



# PHILADELPHIA PARKS & RECREATION

## A History of Philadelphia's Department of Recreation 1880-2010

The following is a general history of municipal recreation in the City of Philadelphia, from roughly the 1880s to the 1980s. Rather than providing the final word about what happened, it is intended as an overview and starting point to provide context for those who are interested in the history of municipal recreation in Philadelphia and want to know more.

Events on both the local and national stage have shaped municipal recreation in Philadelphia, including 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century reform movements, economics, racial dynamics, and battles against city corruption, which all combined to produce Philadelphia's public recreation system.

### The Roots of Municipal Recreation in Philadelphia

By the late 1840s, indoor plumbing became the norm for better housing in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> However, several decades later, in the 1880s, many poor residents of Philadelphia still did not have plumbing or places to bathe. This was before Germ Theory, or the theory that disease was spread by germs, was fully accepted. Most health specialists, including doctors and scientists, believed that dirtiness itself spread disease.<sup>2</sup> Since the poor did not have easy access to baths at home, and could not afford to pay the fee to pay for bath houses, they were often dirty, and the upper classes feared that the “unwashed masses” would spread deadly diseases “such as typhoid, tuberculosis and



1890s, Pearl Street, Philadelphia  
(Special Collections Research Center, Temple  
University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

cholera” to them. Reformers therefore began to open free public baths.<sup>3</sup> Philadelphia was a national leader in building these baths. Between 1884 and 1898, the City built nine free public baths, which later became known as swimming pools.<sup>4</sup> The baths did not function as officials had intended. Instead of providing free bathing to working class men and women, working class boys were the main visitors to the pools. For instance, by 1891, nearly “nine out of ten ‘bathers’ was a boy,” rather than a man, woman or girl. Furthermore, the officials who built the baths intended them to be used for the serious business of getting clean, but the working class boys had other ideas—they used the baths for summer recreation.<sup>5</sup>



Outhouse, North Lawrence Street, North Philadelphia (Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)



1909, Swimmers having fun at Waterview Park Playground and Swimming Bath 1909 Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia Annual Report, pg. 19 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA)

Philadelphia’s early baths were not known for their cleanliness. When a government official from Boston visited them in 1898, he later reported to the Boston City Council that for all but the newest bath in Philadelphia, which included showers, bathers entered the water as soon as they disrobed, and the bathers were “quite as dirty as it is possible for one to conceive . . . I examined the water in a glass in all these places, and can safely say that the condition of the water for the two or three days in the

tank was quite unfit for anybody to bathe in.”<sup>6</sup> This was, of course, before the advent of chlorination.

Other events at both the local and national levels inspired movements for the creation of playgrounds in Philadelphia and around the country. The second half of the

19<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an unprecedented boom in the population of cities around the nation. Philadelphia was no exception. In 1880, its population was approximately 847,000.<sup>7</sup> By 1915, the city’s population had grown to approximately 1,684,000 people.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the greatest increase in population in the history of the

City occurred between 1901 and 1915, when the population grew from 1,293,000 to 1,684,000 people, an increase of 30%.<sup>9</sup> Philadelphia’s poor often had no choice but to live in overcrowded slums, usually in small alleyways and “dark courtyards,” in old houses that often had no running water, were freezing in the winter, and broiling in the summer.<sup>10</sup> Starting in the 1890s, private philanthropists and reformers became increasingly concerned about the welfare of children raised in such environments. Some proposed playgrounds as a way to ensure children’s health, safety, and good character.

Starting in 1895, Philadelphia’s Civic Club began to collaborate with the Board of Education to open school yards as summer playgrounds, starting with four that summer. The Civic Club had been founded in 1893 by educated women “to promote by Education and active cooperation a higher public spirit and a better social order.”<sup>11</sup> The Civic Club was composed



1913 text: “If odors could be pictured this would be foul smelling” North Philadelphia. Population increased 30% between 1900 and 1915. Slums were overcrowded  
(1913 Housing Commission Pamphlet)



of many committees undertaking diverse projects. Most of its projects were focused on benefiting children, women and families, for instance campaigning against child labor, working to elect women to school boards, fighting for clean water and pure foods, or running summer playgrounds. The organization was typified by the care it took to stay well-informed about the issues it pursued, and its efforts to stay connected with reformers on both the local and national levels. To run the summer playgrounds, the Civic Club collaborated with the Board of Education, a branch of City government; and local reform organizations including the City Parks Association, the Evening Home and Library Association, and the Playground Association of Philadelphia after its founding in 1907.<sup>12</sup> The Civic Club's meetings usually featured talks from leaders of various movements. For instance, the club twice welcomed nationally known activist Jacob Riis, author of the influential *How the Other Half Lives*, to speak about his work with summer playgrounds and poor children in New York.<sup>13</sup>

*The Civic Club supported "the opening of all school yards under competent supervision" to ensure that children learned civilized behavior rather than wild street games such as playing with fire and bullying.*

Representatives from the club also attended national conferences, such as the 1908 Playgrounds Congress in New York, hosted by the Playground Association of America.<sup>14</sup> By 1906, the Civic Club was running 60 summer playgrounds. The Civic Club urged "the opening of all school yards under competent supervision,"<sup>15</sup> to ensure that children learned civilized behavior rather than indulging in wild street games such as playing with fire and bullying.<sup>16</sup>

Other philanthropists began to advocate for the construction of playgrounds as well. In his 1897 book, *Educational Value of the Children's Playgrounds*.

