

WINCHESTER BEACHES

By Ellen Knight¹

At the turn of the 21st century, the beach at Wedge Pond had never been more popular, according to the statistics on beach passes, which totaled a little under a thousand.

However, Winchester's beaches, though popular, have had troubled histories in which the cessation of swimming is a recurring theme.

WEDGE POND

Up through the early 20th century, the land around Wedge Pond was privately owned. In 1913, the Town purchased some land on Palmer Street for cemetery purposes from Frances L. Palmer, who stipulated as a condition of the sale that the Town accept the gift of one and one-fourth acres of land at the northerly end of Palmer Street (at Middlesex Street), to be called the Irving S. Palmer Field.

The Park Commissioners accepted the gift. For a few years it was used by neighborhood children but was not improved. In 1916, the commissioners recommended that it receive some care.

Then, in 1917, the Town pursued another direction for a playground in that area by buying 3.68 acres next to the pond for a playground. The next year, the commissioners reported that although they did not openly allow swimming in Wedge Pond, "the attendance on warm days would run from 100 to 300 children who would use the pond to bathe in without any supervision."

Improvements happened gradually. Though the commissioners at first recommended improving the playground for baseball, four tennis courts were constructed in 1922. By the end of the decades there were eight courts. Tennis was so popular, with people having to wait for courts, that more and more courts were added.

Beginning in 1924, the commissioners tried a skating rink, which they reported was popular. In the 1930s, the tennis courts were used for skating rinks, but later Leonard Pond and Winter Pond became the main sites for skating.

Along with tennis, another lasting attraction was the beach. In 1922, a small beach was constructed and was used "considerably" with the attendance on warm days averaging over one hundred. The next year, a large part of the playground apparatus on Manchester Field was moved to Palmer Street and a large sand box with an awning was constructed for little children.





In 1932, with labor furnished by Unemployment Relief Committee and funds appropriated for unemployment relief, the Palmer Street Beach was constructed and sanded.

“This beach is undoubtedly the most popular place in town during the summer,” the Park Commissioners reported in 1933. Lessons were given in swimming, diving, and life saving. In 1941, a new swimming course was laid out with regulation starting platforms. Even

after a second beach opened at Leonard Pond in 1932, the Palmer Beach was perennially popular.

BATH HOUSE BLUES

Ever since people began swimming in the pond, one amenity the commissioners reported was “almost criminal” not to have was a bathhouse with dressing facilities. They got a bathhouse for the small beach when a portable building on the old Wyman School lot was moved to the beach in 1925. Though it provided shelter, it was not equipped with “suitable comfort stations.”

After the larger beach was constructed, the beach got a replacement bathhouse due to the construction of a new junior high school. With the opening of the new school, a portable building in the rear of the Wadleigh School was no longer needed for educational use. This building was moved to the beach in 1932 and divided into four separate rooms with lockers in each room. In 1937, toilet and shower facilities were installed. In 1941, a concrete floor replaced the original wooden one.

In 1959, the bathhouse at Leonard Pond was partially destroyed by fire. In July 1961, during a summer with several suspicious incidents of fire and vandalism, the bathhouse at Wedge Pond was gutted by fire. A year later a new bathhouse took its place, this one constructed of fire-proof material.

MORE CHALLENGES

Occasional challenges to maintaining programs at the beaches have arisen. During the war years, the majority of older boys were in the armed services or finding full-time employment. For the first time, it became necessary to employ girl life guards.

“These girls had all passed rigid tests on life saving and did a splendid job in supervising the beaches, so much so that the Board is agreed that they were just as efficient as any male guards have ever been in the past,” the Commissioners reported.

Red Cross lessons in swimming and life saving continued at both beaches. In 1944, a Winchester Swimming team was organized and participated in a number of swimming meets, including five sponsored by the Amateur Athletic Union.

In later years, a greater problem was the cost of maintaining and staffing two beaches. In 1983, the Board of Selectmen voted to close Wedge Pond Beach and concentrate on making Leonard Pond an improved and better managed swimming facility.

LEONARD BEACH

Before 1932, the area between Leonard Field and the river was a low, wet, swamp with the river winding through it. The area was polluted. Across the river, the J. O. Whitten Co. Gelatin Works was dumping sludge refuse on their property, and the McLatchy Japanning Factory at 50 Cross Street, was also dumping wastes upon the low, wet areas.

In 1932, the Town turned its attention to improving this section of the river, filling in the swamps and rechanneling the river. Leonard Pond was created, and a beach completed in 1933. In 1935, the state Board of Health closed the pool and the beach. The metropolitan sewer frequently overflowed into the river, which originally fed the pool.

In 1938, the pond was made independent of the river, shut off by an earthen dike at one end and a concrete dam at the other. The swimming area was cleaned by pumping out the water, removing two to four feet of sewerage sludge and mud, and spreading out clean sand. Water was then pumped in from a well which had been driven to a depth of 81 feet. In 1939, the Park Commissioners reported, "though the river was entirely dry the well kept the swimming pool filled all summer. Had it not been for the well the beach could not have been kept open after the second week in June."



Leonard Pond in the 1930s with the McLatchy (above) and Whitten (below) factories in the background

In 1945 and 1950 new wells were dug. Again the pond was closed in 1953 due to pollution, apparently from the state sewer line, so the next year additional wells were dug away from that line. The pond was cleaned once a decade, and the last new wells were dug in 1974.



However, troubles continued, as witness the Recreation Department's annual report of 1988.

"A vote of the spring 1988 Town Meeting restored funds to operate Leonard Beach on a fairly limited seven-week basis. The beach closed on Mondays, and swim lessons were offered at beginner and advanced beginner levels only. High bacterial counts closed the facility for approximately eight days. The source of this contamination was undetermined." Soon Leonard Beach was abandoned as a swimming facility.

BEACH AT WEDGE POND RE-OPENS

In 1993, the Wedge Pond beach was re-opened thanks to a citizens' effort begun when Randy Swartz of the Board of Health made an impassioned speech to the Rotary Club and Clarence Borggaard immediately offered a \$100 donation and challenged others to match him. The effort begun then raised the money and gained approvals to reopen the beach, named in Borggaard's honor by fall 1993 Town Meeting.

Environmental and economic challenges to maintaining the beach and water programs will undoubtedly continue. Nevertheless, people flock to the beach, ever more so since the opening of the Splash Park.

The Thomas P. McGowan Wedge Pond Trust Fund is another show of support for the beach. The fund was recently created in 2012 by FANSplash and accepted by the Board of Selectmen. It was named for Thomas McGowan, who ran the programs at both beaches from 1934 to 1947. (McGowan's successor as superintendent of parks and recreation was Herbert S. Mullen, eponym of Mullen Field.)

With the community behind it, the beach can continue to be "the most popular place in town during the summer."

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 3, 2012 and a section of a report for the Aberjona River flood-mitigation engineers. This article supersedes all previous articles.