

PARKS and PLAYGROUNDS in NEWPORT NEWS

By Charles C. Nixon

Publicly organized and supported recreation in Newport News was a long time in the making. The City had grown from its 5,000-odd population of 1896 to a population of more than 35,000 in 1933 before the institution of a formal recreation program in that year in the establishment of three play areas under a program of playground operation. It was a meagre beginning, but it was a step forward, and it led to the fairly full-scale program under which public recreation is now carried on.

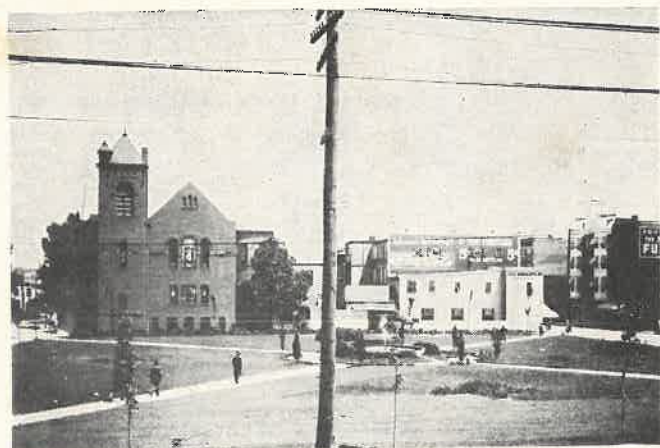
Prior to 1933, recreation took the usual catch-as-catch-can pattern for smaller communities of that time. Groups formed themselves for sports and pastimes, and carried on their own programs. Back lot ballgrounds attracted neighborhood teams; private tennis courts held their quota of self-inspired tennis players; the miles of waterfront commanded the interest of the swimmers immune alike to the hazards of a growing pollution of the waters and the risks of unsupervised learning; high-school football games and track meets offered their seasonable opportunities, while marbles, kite-flying and top-spinning levelled themselves off among the younger generation on the personal contest basis. There was no organized recreation program under public auspices and the extent to which either young or old partook of recreational activity was a purely personal problem, solved only by personal initiative and often as a consequence of personal ingenuity.

In this year 1946, however, Newport News need not be ashamed of its public recreation. There is a City Recreation Division, established in 1941, with its director and staff. There are parks, playgrounds, recreation centers and an organized program, and, thanks to the community interest of the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, two swimming pools, which were opened for the summer of 1946. The enlightened awareness of the importance of supervised recreation in the upbringing of

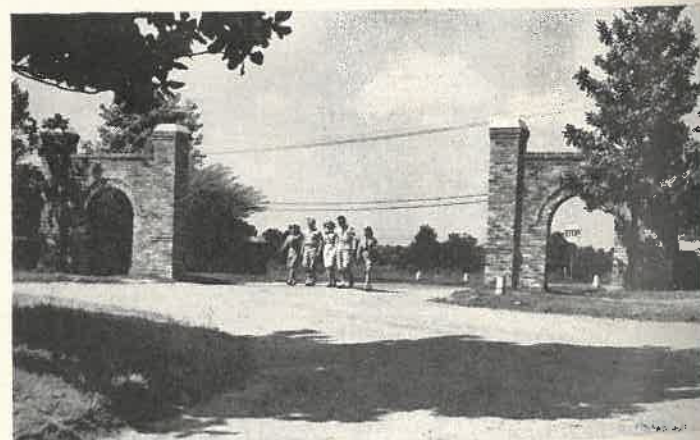
youth is reflected in the program for the further expansion of the system and the extension of the program to embrace neighborhood playgrounds and a year-round program of supervised recreational activity.

Since the beginning of the modern City of Newport News, in the 1880's, the Casino grounds on West Avenue from Twenty-fourth Street to Twenty-ninth Street have been used as a park. Originally there was an elaborate pavilion and bath house on the grounds and the first professional baseball park was located there near Twenty-ninth Street. At one time an academy of music stood on the grounds, also a Baptist Academy and a theatre. A bandstand stood on the bluff for many years and a pleasure pier projected out into the James from the foot of Twenty-fifth Street. The entire area has been continuously used as a park, except during World War I and World War II, when it was taken over by the government in connection with the Port of Embarkation. Just prior to World War II, the City purchased a block of the grounds between Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Streets and on it the Federal Government erected the present U.S.O. Casino Club.

From comparatively early times a park, known as Washington Square Park, was located on Washington Avenue between Twenty-eighth and Twenty-ninth Streets. In the center there was a fountain surmounted by the figure of a water fowl from whose mouth a stream of water sprayed. Norwegian elms cast a pleasant shade over park benches on which the idle could rest and relax. There was a shelter for passengers waiting for street cars, as well as public rest rooms. But in due time progress asserted itself as to this pleasant place. The land was needed for commercial uses and the park was sacrificed under the wheels of trade in 1936.



Washington Park in the old days—Courtesy of Newport News Public Library.



The entrance to Huntington Park from Warwick Road. Summer 1946.