EDUCATIONAL VALUE  
OF THE  
CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUNDS.

A Nobel Plan of Character Building.

[sic] *a Nobel Plan of Character Building*, Stoyan Vasil Tsanoff, general secretary of the Cultural Extension League, a Philadelphia reform organization, explained why playgrounds were necessary and useful. He wrote that poor urban children suffered greatly "in the narrow and dirty alleys

and gutters during the hot months of July and August," that young boys

needed places to play off the street where they would be out of the way of police, and that children's accidents with trolleys showed that they needed places where they could "go to play, safe from danger to life and limb."<sup>17</sup> He also believed that playgrounds were the best way to teach children character and morality.

Tsanoff presented the idea of a "model playground," which would feature "two pavilions, one for girls, and one for boys, with ample halls decorated with pictures and other attractions, equipped with gymnastic apparatus, steam heat, shower bath, and other necessities for wintry and stormy



Happy Hollow Playground, built 1911, inspired by Tsanoff's ideal "model playground" (1913 Report of the Board of Recreation, pg. 19)

weather exercises

. . . the space outside the pavilions is to be equipped somewhat as follows: In the centre is an open circular area intended for plays [sic] requiring more space. It is to be flooded in winter for skating and drained off for the summer in order to

furnish room for other plays. This is surrounded by a race, hoop and bicycle track."<sup>18</sup> This ideal design for playgrounds would help inspire the layout for later recreation sites, such as those at the Happy Hollow and Starr Garden Playgrounds, built in the 1910s. In 1898, the Cultural Extension League "made an ambitious, but thwarted, attempt to create a model playground at Dickinson Square," in South Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup> Besides permission to use Dickinson Square, the Cultural Extension League received no support from the City in building or running the playground. The organization experienced financial difficulties, and as a result the playground opened while its buildings still lacked amenities such as lighting or heat.<sup>20</sup> In addition to financial difficulties, the organization faced resistance to the playground from neighborhood residents, who considered it a nuisance due

to noise, children's misbehavior, and the immoral behavior they claimed the playground hosted after dark.<sup>21</sup> The playground opened in June of 1898. By February 1899, "the Cultural Extension League was out of funds and City officials had taken back control of the square."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps one of the lasting lessons of the failed playground was the value of municipal support in sustainably running playgrounds.

In 1906, the Playground Association of America was formed, followed by the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia in 1907. Both were privately operated philanthropic organizations. The Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia was independent of the Playground Association of America, but had similar

reasons for supporting playgrounds, such as addressing overpopulation, preventing crime and disease and promoting good citizenship. The Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia saw

the construction

of playgrounds as a way to combat the problems of Philadelphia's overcrowded neighborhoods. In its 1909 report, the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia explained that playgrounds would "protect the children from possible contagion of low moral standards by establishing play centres, where they shall be under proper and effective supervision while they play."<sup>23</sup> At supervised playgrounds, children would learn wholesome behaviors leading to good citizenship. The association also argued that providing children with access to open air spaces would aid in the prevention of tuberculosis and physical disabilities.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, "the Philadelphia Playgrounds Association from the beginning clearly defined its function to be provision for play for all children of Philadelphia through municipal support[.]"<sup>25</sup> and its work to involve the City of Philadelphia in providing recreation to the public would help bring about the City-run Board of Recreation.



1909 cover of annual report of Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia  
(Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA)



## The City Gets Involved

Thanks to campaigning on the part of the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia, in 1909, Mayor John E. Reyburn appointed a Public Playgrounds Committee with five members, including politicians;<sup>26</sup> representatives from the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia;<sup>27</sup> and a judge interested in improving the juvenile justice system;<sup>28</sup> to study Philadelphia's need for "open air activities" for the City's children and citizens, and create a plan for bringing more recreation to the city.<sup>29</sup> The Common Council provided the commission with \$5000 for their investigation, which included travel to other major cities to study their recreation programs. In 1910, the committee published "Playgrounds for Philadelphia: Report of the Public Playgrounds Commission, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," in which they found that "playgrounds are no longer left to the philanthropist; the cities themselves have awakened to their responsibilities and are including the children in their plans."<sup>30</sup> The committee proposed that the city should

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—The City of Philadelphia's  
Public Playgrounds  
Commission, 1910



Starr Garden Recreation Center, the first recreation center built by the City of Philadelphia, in 1911 (Demolished 1950s)  
(1913 Report of the Board of Recreation pg. 21)

build and staff supervised playgrounds, and also that the state legislature pass a bill enabling the creation of a distinct recreation system "directed and controlled independently of any existing Department or Bureau of the City Government."<sup>31</sup> In 1910, the City of

Philadelphia took over management of all of the "available Playgrounds of the Playgrounds Association," and began to construct playgrounds, starting with Starr Garden Playground, which was opened with a new recreation

center building on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1911.<sup>32</sup> Philadelphia's Board of Recreation was created in June 1911 by an Act of Assembly of the Pennsylvania state legislature,<sup>33</sup> and it continued to rapidly expand the City's recreation facilities.

