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"The Right to Play" The Establishment of Playgrounds in the American City

Kyle James Fritch
University of Massachusetts Boston

“THE RIGHT TO PLAY”

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PLAYGROUNDS IN THE AMERICAN CITY

A Thesis Presented

By

Kyle James Fritch

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Approved as to style and content by:

_____
Vincent J. Cannato, Associate Professor
Chairperson of Committee

_____
Roberta Wollons, Professor
Member

_____
Timothy Hasci, Associate Professor
Member

_____
Vincent J. Cannato, Program Director
History Department

_____
Timothy Hasci, Chairperson
History Department

ABSTRACT

"The Right to Play"

The Establishment of Playgrounds in the American City

August 2018

Kyle James Fritch, B.A., Salve Regina University
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Associate Professor Vincent Cannato

The Right to Play is focused on the development of playgrounds in America at the end of the 19th century. This overall development is shown through a focus on Boston, the city that instituted the first playground in the country and mirrors the similar rise of playgrounds in other cities. Throughout the 1800s children in cities played in the streets or any abandoned lot they could find. However, parents wanted what they believed to be a safer and healthier environment for their children to play. Along with this, reformers believed that these mostly immigrant and poor children were in need of saving, both physically and morally.

Because of this, they began philanthropic efforts to establish play spaces were children could exercise freely, and also be taught the "proper" way of play. Beginning in 1885 with a small sand garden, these efforts led to the establishment of playgrounds and play advocacy groups across the country. In Boston, the playground movement grew so popular as to necessitate its abortion and financial support by local governments with the passing of the 1907 Playground Act.

Acknowledgements

My initial thanks goes to my high school history teacher Mr. Winterson who introduced me to the fascinating stories history contained and taught me how to go find them.

Professor Vincent Cannato was integral to the development of this thesis, which started as a conversation during a meeting and grew into what a finished product.

My deepest gratitude to my ever loving wife Hillary who has not known me a day in her life when I was not immersed in the University of Massachusetts Graduate Program. She has sat patiently while I did “just one more quick post” or ranted about the difficulties of writing this thesis and the papers that came before it. You always had a kind word to say and a listening ear to give and I will be forever thankful to you and your Beacon Hill apartment that was across the street from the tiny playground that sparked the idea for this thesis.

And finally, while this thesis will not be listed on any list of the great histories, it is for Ellen M Tower all those whose voices and stories have been marginalized or shut out of the historical record.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Playgrounds are a staple of American communities, necessities for residents, and a cornerstone in the development of children. That they are ingrained as a part of life in both spacious rural towns and land-starved cities is due to the tireless work of local organizations, philanthropists, and reformers at the turn of the 20th century. This thesis will focus on how playgrounds came to be, specifically how they transitioned from privately funded and operated lots to the publically owned and financed playgrounds we are familiar with today.

Boston is a typical colonial city that was started on the harbor and grew organically around the rivers, in this case the Charles River, which hemmed it in. Because of this, space has always been at a premium and open land quickly grew hard to find. Urban sprawl would only come later in the post-automobile cities. That it contains the magnificent Boston Common in the heart of the city and is dotted throughout with smaller parks and playgrounds is a wonder in itself. However, it is also a wonder that we expect of our city spaces so much that they can go unnoticed as you drive down Storrow Drive during rush hour, or struggle to find a parking spot in the North End or South Boston. Even if the playgrounds are noticed, it is rare that the question of how they were built comes up or how it is that such valuable land was set aside.

No matter where or in what situation they live, children will always need space to play. Whether this space is provided for them or not, they will go out and find the space they crave. This can be anything from a well-manicured park to the streets and alleys of their neighborhood. The story of playgrounds for these kids starts in Boston in 1885 and spreads quickly from there. This paper will focus on how this came about and how the momentum of the playground movement built to its crescendo in 1907. Urban playgrounds were not a foregone conclusion; they were an idea that had to be fought for and whose efficacy had to be proven time and again.

The playground movement was launched during the Progressive Era, a time when reformers were focused on the improvement of society by bettering the lives all people. While other movements of the Progressive Era, such as the City Beautiful Movement and labor-law reform, have been thoroughly researched and documented, the establishment of publicly funded urban playgrounds has not been covered as comprehensively. Historians such as Stephen Hardy, Paul Boyer, Gerald Marsden, and Dominick Cavallo have written about the creation of urban playgrounds, with a consensus opinion being that philanthropists and reformers felt that the city was a negative influence on children. This impact could be negated and reversed by physical activity and structured play in open spaces. None of the authors discuss in great detail how those playgrounds were then founded or why cities ended up assuming the responsibility of paying for their construction and maintenance.

Boyer argues that reformers were looking for a refuge for children from what they viewed as the moral degradation and evil influences of urban life. He discusses the explosion of city populations and the lagging effort of local governments to keep up with the new demand of their citizens. Immigration helped drive this population growth. In 1900, 60 percent of those living in the twelve largest cities in America were foreign-born immigrants or their children. These immigrants often worked long hours at multiple jobs and could only afford cramped housing in city tenements. This meant that supervision of their children was a difficult proposition. When not at school under the watchful eye of a teacher, the kids typically only had one place left to play where their mothers could keep watch while still working, their apartment's street.[1]

This is why Stephen Hardy is quoted as saying that "urban progress was not all positive." Many civic leaders saw what they believed was the negative influence and overcrowding in unhealthy conditions in these tenement neighborhoods, that led to physical ailments and moral decay. Because of this, a debate arose over how best to "save" the poor, with one camp advocating for social uplift, that would provide them with the means they needed to improve their own lives, and another advocating for social control to mold the immigrants and lower class into what they believed was the "proper citizens". Both of these camps would have their say in the burgeoning playground movement of the late 1800s and beyond.[2]

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[1] Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 221.

