



BROOKLINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

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IN THIS ISSUE

BROOKLINE'S PARKS AND OPEN SPACES AND THE PARK STORIES PROJECT
Page 1

A MYSTERY IN AN OLD BROOKLINE PHOTO
Page 3

NEW BOARD MEMBERS
Page 6

A MEMBER'S GENEROSITY
Page 6

SPRING WALKING TOURS
Page 7

Brookline's Parks and Open Spaces and the Park Stories Project by Ken Liss

Brookline's parks and open spaces—from neighborhood playgrounds to small nature preserves to large expanses like Larz Anderson Park—are treasured by residents and visitors alike. And that's no accident.

The town has been acquiring and maintaining land for public parks through purchase, gift, and re-purposing for a century and a half, beginning a few years after the Civil War and continuing into the 21st century.

Now, the Parks and Open Space Division of Brookline's Department of Public Works is collecting memories, anecdotes, and photos from members of the community about their favorite Brookline parks for a digital initiative called the Park Stories Project.

You can read more about it - and submit your own stories of Brookline parks at www.brooklinema.gov/ParkStoriesProject

To celebrate this initiative, we present this brief overview of the development of Brookline's parks, together with a photo essay that combines current photos with historical images showing the sites of some Brookline parks as they were before the town turned them into the treasures they are today.

Public Squares and Parks Reserved

As early as 1853, Town Meet-

Moved, by Geo. Griggs, Esq., that there shall be made an accurate topographical survey of the town by a skillful engineer, and that a plan be drawn and submitted to the town by him, showing where and at what grades streets and sidewalks can be most advantageously made and public squares and parks reserved, and that, if it meets the approbation of the town, the Selectmen or County Commissioners be authorized to lay out such streets prospectively, to be

ing took up a proposal for a topographical survey of the town to "show where and at what grades streets and sidewalks can be most advantageously made and public squares and parks reserved."

In 1860, Town Meeting considered a proposal to purchase a parcel on Cypress Street for a park and a small piece of land near today's Pearl Street for a public square. The warrant article was rejected by a vote of 130 to 115.

Finally, in 1871 Town Meeting approved the acquisition of two pieces of private land, the properties that became Cypress Field and the Brookline Avenue Playground. They are among the first known

examples in the United States of private property being purchased specifically for public parks.

Many more public parks and open spaces were added over the next 30+ years, a time of explosive growth in Brookline, especially in North Brookline.

The Town's park-building didn't stop there. New additions, renovations, and re-purposing continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. These include, among many others, Robinson Playground (1939), Larz Anderson Park (1951), Hall's Pond Reservation (1975), Skyline Park (2008), and Fisher Hill Park (2016).

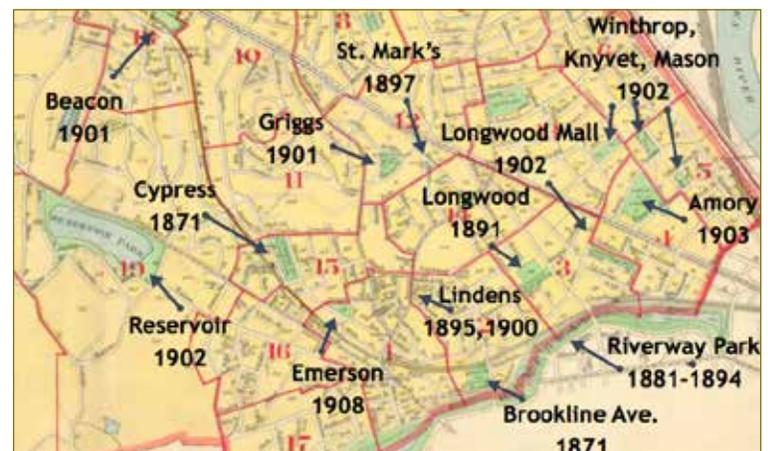
The Brookline Historical Society is dedicated to the documentation and interpretation of Brookline's diverse history, to collecting, preserving, and maintaining artifacts of Brookline's past, and to sharing the story of the town and its people with residents and visitors alike.