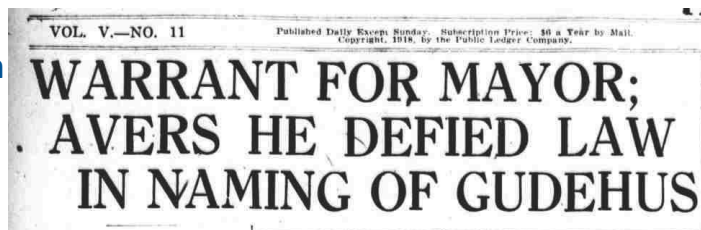
By 1913, the City boasted 13 municipal playgrounds, many of which it had taken over managing from the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia. Less than ten years before, in 1906, there were no municipal playground facilities. "Philadelphia Playgrounds Report of the Board of Recreation 1913" proclaimed that the city had "advanced . . . from backwardness to **a leading position among American cities operating Playgrounds**" (emphasis original),<sup>34</sup> where visitors from around the country and the world came to learn by example. In addition to playgrounds run by the Board of Recreation, the Board of Education ran various recreation sites, including 106 public school yards, which it kept open to school children during the summer of 1913.<sup>35</sup>

## Bringing the Public Bath Houses On Board

In 1913, the new Board of Recreation assumed responsibility for Philadelphia's public bath houses from the Department of Public Safety's Bureau of City Property.<sup>36</sup> The bath houses had grown in number to 23. At this time, the Board of Recreation began taking steps to literally clean up the baths, "securing proper disinfection" for the bathing pools from the Bureau of Health, and installing mandatory shower baths for bathers to use before swimming.<sup>37</sup> In the words of the 1914 commission: "We would not allow our own children to use the baths without these changes, and do not feel justified in allowing other people's children to risk infection."<sup>38</sup>

Philadelphia's Board of Recreation, formed as a relatively independent entity according to the 1910 recommendations of the Public Playgrounds Commission, was vulnerable to political maneuverings that prioritized political advantage over recreational professionalism. After the supervisor of recreation resigned in

1918, Mayor Thomas B. Smith removed the experience requirements from the civil service examination for the position, in order to appoint a newspaper reporter named



1918 Evening Public Ledger headline on the Board of Recreation's political appointment scandal



Gudehus who supported him politically to the post.<sup>39</sup> Board members, and an individual known as Otto T. Mallery, who had served as secretary to the Board of Recreation between 1912 and 1915 and was a board member of both the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia and the Playground Association of America, considered the candidate “incompetent” and “unfit” for the position due to his lack of practical experience. Mayor Smith replaced board members who refused to vote for his candidate of choice, who he nevertheless appointed.<sup>40</sup> Mallery filed an outraged and ultimately ineffective report “calling for the arrest for the mayor for committing the crime of misbehavior and misdemeanor in office.”<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, the Board of Recreation was absorbed into the Department of Public Welfare, becoming the Bureau of Recreation, when Philadelphia enacted a new charter in 1919. At least one of the board members replaced by the Mayor, Sophia L. Ross,<sup>42</sup> was re-hired, serving as the Chief of the Bureau of Recreation in the early 1920s. Otto Mallery “reportedly . . . had a hand in the creation of this Bureau and in helping it weather difficult periods,”<sup>43</sup> though the Bureau remained “ineffective and politically dominated” despite his efforts and the efforts of other recreation professionals.”<sup>44</sup>



The construction of recreation facilities continued in the 1920s. By 1928, the Bureau of Recreation possessed 48 recreation sites, 14 of which



1929 Pet and doll show, Water Tower Recreation Center (Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

featured large, state of the art recreation buildings with furnished gymnasiums. The Bureau also operated 37 public pools, which were segregated by gender.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the Board of Public Education continued to run after-school and vacation playgrounds for youth.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the 1920s, the chiefs of the Bureau of Recreation were women,

including Sophia L. Ross, a member of the Civic Club and one of the founding members of the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia.<sup>47</sup>

## The Bureau of Recreation in the Great Depression

Like the rest of the country, Philadelphia was hit hard by the Great Depression. As Roger D. Simon explains in his book *Philadelphia: A Brief History*, “from 1929 to 1933 the value of the city’s manufacturing output



