

Eyed by Land Seekers, Vandals

NL PARKS

Riverside Park: What Will Be Its Fate?

By NOEL-ANNE GERSON
Day Staff Writer

NEW LONDON — What is the real Riverside Park — is it a place of peaceful quiet or the scene of some of the worst vandalism in New London's history?

Will the Coast Guard Academy appropriate the land, or will it remain the only park in the First and Second Wards?

Riverside Park has survived incredible acts of vandalism against its nearly 19 acres.

These include the destruction of rest rooms and the ripping out of light fixtures and partitions in the camp house.

The Park, which many persons do not even know exists, is a controversial area, having both its bad reputation and some of the greatest natural beauty of any section of New London.

The history of the park goes back to 1911, when a pageant conducted in connection with an event at Williams Memorial Institute drew six or seven hundred persons to the park, according to Ruth Newcomb, whose father was president of the School Board at the time.

The pageant was concerned with historical episodes in New London's past, such as scenes based on Nathan Hale, or the coming of the first minister from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Before that, the park was merely a wooded section on both sides of the railroad tracks in the eastern portion of New London. Now there is a picnic

beach, and a bridge over the railroad to the beach. Roads in the park were later developed by the city, and a school is now being built at the top of the hill overlooking it.

The park itself has been a traditionally good vantage point for watching the Harvard-Yale boat races, and children love to go there to watch trains. The new Winthrop School, to be completed next year, will provide even more advantages to park-goers and their children.

A reciprocal agreement has been worked out involving the use of the park facilities by the school in return for the use of the school playground by the Recreation Department.

As Herbert F. Moran, New London's Recreational Director said, "Children should be on the school grounds — any school grounds — all year — in the summer as well." The school grounds will thus be open to children in the summer, beginning next year when the agreement goes into effect.

The park is, and according to Moran should remain, in a semi-wild state. That way it could be used for nature classes and a summer camp.

"We don't want it too velvety-carpety; we would like an active park," Moran said. Lifeguards have been on the park beaches for more than two weeks to assure the safety of swimmers.

The park has, however, been abused, and according to some sources, much more than

almost ruined by vandalism.

The vandalism seems to have died down to an extent, and the park is not as much of a trouble spot as it once was. Nevertheless there is a great deal in the park that remains to be done.

A spokesman for the Winthrop Community Services, located a few blocks away said, "We are constantly bugging the city about it — to get it cleaned up. Many of our children would like to use it."

According to the spokesman, the beach needs cleaning before it can be properly used. Although the water is not polluted, the beach itself is covered with broken bottles, the remains of piers are left sticking out over the water, and the railroad bridge is rickety.

The statue of a fireman, which used to stand at the head of State Street with water pouring out of the hose he held (the continual flooding of State Street was a reason for its removal to Riverside) is now broken. There is also, apparently, a good deal of poison ivy around.

There has also been the threat of the loss of Riverside to the spreading Coast Guard Academy. In 1960 the Academy appropriated the northern portion of Riverside through eminent domain.

In a case such as this the decision to take the land may not be fought, only the award. New London successfully fought an award of \$18,000 offered for the Riverside section and the price was raised to \$35-

000. What was once the northern portion of Riverside park is now the site of the Academy's Roland Field House.

There was growing fear that the academy would go still further, thus eliminating the only park in the First and Second Wards of the city except for the nature center.

The award money from the sale of the Riverside section was to have been used for a replacement park on Grove Street, the site of the new Winthrop school that is now being built.

The fears of Coast Guard domination seemed founded when in 1967 the Academy requested, as a gift, another section of Riverside land.

The request was not in the form of a notice of eminent domain. This was an expensive proposition for the city, however, as it would have required the relocation of several streets, and so the academy's request was refused.

Returning to the darker aspects of Riverside Park, there is always the question of how much truth lies behind the reports of a greater degree of vandalism at Riverside than elsewhere in the city.

Quite a bit, according to Harvey N. Mallove, former mayor. The park has had its ups and downs as far as usage goes, and it has been the victim of "gross vandalism innumerable times". Only recently, reported Moran, five boys were apprehended after acts of vandalism.

Still worse has been suggested by one official who said that the park has been, and to an extent

still would be, a prime center for riots. In the past there has been trouble there during the day as well as after dark. Mallove said policemen, as well as Moran, have been physically thrown out of the park. When questioned about this, Police Chief Francis P. O'Grady replied, "no comment."

Drinking used to be a serious problem, resulting in what Mallove called, "not a healthy family environment." There is a rule now forbidding bottles of any kind — even soda bottles — on the beach, although the beach aspect of the park is negligible in comparison to what it used to be.

There is also a rule, still on the books although not enforced, allowing only residents of the City of New London to enter the park. This rule is a remnant of an effort to keep undesirable out-of-town elements away.

The city's struggle to keep the park in shape has been almost continuously up-hill.

The poor image of the park must not be overplayed, however; the climate is not nearly as bad as it used to be. The families are beginning to come back, and there is a strong desire on the part of the residents of the area to keep the land as a park. The Connecticut College Nursery School has outings there every day in the spring and the growth plan of the academy no longer includes Riverside Park.

But more than this, there is still the calm beauty of Riverside, a beauty rarely found in the center of any city.