[2] Stephen Hardy, "Parks for the People: Reforming the Boston Park System. 1870-1915," *Journal of Sport History* 7, no. 3 (1980): 5-24.

Cavallo outlines this policy of "child saving" in *Muscles and Morals Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform 1880-1920*. Through songs, parades, and organized team sports, immigrant children would learn the morals and ethics that were believed to be necessary to grow into a contributing member of American society. Sand gardens were put in place for toddlers to play freely, while vacation schools were established for the children too old for the sand gardens. Finally, the playgrounds and fields were incorporated for the team games of the largest teenagers. This final development of training children and providing them the required space to play the games and engage in the activities thought to be necessary to a healthy development is what caused organizations, such as the Massachusetts Civic League, to begin opening full playgrounds with gymnastic structures and fields for baseball and other team sports. These areas were extremely popular with parents who could now be secure in the knowledge that not only were their children being looked after, but they were being given meaningful structure and instruction. Consequently, the protests from parents in neighborhoods without an accessible play space grew each year.[3]

In her article "Voting for Play: The Democratic Possibility of Progressive Era Playgrounds", Sarah Jo Peterson discusses the legislative process that the final playground bill, "An Act to Provide for Public Playgrounds in Certain Cities and Towns", underwent on its way to passage. Again, this deals with a piece of the

[3] Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds in Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

playground movement but does not reflect at length on the depth of work done prior to the vote.[4]

The most comprehensive writing on the subject is Clarence Elmer Rainwater's 1922 study *The Play Movement: A Study of Community Recreation.* Rainwater wrote this book fifteen years after the playground bill was passed as a reflection on the movement itself and its birth in 1887. He recounts the different milestones in the play movement from its roots in Boston, to its spread to New York City, and the establishment of the East Side Playground System in Chicago. This thesis will provide the street-level details involving playgrounds that make up the broad strokes Rainwater provides in showing the history of the play movement from private passion project to public ownership.[5]

These details include the annual reports published by the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. Their Committee on Playgrounds, headed by Ellen M Tower, was the group that first started organizing playgrounds in Boston. These reports discuss the very first sand garden placed on Parmenter Street and the Committee's overseeing of the female branch of the Charlesbank Gymnasium. Further resources include the workings of the Massachusetts Civic League and the personal correspondence and editorials written by the league's president Joseph Lee. His focus on building the ideal playground on Columbus Avenue and the diligent work this entailed is clear from the near daily notes he recorded and the letters back and forth to the park's superintendent. These records are evidence of

[4] Sarah Jo Peterson, "Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playground", *(Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,* 2004).
[5] Clarence Elmer Rainwater, *The Play Movement in the United States*.: *A Study of Community Recreation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1922). 44

how difficult a project the first playgrounds were, how they relied solely on donations and volunteers, and how this system was so popular as to actually make it untenable in the long run. Along with these, the development of playgrounds and their rising popularity among the people of Boston is shown through the *Boston Post* and its reporting of City Council meetings, public comments, and editorials. It is this overwhelming popular support for accessible playgrounds that eventually forced Boston and the other cities in Massachusetts into providing playgrounds as a civic duty.

Providing sand gardens for the use of toddlers had a long history in Germany, as shown by historian Joe Frost. He discusses Johan Friedrich Gutsmuth and how he introduced outdoor gymnastics in 1821 to provide children of the city with the same fresh-air exercise experiences as those living in the country. Subsequently, Friedrich Froebels introduced the first kindergarten and sandlot in Germany to enhance the development of children. This idea was adopted in the United States after these sand gardens were observed by Dr. Marie Zakrzewska, who penned a letter to Kate Gannett Wells, and the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association, who quickly established one in Boston.[6] Wells herself wrote a brief article in the *Journal of Education* describing the beginning phases of implementing playgrounds, but again she dealt in milestones with few specifics.[7]

The public desire for larger, more available play space was chronicled by the *Boston Post* in the 1870s in response to the restrictions put in place in common

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[6] Joe Frost, *Play Environments for Young Children, 1800-1990 (*Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 1989), p. 18

[7] Kate Gannett Wells, *How Boston's Playgrounds Began* (Boston, MA: Boston University, 1909), p. 146

spaces, most famously the Boston Common. These included the banning of baseball and other team games from the fields of common areas and the shooing away of children who were deemed "disruptive" to the quiet tranquility enjoyed by adults.[8] However, the Playground Movement really began in Massachusetts in 1885 as the simple idea of providing a pile of sand for toddlers on which to safely play. This novel idea was so popular that not only did sand gardens flourish all around the city, but larger areas had to be added for the play of older children.

In 1883, the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association had been established and in 1885 a Committee on Sand Gardens was created. Ellen M Tower, a prominent Boston philanthropist, headed this new committee, which soon came to be called the Committee on Playgrounds. This committee was widely successful, a fact that can be attested to by the yearly addition of playgrounds and the swelling numbers of children utilizing them, along with parent and child testimonials. Thanks to the work of Ms. Tower and the matron volunteers, the Committee on Playgrounds was placed in charge of the brand new Charlesbank playground in 1895. The Charlesbank consisted at first of gymnastics equipment for boys, and then after popular demand, girls as well. This transition is documented by Kate Gannett Wells, who was also a member of the Civic League, in *How Boston's Playgrounds Began.* It was the success of the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association, and more specifically the Committee on Sand Gardens that supplied the evidence to support the public clamor and need of discretionary funds. This groundswell of

[8] Wells, p.147

support culminated in Mayor Josiah Quincy calling for expedited funding for playgrounds throughout the city in his 1897 inaugural address.[9]

The torch was then passed to the Massachusetts Civic League (MCL) and a well-known advocate of play, Joseph Lee, in 1897. The MCL was begun with the purpose of pushing for play reform through legislation, but evolved in the ensuing years to also run independent playgrounds of its own.