The Society's headquarters are located in the heart of Coolidge Corner at the Edward Devotion House, one of Brookline's oldest Colonial Period structures.

The Society also maintains the 1768 Putterham School located in Larz Anderson Park.

The Society's extensive collection of historic information, photographs, postcards, and atlases can be viewed on our website BrooklineHistoricalSociety.org

Our membership program is active and volunteers are always welcome.



(continued from page 1)

Here are just a few of Brookline's parks and open spaces, as they were and as they are today.

Emerson Garden



This image on the left is one of two paintings of the Emerson estate, now Emerson Garden. The old Emerson house is in the center with the carriage house on the left. The postcard image on the right shows approximately the same view after the town acquired the property in 1907 and turned it into a park. The house and carriage house were moved across Davis Avenue where they still stand at #74 Davis, just outside the photo.

Robinson Playground



The photo on the left shows the car barn of the Boston Elevated Railway used for streetcars that ran down Boylston Street between Boston and Brookline. The newer image shows the same location, on Cypress Street at the corner of Franklin Street, which became a park in 1939. The park was named for Margaret Robinson, a lifelong Brookline resident who lived on Cypress Street and was active in town and school affairs.

Amory Park/Hall's Pond/Amory Woods



The 1927 aerial photo on the left shows Hall's Pond on the right and the still largely undeveloped Amory Park on the left. This low-lying area was a wetland known as the Cedar Swamp before the park property was purchased from the Amory estate in 1903. Hall's Pond, used at one time as a catchment area for rainwater runoff, remained in private hands until the 1970s when it was acquired by the town and turned into a wildlife sanctuary. (The adjacent Amory Woods were added in the 1990s.)

(continued from page 2)

Ward Playground



The old Aspinwall homestead with its giant elm tree stood on Aspinwall Avenue across from St. Paul's Church. It is seen in the photo at left which looks uphill from Brook Street across the Aspinwall farm. The house, built around 1660 and home to generations of Aspinwalls, was torn down in 1891; the great elm had fallen many years earlier. The town acquired property for the Brook Street Playground in 1914, and extended it through new acquisitions to Aspinwall Avenue in the 1970s. The park was renamed in 1992 as the William (Billy) Ward, in honor of a longtime resident of Brook Street who was active in local politics and town affairs. The park, redesigned in 2013, is shown at right from the Brook Street entrance.

Fisher Hill Reservoir Park



Brookline's newest park, Fisher Hill Reservoir Park, occupies what was once the site of the state-owned Fisher Hill Reservoir, built in 1886-87 as part of the City of Boston's water system and taken out of commission as a reservoir in 1978. Acquired by Brookline in 2011, it was the first acquisition of new park land by the town in 50 years. The park, which was dedicated in 2016, combines an open lawn in the former basin of the reservoir with a variety of plantings and wildlife habitat, including woodlands and a wet meadow traversed by walking paths and a boardwalk.

Photo Credits

*Emerson Garden: Courtesy of Brookline Preservation Department; Brookline Historical Society
Robinson Playground: Courtesy of Collection of Joel Shield; Brookline Parks & Open Space Division
Amory/Hall's Pond: Courtesy of Brookline Preservation Department; Google Maps
Ward Playground: Courtesy of Brookline Historical Society; Brookline Parks & Open Space Division
Fisher Hill Park: Courtesy of Brookline Preservation Department; Klopfer Martin Design Group*

Help Keep Brookline History Alive! Renew Your Membership

Do you enjoy stories like these, plus walking tours, local history presentations, and members-only programs in historic locations? Your membership dollars and donations make all of this possible. Please use the enclosed envelope and membership form - or click on Membership on our website - to renew today. You'll continue to receive newsletters like this one and invitations to special members events, while supporting both old and new ways of discovering and telling the story of Brookline's past

Thank you for your continuing support.

