

# History of Newton Parks, Playgrounds & Recreation:

## Part 3. The Commission and The Superintendent

**Editor's Note:** This is the third in a 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 are available on the Newton Conservators' website <https://newtonconservators.org/newsletters>.

**P**layground Commission.<sup>1</sup> As the playground movement gained momentum nationally around the turn of the 20th century, the demand for active recreation facilities grew. Consequently, the Playground Commission was established on April 2, 1912, when Mayor Charles E. Hatfield appointed the following members: William D. Brewer, Chairman, Mrs. George H. Wilkins, Albert P. Carter, William F. Garcelon, and Charles F. Johnson, Jr. They appropriated \$5000 to be expended by the Playground Commission to supervise the public playground of the city.<sup>2</sup>

At their fifth meeting in May 1912, the Playground Commission offered Mr. Ernst Hermann, the head supervisor of the Cambridge playgrounds, the position of supervisor at a salary of \$1,200 per annum. Mr. Hermann was to give his whole summer and such time during the rest of the year as might be necessary for the prosecution of the work.<sup>3</sup> At their next meeting the commission voted to pay \$300 per annum each toward the salaries of three submasters employed by the school committee, who would devote their time outside of school hours to playground work.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Hermann, who visited the playgrounds on a motorcycle provided by the city,<sup>5</sup> developed a plan for supervising the playgrounds during the summer<sup>6</sup> and appointed staff for the fall.<sup>7</sup>

The following playgrounds were transferred from the Forestry Department to the new Playground Commission: Newton Center, Newton Lower Falls, Newton Upper Falls, Stearns School, Newton Highlands, Cabot Park, Boyd Park, Allison Park, Auburndale Playground, Islington Park, Waban, and West Newton Common.<sup>8-9</sup> Subsequently, the playground at Thompsonville<sup>10</sup> (Bowen) was added, followed by those at Eden Avenue,<sup>11</sup> Farlow Park, Burr School, and Peirce School. Mr. Hermann's plan for supervision of the playgrounds provided that most playgrounds were staffed daily with both male and female supervisors.<sup>12</sup> The Forestry Department continued to maintain the playgrounds under a budget and instructions approved by the Playground Commission.<sup>13</sup>

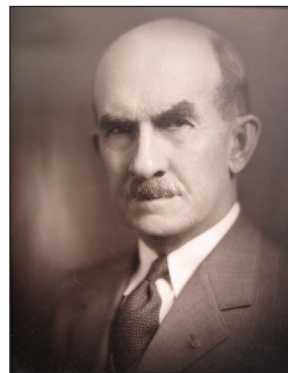
While the Superintendent of Playgrounds assembled the budget, the commission revised and submitted it to the mayor. The Chair of the Commission carefully monitored the expenses and in 1915, the Superintendent

of Playgrounds was instructed to provide all commission members with copies of the monthly financial and billing statements.<sup>14</sup> The commission interacted directly with the mayor and aldermen on budgets regarding the playgrounds.<sup>14</sup> However, the hiring and firing of staff and the programs at the playgrounds were left to Mr. Hermann.<sup>15</sup>

**Ernst Hermann — Superintendent of Playgrounds:**  
The entry on Ernst Hermann in *Pioneers in Public Recreation* contains the following:

Ernst Hermann, more than any of the other pioneers in recreation, personified the influence of Germany upon the new movement, for he brought from that country a background in the fields of health, physical education, and recreation. A man of tremendous energy, he pioneered in industrial recreation and in physical and mental rehabilitation before becoming one of the first administrators of a playground system. The recreation system he developed in Newton was outstanding for the beauty and utility of its areas. Few teachers of recreation and physical education have exerted a more profound influence over a larger number of students. No one who had the opportunity to know and work with him could forget Ernst Hermann, with his bushy, eyebrows, piercing black eyes, positive ideas, and vast fund of knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Ernst Hermann was born in Brunswick, Germany in 1869. His father, August Hermann, was a founding leader of the