While the MCL operated many different playgrounds, this paper will focus specifically on its management of the Columbus Avenue playground, from its founding and eventually growth over the period of years that it operated. Lee, working on behalf of the MCL, and the playground supervisor were in charge of purchasing all landscaping and equipment, overseeing the staff, and organizing the curriculum of games, parades, and events that the park hosted throughout the year.

Throughout the growth of all of these separate programs, ranging from 1885 to 1905, one thing remained constant; funding was received through private donation. For example, the same company, Waldo Brothers, donated all the sand for the gardens. The playgrounds were growing more and more popular and demand was starting to outstrip supply. Because of the strong foundation of private philanthropy, the playground system was seen as something popular that every area of the city, and the other cities of Massachusetts, desperately needed. In light of the fact that it would be too many playgrounds for private citizens to fund, operate, and maintain, residents began looking to local government to take up the cause that Dr. Zakrzewska's letter had set off a decade before.

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[9] Josiah Quincy, *The Inaugural Addresses of the Mayors of Boston* (Boston, MA: Harvard University), p. 14.

This call for more government involvement was done through a grassroots campaign organized in towns throughout the state. The campaign itself was carried out in three phases, the first being correspondence directly from the Massachusetts Civic League, next was a combination of leaflets and pamphlets flooding the state, and finally, personal visits to the local organizations advocating for playgrounds in their towns. It was important to include the local groups and not push just one reason for needing playgrounds. This was because sustaining the playground momentum would require all of its advocates, both from social control groups and those leaning more towards traditional Progressive era ideals.

This process led to the 1907 passage of the Playground Act, mandating that a referendum be held in any city in Massachusetts with more than 10,000 residents to decide if a playground system would be established. Every single town that qualified to vote did so in the affirmative. Politically, the movement argued that "public parks offered little or no space for play" and because of the success of past programs, both Tower's and Lee's, these spaces were exactly what citizens and advocates demanded.[10]

This watershed moment for the playground movement was only able to come about because of the role played by charitable organizations in its earliest years. They brought play to the masses and established that it should not be a luxury, but an ingrained piece of the fabric of neighborhoods throughout Boston. By doing this, a public demand was created that could only by supplied by the financial backing of government.

[10] Peterson, "Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playground",

CHAPTER 2

A CITY WITHOUT PLAY

America had finally completed it growth out in the farmlands and made the move to the big city. The lure of available work and a better life was irresistible to many, both at home and across the globe. By 1900, sixty percent of the population of the twelve largest cities in America consisted of foreign-born or first-generation immigrants.[11] The cities were developing, according to Sam Bass Warner, "an inner city of work and low-income housing, and an outer city of middle- and upper-class residencies." Leading philanthropist and Hull House founder Jane Addams described these areas as "large foreign colonies which so easily isolate themselves" and where the people "often move from one wretched lodging to another" the consequence of which is that "the social organism has broken down." [12] With this came neighborhood overcrowding and a sense that urbanization posed a threat to "society itself."[13] In Boston, arrests for burglary, robbery, larceny, assault, and murder rose to an all-time high during the late 1870s.

This common thought played an important role in the work of many reformers and philanthropists who attempted to correct what they saw as a growing problem. This belief thought, was not one completely agreed upon by historians. In Children of the City: At Work and at Play, David Nasaw argued that the

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[11] Boyer, p. 123-124.
[12] Jane Addams. "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements," *Philanthropy and Social Progress.* T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1893. p. 1-4.
[13] Boyer, p. 130.

settlement house workers who depicted the "working-class immigrants as helpless, hopeless, uprooted victims" were wrong, and historians reporting as much were "misreading the historical record."[14] The ongoing crisis of moral degradation reached such a supposed fever pitch that legislation was passed in an attempt to curb further harm. In 1880, police reported 123 cases of breaking and entering, 108 cases of stealing, and 53 accounts of truancy and pedaling. The ages of the suspects ranged from 6 years and 7 months to 18 years for the boys and 9 years 7 months to 16 years 8 months for the girls, the average age being 13 years and 4 months and 14 years and 1 month for boys and girls respectively.[15] Legislation passed in the State House, House 173 "Essential to Safety of Children and Community Decency" that expanded the definition of a "contributor to delinquency" as anyone who is directly involved in the delinquency of the child. The hope being that House 173 would "check juvenile delinquency at the source."[16] Paul Boyer sums up urban feelings in *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America,* by stating that because police growth had continued to lag behind population growth, "crime represented a constant … growing menace."[17]

1880s Boston

Boston in the post-Reconstruction years was, like many New England cities at the time, an industrial city that needed vast amounts of cheap labor to operate.

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[14] David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and At Play* (New York City NY: Anchor Books, 2012) p. 9.
[15] "Crime or Sport", April 1902. Publications, Carton 4. Joseph Lee Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
[16] "Causes and Cures of Crimes", undated. Carton 4. Joseph Lee papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
[17] Boyer, p. 125.

The city's population had been growing exponentially; its population of 136,881 in 1850 had grown by 150 percent to 362,839 by 1880.[18] Unfortunately, not all "urban growth was positive"[19], cities' "sudden growth led to difficulties as well as blessings"[20] and not all "urban growth was positive."[21] Boston's labor force was forced into compact wards and made to live in dense, overcrowded neighborhoods. Nasaw agrees with this point, writing that both high and low classes shared the same "congested, polluted urban space" and were "assaulted daily by the smoke, soot, and dust in the air" but that for the immigrants and working class the problems were intensified a hundredfold.[22] Boston's renting class shows just how overcrowded it was, as most renters lived in apartment buildings and subdivided homes. Because of this, 82 percent of Boston residents rented, which was higher than the national average.[23] Families made these rented spaces as best as could be possible but the fact was that they were "forced to live in spaces that should have remained uninhabited."[24] While increasing homeownership was not a cause for concern among the working class, the quality of the rental homes was a problem, with "sanitary problems paramount."[25]

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[18] Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon the Hill: Boston Since 1630* (Amherst: MA, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 261.
[19] Stephen Hardy. *How Boston Played: Sport, Recreation, and Community 1865-1915* (Boston MA: Northeastern University Press 1982), p. 5.
[20] K. Gerald Marsden, *Philanthropy and the Boston Playground Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 48.
[21] Hardy, p. 5.
[22] Nasaw, p. 9.
[23] Hardy, p. 103.
[24] Nasaw, p.11.
[25] Hardy, p. 104.

