



1897 view of Newton Centre Playground

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

Newton Centre Playground was created at a time when a public interest was shifting from passive parks to more active recreation facilities. The Newton Centre Improvement Association, promoters of the park, stated in their 1890 report that they were attempting to combine an ornamented ground with a playground. Newton Centre Playground was the first playground in the City of Newton and was the largest municipal public open space in the city at the time. The initial design was conceived by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted & Co. in 1890 and refined into a preliminary plan in 1891. The firm had designed Charlesbank for Boston in 1887, the first open air gymnasium and exercise facility of its kind in a public park. The outdoor gymnasium for men at Charlesbank opened in 1889. The design for Newton Centre Playground was further developed by Herbert J. Kellaway utilizing principles established in the Olmsted firm plan.

The period of landscape significance and emphasis for Newton Centre Playground has been designated to be between 1890 when land for the playground had been acquired and 1915 when the Recreation Center was added to the site. This incorporates the last overall designed change to the park.

Outdoor gymnasium for men, Charlesbank, Boston, 1889 [City of Boston Annual Reports]



THE DESIGNERS

Frederick Law Olmsted [1822-1903] was the designer of Central Park in New York City and numerous other parks and park systems nationwide. The firm, Frederick Law Olmsted & Co., worked on Newton Centre Playground from 1890 to 1891. They also worked on about 3 dozen residential projects in Newton including the estate of Robert R. Bishop, beginning in 1886.

Herbert J. Kellaway [1867-1947], landscape architect, worked in Olmsted firm office from 1892 to 1906 prior to establishing his own firm. He lived in Newton and served as chairman of the planning board from 1930 to 1946. Some of his other work includes Winchester Civic Center, Merrymount Park and Faxon Field in Quincy and Hastings Park in Lexington, as well as a number of housing projects and a rose garden for Mrs. Henry Ford in Dearborn MI.

NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

ORIGINAL DESIGN AND APPEARANCE

In their March 1891 preliminary plan, Frederick Law Olmsted & Co. envisioned a playground with a large central open space for a variety of activities [playground] in a broad expanse of lawn, a tennis ground, a complete interconnected circulation system with curvilinear paths at the perimeter of the property, brooks treated in a natural character [also relocated to maximize uninterrupted space] with 4 bridges, and vegetation to provide a natural character throughout. Entrances were flanked by gate posts. There were to be long walks from the entrances into the playground before encountering activity, allowing time for decompression from urban stress. There also appears to have been provision for special features where Hammond Brook passes under the Cochituate Aqueduct and at the walk connection from Homer Street and the loop path. The plan included a path along the top of the Cochituate Aqueduct with connections into the playground. Their description of the design proposal states:

