Historical Overview

September 2016

Prepared for Friends of Stead Park

STEAD PARK
1625 P Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stead Park is located in Square 180, within the Dupont Circle National Register Historic District (Figure 1). During the late nineteenth century, the site, situated within the 1600 block of P Street, N.W., contained frame row houses and the residence of Henry Hurt, a respected local railroad president and investor. The federal government purchased the property from Hurt’s heirs in 1948, and under the terms of a trust established by Washington architect Robert Stead, developed it into a playground within District recreation system. During the postwar years, the playground served as a central civic, recreational, and cultural space for the largely African American Dupont Circle neighborhood. Renovations in 1992, 2008, and 2014 transformed the layout and configuration of its playground and athletic fields, and altered the appearance of its recreation center. The Friends of Stead Park was established in 2004, and, in partnership with the District Department of Parks and Recreation, the organization has been instrumental to the success of recent community outreach, planning, and the funding of park renovations.

EARLY HISTORY AND PARK DEVELOPMENT

The Dupont Circle neighborhood was developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of population growth and increased construction activity in the District of Columbia. Square 180 was first subdivided in 1867 by John B. Turton (Figure 2). Residential development in the 1600 block of P Street began in the early 1870s, in the form of brick and frame row houses. An 1874 real estate assessment of the District of Columbia indicates that, by this date, brick dwellings were located on lots one and eleven, and frame dwellings were located on lots three through seven (Figure 3). The well-known Shoemaker family of Washington owned a number of these frame residential buildings, which they leased to working-class boarders, including African Americans. The two-story brick building located at 1633 P Street, constructed as early as 1872, is one of the earliest surviving structures in Square 180.

In 1878, Henry Hurt built a two-and-a-half story brick residence with a wood cornice and tin roof on lot 8 at 1625 P Street (Figure 4). Hurt was the president of the Washington and Georgetown Railroad Company, and was an instrumental figure in the modernization of Washington’s early streetcar system. A prominent investor, Hurt also served on the board of directors of the Riggs National Bank. In 1888, Hurt constructed a two-story brick stable-carriage house at the rear of the property (Figure 5). Hurt later expanded the building in 1895, which today functions as the Stead Park recreation center. Hurt’s property also included a large walled garden, which extended to the east of his P Street residence, eventually encompassing lots 3-7 (Figure 6). Henry Hurt died in 1916, and his widow Annie Hurt continued to reside at 1625 P Street until her death in 1921. Hurt’s heir, Fannie Gue Hardell lived in the house with her husband until 1948, when she sold the property to the federal government for use as a playground.

In the decades leading up to World War II, the development of recreational facilities became a joint effort that involved both District and federal agencies. In 1933, President Roosevelt transferred responsibility
Stead Playground arose from a joint NCPPC-Recreation Board initiative during the 1940s to develop new playgrounds in neighborhoods lacking recreational facilities and experiencing high rates of juvenile delinquency. Concurrently, Robert Stead, a prominent Washington architect, died in 1943, and in his will he specified that a charitable trust be established for the purpose of creating a playground for the use of the children of Washington. Under the terms of the trust, the playground was to be developed on Stead’s property located near Fourteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E. The District government, however, wished to locate the park in Square 180, citing traffic-safety concerns and the presence of existing playground facilities in Southeast. Stead’s heirs challenged the change in location in District Court, which ruled in favor of the District government. In 1949, the United States Court of Appeals upheld the District Court’s decision. Further precipitating the development of the new playground, in 1951, NCPPC authorized the closing of a portion of Church Street running through Square 180 and the park site. The Mary Force Stead Playground, named in honor of Robert Stead’s late wife, was officially opened on November 12, 1953, in a ceremony attended by District officials, members of the Stead family, and 400 neighborhood children (Figure 7).

While primarily serving the area’s African American community, the park, referred to as an “open” facility in the 1952 report of the District Commissioners, reflected District policies at the time to eliminate segregation in public recreation facilities.

RECENT HISTORY AND PARK USAGE

The Stead Playground served as an important public space for eastern Dupont Circle’s largely African American population during the decades following World War II. Early usage of the playground included civic, youth, and cultural programs. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Midway Civic Association organized “neighborhood betterment” parades, part of their campaign against slum conditions, which assembled at and departed from the playground (Figure 8). The 1959 parade included 350 children, who assembled at the park carrying signs and banners promoting a clean neighborhood.

