

Riverside Recreation Grounds Centennial – September 27-28, 1997

By Robert Pollock

Today the MDC's Riverside Park is a sliver of land covering approximately ten acres between Route 128 and the Charles River at the eastern end of Recreation Road in Weston. In its heyday, three quarters of a century ago, the Riverside Recreation Grounds was one of the best-known recreational sites in the United States, and impacted tens of thousands of young men from throughout the greater Boston area. The Recreation Grounds, or "the Rec," as it came to be known, opened in September of 1897. It was located a short distance upriver from Norumbega Park in Auburndale, which had opened a few months earlier. Norumbega and the Rec were parts of a flourishing recreational district which stretched along the Charles River corridor between Needham Street, Newton and Moody Street, Waltham. The area was known generically as "the riverside," and would be the inspiration for a popular song of the day, *Down By The Riverside* [1]. The Rec's huge recreational complex and its visionary usage policies would be important factors in introducing young men from Boston and the suburbs to the concepts of sportsmanship, competition, and physical fitness, and in demonstrating the ability of athletics to cut across societal barriers.

Weston businessman and philanthropist Charles W. Hubbard was the force behind the Recreation Grounds. According to his granddaughter, Mary Hubbard French, Charles Hubbard's plan for Riverside was inspired by The Country Club in Brookline, which had opened around 1882. The Country Club was an excellent sports facility, but its use was restricted to the wealthy. Hubbard believed there was a need for a similar complex which would serve as a recreational center for middle- and lower-class youths from throughout Greater Boston. In 1896, Hubbard approached the Metropolitan Park Commission, precursor of the MDC [precursor of DCR, the Department of Conservation and Recreation], with a proposal to cooperate in the construction and management of a huge recreational facility. His original scheme envisioned utilizing more than 100 acres of land in Weston and Newton. When the Park Commission declined to participate in this elaborate project, Hubbard went ahead on his own, purchasing forty acres of land stretching a distance of a half mile along the river. Riverside was sited directly across the Charles River from the Boston & Albany Railroad yards (now the Riverside MBTA terminus in Auburndale). Despite its Weston location, Riverside was more closely connected with the city of Newton, with both an Auburndale mailing address and a Newton telephone exchange.

In selecting the Weston land, Hubbard had a secondary goal in mind; he wanted to prevent commercial development and preserve the tranquility and pastoral beauty of the river corridor – not surprising, in that his home was located a stone's throw from the site. Another important factor in Riverside's location was its accessibility. The main line of the Boston and Albany Railroad ran from South Station directly west to Riverside, while the railroad's Highland Branch ran from Boston to Riverside via Brookline and south Newton. The B&A main line is now the Amtrak line between Boston and Framingham, while the "Brookline Circuit" has been utilized as the Riverside line of the MBTA. By purchasing a 50-trip ticket, rail fares from Boston to Riverside were only twenty-one cents. Express trains made the trip from Columbus Avenue to Riverside in fifteen minutes. In addition to access via railroad, patrons of the Rec could travel to Auburndale via the Commonwealth Avenue Street Railway, which operated between Lake Street, Brighton and the Charles River near Norumbega Park.

The gigantic sports complex was endorsed by many prominent public officials, including the mayors of Boston, Cambridge and Newton, and the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and Boston University. Philanthropist Robert Treat Paine, great-grandson of one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence, was a vocal supporter of Hubbard's plan. (The Paine Estate in Waltham is one of the few private residences designed by H. H. Richardson still in existence.) The Rec opened on Saturday, September 25, 1897, with a swimming and diving contest. Competitors from Newton, Brookline, and Roxbury high schools, the Newton Boat Club, and the Boston Athletic Association took part in the meet. Charles Hubbard officiated as referee of all the contests.

The public-spirited purpose of the Rec, "to provide all those forms of healthful recreation and outdoor exercise that can be secured by a beautiful river and extensive fields," was quickly realized. By the summer of 1898, facilities included two large wooden buildings containing bedrooms which could be rented by the day or by the week, dressing rooms, a "ladies parlor," a 100-seat restaurant and racks for 150 canoes. Outdoor facilities included football, baseball, and softball fields with bleachers for spectators, six tennis courts (one additional court was added later), extensive picnic grounds, and a quarter mile running track. Riverside's swimming pool was the largest in New England, fifty meters long and thirty-five meters across. The pool was spring fed, with a sandy bottom. It featured springboards, diving towers up to 25' high, a greased pole and a 20' slide. Within a few years, Hubbard added a bandstand, bowling alleys and a complete outdoor gymnasium.