1930s Philadelphians receiving food relief  
(Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA)

fell in half . . . by April 1931, 25 percent of the entire workforce was unemployed . . . At the low point of the Depression, in March 1933, 40 percent were completely idle, while another 20 percent worked only part-time.”<sup>48</sup> African Americans

suffered disproportionately; in 1932 their unemployment rate was greater than 50 percent.<sup>49</sup> Even when Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal

relief arrived for much of the nation in 1933, Philadelphia’s Republican political machine resisted the New Deal’s programs because they came from the Democratic Party. In fact, for the most part, Philadelphia did not pursue federal funds until 1935, when Mayor S. Davis Wilson, a former Democrat, came to power.<sup>50</sup> Instead, during Mayor Moore’s term between 1932 and 1935, the City practiced austerity, including closing pools and reducing the Bureau of Recreation’s budget.<sup>51</sup>



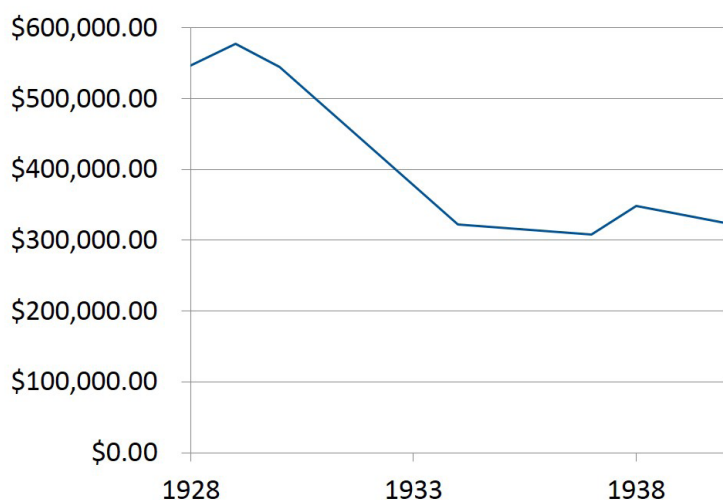
1931 Bank run on the Erie National Bank, Philadelphia,  
6th and Erie  
(Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA)

During the Depression, the Bureau of Recreation sought to meet the needs of newly unemployed adults. At the Depression’s lowest point, when average unemployment rates reached 40 percent, the bureau reported that “increased leisure time resulted in an increase of 114,619 in adult male attendance in our recreation centers and swimming pools during the year

of 1933.”<sup>52</sup> Meeting the increased demand for recreation activities by adults was “one of the most important questions of the day,” according to the Bureau of Recreation’s 1934 report to the Mayor.<sup>53</sup> Specifically, recreation was considered necessary to ensure that Philadelphia’s unemployed spent their free hours on wholesome activities, to prevent social unrest or criminal activity. As a result, the Bureau reported in 1934 that “strong emphasis has been placed on activities for the adolescent youth and the unemployed adult, so through proper guidance the patrons are trained to utilize their leisure time in a constructive manner which will aid in the prevention of crime and result in wholesome living and a bright, happier outlook on life.”<sup>54</sup> Activities such as athletic clubs, music classes, handicraft making, and dances, as well as a club for unemployed men and boys, all sought to address the recreation needs of the unemployed.

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The Bureau of Recreation faced the challenge of meeting the needs of unemployed Philadelphians and continuing normal programming while undergoing drastic cuts in its funding and permanent staff. At its lowest point, the annual budget of the Bureau of Recreation was reduced to



47% Funding cut to the Bureau of Recreation  
Budget Figures from the Annual Reports of the Mayors of Philadelphia

\$307,941.39 in 1937,<sup>55</sup> down \$269,094.66 or 47% from its high of \$577,036.05 in 1928.<sup>56</sup> The bureau’s 1932 report also mentioned the “handicap of diminished staff” in planning for recreation activities.<sup>57</sup> That same year, the bureau partnered with Charles H. English from the Playgrounds Association of Philadelphia to

receive guidance on how best to organize staff so that “activities were increased over former years” and more were “attracted” to playgrounds.<sup>58</sup>



Once the Philadelphia government began to take advantage of the federal relief programs of the New Deal in 1934, seasonal employees hired through the programs proved very helpful in sustaining the Bureau of Recreation. Laborers hired through the Civil Works Administration and the Local Works Division, as well as the Works Progress Administration provided maintenance to recreation facilities and swimming pools.<sup>59</sup> Seasonal recreation instructors hired through the Works Progress Administration and youth instructors from the National Youth Administration helped the bureau keep playgrounds and recreation centers open and supervised, and allowed the Bureau of Recreation to expand its leisure activity offerings,<sup>60</sup> though the seasonal nature of their positions frustrated recreation officials attempting to hold organized programming.<sup>61</sup> Employees hired through federal work relief programs actually outnumbered permanent employees. For instance, in 1938, the bureau had 76 permanent instructors and assistant instructors, whose work was supplemented by up to 117 instructors hired through the Adult Education and Recreation Division of the Works Progress Administration, as well as 56 youth hired through the National Youth Administration.<sup>62</sup> In addition to providing recreation instruction, WPA workers served as lifeguards, which allowed several public pools closed by austerity measures to reopen.<sup>63</sup>

*Seasonal employees hired through the New Deal's unemployment relief programs helped sustain the Bureau of Recreation during the Great Depression in the 1930s.*