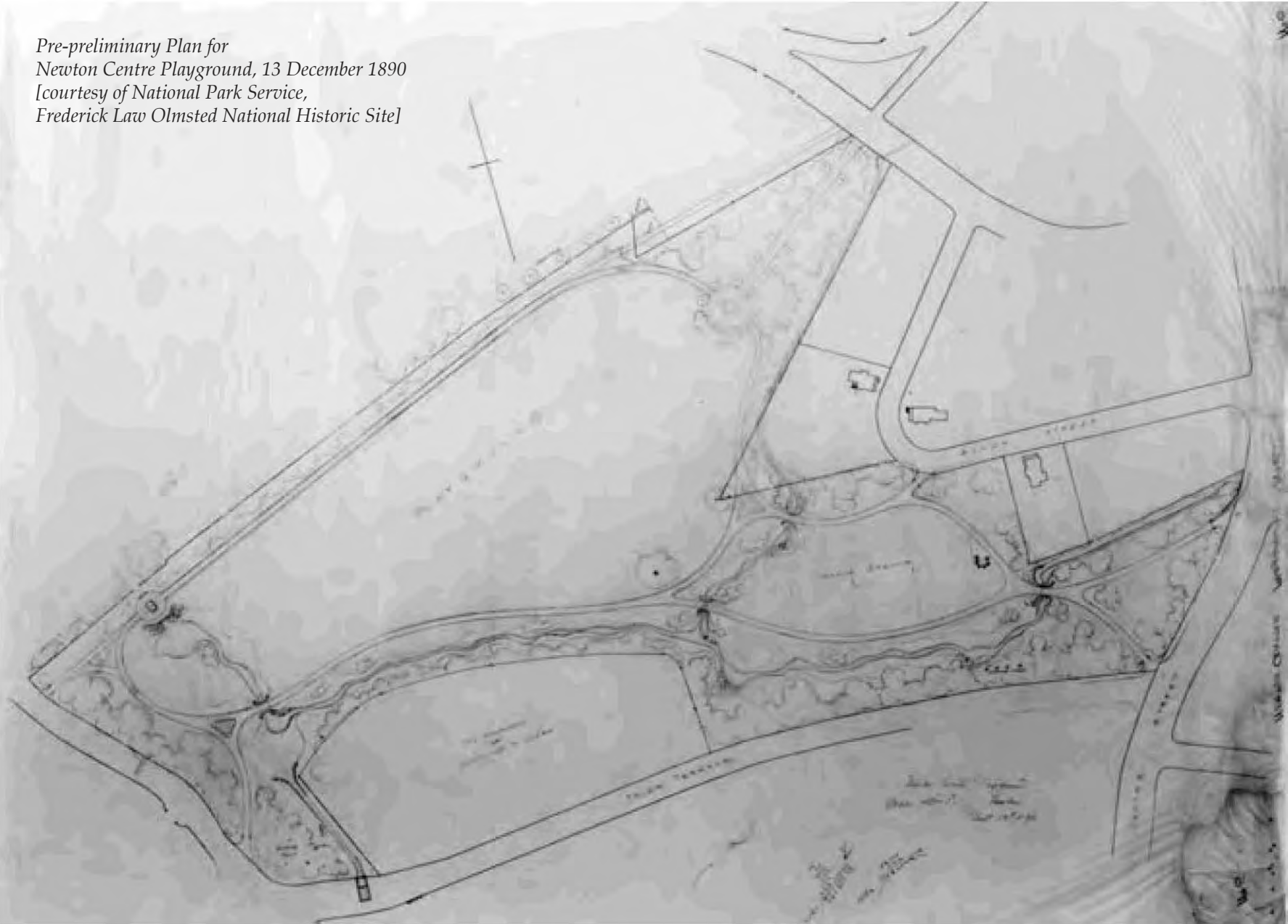
The ground covered by this plan is a depressed area, much of it constantly water-soaked, subject to be flooded and unsuitable to be built upon. While in private hands and subject to transfer in small parcels, it was liable to become a public eyesore and a menace to the health of the community. Partly for this reason, and partly because it is well situated and well adapted to be economically formed into a much needed playground, possession of it has been acquired by the city. To adapt the ground to its intended use, it is proposed to establish a system of thorough underground drainage with a lower outlet than now exists. This system, however, is not intended to convey the water now flowing through the property in constant streams by open ditches. It is intended that this water shall be carried, so far as space is available, by channels having, as nearly as practicable, the character of natural brooks. In order to leave a large area of unbroken turf for ball games, these brook channels are to be laid out near the borders of the property. The existing walled ditch for carrying the waste water of the old aqueduct, near the western end of the property, is to be done away with where it crosses the meadow, the new brook channel being adapted to answer the same purpose.

From the straight walk shown on the drawing, following the line of the aqueduct, an unobstructed view of the ball ground will be commanded. Other walks shown are designed to be used for rambling, but are so laid out as to serve as means of convenient communication between the entrances, from public streets and different features of interest within the ground. Parts of the ground not needed for games and athletic exercises are to be treated with a view to securing as much beauty as practicable, of a natural character.