A Mystery in an Old Brookline Photo: Street Change Sets Town Against Citizen

by Larry Barbaras

The Historical Society has recently started working with the Brookline Preservation Department to curate and post some of their vast collection of photos, many of which are not available elsewhere.

Here is the story of one photo with an unexpected twist.

In 1859, John Panter purchased the former Baptist Church at the apex of Harvard and Washington Streets in Brookline Village and converted the first floor into retail space. That intersection, known as “Harvard Square,” would be a Village focal point for decades to come, and still is today.

We have had a number of photos on our website of this building - called “Panter’s Building” and, later, “the Harvard Building” and “Harvard Hall” - portraying routine and predictable changes over time of the stores and life around them. Here is one, from the collection of the Public Library of Brookline, from 1903. (The steeple of the “new” Baptist Church of 1859 is visible in the background.)

It was in the collection of the Preservation Department that we recently came across the rather startling photo below,

wholly out of sync with our existing documentation of the “routine” evolution of life at the Harvard Square apex. Yes, still tacked on to the front of the ramshackle mess were the familiar Harvard Hall sign, and, below it, the sign of Thomas Dyer. But where were all the windows? And why was the building so oddly asymmetrical? Herein lies a tale that reminds us that struggles between the town and private citizens are not just a recent phenomenon.

It seems that the new (1901) electric trolley line extended to Brookline village from Coolidge Corner was causing problematic crowding issues on the street. A width of 55 feet had to accommodate both trolleys and horse-drawn wagons. The town had previously completed a widening of the northern section between Coolidge Corner and School Street (from 55 feet to 65 feet), a less challenging section as it mostly involved single-family houses set back from the street.

In early 1903, the decision was made to complete the widening of the southern section from School Street to Harvard Square along the western side of the street. At the time, two buildings along the new stretch, the Masonic Building (at the corner of School Street) and Har-

vard Hall were owned by George N. Talbot. Both directly abutted the sidewalk, and neither could be easily moved. A hearing about the proposed widening was held on March 2, 1903.

Talbot, then out of town, had his lawyer argue that any compensation provided by the town would grossly undervalue Talbot’s holdings. They requested that the town desist. But the Board of Selectmen ruled against them, and all abutters were given 90 days to complete any necessary alterations to their properties. Proposals and counter proposals were batted back and forth for several months between Talbot and the town with no resolution.

In the meantime, the town reached a relative, if imperfect, peace with the other abutting property owners, and adjustments and moves were made by most of them, if needed. The work would start at the intersection of Harvard and School Streets. By early September 1903, a large contingent of Boston Elevated Railway Company workers was making rapid progress relocating the trolley tracks. The town was laying down “bituminous macadam” on the street after a successful experiment with it on Kent Street. And they were closing in on Talbot’s Harvard Hall.

(continued next page)



11-13 Harvard Square on August 11, 1903
Courtesy of Public Library of Brookline via Digital Commonwealth



11-13 Harvard Square, 1905
Courtesy of Brookline Preservation Department

The town turned up the decibel level of their public warnings, but Talbot was not budging. The town was limited in finding a solution to the problem of Talbot's intransigence by a wrinkle in the eminent domain law that apparently precluded the complete removal of a property without the owner's permission.

In late September, the town engineer was instructed to begin a bidding process on a rather extraordinary project: slicing off ten feet of Talbot's buildings. And, in short order, that's exactly what happened (carried out by town employees themselves according to one report).

It is not clear whether Talbot or the town was responsible for then adding some rather outrageous embellishments to the dubious implementation. Windows were eliminated, the decorative siding was ripped off, and the structure was left covered with a chaotic jumble of randomly-sized boards. Additionally, visible in the black and white photo here, there are many different levels of darkening on those boards. This actually reflects coloring, reported in a newspaper as "every color of the rainbow," randomly ordered in a wild display evidently meant to heighten the drama. Was the town trying to add to the pressure on Talbot, or was Talbot ramping up his leverage against the town?