## The Evolution from Bath Houses to Swimming Pools

By the 1930s, swimming was fully recognized by officials as a recreation activity rather than a means of bathing. In his 1930 report to the Mayor, the chief of the Bureau of Recreation, William D. Champlin, wrote that “the swimming pools have become in these last few years a very popular recreational activity and should not be considered as ‘bath houses.’ They are fundamentally recreational and health producing and, as



1933, Tot lot swimming pool, Front and Brown Streets, Philadelphia  
(Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

developed by the bureau, are so constructed and administered that pool contamination is reduced to a minimum.”<sup>64</sup> Great care was taken to ensure cleanliness of swimming pool waters. In 1930, swimmers were required to shower before entering pools, the pools were sterilized twice per day and the water for each of the 39 pools was changed once per day.<sup>65</sup> A 1931 act of the Pennsylvania State Legislature placed all swimming pools under the State Health Department, which mandated the installation of chlorination machines for each pool. Due to limited funds, the Bureau was unable to afford the machines, but fortunately, according to the 1932 Report to the Mayor, “the Pep Boys, automobile accessory merchants, made an offer to furnish such a device, which was accepted by His Honor, the Mayor, and installed in various pools by the Water Bureau,” allowing the municipal pools to remain open for the 1932 season.<sup>66</sup>

## The Bureau of Recreation at War

In 1940, as the United States was climbing out of the Great Depression, the Bureau of Recreation began to assist the US Government in mobilizing for war, though the United States would not officially enter WWII until 1941.



1943, Merchant Marines training  
(Special Collections Research Center, Temple  
University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

According to the Bureau of Recreation’s 1940 Annual Report, “the program of activities was revised to some extent this year in order to cooperate with the National Defense program of the United States Government.”<sup>67</sup> To this end, “the entire staff of men teachers received training in military tactics and setting up exercises under Sergeant Kmat of the 103d Engineers,” women teachers were trained in making handicrafts of discarded materials for the American Red Cross, and physical conditioning classes were held for

Philadelphia’s young men at the recreation centers.<sup>68</sup>

During WWII, between 1941 and 1945, the Bureau of Recreation played an important role in mobilizing Philadelphians to support the war effort. By 1941, the bureau was providing “special physical conditioning classes for young men of military age,” which included strength training and

training in military tactics and mental alertness.<sup>69</sup> American Red Cross first aid classes were held in the recreation centers, and instruction in home



War bonds were sold in recreation centers during WWII  
(Public Domain)

nursing was taught by American Red Cross nurses.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the Bureau of Recreation organized activities that mobilized civilians in the war effort. The recreation centers provided “headquarters” for civilian defense organizations, including draft boards and air raid wardens,<sup>71</sup> and coordinated the patriotic sale of war stamps and bonds at entertainment events held at the centers.<sup>72</sup>

Recreation instructors directed the making of “needed handicraft articles” for organizations such as “the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and the Seamen’s Church Institute.”<sup>73</sup>

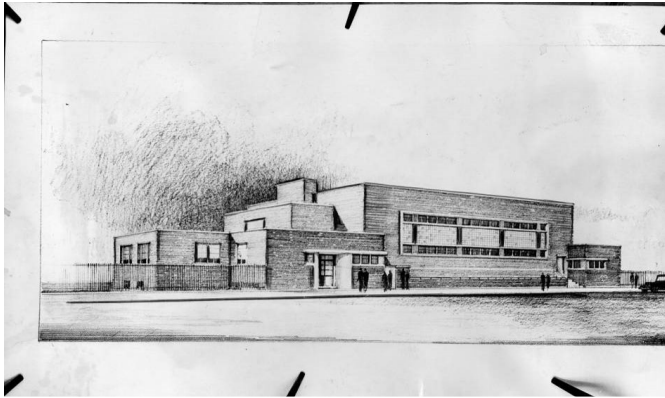
In 1943 alone, volunteers at the centers were responsible for producing 10,487 handicraft articles “mainly useful to servicemen,” including “afghans, lap robes, hospital slippers, memo pads, scrap books, crossword puzzles, needle cases, etc.”<sup>74</sup> The bureau also hosted victory gardens on playgrounds, and organized a waste paper salvage week, where children collected 23,440 pounds of waste paper.<sup>75</sup> The bureau took care to provide recreation opportunities for servicemen, war workers and industrial workers. It opened its playgrounds and gymnasiums for servicemen’s and workers’ softball and basketball leagues, allowed defense workers access to recreation facilities for their own clubs, and presented performances by the boys and girls of the recreation centers to entertain servicemen.<sup>76</sup>

## Mid-Century Reform and Recreation in Philadelphia

Access to recreation resources was not always equal in Philadelphia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1929, “A Study of Municipal Recreation in Philadelphia” found that African Americans were excluded from many types of commercial recreation, including theaters, “moving picture houses,”



“privately organized social centers” and “most Y.M.C.A. gymnasiums.”<sup>77</sup> The report stated that “the inevitable conclusion is that in most commercial forms of recreation, the Negro is rigorously excluded and that therefore it is all the more the responsibility of the city to provide him public