The Kellaway plans of 1908 and 1911 increasingly provided for active recreation of various types to satisfy community desires. The earlier plan generally follows the spirit of the Olmsted firm plan with a few modifications, most notably not relocating much of the brook or changing its character, relocating the tennis courts to the south, adding a playfield for small boys [or archery ground] at the Homer Street entrance, and subdividing the large central open space. A parcel at the corner of Pleasant Street and Tyler Terrace was also not included in this proposal. The written report for the plan describes recommendations for the playground with Olmsted ideals. The 1911 plan, while maintaining the basic concepts of circulation and perimeter vegetation, suggests an intensely developed playground for active recreation and recommends covering the brooks to allow the most usable space. It also recommended more active recreation along the Pleasant Street edge, eliminating another decompression zone.

The Olmsted initial plan attempted to provide a balance between the activities of the playground and calming qualities of the landscape. As the various Kellaway plans developed there was increasing interest in active recreation and less in passive recreation. Most of the later descriptions related to improvements focused on provision of active recreation facilities. There is very little description related to improvements for passive or aesthetic qualities after publication of the 1908 Kellaway plan.

*Pre-preliminary Plan for
Newton Centre Playground, 13 December 1890
[courtesy of National Park Service,
Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site]*



NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

ESTABLISHMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND DESIGN EVOLUTION OF NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