During this transition, the reins of power were in the hands of the "possessors of capital and captains of industry" and local politics and the accompanying development of cities reflected this.[26] These leaders began to develop as "an inner city of work and low-income housing, and an outer city of middle- and upper-class income residences."[27] However, Progressives fought to limit what they called the "monarchical state" and the focus of politics began to shift from "aristocratic privilege to contexts of everyday life."[28]

After years of labor and social unrest, many citizens decided to make changes they believed that people living in the cities needed. It was during this time that middle-class Americans decided that, in the words of Cynthia Zaitzevsky, "only a comprehensive, systematic and orchestrated effort could stave off moral decay and social disintegration."[29] Many different theories were offered as the fix that cities needed and they focused across all demographics, but one stood out as having the promise to save a generation before they were lost.

According to Boyer, "'Child saving' was perhaps the most wide spread reform movement in the United States between 1880 and 1920."[30] Reformers believed that by constructing the right environment, the "complex process of influencing behavior and molding character" could be achieved. [31] This process became known as Positive Environmentalism and was thought to contain the important moral-control

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[26] Daniel T. Rogers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 53.
[27] Boyer, p. 124.
[28] Rogers, p. 53.
[29] Cynthia Zaitzevsky. *Frederick Law Olmsted* (Boston, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), p. 144.
[30] Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds in Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 1.
[31] Boyer, p. 221.

dimension that would help guide the youth of America's cities down the path to becoming productive citizens.[32]

The Progressive Era

During the Progressive Era, America changed in drastic ways and shifted its perspective from limitless economic and industrial growth, to the improvement of the condition of the workers lives that made it all possible. The poor conditions of workers were partly due to the overcrowding of urban areas caused by the unprecedented shift in population from the rural areas to the new industrial metropolises. While this allowed for an industrial boom that would place America among the great powers of the world, it also brought with it many drawbacks. Overcrowding, crime, and an increasing wealth gap were prominent throughout all of America's cities and these issues were being getting worse by the day. Having to face these unique issues caused by newly enlarged metropolises, philanthropists and charities attempted to combat and curb the spread of these illnesses. They attempted different projects, building new parks to offer fresh air and a slice of nature. Settlement houses sprung up to address urban problems on behalf of the vast majority of immigrants and poor being left behind. The idea behind these various projects was that a person's soul was just as in need of care as their physical body. Food and shelter were necessary for all, but so was the desire to not just have life but to have a quality of life that would improve all the conditions of society.

One focus of the Progressive Era was the drive to enhance the lives of urban children by providing them with the structured activities of playgrounds. Before

[32] Anthony M. Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency,* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1977)

this, the tenements would "pour forth their armies of children" following the end of school and completion of dinner. In these moments, Nasaw explains that the children "played on the streets because there was nowhere else for them."[33] The desired result from the playground movement was to not only improve the physical condition of city kids who routinely lived in the dirtiest and most disease-ridden tenements, but to also instill in them the proper beliefs and morals that would allow them to grow into productive American adults. As Frank S. Mason described in his article "The Summer Life of the City Boy":

> To the city boy the summer season in crowded streets and ill smelling tenements, with the continual noise which comes from the passing of teams over stone pavements, is a nerve-trying period, and the mystery to me is that the city boy gets any benefit from the time given him for vacation in the summer period.[34]

This way, they would not succumb to the vices thought to be plaguing cities, but rather, would improve their neighborhoods and environments. Subsequently, the plan to save the children started as a grassroots campaign in small localities and eventually grew into a national movement that placed municipally owned and operated playgrounds in every city in America.

Along with this, in the 1880s, social politics "erupted on a scale unknown before" as evidenced in part by the rise of settlement houses. The most famous of these was Hull House run by Jane Addams. Settlement house workers believed passionately in their ability to affect change by immersing themselves in the locality. Government was not doing enough to relieve the plight of the poor and immigrant

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[33] Nasaw, p. 18.
[34] Frank S. Mason, "The Summer Life of the City Boy," *Work With Boys: A Magazine of Methods,* V.II no. 2 (1902): 85.

classes of the cities but an intense local effort could be "more alert to issues of family, immigrants, and neighborhoods." This ideology of local support filling in for government assistance and molding the city to represent the people and their values would be the basis of the play movement that would start in Boston and spread across the nation.[35]

Space to Play

This was the city in which so many children grew up. Boston was a city that was decidedly unsafe for play and growing more cramped by the day due its street system that, as historian Lawrence Kennedy says, "had been laid without any coherent play or regards for future needs."[36] While parents could provide some safety to their children, either from the sidewalk or the tenement window up above, light, air, and space were at a premium in the city and "undeveloped space was wasted" Nasaw writes.[37] As noted in an 1878 *Boston Post* article, as early as 1874 city officials in Waltham and Brookline were discussing how to provide more playground space for boys.[38] At this time, the typical idea of a playground was an open space that would allow kids to run around. It did not include equipment, guidance, or divided areas for children of different ages. Boston Board of Alderman H. E. Merriam sought a "suitable playground" for the youth in Ward 25, but unfortunately a motion for allocating $1,000 to playgrounds was voted down 37-16.[39]

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[35] Mason. p. 58, 64
[36] Kennedy, p. 98.
[37] Nasaw, p.12.
[38] "Common Council", *Boston Post,* April 9, 1878.
[39] "Play-Grounds". *Boston Post,* July 6, 1878.