At present, the City's one full-fledged park is Huntington Park, located in Warwick County between the City and Hilton Village and lying between Warwick Road and the James River, just beyond the Ferguson Park Housing Facility. In the park grounds are the American Legion War Memorial Museum, picnic grounds and tables and benches, two outdoor brick stoves, an elaborate brick shelter with two fire places and picnic tables, a playground, four tennis courts, two softball fields, a lake (Lake Biggins) where children under twelve years of age may fish, and acres of shaded grassy areas with rustic benches. There is also a bandstand in the park and a pleasure pier runs out into the James River from the beach at the southwest corner of the land.

In the East End, a large area bounded by Salters Creek and adjacent to Stuart Gardens has been acquired and plans have been drawn for the development there of another city park. The land has been filled and seeded for grass, and the plans call for numerous recreation facilities, such as bath houses, softball diamonds, tennis courts, picnic grounds and small boat anchorages for the benefit of the City's people.

In addition to the City's facilities, the grounds of The Mariners' Museum, seven miles north of Newport News on Route Sixty, attract thousands of City residents to recreational pursuits, notably horseback riding, camping, and so forth.

Until the Army moved in to use the area near the Municipal Boat Harbor for military purposes during World War II, the grounds and beach at that point were used as a park for Negroes. This site, known as Lincoln Park, had bath houses and a dance pavilion. Adjacent to this had been a site known as Pinketts Beach, which had a combination dance hall and bath house. This structure was destroyed during the storm of 1933.

The operation of playgrounds under public auspices and supervised control began in 1933 with three play areas. Since then the program has so proved its need and its worth that there are now nine playgrounds for white and colored people. In addition the City owns and maintains nine softball fields. Formerly there were two baseball fields, both at the East End playground, but these were moved and turned into softball fields because of the construction of two swimming pools.

The Old Dominion public golf course was operated from about 1928 until 1940 on the present site of Stuart Gardens and the Gar Wood Industries plant. At present there is no municipal golf course in Newport News, although there are splendid private courses in the neighborhood. The City maintains twelve tennis courts at various locations for the use of residents.

Extension of the City's recreation program resulted inevitably in the need for inclusion of this function in the City's executive department. Following enabling action by Council, the City Recreation Division was established on June 1, 1941. Its first job was community organization, in order to help agencies trying to do something for the servicemen who then flocked to Newport News on leave from adjacent camps and stations. Late in 1942, club houses were built by the Federal Government, one on the Casino grounds and one on lower Jefferson Avenue, and these were operated by the U.S.O. When it was felt that

this and other agencies had the problem of the serviceman well in hand, the Recreation Division turned its attention to civilian recreation. The City then had no facilities of its own but used whatever building and grounds could be found, such as housing projects, U.S.O. buildings, etc., for its program. Since that time, a modern recreation building has been erected at the East End recreation area.

The need for such facilities had long been felt, but other demands for City funds had taken precedence. But the increased City revenues during the war years, together with the availability of financial assistance from the Federal government and the desire to erect a utilitarian memorial to the City's servicemen of all the wars, all combined to open the way for acquiring a modern plant and satisfying the long-felt want.

The matter was considered by Council, the plans were prepared under direction of City Manager Biggins, the necessary financing was arranged, and, in spite of difficulties attendant on the times, the building was completed and was dedicated on October 7, 1945, at impressive ceremonies attended by many of the City's officials and prominent citizens. The relatives and families of those men who had given their lives in the service of their country were the special guests, and Congressman S. Otis Bland paid tribute to the heroes who were thus honored in a stirring address of dedication. Since then the building has amply proved its usefulness as a center for healthful relaxation and recreation for both young and old. The City Council is considering the erection of a building similar in design for Negro residents on the Huntington High School playground site.

The swimming pools which the Shipyard generously made available to the community at large are the last word in modernity. Measuring 160 feet long by seventy-five feet wide, they are equipped with the latest filtration and chlorination systems. The pool for whites is located within the playground area of two square blocks lying between Wickham and Orcutt Avenues and Twenty-eighth and Thirtieth Streets. The colored facilities border the same avenues between Thirty-first and Thirty-third Streets.

The following attendance figures should prove, even to the most skeptical, the value of the City's recreation program as measured in terms of patronage. For the period from May 6 to August 23, 1946, there were 8,676 male players and 1,035 female players on the City's softball fields, drawing respectively 32,977 and 2,775 spectators. From July 27 to August 26, 1946, 28,621 people used the pools. The playgrounds attracted 68,643 participants and spectators from June 17 to August 24, 1946. Although accurate attendance figures are unobtainable, an estimated 180,000 people visited Huntington Park from May through August 1946. Thus, with these splendid facilities at its disposal, Newport News may look forward to the development of healthy citizens, imbued with both a civic consciousness and a sense of sportsmanship and fair play.

[Charles C. Nixon, with twenty years experience in Y.M.C.A. recreational activities, came to the Peninsula in 1937 as Director of Recreation at Langley Field. In June 1941, upon the establishment of the City Recreation Division, he located in Newport News and is present Director of that division.]