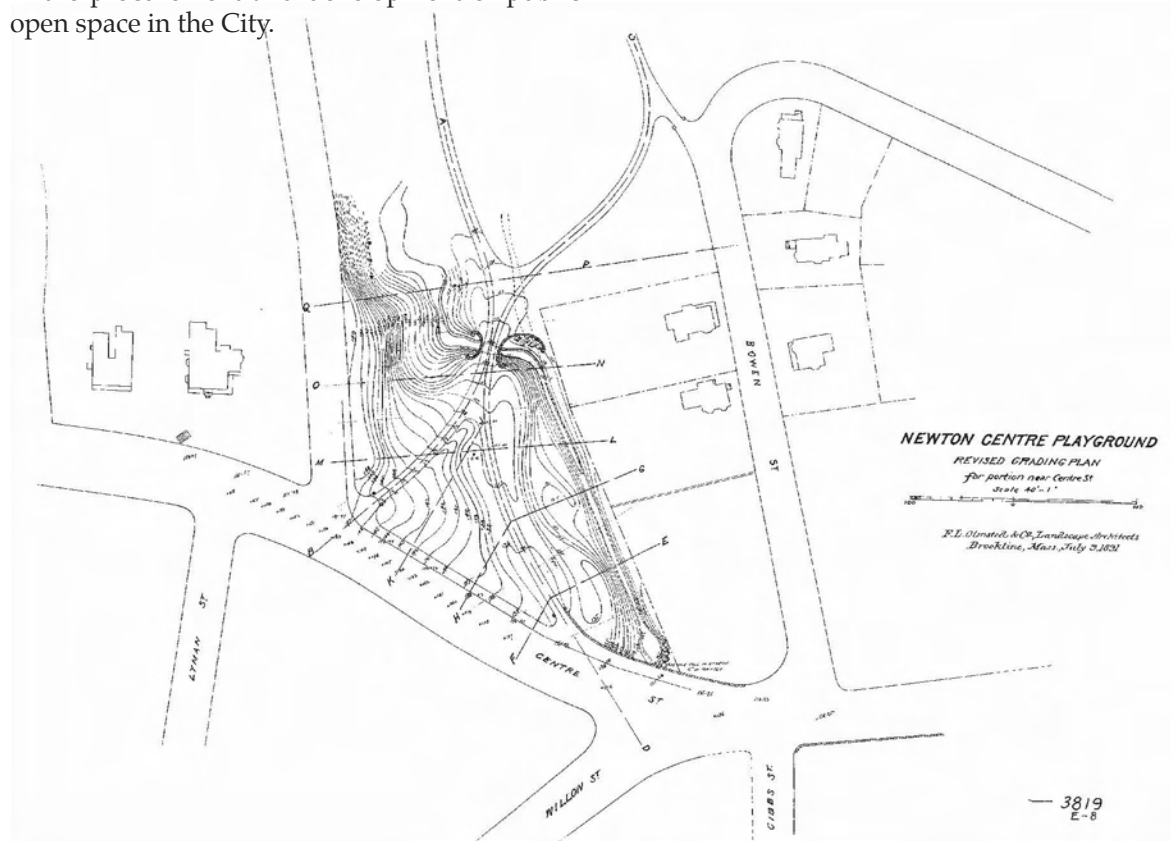
Pre World War I

In 1882 the Massachusetts Park Act became law, stating that a Park Commission is the only body authorized to acquire lands for park or playground purposes, for which appropriations have been made. Local papers provided commentary and opinion on this, and the City voted in favor of public parks. The following year Mayor William P. Ellison advocated securing land for parks while land was relatively inexpensive. Farlow Park was acquired as a gift to the City later that year, beginning a process of citizen involvement in the procurement and development of public open space in the City.

On April 9th of 1888 Robert R. Bishop presented an essay to the Neighbor's Club entitled *What can we do for Newton Centre* recommending the acquisition of about 11 acres in 7 parcels of land for a playground west of Centre Street. He described it as "a playground for games of ball and heavier sports, as well as for tennis courts and the lighter games, ample in size, proper in construction, centrally situated and yet so far away from houses so as to be unobjectionable". He also stated that the city had appropriated \$2,500 toward the expense. Acquisition progressed shortly thereafter.

In the Newton Centre Improvement Association's final report in 1890 regarding a playground and park for Newton Centre, they recapped the process and stated that in 1888 they envisioned a park and playground of about 11 acres for a cost of about \$15,000 and that they had secured about 20 acres for about \$25,000. The citizens had contributed more than \$15,000 and the city paid \$10,000. They also stated that their attempt to "combine an ornamented ground with a playground" came from the character of the land and its location.

Recognizing that a playground and park still needed to be laid out, the Association retained the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted & Co. to develop a plan later that year. In addition to preparing a preliminary plan for the entire property, the firm also developed detailed plans for the Centre Street entrance.



*Revised Plan for Centre Street entrance, July 1891
[courtesy of National Park Service,
Frederick Law Olmsted national Historic Site]*

*Path from Tyler Terrace and Centre Street, 1905
[Postcard courtesy of Newton Historical Society]*



The Olmsted firm seems to have been an obvious choice because they had designed the first playground, an open air gymnasium and exercise facility that was the first of its kind in a public park in 1887, Charlesbank in Boston. It was a linear park along the river with a promenade, boat landings, an open air gymnasium [running track, trapezes and swinging rings, jumping and pole vaulting, horizontal bars, pulley weights, giant strides, parallel bars, shot putting, weight throwing and quoits] at one end for men and a turf playground for little girls as well as gymnastic facilities [track, swings, ladders, pulley weights and giant strides] for women and a sand court for children at the other. Sandwiched between was a lawn with a large natural grove of trees. The men's area opened in 1889 and women's area opened 2 years later.

Progress in developing the park was relatively slow. Over the next 18 years comparatively little was accomplished according to Herbert J. Kellaway in his 1908 report. He noted that some underdrainage had been installed, 2 tennis courts and a 1/4 mile track had been built as well as a gravel drive. Little planting had been done except at the Centre Street entrance. He did not mention that the ball field had been also completed and that outdoor gymnastic facilities had been provided.

Kellaway's May 1908 plan was a revision of the Olmsted firm plan and reflected an increasing interest in accommodating active recreation in parks. His report provided some specifics related to his proposal for what was then the "largest open pleasure area in Newton". Although the Olmsted firm plan proposed moving Hammond Brook near southerly boundary to obtain large free open areas, Kellaway noted that a deeper channel had been constructed for quite a portion of the way with concrete sides and a stone bed. His plan was to only relocate the last [westernmost] section of the brook to the south and noted that it would need to be widened and deepened in the future to accommodate increasing development around Chestnut Hill.

