

MAPLEWOOD HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Maplewood Memorial Park Designation Report for Historic Landmark

Landmark #011-09
December, 2009

Boundary Description:

Maplewood Memorial Park Historic Landmark consists of all the property included in Memorial Park, aka Blocks 17.01, Lot 17, and Block 17.02, Lot 126, including the Civic House (recreation building) near Dunnell Road and the Skate House near Oakview Road, and excluding the Maplewood Main Library building on Baker Street.

2. Current owner (name, address):

Township of Maplewood
c/o Township Administrator
574 Valley Street,
Maplewood, NJ 07040

3. Description at time of designation:

Maplewood Memorial Park consists of approximately 25 acres, bounded by Valley Street to the east, Baker Street to the south, Dunnell Road to the west and Oakland Road to the north. The park is a large, triangular-shaped, landscaped area, designed in the picturesque tradition with artfully arranged trees and shrubbery, winding foot paths, and gracefully arching footbridges. Oakview Avenue bisects the park from east to west. The park features rolling hills and meadows, clusters of trees within and around the perimeter, curving pathways that open up to long vistas, rustic stone and wooden bridges over streams, a rock garden, as well as ball fields and playgrounds.

The East Branch of the Rahway River, which was diverted from its original course (approximately where Dunnell Road now lies) during the construction of the park, runs from north to south through the park and is the focus of a variety of features such as footbridges and winding footpaths. The river is lined with stone walls, some of which were replaced in 1999 with pre-cast concrete panels imitative of stone, following massive damage by Hurricane Floyd. In the northern section of the park, the river runs close to Dunnell Road, but moves further east as it moves south. Just north of the library, this stream joins with Crooked Brook which comes in to the park from the west. To the north and east of the library, the river feeds a small duck pond. Three rustic foot bridges constructed of stone piers and timber rails span the river, one behind the library, one near the duck pond, and another to the west of the Civic House. (All the bridges have been fitted with iron railings to meet federal ADA requirements.) The banks of the river, on either side, are planted with a variety of flowering trees and shrubs.

There are a variety of memorials located throughout the park. A high plot of ground, on the park's western edge facing the railroad station and tracks at Dunnell Road has a flagpole and was

originally planted with a semi-circle of trees that was the original memorial for which the park was named. After these elm trees were lost to blight, they were replaced by others in a similar, though not identical, manner. The “Memorial Boulder,” with plaque dedicating the park to soldiers from Maplewood who served in World War I, sits atop a knoll adjacent to Baker Street. Other trees throughout the park have been dedicated to specific individuals.

Other features of the park include: a small rustic rock garden located behind the library by the brook; a small playground at the northwest corner of Oakview Avenue and Valley Streets and a larger playground in the northernmost section of the park between the tennis courts and Oakland Road, separated from the walkway by a low hedge. A narrow strip of the park lies between Dunnell Road and the river, and in the spring is covered with flowering bulbs, trees and shrubs. To the east of the Civic House are tennis courts and basketball courts. A large open space with two ball fields that is partially flooded for winter skating is located south of the basketball courts. Across Oakview Avenue to the south, the park includes three additional ball fields, and a variety of mature trees are located around the perimeter of the entire park. In the area east of the train station, the land slopes steeply down toward the river. The sloping hill forms an amphitheatre that terminates in an arc of trees and shrubs. The amphitheater is the site of public ceremonies, concerts, and movies during warm months of the year and sledding in the winter.