The Harvard Street side of the building, with "boards painted blue and boards painted green, and a whole lot of boards painted bright, smiling red," reported the Brookline Chronicle. The effect, said the paper, "is almost dazzling."

On the right side of Harvard Hall was the provisions store of Lucius N. Danforth. Danforth had been a clerk working for more than 26 years for the two

previous owners at the stores there, starting out as a young man. In a move timed with epically bad luck, the store had just reopened under his ownership a few months earlier, in June 1903. His side was obliterated less than four months later (he relocated to Boylston Street on the northwest corner with Cypress Street).



The Dyer and Danforth stores on the first floor of Harvard Hall.

On the left side was the grocery store of Thomas Dyer. Dyer, a Brookline resident, had previously co-owned a store across the street, Collins and Dyer, followed by several years working at the provisions store of Hartwell & Skinner in Boston's New Faneuil Hall Market and, by 1882/1883, he, like Danforth, had finally opened his own store in the Harvard Hall building, becoming a fixture of the town there for more than two decades. Dyer would not budge; it appears that he was joining Talbot in his act of defiance.

As the dilapidated building remained, month after month, deliberately unchanged by an angry and litigious Talbot, the hue and cry in the town increased. The October 22, 1904, issue of the Brookline Press exclaimed:

"The aesthetic, if not the public-spirited citizens of Brookline should force the selectmen or Mr. Talbot to obliterate the eyesore at the head of Harvard Square. Shades of John Panter and the good old Baptist folk that have gone before. Could they but see the old Harvard building as it stands today."

Nevertheless, the mess was still there in mid-1905, at one of the most prominent locations in a town whose grand bicentennial celebration in November was

fast approaching. Dyer, who had held out for almost two years, was ordered to vacate by September 1st. By November 1905, he had reestablished his business in a newly-constructed building around the corner at 33 Harvard Street.

Meanwhile, Talbot had just cut a lucrative ten-year leasing deal with a large

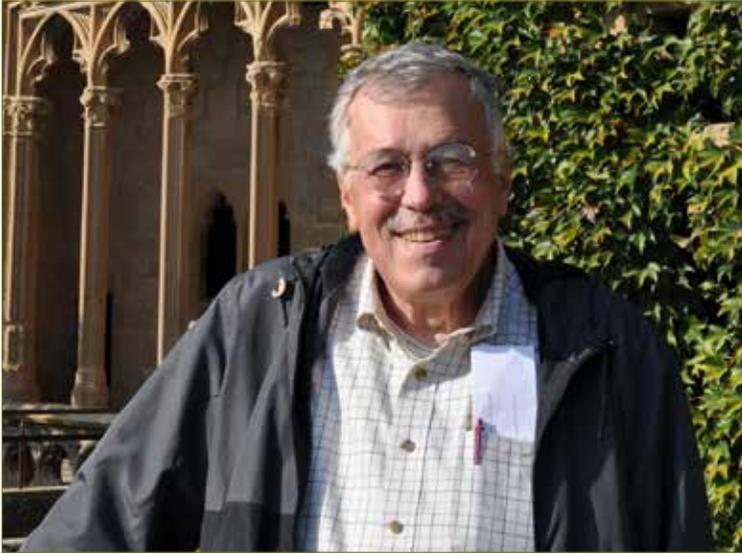
grocery-store group, Rhodes Brothers Co. It is not clear whether Talbot had finally caved in to pressure from the town or whether a great deal just came his way in the normal pursuit of his business. Talbot, at last, prepared plans for a new building on the site and construction on the replacement for Harvard Hall began immediately.

On December 30, 1905, Rhodes Brothers Co. groceries, comparable to today's large supermarket chains, opened their store there. Today, the same building is occupied by the Beacon Hill Athletic Club and Brookline Bank, whose first location was established steps away, almost exactly 150 years ago.