At the Centre Street entrance he stated that the wide existing drive was never used and recommended reducing it to a walk with an 8' maximum width. Individual shrubs scattered about walks were to be removed to provide a simple lawn treatment. Old and overgrown shrub beds near entrance walks were to be replaced with younger growth of low growing edging shrubs on the margins of the beds. Perennials in the center of the lawn were to be moved to a margin of shrubbery. A 20' to 30' wide plantation of Pine and Hemlock was to be planted to screen the back yards from Centre Street. Native shrubs [Privet, Viburnum, Barberry and Wild Rose] were to be used along the margins of border plantations. The general effect was to be one of openness and neat simplicity.

Turf playground for little girls, Charlesbank, Boston, 1892 [City of Boston Annual Reports]



Ballfield from Cochituate Aqueduct, undated [courtesy of Newton Historical Society]



NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

He believed that the tennis courts protruded "objectionably" into the landscape in the Bowen Street area. He recommended removal and replacement with a small playfield for boys, relocating the tennis courts, and providing more, to the opposite side of the brook at the base of the bank of Tyler Terrace, enclosed by a fence covered with vines and a mass of shrubs and a few trees to screen the gravel area from general park views. He suggested that athletic apparatus could be placed near this entrance.

At the Homer Street entrance he recommended developing a small play place with walks skirting the margins, removing a stone retaining wall, and extending the culvert for a better entranceway. He recommended that walks be a maximum width of 8', preferring 6', and that carriages could use the walks to attend games on the large field, if necessary.

The Pleasant Street edge was to have open spaces with plantations of shrubs and scattered trees permitting views into the playground. The brook in that area was to be moved to allow for a small space for boys and younger children. A border plantation was to be provided for the length of the field against the bank of the aqueduct, composed mostly of Pines with a few deciduous trees [Paper White Birch] on the margin with a mix of Sumac, Viburnum, Privet, Cornus and Common Elder for a pleasing natural effect. There were to be no yellow or purple leaved shrubs.

He felt the Playfield [running track, football field and baseball field] needed grading and further study of the levels for the track. He recommended that the backstop be made of open mesh wire, not boards.

At the Grove and Shelter [which became known as the Childrens Corner] trees were to be added to secure the future of the grove. Seats, scups, sand courts, swings, drinking fountain and other amusements were to be added as well as a shelter in the center of all activities which would include sanitariums for both sexes and a space for protection from passing showers.

Rustic bridges were to be built of a permanent character with long wing walls and graceful lines. Vines and shrubs were to be planted to soften the stone work.