Significant built structures include the Civic House and Skate house:

In contrast to the classical formality of other municipal buildings, the *Civic House/Shelter House*, constructed in 1929, was designed in an Arts and Crafts style. The design is well-suited to its location, nestled between the East Branch of the Rahway River and the picturesque pathways of Memorial Park, in the northwestern part of the park. The 1 ½ story building faces Dunnell Road to the west with its rear façade facing the tennis courts and the park. The building is rectangular in plan and constructed of brick, laid in Flemish bond. It has an irregular, steeply pitched roof with numerous gables and shed dormers and is clad in slate. The windows are steel frame casements in combinations of six and eight lights, placed asymmetrically, in gables and on the facade. The windows have brick sills and broad wooden lintels. The western façade has two projecting bays with steeply pitched front-facing gables on either side of the recessed entrance. The entrance incorporates two doors and is sheltered by a projecting gable highlighted by stucco and wood half-timbering carried on wooden posts. There is a brick chimney at the main ridge of the roof. The doors are wood, with numerous small glass lights. A wooden porch is located on the rear façade, and shelters another entrance door and window. A small, one story gabled extension is attached to the northern side of the building, and has its own door and windows on each façade.

A one-story addition, dating from 1953, extends to the south of the original building. It is attached to the main building by a one-story, flat-roofed connector and has a low-pitched gable roof clad in slate. The roof is edged by brick sidewalls with stone coping. The entrance to this section is located within a projecting brick enclosure on the western façade and has non-historic metal doors flanked by fixed-pane windows. There is a wooden sign mounted over the doorway inscribed “Maplewood Civic House.”

The Skate House, constructed 1929-30, is a small, one-story wood frame building, rectangular in plan with a moderately pitched hipped roof. The roof has wide, over-hanging eaves and exposed

rafter tails. The wood frame walls are clad in wooden shingles. The foundation consists of rubble supporting piers with concrete block infill. There is a roof extension on the east elevation (date unknown) supported by steel columns over a concrete pad.

6. History of property:

The history of Memorial Park relates closely to the early 20th century development of the Township as a railroad suburb.

The Morris and Essex Railroad had run through Maplewood, from Newark to Morristown, since 1838, hauling freight and passengers. In 1869, the Morris & Essex Railroad, which then specialized in passenger transportation, became a division of the growing Delaware, Lakawanna and Western Railroad. In 1901-03 the tracks at Maplewood were elevated and the present station structure at the top of the hill, on the eastern side of the tracks, was built. It became increasingly clear that the train station would make the area a focus of increasing activity. The land to the east of the station belonged to various people, including (according to an 1850 map) R. W. Smith, W. H. Skillman and S. P. Brown.

During the late 19th century, Maplewood (then the more rural part of the Village of South Orange) began to attract wealthy city dwellers, which led to the development of large new houses along the streets near the village. Around the turn of the 20th century the number of commuter trains running to Newark from Maplewood increased, as did the number of people settling in the quickly-growing town. During the first decade of the century, an average of 50 new houses was constructed annually. In 1904, the Village of South Orange separated itself from South Orange Township.

Land was purchased in 1911 from the Delaware Lackawanna and Western Railway and from R. A. Woodbury for an approach to the station. A plan was devised and carried out in which property near the train station was purchased by the Railroad jointly with the township for equal division, with the township's portion to be used for a park plot. This low-lying land around the East Branch of the Rahway River had always been the location of various early industries, mills and manufacturing, and for farming and grazing. By 1913, the Township condemned the Brown estate for property needed for park purposes, and additional land was purchased from the estates of Henry S. Smith and Samuel Brown. By 1919, titles were passed, deeds recorded and payment was made for purchase of the Smith and Trimpi properties for park purposes, and the south Orange Township Committee passed an ordinance to purchase all lands between Oakview Avenue, Baker Street and Dunnell Road.

The next year, playgrounds were set up in the area north of Oakview Avenue. These provided for separate areas for girls and boys. Other facilities included a football field, tennis courts and a skating rink. A small Shelter House was donated by architect Kenneth Dalzell of Budall Realty, who would subsequently design many homes in Maplewood. In the area on the Baker Street side of Oakview Avenue, land was purchased from Paul H. Land. The *Home News* reported the donation of land for the park by Albert J. Knoll, Albert J. Knoll Jr., Edward Guliek and J.C. Osman.