1948, Architectural drawing of type of building planned for new recreation facilities: out of 39 new sites, only 4 were in African American neighborhoods (Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

recreation.”<sup>78</sup> Although the 1929 report noted the need to provide recreation service to black Philadelphians, it did not suggest that the Bureau of Recreation involve itself in desegregating its existing recreation centers, noting instead that “unfortunately, in spite of the official welcome extended, the objection and race prejudice of the white visitors often exclude colored children from some of the

playground and recreation centers . . . Where the race prejudice is so strong that large numbers of colored children are excluded from a neighborhood playground, a separate playground should be acquired for their own use.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite the findings and recommendations of the 1929 report, 18 years later, in 1947, the Bureau for Municipal Research of Philadelphia wrote a report titled *Recreational Facilities and Negro-White Relations in Philadelphia*, which found that the city’s African American neighborhoods tended to be underserved by recreation facilities. Furthermore, the Bureau reported that “a recreation center which is geographically available to Negroes may not be, in fact, used by them, for actions resulting from the prejudices of local whites may restrict the opportunities of the Negroes, or may definitely exclude them from some facilities.”<sup>80</sup> The author of the 1947 report, G. Gordon Brown, provided the example of an unnamed swimming pool in a predominately African American neighborhood, where racial exclusion enforced by threats and violence had been occurring for at least 25 years and seemed to have been passed down between generations of white children.<sup>81</sup>

The 1947 report suggested several methods for addressing racial discrimination. One method recommended was to establish staff trained in

addressing and preventing discrimination. Another was to hold meetings to address racial misconceptions before integrating facilities, and then integrating them gradually, a task not yet completed at the example location. A further method of limiting recreation facility use to local neighborhood residents, and then working intensively to address prejudice within the neighborhood, was suggested to avoid the withdrawal of whites from recreation facilities after their integration.<sup>82</sup> Although Brown noted that “one high official of the Bureau [of Recreation] stated that their policy was definitely opposed to discrimination,” he also explained that “the problem for official recreation administrators is to devise means of dealing with prejudice, a problem which they have only partly solved.”<sup>83</sup>

*Although the Bureau of Recreation was opposed to racial discrimination, racial discrimination persisted informally at recreation sites, enforced by recreation users. A 1947 report found that “the problem for official recreation administrators is to devise a means of dealing with prejudice, a problem which they have only partly solved.”*

The 1947 report also found that although the majority of Philadelphia’s African American neighborhoods were underserved by municipal recreation facilities, of thirty-nine new sites selected in 1946 as locations for new recreation facilities, “only four” were definitely within African American neighborhoods. The report emphasized that it was not attributing the lack of construction of new recreation sites in African American communities to “discrimination or neglect on the part of the Bureau of Recreation or of the City Council.”<sup>84</sup> Rather, it noted that many of the new construction sites were located in Northeast Philadelphia, where land was readily available, and that the purchase of sites within principally African American areas “would necessitate condemnation proceedings and the tearing down of houses in the sections of the city already desperate for more housing space.”<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, the report noted that it was of “utmost importance” that African American recreation “be given serious and constant attention in the years to come.”<sup>86</sup> Changes in the management of Philadelphia’s municipal recreation under a new Department of Recreation, formed by Philadelphia’s 1951 Charter, would help address the inequalities.

By the mid-1940s, Philadelphia had long been notorious for the corruption of its government, but reform efforts had been slowed by the one-party Republican political machine, which had been in place for decades. In

1947, Richardson Dilworth, “lawyer and returning war hero,” ran for mayor. Although he did not win the election, his campaign brought focused attention to the corruption of City government. In fact, at a street rally in the incumbent mayor’s own ward, he publicly announced the “names and amounts of bribes” of “128 officials, ward leaders and magistrates.”<sup>87</sup> Pressured by these charges, the City Council established the Committee of Fifteen, which investigated and revealed “a huge catalogue of scandalously haphazard and crooked city practices.”<sup>88</sup> After these revelations, the Committee received more funding for more investigations.

Over the next few years, a grand jury was appointed to continue the investigations, which revealed one scandal after another. Dilworth, along with his friend Joseph Clark, continued to expose Republican corruption



1951, “Democrats Predict Clean Sweep at Polls” C: Joseph S. Clark, Jr. R: Richardson Dilworth  
(Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

after running for city treasurer and controller, respectively, in 1949. They, along with other outraged citizens, “joined a bipartisan fight for a new city charter.”<sup>89</sup> The charter was ratified by voters in 1951, and issued in sweeping reforms, including a new Department of Recreation. Furthermore, “a new type of administrator was brought to City Hall, the professional as opposed to the political appointee.”<sup>90</sup> The new recreation commissioner,

Fredric R. Mann, took care to recruit and hire Robert Crawford, a professionally trained recreation administrator. Crawford, who eventually assumed the role of commissioner himself, transformed the scale and scope of recreation in Philadelphia for decades to come.