Cultural events at the park were epitomized by the “Starlite Movies” summer outdoor film series, held at the park during the 1950s. The program, sponsored by the Evening Star, in cooperation with the District Recreation Department and the Film Center of Washington, featured 750 movies shown in playgrounds in the District, Maryland, and Virginia. In 1954, Stead Playground received a certificate of merit, along with

8 “Planning Group Buys Two Tracts,” Washington Post, October 12, 1951.
twenty-two other playgrounds, for its film program.\textsuperscript{12}

The playground hosted an array of youth programs during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1957, the Midway Civic Association, working with the director of the Stead Playground, created a program to organize and register grocery delivery boys in the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{13} Uplift House, a local organization operated by the Commissioner’s Youth Council with the aid of local churches, sponsored youth events in the park during the 1960s. In 1966, it’s tutoring program held a carnival at the Stead Playground.\textsuperscript{14} The D.C. Recreation Department offered summer youth programs throughout the District during the 1960s. For example, in 1967, Stead Playground hosted preschool and public improvement programs.\textsuperscript{15}

During the 1970s and 1980s, the playground acquired the reputation as one of the best locations in the city for informal “pick-up” basketball games. In addition, the District Department of Recreation (DPR) coordinated summer basketball tournaments at the playground.\textsuperscript{16}

Beginning in the late 1980s, neighborhood residents became concerned regarding the deteriorating condition of the playground. Newspaper articles from this period refer to the park as having been “overrun” by “vandalism and neglect.” In 1987-1988, the Jaycees and DPR, along with community volunteers, held workdays at the park as part of the Create-a-Playground project. With the District facing limited funding at the time for recreation upgrades, the Jaycees solicited construction materials from local suppliers, and also contributed funds to the project. Work at the park included clearing trash, planting new shrubs and flowers, repairing benches, water fountains, and playground equipment, and painting the exterior of the recreation center. In addition, DPR organized Youth Litter Patrols as part of its Summer Youth Employment Program in an effort to maintain the playground.\textsuperscript{17} DPR temporarily closed the playground in 1992-1993 during renovations to the facility. Neighborhood residents were angered by the length of the closure, and by recurring rodent problems in the park.\textsuperscript{18}

By 2004, the park had once again fallen into disrepair, and a proposed lease agreement recommended transferring operational jurisdiction of the park from DPR to the D.C. Center for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People (Metro GLBT). Under the proposed public-private partnership, Metro GLBT was to be responsible for recreation programming at the park, with DPR responsible for maintenance of the park’s playing fields. Also proposed at the time by Metro GLBT were a new five-story office building on the site, replacing the existing recreation center, and a new 540-car, three level, underground parking garage, to be constructed through a mix of public and private funds (Figure 9). Metro GLBT’s plans for developing the site ran counter to the wishes of many Dupont Circle residents, who wished to see open green space and the historic character of the area preserved. Their opposition to the plan was vocally expressed at a series of community meetings held by DPR at Foundry United Methodist Church between August and October 2004. In addition, the Historic Preservation Office, working with the Dupont Circle Conservancy, sought to include the property within the expansion of the Dupont Circle Historic District.\textsuperscript{19} Metro GLBT

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{19} Harvey, 9.
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subsequently dropped its plans for the park, as DPR advanced its own renovation plans for the site in partnership with the Friends of Stead Park.²⁰

The Friends of Stead Park (FOSP) was established in order to ensure and maintain Robert Stead’s vision for the park, while realizing its potential as a valuable educational and cultural resource. The organization was created in 2004 through a collaboration between Charles Carroll Carter, a retired Washington publisher who had grown up in the neighborhood, and Father Julian Stead, a Benedictine monk and the grandson of Robert Stead. FOSP consulted with Bank of America to help make funds from the Stead Trust available, and in collaboration with DPR, has led the effort to realize improvements to the park, including renovations in 2008 and 2014. The group donated more than $200,000 dollars to help fund the 2014 renovations, which totaled $1.8 million.²¹

RENOVATIONS TO BUILDING AND LANDSCAPE

Historic drawings and plans provide insight into the park’s early layout, features, and improvements, and serve as a baseline for an analysis of subsequent alterations. In February 1952, the National Park Service, National Capital Parks, prepared a general development plan for the playground (Figure 10). On this plan, the southern portion of the playground features the recreation center, a concrete-surfaced multiple-use area, a central “spray area” containing benches and delineated by shrubs and walkways of brick and concrete, an “apparatus area” containing playground equipment, and a “crafts and toys area,” also containing playground equipment. The plan depicts the portion of the site located to the north of the recreation center as allocated for softball and football, with a small area designated as a “horseshoe course.” The majority of the site is surrounded by low concrete walls surmounted by metal chain link fencing, with sections of existing brick walls bounding the eastern alley edge of the apparatus area and the northern edge of the crafts and toys area.²² The section of brick alley wall which runs along the eastern edge of the site remains, and was likely originally built in 1940 by owner Walter F. Hardell.²³ A 1953 construction plan prepared by National Capital Parks, Engineering Division, retains the majority of the landscape elements shown on the 1952 concept plan, but combines the apparatus and the crafts and toys areas into a single large play space (Figure 11).²⁴

In addition, NPS repurposed the existing nineteenth-century brick stable-carriage house, associated with the former Hurt residence, into a recreation center. Plans prepared in 1953 by National Capital Parks, Architectural Division, reveal the degree to which the structure was altered during the renovation (Figure 12). On the building’s front elevation, one doorway was widened, and a new brick arch and door were installed. Also, two first-story front-elevation windows were removed and the openings were filled with brick. The most extensive alteration to the front elevation involved the removal of the existing second-story wall and windows of the gabled central section, and the installation of a bank of fifteen rectangular metal windows (ten awning-style and five fixed-sash), arranged in three rows. At the time of the park’s dedication in 1953, the first story of the central section, possibly used historically as a carriage entrance,

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²³ District of Columbia, Fence Permit 238165, issued October 31, 1940, Special Collections, D.C. Public Library.
remained open. Alterations to the rear elevations included the removal of two first-story windows, which were filled in with brick, and the replacement of one second-story window with one of a smaller size. In addition, the building’s two existing brick chimneys were removed, and a new single brick chimney was installed. On the building’s east elevation, NPS installed two new doors and a concrete stoop with metal railing.25

In 1977, the District solicited bids for roof “rehabilitation” at Stead Playground.26 D.C. Archives holds no permits for the work, however the scope seems to have only involved resurfacing.