America had plenty of play spaces for children to use during these early stages of their development, but unfortunately they were not in cities.[40] In Boston in particular, had an envious Common, but as a consequence of the growth of the city, it was no longer available to children to play. In January 31, 1879, the *Post* lamented that children had been removed from playing on the Common.[41]

In that same year, Frederick Law Olmsted, famous for designing New York City's Central Park, was brought in to supervise the development and construction of 2,000 acres of parkland for Boston. This was the result of a citizens' petition hoping to "preserve public health and morality in an era ravaged by industrialization."[42] Olmsted was a staunch believer in the restorative properties that nature and open spaces could have on city residents and went on to design a park system that was the envy of other cities and is still an important piece of Boston's geography.[43] During this project, Olmsted worked closely with the Boston Parks Commission, which had been established in 1875, to provide residents with a space to relax and take in the beauty of nature. However, this beauty did not include loud children running around wildly throughout the summer months. While the city council approved $1,000,000 in bonds for the park system, this was not money to be used for any playgrounds. The new parks were not designed to support children's play. This is no surprise since playgrounds – structured open space for young

[40] Cavallo, p. 18.
[41] "Common Council", *Boston Post,* January 31, 1879.
[42] Kennedy, p. 89.
[43] Zaitzevsky, p. 152

children to play – were still such a novel idea that one Boston councilman remarked at a city council meeting that he "didn't even know what a playground means."[44]

Ten years earlier, amateur baseball players had formed the "Red Ball" ticket to protest sports being banned from Boston Common. Their platform was to "elect men who will grant our youth some spot for recreation."[45] While the newly elected alderman allowed boys sports on the lower end of the Common, this did not change the fact the one area would not be enough for a city the size of Boston, which was growing at a fast pace. Because of this, children were forced to continue filing the streets of Boston and running into all the old troubles that this brought. In 1881, a Boston alderman commented on how times had changed in the South End. Twenty-five years earlier there was plenty of space for children to run and play, but with the growth of the city there was no longer anywhere in the South End fit to play. "Play areas that had previously existed disappeared," [46] Gerald Marsden said. Because these areas that had previously existed we no longer available, children were forced to play in the streets. David Glassberg wrote that, "Children raised in such an environment would also get into mischief … unless rescued by more healthy traditional forms of play."[47]

Something needed to be done for the intellectual and moral development of these children and organized play could help in this regard. Reformers predicted that playgrounds "would be the womb from which a new urban citizenry – moral,

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[44] Hardy, p. 91.
[45] Hardy, p. 85.
[46] Marsden, p. 48.
[47] David Glassberg, *Restoring a "Forgotten Child": American Play and the Progressive Era's Elizabethan Past* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 352

industrious, and socially responsible – would emerge."[48] Now they just needed to prove this theory to everyone else.

[48] Boyer, p. 242.

Chapter 3

PLAYGROUNDS TAKE ROOT

In 1885, Dr. Marie Zakrzewska had returned to her hometown of Berlin for vacation. Dr. Zakrzewska was born in Germany in 1829 and became a midwife in 1852, before emigrating to America.[49] Dr. Zakrzewska's mother was a midwife and her grandmother was a veterinary surgeon.[50] Throughout her education, she was faced with all the discrimination that women experienced in a male-dominated field. Because of this, she emigrated to America for what she hoped would be a more welcoming environment for women to study medicine.[51]

In 1856, she graduated from Western Reserve College in Cleveland with a doctor of medicine degree. The following year, she helped to open New York Infirmary for Women and Children, in hopes of alleviating the challenges that women faced in entering and advancing in medical studies. This led her to move to Boston and accept a role as a professor of obstetrics at the New England Female Medical College.[52]

However, she faced many of the similar problems she had seen in previous stops. She could not find adequate working experience for her students and she disagreed with the medical school's curriculum. This led to her leaving the school

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[49] Arleen Tuchman, *Science Has No Sex: The Life of Marie Zakrzewska, M.D.* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 16.
[50] "Changing the Face of Medicine, Marie E. Zakrzewska", U.S. National Library of Medicine, June 03, 2015, accessed December 28, 2017, https//cfmedicine.nlm.nih.gov/physicians/biography_338.html
[51] Tuchman, p. 18.
[52] "Changing the Face of Medicine".

and opening her own hospital in Boston, the New England Hospital for Women and Children. This hospital would become a leading institution in the training of female nurses and physicians, with Dr. Zakrzewska being an advocate of medical reform throughout her career.[53]

It was in this role as a prominent Boston reformer that she was became acquainted with leading philanthropists of the day, one of whom was Kate Gannett Wells. Wells happened to be the chairman of the executive committee for the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association, an association that was committed to promoting knowledge about emergency situations and hygiene to poor and working class residents of Boston.[54]

As she was traveling through Germany, already famous for its kindergartens, Zakrzewska came across a peculiar sight in Berlin. Many children were grouped together on what looked to be a pile of sand. Upon questioning the supervising adults, she was informed that it was indeed a sandlot and it was put there so that children would have a safe place to play freely. The goal of this was to combat the overcrowding and dilapidated conditions of city life and provide a safe space for developing children to learn to play with others and practice the skills of cooperation, fair play, and social skills that they would use later in life. After observing these sand gardens, Dr. Zakrzewska wrote a letter to Miss Wells and the MEHA.

The Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association

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[53] U.S. Nation Library of Medicine "Changing the Face of Medicine, Marie E. Zakrzewska
[54] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association, *First Annual Report, 1885* Boston MA. Coal Bin Serials, Massachusetts Historical Society.

