

# Riverside Park: Sun and shade along the Thames

How well I recall the First Baptist Church Sunday School picnics held at Riverside Park in the days of my youth.

One fine Saturday in June or early July we all met at the pavilion for a glorious day in the outdoors. This included clam chowder and picnic lunches with a wonderful chance to explore the wide rocky acres which stretched down to the sparkling river.

At that time I didn't know much about the history of Riverside park and I didn't care. I only knew it was a wonderful spot to spend a warm Saturday, a place thoroughly approved by parents and Sunday School teachers. I've heard rumors that it may not be the same today.

Recently, I stumbled upon a short history of the park in my favorite newspaper, The Day, written in 1907. According to that article the City of New London acquired the park in 1895 when ex-Gov. Thomas M. Waller, a local resident, approached the city fathers on behalf of the Post Hill Improvement Company, offering to sell them a 12-acre site on the banks of the



Historic Glimpses

**Carol W. Kimball**

Thames River for \$5,000 to create a new park.

The land, then known as Lewis woods, once belonged to the estate of John R. Bolles, a New London publisher who was instrumental in establishing the Navy yard across the river.

Waller was so enthusiastic about the proposed park that he offered to buy it back from the city for the same amount if they ever regretted the purchase.

But in spite of the ex-governor's hearty endorsement the city was lukewarm about the property. There were those who said New London would only be saddling itself with waste land, for the park would not be practical; its location was too remote from the center of the city.

When the citizens met to act on Waller's proposal sentiments seemed to be against the purchase. A majority planned to vote it down. But Waller rose to address the meeting, describing with such eloquence the advantages of the city owning such a beautiful natural spot that when the vote came it was almost unanimous in favor of purchase and the city bought the old Lewis woods for \$5,000.

For several years the park lay as it had been through the ages, used only as a gathering place by night for tramps and hoboes who slept under the stars, although it began to be popular on Sundays for baseball games. At last a board of park commissioners was appointed, headed by ex-Governor Waller, and development began.

In 1904 Waller, J. D. Cronin and Mayor B. F. Mahan contracted with the Shady Hill Nursery of Boston for a topographical map showing proposed walks, shade trees and other features. They also engaged Daboll and Crandall to prepare grade figures. Real work began



Picnicking at Riverside Park

when Superintendent of Parks H. C. Fuller brought his gang of workmen to the site and began to cut brush, remove old trees and lay out walks.

Each bit of progress was encouraging, and by 1907 the Day reporter wrote, "A day spent under the beautiful shade trees, lolling on the green grass or enjoying the prospect over the river and up the Thames valley may be counted as a day in a lifetime."

Alderman B. H. Hilliar was chief spokesman for the advantages of Riverside park. "It is not altogether an uptown park, for people go to it from all parts of the city. It is a poor man's park," he said, "for it can be reached without trolley fare and there are many families in the city that cannot afford the carfare expense to Ocean Beach. They can go to Riverside and breathe the air of the country without cost."

"The city's breathing spot on the bank of the Thames gives pleasure to all who see the diversified beauty," concluded the article.

In my day we took the trolley to Bullard's Corner and walked up the hill to the park. After lunch we hiked down the steep road to the old fountain. The artificial pond was dry then, and the goldfish were gone, but in the moist pond bed, among the rocks and weeds we found dozens of tiny toads and frogs hopping about.

What fun we had with them! We always tried to take some home for pets, but the unfortunate amphibians did not take kindly to transplanting.

New in 1907 was an artificial lake full of goldfish with a sparkling fountain in the center. For the convenience of all-day picnickers there was a pavilion where shore dinners were served and ice cream and candy were sold. There were even outdoor concerts on Sunday afternoons. The park was especially popular on Boat Race Day. Its heights afforded a fine view of the Yale-Harvard course.