

A city park by default

Part Three of Three

In 1907 the fact that two city alderman, Willard Hayden and Charles Holbrook, were attempting to profit out of municipal funds by selling their land to the city for a new park enraged local manufacturer William Vanderman. During a contentious city meeting, Vanderman criticized the aldermen for wanting to waste \$7,000 on a park. He argued that the American Thread Co. provided the city with a fine public park at the fairgrounds and that a city-funded public park located at Hayden's lot, atop a rock ledge on the south side of the Willimantic River, east of Bridge Street, would attract "undesirables."



Tom Beardsley

Ignoring Vanderman's protestations, another alderman proposed that the city immediately pay Hayden \$7,000 for his 8-acre lot, which had originally been part of the Smithville Manufacturing site owned by Hayden's father, Whiting Hayden. Melvin Lincoln disagreed. He rose to speak, stressing that open woods and fields were only a short walk from the city, so why pay so much money for Hayden's lot?

Vanderman heartily agreed with Lincoln, pointing out that the residents of Stone Row (Riverside Drive), located across the river from Hayden's piece of land, dumped their rubbish in the river, that the odoriferous Willimantic gas works was located just east of it, and that the cotton mill privies emptied directly into the river across from the proposed park.

Vanderman accused Hayden of "packing the meeting" with mill employees and threatened to go to his foundry and bring his employees into the meeting to vote down the purchase. George Melony, the city attorney, responded that Hayden's lot was worth \$9,000, so the city was getting a bargain at \$7,000.

Vanderman rose again, and accused Hayden of "selfish motives," Lyman Maine agreed and said that this was no place for a park. It was isolated from Pleasant Street, and was a dirty, disease-infected place. James Johnson also agreed, adding that he recalled when the Linen Co. had built a park at the Oaks 20 years previously, but that mill workers had vandalized its seats, flowers and bandstand and the company had to close the park down.

Despite criticisms from the audience, Hayden reiterated that his lot was a beautiful place for a park and that he would provide a footpath to it from the recently opened footbridge. This enraged Vanderman, who objected paying city money to buy a park for "disorderly people and drunks." He argued that the city would have to pay extra for policeman to patrol a park built on Hayden's wasteland. Vanderman also doubted that Hayden would build a footpath to the site, because of the expense in clearing the rock ledges on the Willimantic River's southern side.

After heated discussions, a final vote of 57-47 decided that the city should abandon its plans to pay \$7,000 for a lot to develop a public park. This raucous meeting during the summer of 1907 decided that Holbrook's lot was too far out of town for a park. It eventually became a Willimantic neighborhood centered on Holbrook Avenue.

Prior to the 1907 park debates, where two city alderman had shamelessly attempted to profit from city funds, the town fathers had repeatedly refused to develop a combination town-borough city park. They pointed out that the town had developed the Willimantic Cemetery into a kind of public park. Indeed, in 1877 the Willimantic Journal newspaper reported that the cemetery was a popular meeting place for mill girls at lunch times and that on weekends, gentlemen and ladies rode around the landscaped cemetery on horseback and in carriages.

However, as attitudes to death

changed in the 20th century, many believed that cemeteries should not double as parks.

Accordingly, as the century progressed American Thread donated its Fairgrounds Park to the town and the city subsequently developed public parks on Young Street and at Veterans Park, now known as Main Street's Memorial Park.

Ironically, the public park long

desired in the downtown area appeared by default because city authorities failed to redevelop a section of the city demolished in the mid-1970s.

Consequently, the question remains whether Jillson Square is a testament to poor urban planning during the last 30 years or whether it is at last the ideal public space desired by local residents since the Civil War.

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