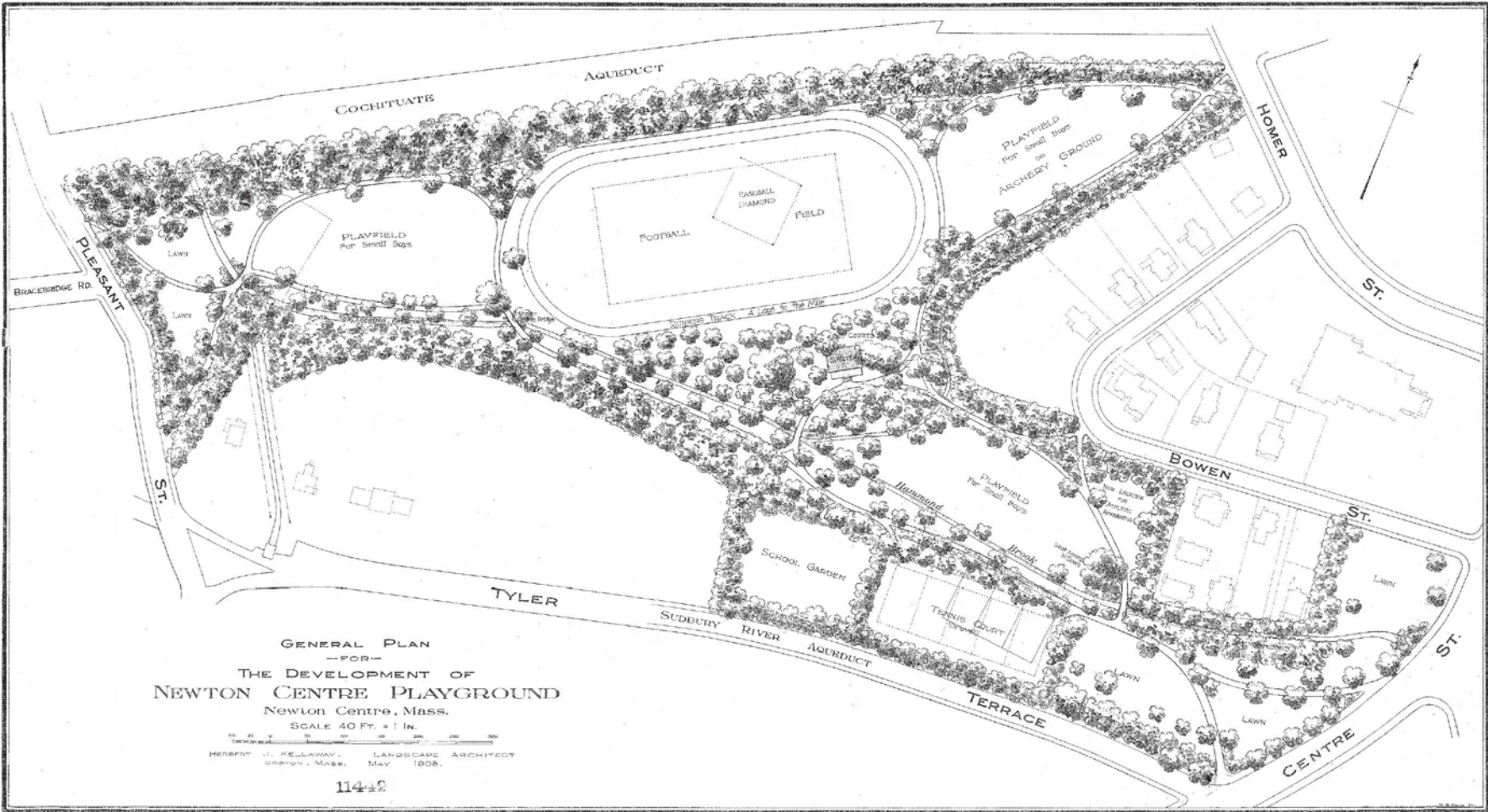
A school garden was to be provided to teach children how to grow plants. It was to have a fence enclosure covered with vines and with shrubs at the base. The steep bank along Tyler Terrace was to be planted with thorny shrubs to discourage boys from entering except through the gateway.

Childrens Corner, 1916
[courtesy of Newton Historical Society]



Tennis Courts, 1909-1913
[courtesy of Newton Historical Society]





General Plan for Newton Centre Playground, May 1908 [courtesy of City of Newton]

NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

Planting was to be initiated as soon as possible. Shrubs were to be used in masses and allowed to grow naturally to reduce maintenance. Isolated shrubs were to be avoided. Ornamental shrubs [Spiraea, Honeysuckle, Deutzia and Forsythia] could be used near entrances.

In regard to maintenance, he felt that police presence was desirable.

The Kellaway 1911 plan design reflected the increased desires of the public for specific areas for sports and exercise. Even though more land was available for playground use, the brook was to be covered to create space for larger and additional play areas. Separate courts for girls and boys basketball were added. The plan proposed moving the children's area from the grove in the center of the site to the edge of Tyler Terrace with an open lawn and various amusements at the edge [sand boxes, scups, merry go round, wading pool, etc.]. It also proposed moving the school garden to a new location. The plan added 4 new tennis courts [for a total of 9] near Pleasant Street. Two buildings were also part of the plan, a cottage near Pleasant Street, and a shelter and natatorium [indoor pool] at the midpoint of Tyler Terrace.