In 1990, the District began planning extensive renovations to the recreation center. Most notably, these included the construction of a second-story, frame, siding-clad addition built onto the rear elevation, supported by four reinforced brick posts. As designed, the addition contained a recreation room, kitchen, and storage space. Architectural plans, prepared by the firm of Navy, Gordon, and Marshall, suggest that the building’s central first-story carriage entrance had been previously enclosed prior to 1990, as the plans do not refer to the front elevation carriage doors and windows in these bays as new elements (Figures 13-14). The 1990 renovations included the following: 27

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repair of gable louver</td>
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<td>Replacement of one second-story fixed-sash metal window</td>
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<td>Metal railing added in front of western-most doorway</td>
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<td>New first-story window and door lintels</td>
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<th>East (Side) Elevation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Installation of two 8” x 4” louvers</td>
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<th>Rear Elevation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Second-story addition with steel balcony and railing</td>
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<td>Installation of metal louvers over two first-story windows</td>
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<td>Two new first-story doorways</td>
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<td>New lintels on one first-story window and two second-story windows</td>
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<td>Alteration of roof line</td>
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<td>Exterior pointing of masonry and painting</td>
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<td>Installation of new metal coping and flashing</td>
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<th>Landscape</th>
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<td>Alterations to design of Spray Area shown on 1953 plan</td>
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<td>New playground equipment</td>
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In 2008, a playground redesign by the firm of Lee + Papa Associates altered the configuration of existing play spaces located to the south and east of the recreation center building (Figure 15). The project included the creation of a new elliptical courtyard, as well as two new play areas.\textsuperscript{28} Following extensive community outreach by FOSP, DPR renovated the athletic field in 2014. The project, designed by the landscape design firm of Studio 39, included the resurfacing of the playing field, a new perimeter jogging track, landscaping, seating, and a new interactive water park and pavilion (Figure 16).\textsuperscript{29}

**CONCLUSION**

Stead Park was developed in 1952-1953 by the District government, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and the National Park Service. The site, located within Square 180 in the Dupont Circle Historic District, was first subdivided and developed during the late nineteenth century, and originally contained frame row houses and the residence of prominent local figure Henry Hurt. Developed in accord with the wishes of Washington architect Robert Stead, the desegregated playground served Dupont Circle’s predominately African American community during the decades following World War II. The condition of the park began to deteriorate during the 1980s, and DPR undertook renovations in 1992, 2008, and 2014, which modernized the original layout of its playground and athletic field, and altered the appearance of its recreation center. Playing an integral role in the planning and funding of recent park upgrades, the Friends of Stead Park, established in 2004, is committed to maintaining the park as a vital public space within the community.


\textsuperscript{29} Anthony L. Harvey, “Dupont Circle’s Stead Park Athletic Field Redevelopment Soon to Start,” InTowner 46, no. 1 (July 2014): 1.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Building Permits, Special Collections, D.C. Public Library, Washingtoniana Division.


Vertical Files, Special Collections, D.C. Public Library, Washingtoniana Division.

Figure 1. Satellite imagery of park, with GIS boundary outlined in red (Google/District of Columbia)

Figure 2. Subdivision plat of Square 180, May 1, 1867 (Office of the Surveyor)
Figure 3. Faehltz and Pratt 1874 tax assessment of Square 180 (Special Collections, D.C. Public Library)
Figure 4. Permit 234, February 18, 1878 (Special Collections, D.C. Public Library)
Figure 5. Permit 1660, April 2, 1888 (Special Collections, D.C. Public Library)
Figure 6. Site survey prepared by the Office of the Surveyor in 1945 (Office of the Surveyor)

Figure 7. Photograph published in the Evening Star, September 21, 1953 (Special Collections, D.C. Public Library)
Figure 8. Participants in parade organized by the Midway Civic Association (*Evening Star*, May 21, 1961)

Figure 9. Proposed site plan for Stead Park (*InTowner*, August 2004)
Figure 10. 1952 general development plan (Department of General Services)

Figure 11. 1953 playground construction plan (Department of General Services)
Figure 12. 1953 renovation plan (Department of General Services)

Figure 13. Elevations and sections, 1990 (Department of General Services)
Figure 14. Playground equipment, site plan, and details, 1990 (Department of General Services)

Figure 15. Site plan prepared by Lee + Papa Associates (InTowner, June 2008)
Figure 16. 2014 site plan prepared by Studio 39 (Friends of Stead Park)