This association had been established in 1884 by volunteers to provide the people of Massachusetts with information on everything from caring for sick children to consuming healthy foods to bathing, basic first aid, and much more. In 1885, at the suggestion of Dr. Zakrzewska and following "the plan in Berlin, which has proved useful to children," a mound of sand was donated by Waldo Brothers and was placed at the Parmenter Street Chapel in Boston's North End. This sand garden attracted an average of 15 kids a day, three days a week in July and August. To be sure, the volunteers who worked that summer had no idea the magnitude of the movement they had just begun. While another sand garden placed in the West End Nursery failed due to the children being too young (under two years old) to use it, the association remained hopeful that "the success of the experiment on Parmenter Street may have sufficiently demonstrated the usefulness of the sand-garden."[55]

In the MEHA second annual report in 1886, Dr. Francis Minot, its president, commented in his address:

> The experiment of providing "sand-gardens" for the amusement of the younger children of the poorer classes who ordinarily play in the streets, where they are exposed to accidents and to unfavorable moral influences, has been tried with success during the year.

The sand garden report from this year ends with the telling quote: "playing in the dirt is the royalty of childhood, but poverty infringes upon the right."[56]

By next year, the MEHA had established a separate Committee on Sand Gardens run by Mrs. Eliza M. Bowen. Its annual report even included a separate section for the

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[55] Ibid., p. 9.

[56] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association, *Second Annual Report, 1886,* Massachusetts Historical Society, Coal Bin Serials. Boston, MA. p. 9.

progress of the sand garden project and would continue to do so over the next decade. In 1886, two other play areas had joined the Parmenter Street sand garden: one at the chapel on Warrenton Street and the second at the Children's Mission.[57] Also, the committee chair had become Ellen M Tower, who in the ensuing years would stake her claim as the Mother of Playgrounds.

The sand gardens were providing a needed service for the children of Boston "who without them" Miss Tower wrote, "would have neither sand nor earth for the dirt-pies and miniature forts."[58] Proving the success of the sand gardens, the Boston School Board in 1887 agreed to allow the Committee on Sand Gardens to use the schoolyards during summer vacation as "play-grounds for very young children, under proper supervision."[59] This proper supervision was overseen by playground matrons whose salaries were supplied by the MEHA through private solicitations. According to Dr. Minot, this addition to the sand garden program was "eminently successful" but was not the only success of that year. The sand gardens exploded from three the previous year to ten in 1887 and "the reports from the various places show the great enjoyment and hygienic value" of the sand gardens. The sand gardens now included a mix of available locations; 64 Morgan Street, the Temporary Home for Destitute Children, Children's Home, 36 Austin Street, Charlestown, Day Nursery School, and one in Mrs. Hannah Welch's yard at 14 Willard Street.[60]

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[57] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1887) *Third Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Coal Bin Serials, Boston, MA. P. 19.
[58] Ibid, p.19.
[59] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1888) *Fourth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Coal Bin Serials, Boston, MA. P. 3.
[60] Ibid, p. 20.

Clarence Elmer Rainwater argued in *The Play Movement in the United States*, that the "inception of the play movement" can be traced back to this tripling of sand gardens in 1887.[61] The important piece to be recognized in the birth of this movement and seen in the procurement of space, workers, and even sand is that it was all donated, "in every instance, philanthropic maintenance preceded public support and control." The money needed to run the popular sand gardens was paid by voluntary "subscriptions" from the public.[62] An article published in the *Boston Post* on April 19, 1890, details the success of the playgrounds, while adding that the services were provided at a cost of less than $1 a day. The grounds made the children happy and in the process they were kept away from any negative influences they may have been exposed to running free in the city. All donations could be sent to Dr. Francis Minot, Mrs. Kate Gannett Wells, or Miss Ellen M Tower.[63] The growth of these new areas was facilitated in part by the People's Entertainment Society and Associated Charities with the idea that sand gardens would "become a large factor in the summer enjoyment of children who have no play-ground but the crowded streets." [64]

Boston created the early sand gardens in order to accommodate the play of small children who had no open, safe places to play and to "combat poverty,

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[61] Rainwater. P.44
[62] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1889) *Fifth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Coal Bin Serials. Boston, MA. p. 2.
[63] "Playgrounds for Little Children," *Boston Post,* April 19, 1890, accessed August 15, 2017, https://www.newspapers.com/image/66237307/.
[64] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1888) *Fourth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Coal Bin Serials. Boston, MA. p. 20.

congestion, filthy slums, and inadequate parental supervision of children."[65] At the Quincy School sand garden, "clean hands and faces grew to be the rule instead of the exception" and the "pupils might have served as a lesson" for other children of the city.[66] The sand gardens were so successful with the toddlers they had targeted that in 1888 the committee sought to expand this gift to older children as well. In light of this, the Committee on Sand Gardens formally changed its name to the Committee on Playgrounds, "an effort will be made to obtain from the city the use of an unoccupied lot of land for the use of older children as a playground"[67] and the committee agreed that "through the playground is developed a practical active side of our work, which should be zealously fostered."[68] Ms. Tower wrote in her end of the year report that:

> For many hours during the hot, sultry months four hundred children were kept away from the association of the gutters and the wharves, were made happy, and taught something of honest, unselfishness, and gentle manners.[69]

The budget for this year of operation was solicited from public donations through newspaper ads, which amounted to $426.25. This does not include the yearly Waldo Brothers donation of sand, which was valued at this time to be worth 56 dollars.