The annual membership fee was ten dollars, with students up to the age of eighteen paying only half that amount. Membership included use of all facilities, including the pool, dressing rooms, and lockers. According to the Riverside prospectus, "Membership will be granted only to those who present written applications, with endorsements satisfactory to the management." Approximately twenty private rooms were set aside for canoe clubs and similar organizations, each of which annually elected a "captain" who served as liaison with the Rec's management, and who was responsible for the conduct of club members. The clubs rented space on an annual basis, and held parties, banquets, and meetings on the premises. Non-members were welcome to use the Riverside facilities for twenty-five cents per day. Non-member tickets could be purchased in advance at several locations around Boston including the B.A.A., the Cadet Armory, the Cambridge Golf and Country Club, the Union Boat Club and the Bank Officers' Association of Boston.

On weekends and holidays between May 1 and September 30, the restaurant at Riverside served a table d'hôtel dinner for fifty cents. Hotel rooms were thirty-five cents per night, or two dollars a week. Rental of a boat rack was five dollars per year, and non-members paid twenty-five cents a day to use the facilities. Canoes rented for twenty cents an hour. (To put these numbers into perspective, in 1897 Castile soap was selling for two cents a bar, good quality cotton towels were three cents, boys' knee-pants were nineteen cents, a hand-made shirt sold for a dollar, and a complete set of false teeth – uppers and lowers – could be purchased for less than five dollars.)

In its early years, Riverside was managed by James B. Knowlton. Herman Boos, the gymnastics coach at MIT, was director of games and sports, and well-known swimming and water safety instructor John A. Leavitt was in charge of the pool. Leavitt was famed for his ability to swim underwater the diagonal length of the pool – a distance of about seventy yards. Colleges and schools utilized the Rec for outings, swimming and diving contests, football and baseball games, and track meets. Company picnics at Riverside were also very popular at a time when most people were totally dependent on public transportation. Typically, a company outing might spend the daylight hours at Riverside, with a cookout, games and contests, and an athletic theme. Then around 6:00 pm, those attending the outing would move on to Norumbega Park and spend the evening there. (By water, Riverside and Norumbega were about six-tenths of a mile apart; on foot, the distance was somewhat less.) Among the groups who held annual outings at Riverside were Boston City Hospital, the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Gillette Company, and the Bank Officers' Association of Boston.

The National AAU Championships were held at Riverside in 1899; it was the first time they had ever been held in New England.

Beginning around the turn of the century, the Lakes District of the Charles River, from Newton Lower Falls to Waltham, was the most heavily canoed body of water on earth. During the first two decades of the century, there were approximately 5,000 canoes berthed along this stretch of river, and in 1920 the official MDC estimate was 6,000 boats. While there was some disagreement as to who was actually number one, it was generally accepted that Riverside, Robertson's boathouse (directly across from Riverside), and Norumbega Park operated the three largest canoe liveries in the United States. Another large boathouse, situated midway between Riverside and Norumbega, was owned by the Boston Athletic Association, and was the birthplace of the Boston Marathon.

Along the river, a young man's first canoe was a "rite of passage" similar to the first automobile purchase of today's teenager. The canoe taught responsibility, provided recreation, and stimulated competition. Although canoe races and regattas were very popular in the early years of the century, courting was the most important reason for the number of canoes berthed along the upper Charles. In those "good old days," a canoe was one of the few places where a respectable young man and young woman could be together without a chaperone. Our grandparents coined a word for these romantic activities – "canoodling" was the semi-respectable term for necking in a canoe. On warm summer evenings and weekends the Charles was crowded with courting couples, the young man doing the paddling and perhaps providing music, either via virtuosity on mandolin or banjo, or by utilizing a crank-type phonograph which could be set on a platform across the gunwales of the canoe. The young lady was responsible for providing a picnic and might also create hand-sewn canoe pillows for a favorite beau.

Canoes and music just seemed to go together. Several canoe clubs were based at each boathouse along the river, and on Friday and Saturday nights these clubs hosted dances, the music wafting out across the water. Band concerts, generally held on weekends, were also quite popular. There were bandstands at Riverside, the B.A.A., Norumbega Park, and at Fox Island, on the Newton/Waltham line. Boaters and picnickers were entertained by groups like the Waltham Watch Factory Band, the Harry E. Brigham Concert Orchestra, and the Talma Ladies Military Band. Canoeists applauded the music by slapping the canvas sides of their canoes, resulting in a loud booming sound. Saluting the national anthem was accomplished by raising the canoe paddle into a vertical position.

