

History of Beaver Ponds Park

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The Beaver Ponds are not what they used to be. Originally—meaning after the last Ice Age some 2,500 years ago—a large chunk of ice melted, leaving a “kettle hole” or depression in the ground, the lowest point between West Rock and East Rock. As that depression filled with silt and vegetation, it became a marsh that beavers turned into a series of little ponds. There isn’t much left of that original landscape; the marshy woodland on the north shore of the South Pond is probably the closest we will come to what it looked like when New Haven was founded, except for the lack of beavers.

The beavers are long gone, killed for their pelts by Indigenous trappers and sold to English and Dutch traders in exchange for knives, cloth, guns, liquor, and other necessities of life. By the mid-seventeenth century all the beavers had disappeared from southern New England, sacrificed to make hats for fashionable Europeans. What was left was a wetland that collected the storm water of over 1,200 acres and funneled it, slowly, into the Wintergreen Brook and from there into the West River that flows through Edgewood Park.

Starting in the mid-17th century, Beaver Pond was utilized for its natural resources. The town built a ditch from the southern end of the pond eastward towards a creek flowing into Long Island Sound. The goal was to redirect the pond’s flow and thereby allow for a mill closer to the city center. By the early nineteenth century, the area around the marsh was owned by several farmers, among them George Mead, Seldon Osborn, and William Farnham. Chauncey Goodyear, a dairy farmer on Dixwell Avenue, used Beaver Pond to harvest peat, which he sold, and wrote about, as an amazing fertilizer. Arthur Farnam had a wholesale farm on the banks of the west pond. His large establishment covered over an acre and contained many buildings, greenhouses, and earthworks. The north end of the pond was known as Hell’s Alley. It was home to Polish workers who worked at Arthur Farnam’s farm. A slaughterhouse was built at the southern end of Beaver Pond, allowing its waste to spill into the water.

In 1872, the city of New Haven acquired the land. In 1890, when urban development reached the marsh, the city proposed creating a park by reclaiming the land with fill. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the city built playgrounds, ball fields, and swimming holes. More parts of the marsh were filled in for public use and run-off from nearby neighborhoods increased. As the outlet into the West River became clogged with decayed vegetation, what had been a marsh filled with water, becoming a pond. Evidently, the park was very popular with New Haveners coming out by streetcar along Dixwell or Goffe on warm sunny days to frolic and relax. Meanwhile, the heirs of George Mead decided to subdivide his land on Beaver Hill overlooking the park. Over the next thirty years, new houses were built to high standards, attracting upper-middle and upper-class residents. A swimming hole near the corner of Fitch and Crescent attracted large crowds until the 1930s, when several drownings and controversy over nude bathing shocked the city into closing that popular attraction. In 1932, Fournier Street divided the park in two, turning Beaver Pond into Beaver Ponds.

In a growing city, such a large area of land was an obvious temptation for city planners. In 1945, anticipating a need for more sports facilities, the city appropriated funds to construct Bowen Fields, bringing in thirteen thousand cubic yards of soil to fill in fifteen acres of wetland. Meanwhile, in 1953 New Haven State Teachers College (now Southern Connecticut State University) moved into thirty acres of park land at the corner of Fitch and Crescent. At the other end of the park, the city built Hillhouse High School in 1956-57. In the 1970s, when the city announced plans to build a middle school on park land, citizens' groups protested, even bringing a lawsuit to stop the plan. But the city prevailed and built Jackie Robinson Middle School on land at the northern end of the park. Later, more land was taken from the park to build the Police Academy on Sherman Parkway and the Animal Shelter on Fournier Street.

Beaver Ponds Park, as we know it today, is thus much reduced from what it once was. The south shore of the south pond is the pride and joy of the Friends of Beaver Ponds Park, a citizens' group formed mainly of residents of Beaver Hills, and is much used for recreational walking, fishing, and cycling. The north shore is a nature area with abundant vegetation and wildlife. Anglers fish in both the north and south ponds. Bowen Field is regularly used for sports and personal fitness. In recent years, volunteers and Urban Resource Initiative staff have been building trails on the Sherman Parkway side of the park so that Newhallville residents can access the pond.

Beaver Ponds Park also serves to capture run-off from nearby neighborhoods. Flowing into the ponds through ten storm drains after every storm, rainwater allows silt and pollutants to settle before draining slowly into the West River, where it would otherwise flood Edgewood Park. Additional land transfers from the park to nearby institutions and lack of maintenance threaten, over the next decades, to compromise the beauty of the park and its value to wildlife and humans alike.