

History of Newton Parks, Playgrounds & Recreation: A Strong Alliance. New Parks or Are They Playgrounds?

During the early decades of the 20th century, Newton became an acknowledged leader in the Recreational Movement.¹ In addition to an activist Playground Commission and Superintendent, playgrounds had a strong advocate in Mayor Edwin O. Childs, who presented substantial arguments for increased parks' acquisitions, capital improvements, as well as maintenance and personnel throughout his initial tenure of 1914–1929. Childs emphasized not only the rhetoric of the playground movement that stressed the interaction between mind and body, but also the need for able bodied young men in both manufacturing and military service.²⁻⁸



Figure 1, Mayor Edwin O. Childs c. 1914

In his 1919 address, Mayor Childs noted the pending donation of Burr Park: In the near future, the city will receive from the children the late Isaac T. and Anne F. Burr a playground, which comprises the Burr estate on Park Street in Ward 1. For years that section has been without a suitable place where boys and girls could play. Situated as it is adjoining the Bigelow school, it will be of inestimable value to the young folks of that locality...⁸

The next year, the mayor notes that Burr Playground officially being turned over to the city: A very elaborate shelter building has been constructed, with office, dressing-rooms, and shower baths.⁹ The building, fixtures and equipment are complete to the last detail. Even the coal bin has been filled. At the present time an open shelter building and a wading pool are in process of construction and a complete equipment of fixed gymnasium apparatus is being prepared.⁶⁻⁷

The Edmands family had shared its 33 acre oak forest, sometimes known as Cabot Woods, with Newton citizens for many years, and hoped their 1913 gift of Edmands Park to the city would allow this to continue. It was only when a reluctant Board of Aldermen heard that a real estate developer had offered \$10,000 for the land that it agreed to accept the gift, with the provision that the city would not be obligated to improve the land. Nevertheless, a skating pond was later created by damming the brook on the property.¹⁰

In the summer of 1914, the Commission voted to grant permission to the Playground and Social Service League of Newton Centre to move the Episcopal Church building of Newton Centre (since known as “The Hut”) onto the Newton Centre Playground along Tyler Terrace.¹¹⁻¹² This

structure was constructed on Pelham Street in 1892 as the first church of Trinity Parish in Newton Centre, then moved to the corner of Centre and Homer Streets, and finally to Tyler Terrace in 1916.

Auburndale Playground or Park or Lyons Playground or Park? While the Olmstead firm had created a plan for Auburndale Park, a design from the Auburndale Improvement Association was accepted instead.¹³ Auburndale Playground was constructed in 1914 as a part of Auburndale Park. Additional land along Commonwealth Avenue was purchased in 1938 and was included in Auburndale Playground.¹⁴ While the term “Lyons Park” appears in the 1937 minutes,¹⁵ in the following year, Auburndale Playground was renamed Thomas J. Lyons Playground in honor of a citizen of Newton, who was an active supporter of boys sports and for many years and was a member of the Playground Commission.¹⁶ The term “Lyons Park,” which now refers to the parcel on Commonwealth Avenue does not appear in the record until 1997, although a sign to this effect was on Commonwealth Avenue for some years before.

The Oak Hill Playground was named the Gobinet Hurley playground after the donor.¹⁶ The Waban Playground, on the site of the 19th century almshouse,¹⁷ was renamed the George Angier Playground after the man who was instrumental in the purchase, establishment and development of the playground and in adding a recreation room to the Angier School.^{16, 18}



Victory Field – Field Day, 1926. (Newton Historical Society)

In 1920, the use of Victory Field in Nonantum was donated by the owners of Shepherd Mills, who maintained it at no expense to the city with gymnasium apparatus, swings and sand boxes.⁷ Five years later, the mayor proposed selling Allison Park and buying Victory Field, which was much more developed.

References can be found on the online version of our newsletter. ♦

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