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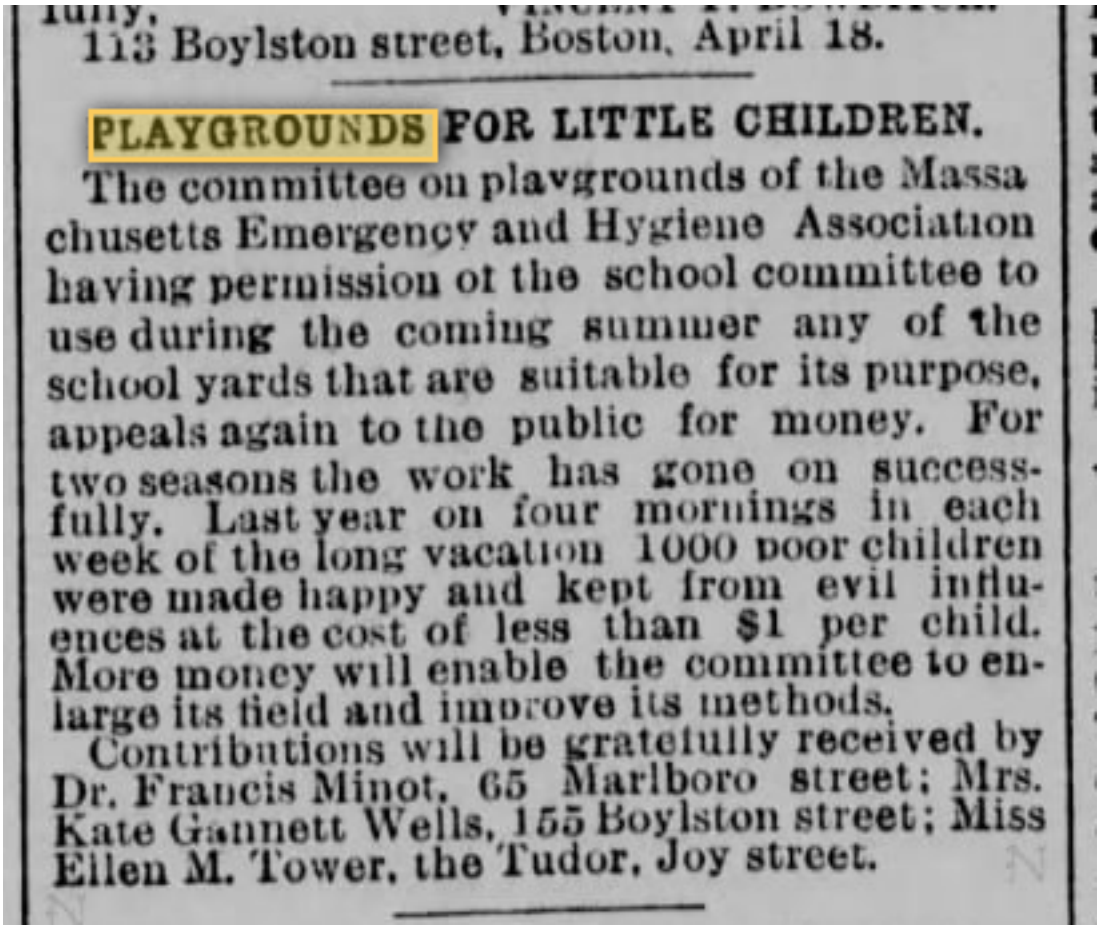
[65] Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds in Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 23.
[66] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1889) *Fifth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA. p. 29.
[67] Massacusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1889) *Fifth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA. p. 2.
[68] Ibid. P. 17.
[69] Ibid. p. 32.



113 Boylston street, Boston, April 18.

PLAYGROUNDS FOR LITTLE CHILDREN.

The committee on playgrounds of the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association having permission of the school committee to use during the coming summer any of the school yards that are suitable for its purpose, appeals again to the public for money. For two seasons the work has gone on successfully. Last year on four mornings in each week of the long vacation 1000 poor children were made happy and kept from evil influences at the cost of less than $1 per child. More money will enable the committee to enlarge its field and improve its methods.

Contributions will be gratefully received by Dr. Francis Minot, 65 Marlboro street; Mrs. Kate Gannett Wells, 155 Boylston street; Miss Ellen M. Tower, the Tudor, Joy street.

This is a typical MEHA ad, posted in the *Boston Globe*, soliciting donations.

Playgrounds were not only being enjoyed by the children who used them for play, but mothers were also happy to finally have a place nearby where they knew their children would be looked after during the workday. One Boston mother who was watching her child play with his peers told Miss Tower that the sand gardens and playgrounds were "the best thing the missionaries have ever done."[70] This local groundswell of approval and support would continue to build with each successful summer of MEHA play spaces.

The Expansion of Playgrounds

The Committee on Playgrounds report for 1889 showed much the same progress as in previous years. Playgrounds expanded from seven to eleven, and serviced twice as many children: one thousand children compared to four hundred from the year before. Most importantly, the city of Boston donated a lot on Fellows Street, along with $1,000 to grade and grass the field, so the South End would have a playground.[71] The popularity of the MEHA sand gardens and playgrounds was growing throughout the city. Consequently, neighborhoods were coming to expect that local and convenient play spaces would be offered to them. This need was evidenced by the growing number of children utilizing the areas and the increase in fundraising to $751.70 for the year.[72] Playgrounds increased the following year to a total of seventeen in the summer of 1890 and the next year a playground was

[70] Ibid., p. 30.
[71] Massacusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1890) *Sixth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, MA. p. 35.
[72] Massacusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1891) *Seventh Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. MA. p. 36.

opened at the scene of the movement's birth, Parmenter Street.[73] Due to the many successes, it was in 1891, six years after the opening of their first sand garden that the park commission of Boston reached out to Tower and the Committee with an offer in recognition of their great success. They wanted the Committee to be in charge of another part of the play movement that had grown out of the sand garden.