World War I and the Depression

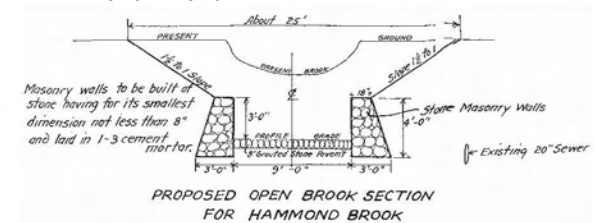
Before the United States entered World War I the Newton Centre Improvement Association, Playground and Social Service League, and Newton Centre Woman's Club met in April and May of 1915 to raise money for moving and equipping the Trinity Parish building. Kellaway sited the building in the park. A convenience station was added to the playground in 1916.

The toboggan slide was added in 1929. Fencing for the tennis courts and some boundaries was added in 1931. Work on the brooks commenced in 1938. Stone masonry walls enclosed a grouted stone waterway that was set deeper than the existing brook. The junction of the 2 brooks was realigned and a portion of Hammond Brook adjacent to the tennis courts was covered at the same time.

*Toboggan slide, undated
[courtesy of Newton Historical Society]*

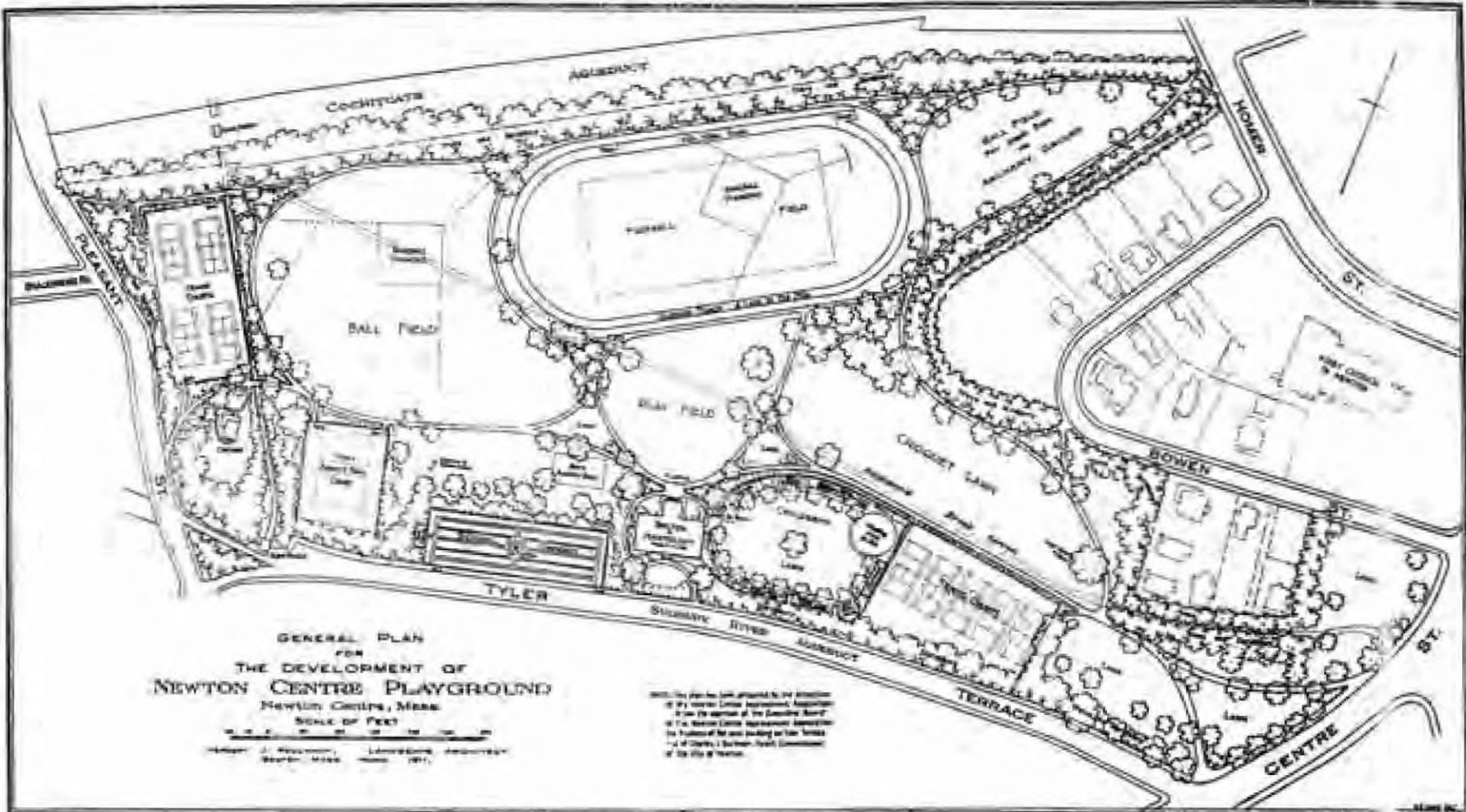


*Detail at Hammond Brook, 1938
[courtesy of City of Newton]*



*Toboggan slide, undated
[courtesy of Newton Historical Society]*





General Plan for Newton Centre Playground, March 1911 [courtesy of City of Newton]

NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

World War II and Later

During World War II concrete steps were on the Tyler Terrace slope next to the tennis courts in 1943 and Victory gardens were added along the Pleasant Street edge in 1945. Few improvements other than repairs were made until 1957. In anticipation of the construction of the Mason-Rice School at the Pleasant Street end of the site, the archery range was relocated, the school garden and the running track was removed, and the baseball field was improved.

A merry go round was installed in 1962. The tennis courts were resurfaced the following year. The Little League field was refurbished over the next 2 years. A new tot lot area was installed in 1965. A practice tennis court was installed in 1966 and an asphalt basketball court was added the following year. Lights were added for football in 1972. The toboggan slide was removed in 1978. A play structure area was added to the Mason-Rice School in 1989. Lighting was added to the basketball court in 1995.

REMAINING HISTORIC FEATURES

The playground retains features from both the original Olmsted firm plan and Kellaway plans. Although the equipment has changed, the baseball field and play apparatus area are in their original location as are the Recreation Center and path system from Centre Street to the tennis courts. The latter did not include construction of pedestrian gate posts, the bridge or relocating the brook. While the tennis courts are not in their original location, they are where they were sited in Kellaway's 1908 plan. The Recreation Center retains much of its original character.

