

A HISTORY OF THE GREAT NECK PARK DISTRICT

On Monday, August 14, 1916, Roswell Eldridge of Great Neck appeared before the Board of the Town of North Hempstead in Manhasset, N.Y. and filed a petition for the establishment of the Great Neck Park District. Its founding mission was to obtain and preserve open space. The community association was to be outside any village or city and supported by taxes on district residents. Creation of the Great Neck Park District was widely supported; ninety percent of the people approached about the petition signed it. In addition, the petitioners collected \$200,000 above the necessary one-half of the assessed value of the taxable real property in the proposed district. The petition for the establishment of the Great Neck Park District was then granted; it is comprised of the Village of Great Neck, Great Neck Plaza, Kensington, Thomaston, Kings Point and Russell Gardens.

The first commissioners were appointed for one, two and three years consecutively, thus setting the pattern for the future of three-year elected officials. While the petition was presented by Roswell Eldridge, his wife Louise Eldridge was also committed to creating the Great Neck Park District, and both of them were staunch benefactors. Louise was an early commissioner of the Park District; she was also instrumental in opening the first library in Great Neck and the first woman mayor in the state, serving in Saddle Rock.

Louise and Rosewell Eldridge led the first acquisition by the Park District. In 1916, the couple and their friends financed the purchase of Hayden's Coal Yard at the western end of Steamboat Road and transformed the land into a public park and beach. The Park District was now in business! Allenwood Park was obtained in the early 1920's. Soon after, William Gould Brokaw, owner of the Nirvana estate in the present Strathmore area and beyond, sold a piece of his property, between Beach Road and Arrandale Avenue, to the Great Neck Park District. Three-and-one-half more acres were added to the Park District by the Great Neck School District, and the combined property became the Village Green in the Old Village. When Roswell passed away in 1927 at age 70, Louise had a bandstand erected in his memory. It still stands today.

In 1938 the Village of Kings Point leased Kings Point Park to the Park District. Since then, the 175-acre recreational facility and forest area is used year-round, a favorite destination for walkers, ball and soccer players, picnickers, tennis players, and families enjoying the playground. By the 1940's the Park District was busy obtaining land to create neighborhood parks. These included Cutter Mill Park, Firefighters' Park (formerly Grace Avenue Park) and Wyngate, all of which enhanced the central part of the community that had spread southward from the Old Village to the Plaza area, where commuting to New York City changed from catching the steamboat to catching the train.

In 1942 the bathing beach property at the end Steamboat Road was bought by the United States Merchant Marine Academy. This sale was offset by the purchase of the present Steppingstone Park and Marina from Walter Chrysler Jr. Shortly

after 2000, Steppingstone Park was expanded to include land that had been part of the George M. Cohan estate. Lakeville, Upland, Thomaston and Ravine Parks were added to the Park District in the early 1960's. In 1964 the Parkwood athletic complex was constructed, with a pool and rink (named the Andrew Stergiopoulos Rink following the 9/11 attack). Since then, several renovations have been made including enclosure of the rink and the creation of the Parkwood Aquatic Center.

The Peninsula Club property in Thomaston was acquired in the 1990's and now contains a much-loved dog park. Still in progress is the revitalization of the Village Green, with Phase Two of the all-abilities PlayGarden, a new Veteran's Memorial and beautification of the Village Green. The latter was in the planning stage, with a new fountain installed, when a microburst in June 2010 destroyed dozens of trees in the Village Green in less than five minutes. Incredibly, within just a few days the park was cleared of debris and declared safe, though the devastation was painful to see. However, by December a program of replanting was well under way, with 38 new trees in the ground and 40 to follow in the spring.

The present Park District commissioners continue to carry out the mission of Louise and Roswell Eldridge and are proud stewards of the Great Neck Park District. For more information on the Great Neck Park District, see www.greatneckparks.org.