At this time, the town's Municipal Building and other services were housed in a large building that originally served as a school, located approximately where the U.S. Post Office now stands, near Maplewood Avenue on the western side of the train tracks. As the community's needs increased, the fire department moved out of this communal structure to its own building nearby. The population of the Township expanded rapidly, enhanced by soldiers returning from World War I. Here as in the rest of the country a housing shortage prompted a huge construction boom. Farms throughout the community were purchased by developers who graded the land and sold the lots for new houses. In 1922, in an effort to forge a distinct identity and to prevent confusion, the official name of the community was changed to the Township of Maplewood and community leaders set out to establish a civic center that would define the developing Township.

By the 1920s the Township began purchasing property along Baker Street, east of the train tracks. By this time a row of individual homes had been constructed along this street and the Township had to purchase the land from each owner. Additionally they bought land owned by the Oakes Realty Company that had already begun to develop the area with houses. It was noted in the deeds that this property was purchased to create a public park.

In 1922 the Township hired the prominent landscape design firm of Olmsted Brothers to create a picturesque park on the land they had assembled. The Olmsted Brothers firm, comprised of the step-son and nephew of Frederick Law Olmsted, was a prominent design firm, creating many park designs in Essex County, including Branch Brook Park, Weequahic Park and the South Mountain Reservation. Drawings from this period are signed by Percival Gallagher, a principal of the firm. This firm created a design incorporating most of the two block area that is now contained within the park. They laid out a plan for separate activities, including a small lake, an amphitheater, winding paths, playing fields, a playground for small children and a formal garden, a coasting hill a wading pool and a walled channel for the stream.. The Olmsted firm also created grading and planting plans for the park. Although some of the final locations of the activities were changed, the final design for the park included most of the elements of the original Olmsted design. The existing paths and channeled waterway were established in the original plan and form the basis for the park that exists today. In 1923 the Township Committee voted unanimously to issue park bonds to raise money for the construction of the park. In 1925 engineer David Petruzzello was awarded a contract for changing the course of the East Branch of the Rahway River to run through the park. It was paved with concrete in order to control its flow and runoff.

In December, 1925 more money was authorized by the Township Committee to purchase new tracts of land to extend the Memorial Park site, including land on Dunnell Road. An ordinance concerning the acquisition of land for use in the establishment of municipal buildings and other municipal uses passed the Township Committee in the spring of 1926. In November, 1927 the Public Buildings Committee was delegated the authority to employ assistance in the improvement of Memorial Park. The following month, the Township Committee approved the hiring of the important landscape design firm of Brinley & Holbrook to complete the park design, including a planting plan and plans for details such as the curving wooden foot bridges, and playgrounds that were originally intended to be maintained by the Board of Education.

Memorial Park was dedicated in 1931 to the men and women of the Township of Maplewood who served their country in World War I. A stone monument with a dedicatory plaque is located on a rise at the southern end of the park near Baker Street. Other memorials are located in an area across Dunnell Road from the train station and include a flag pole and other plaques, and a stand of trees designed to echo those planted at the time of the park's opening in memory of the soldiers who had died in the Great War. Memorial trees continue to be added to the park to this day. The small Skate House was designed by William Mitchell and constructed in 1929-30. This building historically provided shelter from the cold to skaters at the nearby frozen pond. The other large structure, the Civic House, was constructed in 1929-30 and was designed by local architect Charles C. Grant (architect of the old police building). Grant completed an addition to this building by 1935 and the building was extended again in 1953 by William Mitchell. It serves as the location of civic activities and meetings such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and continues to be a center for community activities and offices. These buildings were included in the original designs for the park and are integral to the many uses of this space.

7. Statement of significance, incorporating criteria for designation:

Maplewood Code § 41-1, et. seq. requires that the Historic Preservation Commission consider for landmark designation “[a]ny buildings which merit landmark designation and protection, and possessing integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship” and which meet one or more criterion set forth in § 41-7(A) of the ordinance. The Maplewood Memorial park continues to exist at its original location and maintains a design that is very close to the original, although some vegetation has been replaced with similar materials over the years.

According to the criteria set forth in Section 7 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance of the Township of Maplewood (#2166-01), the Maplewood Memorial Park is eligible as a Maplewood Historic Landmark under criteria (1), (4), and (7).

