between Chestnut



Auburndale Park

of the Ware Farm in Auburndale on Ware's Cove along the Charles River, which was soon developed for mixed recreation with ball fields, picnic tables, fireplaces, swings and sandboxes, a bath/skate

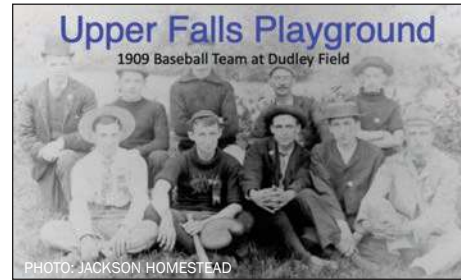
house and walking trails; 3) Boyd Park, which extends into Watertown and included a mill pond that was drained within a few years; 4) 42 acres on the Charles in Lower Falls including a high bluff overlooking the river with "the finest growth of pine" in Newton. In 1894, the city gained two small parcels (Cronin and Levingston Coves) of Crystal Lake shorefront.²⁵ In 1889, five acres in Nonantum along the Charles was acquired from the heirs of John S. Allison, a farmer, for Allison Playground (now Forte Park).³⁸⁻³⁹ The "grand boulevard" of Commonwealth Avenue was laid out and four miles partially constructed in 1894.⁴⁰

In 1897, Mayor Henry E. Cobb, called for the acquisition of Bullough's Pond, which the owners donated the following year. The dell below Dexter Road was laid out as a park and the pond over-flow was guided over ledges and boulders to create a rustic effect.⁴¹⁻⁴² The 3.4 acres of Stearns Park in Nonantum were added in 1906.

For many years, it was the responsibility of the Street Department to supervise and manage Newton's parks and playgrounds along with tree planting and maintenance; but this eventually required more effort than the Street Department could manage. Tree and forest maintenance, which were taken very seriously, were also recognized to be substantially different than playground management.⁴ Because of insect damage caused to the city's trees, the Forestry Department was created in 1908 and was charged

with not only planting and caring for the city's trees, but also the maintenance, care and management of parks, playgrounds and cemeteries.^{25, 43-45}

In 1909, three new parcels were given to the city for parks including Nye Park (1.09 acres) near the Auburndale Railroad Station (both of which disappeared with the



Upper Falls Playground

construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike in the 1960s). The Beacon Triangle (0.25 acre) and Paul Park (0.35 acre) were also added in 1909.

The former became the site of the Mason School⁴⁶ from 1901 to 1959, and the latter was absorbed into the Weeks Jr. High Playground in the 1930s.

In 1909, the Upper Falls Improvement Society donated \$4500, raised from subscriptions and entertainments, to the City to purchase Dudley Field, a hayfield where baseball had been played since the 1880s,⁴⁷ between Chestnut Street and the river.¹² A 1910 design plan was prepared by Boston landscape architect Herbert J. Kellaway, but only the baseball diamond seems to have been placed according to the plan.⁴⁸ A section from the Marcy property was added in 1924.⁴⁷

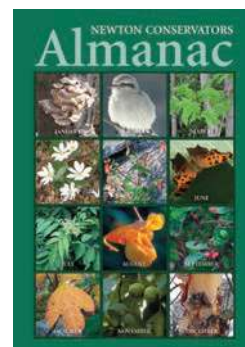
In 1910, the Forestry Department developed West Newton Common at Elm and Webster streets into a playground.²⁵ Newton Highlands Playground⁴⁹ was established in 1911 and was later named after Joseph Lee, "the father of the playground movement in America."^{35, 50-51} The Forestry Department also began flooding a part of Cabot Park and the Burr School yard for skating,⁴⁹ and the following year it did the same at Boyd Park.⁵²

Michael J. Clarke

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- New members receive a trail guide free with their first membership.



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Newton Parks and Playgrounds Prior to 1912^{38, 53-54}

Current Name	Date	Acres	Original Name
Newton Centre Green	~1726	1.94	Newton Centre Green
Grafton Park	1859	0.25	Grafton Park
Kenrick Park	~1845	0.72	Kenrick Park
Islington Park	1872	1.43	Islington Park Playground
Farlow Park.	1883	3.76	Farlow Park.
Loring Park	1884	0.69	Loring Park
Linwood Park	1888	1.00	Linwood Park
Richard J. Forte Memorial Park	1889	5.00	Allison Park Playground
Newton Centre Playground	1889	17.90	Newton Centre Playground (16.41 acres)
Boyd Park	1893	6.06	Boyd Park Playground
Cabot Park	1894	11.60	Cabot Park Playground (14 acres)
Auburndale Park	1894	28.81	Auburndale Park (9.53 acre, 1914)
Lower Falls Park	1894	46.00	Lower Falls Park
Brooks Park	1897	0.13	Brooks Park
Elmwood Park Playground	1898	0.63	Elmwood Park Playground
Wolcott Burr Park	1905	0.60	Wolcott Burr Park
Stearns Park	1906	1.15	Stearns School Playground
Bray Park	1906	0.08	Bray Park
Claffin Playground	1906	6.43	Claffin Field Playground
Weeks Field Park (portion)	1907	0.35	Paul Park
Subsumed by Mass Turnpike	1908	1.09	Nye Park
Lowell Park	1908	0.6	Lowell Park
West Newton Commons Playgrnd	1909	3.63	West Newton Playgrnd, John Weeks Playgrnd
Officer Robert Braceland Playgrnd	1909	6.93	Upper Falls Playground
Beacon Triangle	1909	0.25	Beacon Triangle
Joseph Lee Playground	1911	4.28	Newton Highlands Playground
Lower Falls Playground	1911	8.57	Lower Falls Playground