## The Crawford Era

Crawford was distinguished by his formal training in recreation. He had graduated from the National Recreation School in New York City in 1935. The school was run by the National Recreation Association, a direct organizational descendant of the Playground Association of America. At



the school, Crawford had studied recreation administration. He came to Philadelphia from Oakland, California, where he had revitalized the city's ailing recreation program. Crawford had an expansive vision for the mission of recreation. In his autobiography, *Reflections of a Recreation Professional*, he wrote that "recreation is a necessity, not a luxury . . . the business of recreation is a challenge and an opportunity to invest in human dignity and to provide opportunities for enrichment to the human spirit." He also believed that "recreation is for everyone,"<sup>91</sup> and that "everybody, regardless of age, sex, race, national origin, religious preference or any other variable, needs wholesome and meaningful leisure opportunities."<sup>92</sup>

In his autobiography, Crawford claimed that when he arrived in Philadelphia, "I found a recreation program of very limited scope and reach, focusing almost exclusively on children and teenagers and offering little more than playground activities and sports. I knew that recreation could and should be much more, and should reach all of the citizens, not just a few."<sup>93</sup> In reality, the Bureau of Recreation had offered non-athletic activities such as drama, music, handicrafts and hobby clubs since at least the 1920s. By the late 1940s, the bureau had begun to offer clubs for senior citizens, and to train recreation leaders to teach classes for physically disabled individuals, especially veterans from WWII.<sup>94</sup>

Crawford's time as commissioner, from 1952 to 1981, was distinguished by the deliberate expansion of the scale and scope of such activities and by the Recreation Department's efforts to further connect with underserved Philadelphians. Under Crawford's leadership, the Department of Recreation expanded services for people with physical and developmental disabilities, for senior citizens and adults, and for very young children. The Department of Recreation also reached out to historically underserved African American communities. Crawford explained that "before I arrived in Philadelphia, the poor areas of the city, particularly the Black neighborhoods, were neglected recreationally and



Robert Crawford, Commissioner 1952-1981  
(Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

had very few facilities. Those that existed were run down and maintained poorly,” so he took care to ensure increased spending on recreation in those areas.<sup>95</sup> In one instance in 1952, when the privately operated Crystal Pool at Woodside Park was opting to close rather than admit African American members, the Department of Recreation assumed operation of the pool, integrating it and allowing it to remain open.<sup>96</sup>

Crawford’s leadership was noteworthy as well for his commitment to community involvement. He explained that “my most important accomplishment during my career in Philadelphia was getting the citizens involved in our decision-making process.”<sup>97</sup> During his nearly thirty years as commissioner, Crawford personally attended “well over 1,000 community



1974 Bridesburg Recreation Center community meeting with Robert Crawford (Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA)

meetings.”<sup>98</sup> By the time he retired, the Department of Recreation had “more than 3,000 volunteers in 127 local councils, 12 district councils and one citywide group,” who all provided ideas and feedback about community recreation needs and interests, as well as support

to the Department by organizing volunteers and raising funds and publicity for “events and activities.”<sup>99</sup> Under Crawford’s leadership, before building recreation centers, the Department of Recreation would also host well-publicized meetings of 300 to 400 community members to solicit feedback about building plans, which the Department used to tailor recreation building plans to suit individual communities’ needs. Crawford’s ability to build strong relationships with the public and gain public support was vital in his efforts to expand and sustain Philadelphia’s Department of Recreation.

When Crawford began his career in Philadelphia, the City had around 81

recreation centers.<sup>100</sup> By the end of his career, the City possessed around 230 recreation centers. Much of the expansion of recreation sites in the City followed the *Comprehensive Plan: The Physical Development Plan for the City of Philadelphia, 1960*. Based on the city's projected population growth to 2.5 million in 1980, the *Comprehensive Plan* provided "one playground for every 11,000 to 12,000 persons consistently throughout the city."<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, as the City Planning Commission explained in its newest comprehensive plan from 2011, *Philadelphia 2035: The Comprehensive Plan*, Philadelphia's population had already peaked in 1960.<sup>102</sup> Between 1960 and 2000, the city's population decreased from 2,002,512 to 1,517,550, or 24%.<sup>103</sup> This meant declines in tax revenue, and resulting budget cuts for the Department of Recreation. Nevertheless, the Department was left with "an inventory of public facilities designed for at least 2 million people."<sup>104</sup> The years following Crawford's retirement as commissioner were marked by his successors' struggles to staff and maintain recreation sites in the face of budget cuts. This took the form of both cost-cutting measures and seeking out new sources for funds.