(1) Of particular historic significance to the Township of Maplewood by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community:

The Maplewood Memorial Park is significant because it was designed and constructed at a critical period in the development of the Township. The park serves as a town center for the community, located near the physical center of the Township in a valley between two ridges. The small river running through it, the East Branch of the Rahway River, and the surrounding park area has been the site of a variety of activities for many years, beginning with agrarian and residential uses and then community gatherings. However, this landscape and its important structures were designed and constructed in the 1920s and early 1930s and their arrangement and appearance are an integral part of the development of the Township as a picturesque residential suburban railroad town..

In 1922, as the Township's population soared and its character changed from rural to suburban, the name of the municipality was changed to the Township of Maplewood and the town leaders set out to create a distinct identity for the community. The governing body, aware of the dramatic

changes that were occurring, moved to create the community we see today, purchasing land for large parks and numerous schools to serve the growing population. They purchased property near the center of town from local residents and hired the Olmsted Brothers firm, one of the most prominent landscape designers in the county, to create a picturesque park. The Olmsted Brothers firm designed numerous parks throughout Essex County, including the South Mountain Reservation. Although the Olmsted Brothers initially designed the park and laid out a planting program, another prominent landscape architecture firm, Brinley & Holbrook, based in Morristown, was hired to implement the design, following the general outlines of the Olmsted plan and developing it further.

Memorial Park has been, and continues to be the civic center of the community since its establishment. This large open area, surrounded by the architectural symbols of government is the location of innumerable important community-wide events epitomized by the Fourth of July celebration. Its importance is documented by the fact that one of the murals in the large meeting room of the Municipal Building depicts this holiday. It is used regularly for a variety of sports and school events, and many festivals, concerts, movies and other entertainments take place in the park. During the winter, the park hosts ice skating and sledding. For many citizens it is the physical heart of the community, an area they use often and in which they can meet their friends and neighbors. As such Memorial Park contributes to the strong sense of community and democratic ideals of this town.

(4) An embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of architecture or engineering:

The picturesque Memorial Park and its park buildings are typical of a popular architectural style during the 1920s and 30s in the United States. The original designers of the park, the Olmsted Brothers firm, was one of the most prominent landscape design firms in the country. They created numerous parks throughout Essex and Union Counties at this time. The Olmsted Brothers continued the romantic tradition of landscape design started by Frederick Law Olmsted during the late nineteenth century, embodied in the winding paths and romantic arrangement of the park. Based on Olmsted's early work, the plan of the park was completed by another prominent landscape design firm, Brinley & Holbrook, designers of numerous large estates in western New Jersey and who also worked at the New York Botanical Garden. The Civic House in the park, a picturesque building with irregular plan and rooflines that is entirely in keeping with the picturesque ideals of the park was designed by local architect Charles C. Grant, a designer who worked for many years in the office of Charles Platt.

(7) Able or likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Potential archaeological deposits located within the boundaries of the Maplewood Memorial Park are likely to yield important historical information on early settlement, the agrarian era, and milling in Essex County. The area comprised by the park may hold sites associated with Native Americans as well. Because the East Branch of the Rahway River has long been used as a power source for a variety of industries in the valley, and was the location of the earliest mills in the community and throughout the late 19th century, there are likely to be significant archaeological remains that could provide important information about Maplewood's industrial development. In

addition, sites associated with the late 19th and early 20th century houses that were removed along Baker Street and Dunnell Road (when the land was acquired by the Township for the park) may yield important information about that era of Maplewood's history.

Sources

Clerk's Minutes, Township of Maplewood, various years.

Essex County Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances.

The Home News, clippings and document files, photographs, and maps, Maplewood and Newark, NJ public libraries

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Maplewood Past and Present, A Miscellany, Edited by Helen B. Bates, Maplewood, NJ (1948).

Bausmith, John, *Maplewood*, Images of America Series, Arcadia Publishing (1999).

Brinley & Holbrook archives, Morristown Library

Report by Virginia Kurshan and Jon Stout
November, 2009