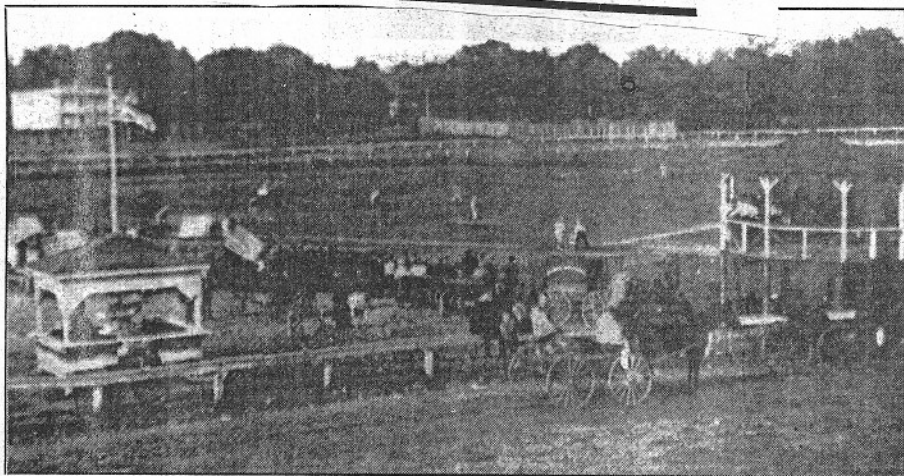


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Recreation Park is pictured here in 1915, shortly after its official opening.

## Racing was Willimantic's passion

Horse racing was a 19th century passion in Willimantic. The Willimantic race track was well known across New England, but this interesting history has been largely forgotten.

It began shortly during the Civil War when a group of local notables, led by livery-stable owner Warren Tanner (1808-83) formed a racing association, and leased the land in the Shetucket River horseshoe, which today houses the radio WILI transmitter. The organization was known as the Horse Shoe Park Association. Stables, bleachers and a grandstand were built to accommodate the owners, trotters and spectators. This area became too small and the association joined forces the Willimantic Farmers Club, and in 1872 a race track and an agricultural fair was organized at Pleasant Valley in Mansfield.

In January 1882, the Willimantic Farmers Club voted to develop a new race track closer to the railroad. Several sites were considered, but William Barrows, the president of the Willimantic Linen Co., offered the farmers and racers a favorable lease of 5 acres of land adjacent to the Natchaug River. In the summer of 1882, the thread mills, the farmers and



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the horse lovers amalgamated to form the Willimantic Agricultural and Industrial Association, and a forested area, known today as Recreation Park, was developed.

More than \$12,000 was expended on the race track alone. The grandstands and stables are no longer there, but the racing track is still clearly visible.

The first Willimantic Fair took place on Oct. 3-5, 1883, and American history was made when the Willimantic Linen Co. installed 34 large electric arc lamps and illuminated the trotting course, thus allowing racing to take place at night.

The WAIA was disbanded in 1901 and reorganized as the Willimantic Horseshoe Park Agricultural Fair Association, and a grandstand was built to accommodate 2,000 spectators. The last fair and race took place in 1913, when American Thread informed WHPAFA that they intended to develop the Willimantic Fairgrounds as a recreational park for their employees, and the trotting track was redeveloped as an athletic track.

Some of the finest trotting races ever witnessed took place at the Willimantic track between 1883 and 1913. It attracted some of the greatest

drivers in the trotting game, such as Fred Reynolds and John Shilinglaw. The track held the yearling record for a New England bred horse, made by Lady Lacy at 2:37. Lady Lacy's sire was Alcyco, bred in Willimantic by Isaac Sanderson. The track record stood at 2:11, made by Bingass, a Massachusetts-bred horse, in September 1912. Several local businessmen, including Amos Walker, Isaac Sanderson and Eugene Lincoln, established local stock farms to produce top trotting horses.

The most famous Willimantic race meeting took place on July 9, 1909, resulting from a challenge between two local men, Louis Dondero and John Curran. Dondero had been to California and purchased a horse he named Donnybrook. Curran's horse, Goldbeater, was considered to be unbeatable. A match-up was arranged, and all proceeds were donated to St. Joseph's Hospital.

A crowd of more than 5,000 assembled at the Willimantic Fairgrounds to witness the contest. The races took place over three heats, and Dondero's horse won easily, lowering the track record from 2:18 to 2:14.

At the last Willimantic Fair in 1913, more than 10,000 people turned up to see Jack McGee of Providence give an airplane exhibition in his 60 horsepower Wright-Curtiss biplane. It was a sad day for many in Willimantic when American Thread decided to close the trotting ring and the fairgrounds midway to build Recreation Park, which opened in 1915.