People canoeing the peaceful upper Charles today, or walking along its banks, might have some difficulty equating it with the bustling river of a century ago. Working downriver from Newton Lower Falls, the following facilities once existed: Pine Grove Park, the Rec, Robertson's boathouse, Robertson's canoe factory, Partelow's boathouse, Frost's boathouse, the Newton Boat Club, the headquarters of the American Canoe Association, the Terminal boathouse, the B.A.A. facility (which included a boathouse, a skeet shooting club, and several athletic fields), the MDC building, which was a combination boathouse, police station, jail, and barracks, Emerson's boathouse and restaurant (later known as the Metropolitan boathouse), Norumbega's two boathouses and a small restaurant which was actually built out over the water, the Wawbewawa boathouse, Ware's Cove, Forest Grove Park, Fox Island, Purgatory Cove, Burgin's boathouse, Arnold's boathouse, the Waltham Boat and Canoe Club, and Nutting's boathouse, restaurant, and ballroom located at the Prospect Street Bridge in Waltham.

On summer weekends and holidays, people by the tens of thousands came to Auburndale via train and trolley. Often, the Charles was so congested with canoes that one could walk from the Newton side of the river to the Weston side by stepping from boat to boat. While these huge crowds faded with the end of summer, the riverside area was a year-round playground. Football games took place at Riverside and the B.A.A. fields in the autumn, and the first warm days of April saw the beginning of spring training for the baseball season. In the winter, skaters and iceboats traversed the Charles' numerous coves, and ice-fishing came into its own. Some years, the whole river froze over, allowing youngsters to skate from Newton Lower Falls to Waltham. Charles River ice was a valuable resource, prized for its purity. It was cut from the river in huge blocks and shipped via railroad to sites throughout the eastern United States.

In 1914, Charles Hubbard donated the Riverside Recreation Grounds to the Metropolitan District Commission. The gift consisted of forty-one acres of land, two large buildings and extensive sports facilities, including the swimming pool and athletic fields. Rather than have the MDC operate Riverside, a decision was made to lease out the concessions. Over the years, successive leaseholders were well-connected politically, and were generally able to show a generous profit from operating the Rec. The MDC assumed responsibility for major maintenance items: replacing roofs, installing sewage tanks and drains, etc. These costs were substantial; in 1920, an expenditure of \$19,800 was required to keep the Rec in operation. Charles Hubbard continued to take a strong interest in Riverside until his death in 1932, at the age of 77.

Reflecting changes occurring across the United States as well as the realities of becoming a public facility, in the late teens and early 1920s the Rec began to de-emphasize the male club atmosphere which had been in effect for almost two decades. Women were not only invited, but encouraged, to take a more active part in recreational activities. Further, the Rec began hiring women to work at jobs other than locker room attendants. Auburndale native Edith Hamilton worked at the Riverside boathouse in the 1920s. It was there she met Hugo Lira, who would become her husband. "Baron" Hugo was a very successful local musician, who, as he once put it, "returned to the scene of the crime," when he took over as house bandleader at Auburndale's famous Totem Pole Ballroom. Hugo was originally hired by Roy Gill for a one-week trial engagement beginning on Christmas Night, 1942. The Baron would remain at the Totem Pole through Labor Day, 1951 – probably a world's record for a one-week engagement!

Riverside's best years were in the late 1920s. The annual lease between 1926 and 1928 was \$5,000, indicating the success and popularity of the facility at that time. During the Depression years, the fee dropped to around \$ 1,000. As the years went by, local schools and colleges built their own athletic facilities, and fewer and fewer track meets and ball games were held at Riverside. Patronage at the swimming pool also declined during the 1930s. With so many breadwinners out of work, youngsters were far more likely to swim in the river for free than to pay to use the pool. Even company outings were affected by the Depression, and Riverside had to survive some very lean years. The Rec lost a lot of land, shrinking to less than half its original size when the MDC's Riverside Golf Course (now the Leo J. Martin course) opened in 1934. From 1930 to 1935, the Recreation Grounds were managed by Lawrence Eliot of Newton. The canoe livery was sub-let to a man named Harvey. Newton native Vinnie Tuscher recalls that in the early 1930s, use of the pool was twenty-five cents including a locker, or fifteen cents without a locker. Tuscher also remembers that many of the big-name musicians appearing at the Totem Pole Ballroom used to spend afternoons at the Rec, working on their tans.

The Riverside Recreation Grounds made a comeback of sorts during World War II. Its accessibility via public transportation again became important, as gas rationing and the shortage of rubber for tires resulted in family automobiles being used infrequently, or in their being put up on blocks in the back yard "for the duration." A woman named Doris Ahearn recognized the increased potential at Riverside, and, in 1945, raised the stakes by bidding almost double the amount of the previous year's lease. For several years prior to taking over Riverside, Ahearn had been employed by the MDC at

Nantasket Beach. Speaking with this writer in March of 1987, Ahearn recalled, "It was Captain Murray, the police captain at Nantasket Beach, who convinced me that I could run Riverside. . . . When Murray was transferred to Brighton, he called me one day and told me about (Riverside). He said he thought I could run it, and that I would like it, and that I could earn more money than in my present job. So, I took him up on it. He let me run Riverside the way I wanted to, and never butted in on me. He had a lot of trust in me, and I've always been grateful to him for the opportunity. It was very unusual for a woman to be given that much responsibility in 1946."