The building today

Introducing New Board Members



Dale Flecker

The Historical Society is pleased to introduce two new members, Dale Flecker and Jean Woy, to our board of trustees. Dale and Jean have brought new energy, ideas, and experience to the board as we plan new and continuing activities for the Brookline community.

Dale Flecker has lived in Brookline for 44 years. Before retiring 10 years ago, he was Associate Director of the Harvard University Library responsible for information technology. He has a

long-standing interest in history and in historic preservation. He and his wife received a commendation from the Brookline Preservation Commission for the restoration of their 1827 house in Brookline Village.

Jean Woy grew up in the Washington DC area and was a history major at Lawrence College (now University, founded by Amos Lawrence of Brookline) in Wisconsin. She earned a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester in British



Jean Woy

history. Jean then worked in college text publishing from 1971 to 2015, as an acquisitions editor and manager at Houghton Mifflin and other publishers, specializing in history and political science. She volunteers with the Boston City Archaeologist and Lawrence University as well as the Brookline Preservation Commission and Brookline Historical Society. She lives on Sewall Avenue.

Our Thanks for a Member's Generosity



Natalie Greenberg

Longtime Brookline Historical Society member Natalie Greenberg, who passed away at the age of 87 in November 2020, left a generous bequest to the Society that will help us as we plan and develop new ways to explore and share the history of the town.

A native of Lawrence, Massachusetts, Natalie worked in publishing for several different companies in New York and Boston. She also served at one time as assistant to Dr. Abram Sachar, President, and later Chancellor at Brandeis University.

Natalie enrolled in and completed the Management Training Program offered by Harvard-Radcliffe, a precursor to women being accepted at the Harvard Business School. In retirement, she volunteered at the Public Library of Brookline and the Museum of Fine Arts.

She was a regular at Historical Society programs and events over many years who will be missed.

Spring Walking Tours

Put on your walking shoes and join Historical Society president Ken Liss for spring walking tours of Brookline. All tours are free. Follow the links below for details and registration.



150 Years of Shopping in Coolidge Corner

Sunday, April 10, 2022, 9 am - 10 am
Journey back to the origin of the Coolidge Corner retail district and a glimpse of local shopping in the early decades of the 20th century.

<https://coolidgecorner4-10-22.eventbrite.com>



Beaconsfield Terraces Walking Tour

Sunday, April 24, 2022, 10 am - 11 am
The chateaux-like Beaconsfield Terraces near Washington Square, still standing today, provided condominium-like living in the 1890s.

<https://beaconsfield42422.eventbrite.com>



Brookline Village Walking Tour

Sunday, May 15, 2022, 10 am - 11:30 am
A walking tour of the historic residential, commercial, and civic areas of the neighborhood centered on Washington and Harvard Streets north of Route 9.

<https://brooklinevillage51522.eventbrite.com>



Blake Park: History of a Neighborhood

Sunday, May 22, 2022, 2 pm - 3:30 pm
Learn how the neighborhood behind Brookline High School emerged – despite failed plans, untimely deaths, and financial scandal – between World Wars I & II.

<https://blakepark52222.eventbrite.com>

Presentations Past and Future

The Historical Society hopes to get back to in-person presentations, including special members-only presentations, in the near future. In the meantime, here - in case you missed them - are links to recordings of a number of virtual programs that have been presented while the pandemic kept us from meeting in person.



At Home with H.H. Richardson

Presented for the Historical Society by William Tyre, Executive Director and Curator, Glessner House, Chicago
March 21, 2021
<https://www.screencast.com/t/INHn9S8G>



Brookline by Map

Presented by the Norman Leventhal Map Center, Boston Public Library with the Public Library of Brookline and the Brookline Historical Society
June 21, 2021
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NS5lhB2glY>



A Brief History of Brookline's Town Government

Presented by Ken Liss and Greer Hardwicke for the League of Women Voters of Brookline
October 20, 2021
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrQirY8H7uo>

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Membership renewal form included