

Recreation in the Parks

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From the Fall 2001 Newsletter

"Parks" and "recreation" are words that are often linked, run together into "parks-and-rec" in daily conversation. Recreation, of course, can consist of active endeavors such as playing games, running, swimming, but it can also be passive, with time spent in the greenery of an urban parkland having the effect of lifting some of the burdens of modern life. Brandywine Park and Rockford Park offer a long history of both sorts of recreation.

The Wilmington Board of Park Commissioners included elements of passive recreation from the earliest years of Brandywine and Rockford parks. Park pavilions were among the most visible features that enhanced passive recreation, offering visitors places to share picnics, to read, or just to enjoy time off. In the case of the Sugar Bowl, completed in 1902 on the bluff above the river near the north end of the Washington Street Bridge, a pavilion was the site for musical concerts. In 1902, the Board constructed a rustic picnic shelter in Rockford Park and followed it in 1911 with a brick pavilion in North Brandywine Park. By the 1940s, work by the Works Progress Administration [WPA] had added the South Park Pavilion and the Monkey Hill Pavilion to Brandywine Park.

In the late nineteenth century, advocates associated with the "recreation movement" urged city park departments to include forms of active recreation in their plans by adding playing fields, tennis courts, and swimming pools to their facilities. Wilmington's Park Commission heard the message, making active recreation an important component in their plans. Although there was never an organized playground program in either Brandywine or Rockford Park, the Commissioners provided ample opportunities for Wilmingtonians to find exercise of all sorts in the parks. One popular late nineteenth-century activity was bicycling and park engineer Theodore Leisen advised the Park Commissioners in 1895 that building proper roads through the parks would "be a source of great pleasure to the growing army of cyclists as well as to the community at large."

The city's first swimming pool opened in 1898 in Brandywine Park, at the foot of Adams Street between South Park Drive and Wawaset Street.

Operating from the first Monday in June until 30 September, the pool schedule allowed men and boys to swim five days each week and women and girls, one day. The pool served an average of 250 patrons during its first year. In 1899, the comparatively few women users caused the Park Commissioners to observe that "the small number of women who avail themselves of the opportunity [to swim] scarcely warrants reserving one-sixth of the time for their use," although it continued to serve both men and women. The pool remained in use until 1948 and only remnants of its foundation survive.

Tennis was another popular pastime that soon found an enduring place in the city's parks. In 1913, the Park Commissioner's report noted that "Recreation in one form or another is necessary at all times for all men, women and children, and as a city provides opportunities for the same so in turn will its citizens be better, happier and healthier." That same year, the Commissioners began preparing ground for tennis courts near Adams Street. By 1915, the Park Commission had built those courts, two tennis courts in the area of Rowan and Gilpin streets, and two courts at Rockford Park. In 1922 the Commissioners added six more courts at Rowan Street and, in 1931, they constructed four tennis courts on the hill at the corner of Lovering Avenue and Van Buren Street.

The Park Board also installed playing fields early in the twentieth century. By 1911, young athletes played both football and baseball on fields in Brandywine and Rockford parks. A decade later, a soccer field was added to the facilities at Rockford Park and the Park Commissioners had the football field laid out at what is now Baynard Stadium. Adjacent to the stadium site, they also installed two baseball diamonds and two field hockey fields along 18th Street. When the stadium was dedicated in 1922, the opening event included an Athletic and Gymnastic Tournament of the Philadelphia District of the American Gymnastic Union.

Winter meant both ice-skating and sledding in the parks. The Board's annual report for 1914 noted that the ponds just below the Zoo [where the Josephine Fountain was later installed] were kept clear of snow to allow people to skate. The same

report also remarked that the sledding hill in Rockford Park "has been lighted and iced and stones and inequalities have been removed from the course." In the 1930s, the sledding hill got further attention when WPA workers endeavored to make the course smoother and faster.

By the 1940s, the Park Commission reported to the community that Brandywine and Rockford parks together offered the community a wide range of recreational facilities - an archery range, two badminton courts, four baseball diamonds, twelve fireplaces, two football fields, three hockey fields, six picnic grounds, a soccer field, six softball diamonds, a swimming pool, sixteen

tennis courts, three trails, a sports stadium and a zoo.

In many ways, recreational park use has changed over the past century, with flannel trousers on the tennis courts replaced by shorts and tee shirts and horses no longer seen on the trails of Rockford Park. The swimming pool is gone, at least one of the tennis courts is now a basketball court, and playlots and shuffleboard courts have been installed. But a visit on any warm summer weekend will still find families gathered for picnics and informal games, enjoying the respite from life's burdens that the parks' green meadows, shady trees, and quiet spaces offer.