Cost-cutting efforts, which included avoiding new hiring, deferring maintenance to recreation facilities and delaying pool openings, impacted the quality of services offered by the Department of Recreation. The early 1980s saw a decrease in

federal funding. As a result, the department could no longer benefit from programs such as the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, or CETA, which had been used to hire Department of Recreation staff.<sup>105</sup> In addition, the

### *Staffing Cuts*

*Early 1980s: 847 recreation leaders*  
*1990: 338 recreation leaders*

*Early 1980s: 353 maintenance workers*  
*1990: 232 maintenance workers*

Department of Recreation found its overall budget reduced, and responded by cutting back on new hires to replace retired staff. By 1990, the number of employees at the Department of Recreation had decreased to 570, down from 1,200 in the early 1980s.<sup>106</sup> At the same time, the number of recreation facilities stayed the same, so simply ensuring a staff presence at the centers was sometimes a challenge. Maintenance staff decreased as well. Of the 570 employees in 1990, 232 were maintenance workers, down from 353 workers in the early 1980s.<sup>107</sup> Limited capital funds, as well as limited maintenance staff, encouraged the practice of putting off maintenance of important parts of buildings such as roofs or heaters. A



*Cost-Cutting Efforts  
Impacted Quality of Service*

*1990: "Complaints are widespread about filth, broken lights, broken water fountains, broken restrooms, dangerous playing fields, peeling paint, leaky roofs, [and] graffiti-covered buildings."*

*—Philadelphia Inquirer*

1990 Philadelphia Inquirer article titled "Fighting to Save the Playgrounds" found that "Complaints are widespread about filth, broken lights, broken water fountains, broken restrooms, dangerous playing fields, peeling paint, leaky roofs, [and] graffiti-covered buildings."<sup>108</sup>

Delaying maintenance of the Kingsessing Recreation Center caused the roof of its auditorium to collapse in 1995, leaving the space open to the sky.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps the most infamous of all cost-cutting measures occurred in the early 1990s, when the Department of Recreation

delayed the summer opening of the public pools for weeks, causing public outrage.

Faced with budget cuts, recreation commissioners learned that they needed to seek out alternative sources of funds, including grants and sponsorships from the private sector and citizens' groups. Nathaniel Washington, who served as commissioner from 1981 until 1985, brought over a grants division from the Welfare Department as a way to bring new funds to the Department of Recreation.<sup>110</sup> The grants division included programs such as the Neighborhood Youth Corps, a job training program for low-income youth. In 1992, when he became commissioner, Michael DiBerardinis addressed the Department's limited budget by mobilizing community and business support for recreation. Noting the unpopularity of the late opening of the City's pools the previous year, Commissioner DiBerardinis started a "Pull for the Pools" campaign with the goal of raising \$225,000, enough to open the pools. The campaign gained support from companies including "CoreStates Financial Corp., Fidelity Bank and Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Co.," but also asked for donations from private individuals. In order to build community buy-in to the campaign, community groups representing the specific recreation facilities were each asked to raise \$500 for it.<sup>111</sup> Philadelphians were inspired and mobilized to financially support their recreation centers.

Under Commissioner DiBerardinis, businesses also sponsored much-needed maintenance at recreation centers, including new roofs and heaters.<sup>112</sup> At

the same time, concerned citizens groups raised funds and advocated for better playground maintenance which the Department of Recreation might not otherwise have been able to provide due to a limited budget. For instance, when the City did not have enough money to afford swings on its playgrounds, community members organized the Philadelphia Swing Project to raise money to pay for at least 40 swings.<sup>113</sup>

By 1997, the Philadelphia Inquirer found that “with the backing of Mayor Rendell and the leadership of Commissioner Michael DiBerardinis, the Recreation Department has received a transfusion of new resources in recent years. A \$71 million capital improvements campaign has patched leaky roofs on 70 buildings at neighborhood playgrounds, replaced outdoor lights at more than 200 fields, and almost totally rebuilt playground equipment citywide. Corporate sponsorships, foundation grants and added city money are paying for new gym floors . . .”<sup>114</sup> Of course, the struggle to sustain regular maintenance of recreation facilities was not over, and would continue to pose a challenge for the Department of Recreation.

Even while the Department of Recreation faced difficulties in staffing and maintaining its facilities, its programming and offerings continued to evolve. Starting in the 1980s, the Department of Recreation began to host summer camps for Philadelphia’s youth. Previously, recreation centers had hosted largely unstructured activities, including athletic leagues and competitions. In contrast, camps followed a daily schedule and provided children with structure during the summers when they were off from school.<sup>115</sup>

The Department also began to offer specialty camps, focused on subjects such as the performing or visual Arts. In 1990, the Department of Recreation under Commissioner Dolores Andy hosted the Youth Games,

described as similar to “a junior Olympics.”<sup>116</sup> The Youth Games gathered youth from cities throughout the country to compete.<sup>117</sup> Starting in the late 1990s, the Department of Recreation began to provide children with after-school programs in order to keep them engaged in positive activities. The effort to keep youth out of harm’s way extended to teenagers in the early 2000s, when the Department hosted teen centers with lounges and game rooms, as well as teen summer camps, one of which would be still active in 2016.<sup>118</sup>

In the spring of 2008, Philadelphia City Council passed and Mayor Michael Nutter signed into law a ballot measure for merging the Department of Recreation with the Fairmount Park system. Voters in the 2008 election approved the Charter amendment authorizing the merger. The Department of Recreation officially merged with the Fairmount Park Commission in 2010 to create Philadelphia Parks & Recreation. In 2016, residents enjoy hundreds of recreation facilities and approximately 10,600 acres of land under the jurisdiction of PP&R throughout the City of Philadelphia.

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