The Centre Street edge was always intended as a passive space, but the area north of Hammond Brook adjacent to Centre Street was apparently not developed as described in the 1908 Kellaway plan. The playground has always had the most frontage on Tyler Terrace, but little presence because most activities occur well below street level. The 1911 Kellaway plan proposed facilities in closer proximity to adjacent residences, as did the addition of the toboggan slide which is now gone.

CHANGES TO THE ORIGINAL PLAN

Aspects of the historic plans were never implemented, particularly in relation to circulation systems and the placement and treatment of the brooks. With few exceptions, planting was not developed or completed. Apparently only a general approach was proposed and a specific planting plan does not appear to have been developed. In recent years there appears to have been a general loss of vegetation, specifically the loss of the Willows along Hammond Brook, and loss of the separation between use areas like the play structure area and ball fields. Volunteer growth related to the brooks tends to conceal that feature of the playground.

While loss of the running track is not a significant issue, construction of the Mason-Rice School on park land was a major intrusion resulting in the loss of playground space and connections to the neighborhood at the west end of playground. While the activities of the Little League field and basketball court are appropriate, their locations are not. Kellaway suggested playfields for small boys near the Homer and Bowen Street entrances that would have included a flexible open space of lawn accommodating a variety of uses. The Little League field has a defined single purpose use, has a fenced enclosure which was not anticipated, and barely fits into its site. The fenced enclosure, which was not anticipated in the early plans, blocks the entrance to the playground from Homer Street. The basketball court also has a single purpose use and protrudes "objectionably" into the landscape much as the original tennis courts did in that location as noted by Kellaway.



Teeters, undated

[courtesy of Newton Historical Society]



Note: p 18 is blank in published report & has been omitted here,