German playground movement and is credited with introducing rugby, cricket, and baseball to Germany.<sup>17-18</sup> In 1893 Ernst immigrated to America and attended the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, which in 1909 became Wellesley College's Department of Physical Education.<sup>16, 19-20</sup> He began at the State Hospital at Foxboro, Massachusetts, where he introduced practices and methods

in physical and mental rehabilitation that were widely adopted by other institutions.<sup>16</sup>

In 1902 Hermann became the recreation director for the Thomas G. Plant Company, said to be the world's largest shoe factory, in Jamaica Plain, where he supervised the health, welfare, and recreation opportunities for 5,000 male employees. From his industrial experiences he came to believe that "the playground in its broadest conception is the only practical means of counteracting the monotonous drudgery of factory life."<sup>16, 19</sup>

Hermann also worked with school systems in Massachusetts and was quoted as saying, "Recesses should be held as often as time can be spared for them."<sup>21</sup> In 1909 he became an assistant director of Physical Training and Athletics for the city of Boston, which included supervising playgrounds. In 1911, he added Cambridge to his athletics and playground responsibilities. The following year he became the Superintendent of Playgrounds for Newton and the City Director of Physical Education for Somerville.<sup>16, 19</sup>

During the early part of the twentieth century, most areas intended for recreation were designed as "landscape parks" and afforded little opportunity to engage in vigorous games and sports. Hermann was determined to help communities secure recreation areas that would not only be attractive in appearance but would also enable a wide range of activities for children and adults.<sup>16</sup> As a recreation planner and playground administrator, Hermann promoted the acquisition of playgrounds, which he called "an oasis in the desert of the modern city." He viewed a playground without grass, shrubs, trees, and flowers as not a real playground for children.

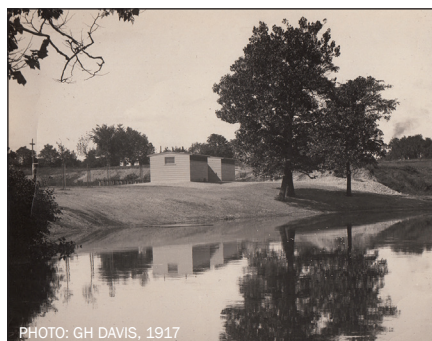


*Highlands Playground*

National Recreation Association, included vine covered trellises, wooden boundary fences, strategic shrubs and trees, grassy areas, and a roofed sandbox and shelter.<sup>16, 22-23</sup> Hermann<sup>16</sup>, together with Mayor Edwin O. Childs<sup>24</sup>, felt that "A playground properly located, properly designed and laid out, properly maintained and properly supervised, is the greatest real estate asset a city has."

His vision and success in Massachusetts led to the National Recreation Association naming him the chairman of their Recreation and City Planning Committee in 1922. He said,

"Let us have plenty of space, plenty of structures resembling the structures of the old-fashioned farms and yards, plenty



*Boathouse at Allison Playground  
(now Forte Park)*

of apparatus for the training of the whole muscular system, plenty of tools for working the earth and the wood, which have always been our best 'brain builder'."<sup>16, 19</sup>

Hermann perfected the maintenance of ice skating

rinks<sup>25</sup> and designed an ice hockey rink, which allowed for easier ice cleaning and surface handling. He believed that recreation leaders should ascertain what children liked to do and then assist them in their play and that "a 'cut-and-dried' program would cause playground attendance to fall off."<sup>16, 19</sup>



In 1906, Hermann began teaching a gymnasium class for faculty members at Harvard University, which he taught often until he retired in 1940 at the age of 71. Among the other courses he taught were: The Philosophy and Psychology of Play; Organization, Construction, and Equipment of Playgrounds; and Leisure Guidance. In 1926, he taught in the graduate program at the National Recreation School of the Playground and Recreation Association of America in New York, which trained recreation executives through the Department of Agriculture's Extension Service.<sup>16, 19</sup>

In 1916, he began teaching Swedish gymnastics and games at the Sargent School of Physical Education for Girls. Thirteen years later, when the school became a part of Boston University, he became the director of the new Department of Physical Education. As the program expanded to a four-year degree, he became the dean of the department.<sup>26-27</sup> He was also the director of the girls' summer camp, which the Sargent School and then Boston University offered in New Hampshire.<sup>16</sup> ♦

Michael J. Clarke

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