

The Old Woronoco Park

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While many people may not know about it today, Westfield used to be home to one of the best-known horse racing tracks in Massachusetts. For over half a century, jockeys and their horses flooded the stables wanting to be able to race at Woronoco Park.

It all began in the summer of 1893 when a group of men started a corporation to build a park in Westfield. Woronoco Park was located where Park Drive and Park Circle stand today, off of Western Avenue, across the street from Westfield State University's old apartments. Going into the entrance in the late 1800s, a person would have seen many horses, fireworks, and balloons rising above the track. The opening day of Woronoco Park on June 27, 1894 was filled with "horse races, bicycle races, baseball, balloon ascensions and evening fireworks", and a week later the park was formally dedicated to Westfield (Westfield Tri-Centennial Association). These glorious first events really set a grand atmosphere for the park and the harness racing that would occur there. Two weeks after the dedication, the Westfield Band gave an open-air concert at Woronoco Park. This concert at Woronoco Park inspired the town to relocate its bandstand from the Town Hall to the park, where it would be used and enjoyed by the townspeople more frequently (Westfield Tri-Centennial Association).

Getting to the park was very easy. The Highland Co., a local railway company, had created a track from the Pine Hill Cemetery to the park. The horses and carriages used for this track were kept where Highland Circle is today. Later on in the park's lifetime, the Highland Co. and the Woronoco Street Railways consolidated together to make the trip cost only eight cents. This ability to easily access Woronoco Park is one of the factors that made it such a popular destination (Westfield Tri-Centennial Association).

Horse racing was the biggest attraction at Woronoco Park, and 1899 was the best year for it. A five-day long meet was held, and hundreds of racers and many spectators came from all over New England. The purses, or money that was distributed to the owners of those who entered, for this meet were as high as \$500, and the whips that the jockeys used were made right in Westfield. Woronoco Park was a place where everyone could go to always have a good time, and watching the races and cheering on the competitors brought the citizens of Westfield together. (Westfield Tri-Centennial Association).

Not only did the park hold horse racing, it also held school track meets for some of the local schools, including Westfield Grammar School and Westfield Normal School (which later became Westfield State University). Student-teachers from the Normal School could be seen cheering on the competitors running the 50-yard dash, the 75-yard dash and the half mile relay (Westfield Tri-Centennial Association).

After years of thrilling events and countless races, interest in the park started to go down, and unfortunately, like all good things, Woronoco Park came to an end. In 1921, Joseph C. McClure, a well-known horse racer, had died, and subsequently, the park dwindled without his presence. Within ten years, the park faded away, and in 1946 it was eventually leveled to make way for a new housing project. The mark that Woronoco Park made on Westfield was not forgotten by the old timers, though. Stephen J. Pitoniak, a Normal School custodian, said, "It is only the old-timers, for the most part, who even realize that the present entrance to Park Dr. was once the entrance to the park, a center of entertainment for area residents for so many years." (Canterbury).

Woronoco Park spanned across 33 acres of land, and gave 53 years of intense racing, weekly dances, and music and fellowship to the town of Westfield. It is sad to know that

Westfield lost this great community gathering place, but knowing that the city we call home has this rich history emphasizes the importance of community. Woronoco Park was an engaging race track with an exciting atmosphere that Westfield residents, as well as residents from all over New England, had the privilege of enjoying for many years. As Tom Mayes says, “Old places foster community by giving people a sense of shared identity through landmarks, history, memory, and stories”, and Woronoco Park gave that sense of identity to the residents of Westfield.

Residents gathering for a race at
Woronoco Park 1898.



A picture of the harness racing



Works Cited

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