Doris Ahearn paid the MDC \$2,040 per year between 1946 and 1955. She was able to attract several large company outings back to the Rec, which was crucial to its success. (The Gillette outing alone covered the lease fee.) "Miss Ahearn" personally supervised every aspect of the operation at Riverside. She hired local youngsters to rent and maintain the canoes, sell food and soft drinks, serve as lifeguards and locker room attendants at the pool, and keep the Rec clean and attractive. Her employees were fiercely loyal, as were Roy Gill's workers downriver at Norumbega Park. While there was some friendly rivalry and competition between Riverside and Norumbega employees (who frequently lived under the same roof), it didn't prevent them from devising a mutual aid scheme to provide rapid assistance when gangs of rowdies appeared at either facility.

Ahearn reminisced, "I admired all those kids who worked for me. They were so honest and so good, and they tried so hard to please me. I never had to fire anybody or complain about them. It really was amazing – where I was a woman, you'd think some of them would try to take advantage, but they were always good, and it made life much easier for me. . . . People remember the pool, but there was really so much more at Riverside. We had a restaurant, a boathouse, an arcade with pinball machines, a softball diamond, tennis courts, and a bandstand for concerts. There was a bowling alley behind the women's locker room. I couldn't use it during the summer when the pool was open, but only for a little while in the fall. Riverside was a really big place, and hard to keep clean. I had to hire people to come down early in the spring to get it ready for the summer. . . . The Gillette Company was always my biggest outing. Thousands of people would come out on a Sunday and cleaning up after them was a tremendous job!"

On a personal note, the writer's first paying job was working for Miss Ahearn on the day after the Gillette outing - probably in 1951 or 1952. My brother Bill and I sorted several thousand pop bottles, each of which was worth a two-cent deposit. Riverside sold Coke and Pepsi, as well as Cream Soda, Hire's Root Beer, Birch Beer, Orange Crush,

Lemon & Lime, Grape, Fruit Punch, Moxie, and numerous other fizzy concoctions. Each variety had to be sorted into its own 24-bottle wooden "shell." My recollection is that Billy and I filled more than 300 soda cases with empties from the outing. I also recall that Miss Ahearn paid us for our labors in silver dollars, and that she paid us precisely double the amount which we had originally negotiated.

Another factor in Riverside's survival after the war was the utilization of the Rec's long-abandoned canoe club rooms by local day camps. During the early 1950s, as many as five day camps were situated at Riverside. According to a report issued by the Boston YMCA for the 1955 season, a total of 264 campers were situated at Riverside, including the Newton YMCA's Camp Chickami (which the writer attended for several summers) and the Allston-Brighton Y's Camp All-Bright. In addition, 1,260 children from fifteen other community organizations utilized Riverside's facilities on an intermittent basis. The Rec was an ideal site for summer camps, with the pool, tennis courts, and other athletic facilities, fishing and boating, and opportunities for observing animals, birds, plants, and insects in the nearby woods. YMCA campers and counselors could board the Boston & Albany trains at Brighton or Newton Corner and be at the Rec within twenty minutes. Return trains from Riverside operated in the afternoon, although those of us fortunate enough to live in Auburndale were generally permitted to remain at the pool until it closed at 5:30. Day camps and youth groups not located along the railroad line arrived at Riverside via buses, traveling along the recently-completed Route 128, or out Route 9 from Boston. When Route 128 was built in 1949 and expanded a few years later, the right of way took about five acres from Riverside, including two tennis courts and the running track. Unfortunately, construction of the highway also interfered with the springs which fed the pool at Riverside. For the last several years of the Rec's existence, filling the pool on Mondays required opening an adjacent fire hydrant to augment the springs.

Miss Ahearn left Riverside after the 1955 season. By that time, the facility had become old and rundown. Virtually no state money was available for maintenance, and the refreshment stand and arcade were closed permanently. The pool still attracted local youngsters, but few people were willing to travel any distance to use the Riverside facilities. The boathouse/canoe livery was leased to an Auburndale resident named Frank Wedekind and operated by Wedekind and his son, Wayne. The lifeguards and locker room attendants at the pool were directly employed by the MDC, and MDC police officers patrolled Riverside by both motor launch and police car.

Editor's Notes

[1] This is most likely inaccurate; see <https://www.thetabernaclechoir.org/articles/down-by-the-riverside-history.html>.