

New London's Riverside Park's Former Glory Days



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☐ *The fountain at Riverside Park from a c.1910 postcard.*

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO New London's Riverside Park? That 18.64 acres of prime real estate stretches down to the Thames River adjacent to the Coast Guard Academy. One of the city's 25 parks, it offers a playground, basketball court, picnic tables, benches, a beach and a pavilion with plenty of on-site parking. Yet it seems to have seen better days.

I have happy memories of Sunday School picnics there in golden summers past, and it was a favorite stamping ground for kids who lived near Hodges Square. In winter they enjoyed sliding down the slope from the old fireman's statue. In summer they swam at the waterfront, diving from the dock. But now it seems neglected and forlorn.

It did my heart good to read in *The Day* last month that a group of friends and neighbors, with the help of cadets from the nearby Academy, had scheduled a volunteer cleanup of the park last month. Mayor Peg Curtin, always an advocate of the park, thought it was a terrific idea. And certainly it was a step in the right direction.

In my youth, Riverside Park was first choice for the annual Sunday School picnic of the First Baptist Church, which still stands on State Street. On a fine Saturday in June we met in the spacious picnic pavilion on the hill, the center of operations. Far below in the distance you could see the blue waters of the Thames. Inside, the pavilion was furnished with wooden tables and benches.

Outside among boulders and rocks, men of the church cooked hot dogs and hamburgers over wood fires. We ate them at the picnic tables accompanied by delicious potato salads, stuffed eggs and other goodies made by the church women. Sometimes Ben Sweezy cooked clam chowder in a huge pot over an open fire. Mrs. Sweezy was my Sunday School teacher, but I wasn't chowder fancier in those days. We had ice

cold lemonade to drink and bottled soda, too: orange crush and grape. After those substantial treats came mouth-watering desserts, like decadent devil's food cake with thick chocolate frosting.

When we could eat no more there were organized games. I remember the sack race where you had to step into a burlap bag and hop or jump your way to the finish line. I didn't like the smell of the burlap and it was scratchy, so needless to say I didn't win that race. There were relay races too. My favorite was the potato race. You had to carry a potato in a large spoon to the finish line. If you dropped it you had to pick it up and continue the run. Then you passed it along to the next person on your team. It was a lot of fun.

We also had three-legged races. One of your legs was tied with a bandanna to your partner's, and the two of you made your way over the race course. Falling down was half the fun. We ended this part of the program with a giant tug of war, which included everyone who wanted to participate.

After that we had a chance to explore the park. Our picnic didn't include swimming, so we didn't go down to the river, although this location was considered a prime spot for viewing the finish of the Yale-Harvard boat races when the teams rowed downstream. Instead we fol-

lowed a winding path halfway down the hill to a spot where there was a large fountain. This fountain wasn't working when we visited, although I have seen postcards of it spouting water in all its glory. But at that time the pool was dry and filled with weeds. Nearby was a small store where you could buy candy and ice cream, but none of us had brought money. We were full of hot dogs anyway, so it was no problem.

At one time a statue of a fireman with helmet and hose was located in the park. This monument originally stood at the head of State Street near the old Court House. I never saw the statue when it was in the park and I'm told it's no longer there. I wonder where it went and who was responsible for it.

However, not far from the fountain were rock formations with pools of water that had been incubators for a species of tiny toads which had developed from tadpoles. Hundreds of these small brown hopping creatures no bigger than pennies were jumping through the grass. We spent a happy time pursuing them, capturing them in paper cups that had held lemonade. That kept us busy until we were called back to the pavilion to eat watermelon, and sadly after that it was time to go home. I don't recall that we took the baby toads home with us. If we did, I'm afraid that few survived.

Riverside Park was a wonderful place when I was young. Perhaps it will come into its own again.
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