



Riverside Park

Undiscovered beauty
close at hand

Riverside Park's location in New London is at once the source of its beauty and the reason for its neglect.

Set on a steep hillside just south of the Coast Guard Academy, the 29-acre, city-owned park commands a lovely view of the Thames River. Oaks and other hardwoods grow alongside evergreens and shrubbery, a pleasant mix of rural naturalness and urban landscaping.

The city bought the first 18-acre parcel in 1893 after residents petitioned for a park in the northern section of the city, at the time the fashionable end of town. Donations of waterfront acreage in 1908 and 1909 added to the park's size.

From the early days of this century, the woods, water and view made the property a place of beauty. But the hilly terrain with its ledges also precluded the construction of ballfields and the beach there, reached via a walkway over Central Vermont Railway tracks, is small. So the recreational opportunities are limited to modest numbers of people at one time.

The park is tucked away east of Crystal Avenue, out of view, so that a person would come upon the land only if he was looking for it. There have been other problems, too. Riverside once was more than 40 acres, but it was reduced in size by one-third when the Coast Guard acquired part of it. And there has continued to be the spectre that more land might eventually be lost to the federal government.

Furthermore, buildings and play equipment have been vandalized over the years, although the police maintain regular patrols in the park. The prospect for reducing vandalism likely would increase with use by the public.

Several years ago, the executive director of New London Landmarks-Union Railroad Trust, a preservationist group in the city, saw how little attention the park received from the public, so her group sponsored a Saturday noon lunch at the site. Director Sarah Churchill said at the time, "Mainly, we want people to find out that this park exists. Most people have never even heard of it. It's one of the prettiest and most underutilized parks around."

But it wasn't always so. There once was a campground and camp house on the lower portion and a bathhouse was added in the 1940s. In the 1950s the city used part of the land for a dump and landfill, but residents of the area complained and the practice was stopped. Today, the picnic areas get used in the summer and the park is a good vantage point for watching the Yale-Harvard regatta, but the public still fails to make use of the land. It's a shame.

The city itself has had a fickle relationship with this beautiful park, alternately treating it with special affection and renewed interest, then quickly putting the area out of mind.

The city should make better use of the park by upgrading it, possibly with federal money available from the Department of Interior specifically for the purpose of creating pleasant urban park areas — just as New London did in other locations. Once Riverside Park is put into a neat and attractive condition, then the city should promote the area intensively. Good recreation areas are, after all, a scarce resource in New London.

In the face of Reagan administration budget cuts, this may not be the best time to secure early federal assistance, but the city should make a lasting commitment to promoting one of its nicest and yet little-known recreation areas.