

Whitney Playground results from one woman's generosity

Nov. 22, 1987

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Special to the Eagle

One of the many unique features of Westford is the excellent playground in the center of town. Most Westford residents know it is there but how many are aware of its origin? Who had the foresight and interest to make possible the development of this recreational area for all the townspeople?

It was in 1910 that Mrs. Martha Elizabeth (Leland) Whitney, a life-long resident of the town, offered to finance the grading and landscaping of the unimproved lot of land located between the Frost School and the Academy — the latter being the building known today as the Roudenbush Community Center.

In addition to offering to transform "the rough, wet and unsightly field into a playground", Mrs. Whitney donated \$5,000, the income of which was to be used in maintaining it. She agreed to name two members of a commission, who would select a third member, to supervise the landscaping and administer the fund. Mrs. Whitney appointed Oscar R. Spaulding and Edward Fisher. Herbert V. Hildreth was chosen as the third member.

Under Article 34 of the Annual Town Meeting of March 21, 1910, the town accepted her offer and voted "that such premises shall hereafter be known as the Whitney Playground and the fund designated as the Hiram Whitney Playground Fund as a mark of appreciation of such gifts and as a memorial to Mrs. Whitney and the late Mr. Whitney."

The town meeting also resolved "that a vote of thanks be extended to M. Elizabeth Whitney for her thoughtfulness and generosity in bestowing upon her native town such a munificent, extensive, and substantial gift, whereby the citizens of Westford have secured both a spot of beauty and place of amusement, thus affording a source of pleasure and happiness to all, both young and old, and that the clerk be instructed to send a copy of these resolutions to Mrs. Whitney."

Additional land purchase

As work progressed the committee found that additional land was needed to provide room for a baseball field. Whereupon, Mr. Donald M. Cameron conveyed about three fifths of an acre of land behind the Academy building. Oscar Spaulding and William L. Woods also donated small pieces of property. Although the acquisition of this addi-

tional land increased the landscaping cost, Mrs. Whitney "encouraged them in providing everything that would make the grounds more attractive and serviceable regardless of cost."

A large stone was moved to the playground and inscribed: "Whitney Playground, 1910." A baseball diamond and tennis court were constructed and "playground apparatus, consisting of a row of swings, eight in number, a seesaw with six boards, and a giant swing" were installed. In addition, several flower beds were provided to be planted and maintained by the school children. Nine large concrete settees and 12 movable settees were added along with a concrete drinking fountain.

Saturday, May 27, 1911 was set aside for the formal dedication of the Whitney Playground. The program included a tennis tournament and a baseball game between Westford Academy and Littleton High School in the morning. The afternoon was given over to children's activities — "Sunbonnet Babies, Mother Goose Shoe, Highland Fling, Crowning of the May Queen, Maypole Dance."

In 1914 the committee found that the income from the fund was not sufficient to pay the bills. Mrs. Whitney very kindly offered to pay the \$2500 to be administered by the Playground Committee with the income to be used for the preservation, care and replacement of shade trees on Depot Street.

Town reports carried reports of the Playground Committee through 1923.

Who was this beneficent woman?

Elizabeth Leland benefactor

M. Elizabeth Leland was born July 6, 1945, the daughter of Ira and Susan (Prescott) Leland. She was brought up in the Leland homestead at the corner of Main Street and Leland Road — later known as the Whitney Wright house — and married Hiram Whitney of Westford.

In recent years, new playground equipment has been donated and installed along with a bronze plaque that reads: "To the Children of Westford - May you enjoy playing in these grounds as much as he did - Richard T. St. Onge - May 4, 1941 - December 5, 1970 - Gift of Richard T. St. Onge Memorial Fund."

George Parkhurst, a prolific writer with a keen interest in history, recently moved to Hildreth Hills from Chelmsford.