In the 1892 Annual Report of the Massachusetts Hygiene and Emergency Committee, Tower reported: "The new work of the Association this past year has been the management of the Women's Division of Charlesbank."[74] Due to such high demand, the park commission of Boston planned an expansion of the Charlesbank Gymnasium that would include a division for women to exercise. It opened in June of 1891 and was touted by the members of the committee as the first of its kind in the world. The women's division was smaller than the men's and had less equipment, but nonetheless contained an 1/8 mile track, with grass playfield on the inside, sand-pens for little children, and a two story house with dressing rooms and offices which added "greatly to the comfort of the visitors."[75] The offer had been extended earlier in 1891 and the committee felt that the Charlesbank Gymnasium promoted all of the healthy living standards that they had been exhaulting in their playgrounds and could not pass on an opportunity to benefit the people of Boston on such a large scale.

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[73] Massacusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1893) *Ninth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, MA. p. 24.
[74] Ibid. P. 13
[75] Massacusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association. (1893) *Ninth Annual Report.* Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, MA. p. 13.

The Women's Division of the Charlesbank Gymnasium opened on June 1, 1891, and contained a playground, sand-pen, and track. The gymnasium had a capacity of seventy-five people at a time. Working girls had the exclusive use of it in the afternoon, and "silently, day to day, order and gentleness was introduced."[76] In this first season the gymnasium was open from June 1 to November 1 and the attendance recorded says all that needs to be about the desire of the people of Boston for increased outdoor recreation, 114,539 total, for a daily average of 945 people.

The work of the MEHA would continue on through the 1890s but they knew that their efforts alone, still funded by volunteer hours and donations, would not be enough to provide for the children of Boston, writing in their annual report,

> Until Boston does more for its children than at present, the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association must continue its efforts, but we look forward to the good time coming when some large scheme of the city shall absorb our smaller one, and we can truthfully say our task is ended.

Soon, this citywide plan would start to take shape and they would not be so alone in their advocacy for playground reform. [77]

Mayoral Support

In his 1897 inaugural address, Mayor Josiah Quincy called for immediate funds to build a playground system throughout Boston. He recognized the public good that playgrounds served, something that would never have been possible

[76] Ibid. p.14
[77] Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Report. (1898) *Fourteenth Annual Report*, Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, MA. p. 56.

without the MEHA's Committee on Playgrounds. In discussing what he termed an "enlightened policy" during his inaugural address, he stated:

> I know of no direction in which the expenditure of a few hundred thousand dollars will do more for this community, through the healthful development of its children and young people, then by the judicious provision of properly located and equipped playgrounds.[78]

Mayor Quincy believed that Boston had done an amazing job, like other cities, in developing its park system, but that the construction of playgrounds had been sorely neglected. "If one-twentieth the sum" of the money dedicated to creating the Boston park system was spent on buying and equipping playgrounds, he argued, "the investment would … bring in a still larger percentage of return." The playground reformers had shown that quality playgrounds were possible and that they were extremely effective in attracting the people of their surrounding neighborhoods. Unfortunately, there were not enough of them to service all the wards and all the people of the city, so here was the Mayor himself, declaring that every ward in the city should be provided with "some place where children can play."[79] Furthermore, the people of Boston agreed with him. Mayor Quincy cited a recent petition by the taxpayers of Charlestown demanding playground space so as to remove the children from the street where play was an inconvenience and dangerous. He believed that "the more crowded a district the greater is the necessity of at least some accommodation."[80] The Mayor was seeking a $200,000 loan for the

[78] Josiah Quincy, *The Inaugural Addresses of the Mayors of Boston* (Boston, MA: Harvard University), p. 14.
[79] Ibid., p. 14.
[80] Ibid., p. 19.

purchase and development of playgrounds even though in his heart he truly believed that it was more important for the city to spend $400,000 on baths and playgrounds than on any issue, not matter how pressing it may seem.

In his inaugural address the next year, at this time Boston mayors were elected each year, he again called on the legislature to appropriate money for playgrounds, this time he asked for $750,000 for the Parks Commission to build a playground system throughout the city. This bill made its way through the House and Senate, where it was adjusted to $500,000 with a yearly spending ceiling of $200,000 and went into effect on December 1st. In the next three years, the city built ten playgrounds with these funds. This is the first moment of extensive municipal funding during the playground movement, but ten playgrounds was not enough for any city, let alone one with the dense population of Boston. More would have to be done and just as had happened before, philanthropy and reform would step in, this time in the form of the "Father of Playgrounds."[81]

Joseph Lee

Joseph Lee was born into wealth in Brookline as the son of Colonel Henry Lee, who was a prosperous Boston banker, and was raised with all the trappings that wealth could afford. He attended Harvard Law School, but upon his graduation in 1887 he rebelled against the life set before him by his family. Instead of following in his father's footsteps, he became a philanthropist, focusing on tackling juvenile delinquency. It was in this new quest of his life that he became aware of the effect of play, and the lack of it, could have on the development of children. "The boy without

[81] K. Gerald Marsden, "Philanthropy and the Boston Playground Movement, 1885-1907," *Social Service Review* 35, no.1 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1961). 48-58.

a playground is father to the man without a job" he was fond of saying. Lee believed passionately in the ethos of the play movement, that through play, a child learned the lessons needed to set the foundation that a productive adulthood could be built off of. Margaret Cabot Lee, his wife, who was an avid kindergarten supporter herself and had interchangeably worked in and ran kindergartens for ten years prior to meeting her husband, also heavily influenced him. He would tell anyone who would listen that she was in partner in both knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, playgrounds.[82]

Joseph Lee's path to becoming a playground advocate started with his desire to help curb delinquency in the city's youth.[83] He witnessed the children being sent away from juvenile delinquent facilities and wanted to help improve their situations before the reached that stage. Lee weighed in on this topic in 1902 in his article "How to Help Boys," arguing that the youth of the city did not have a useful and harmless avenue to get out their energy. He stated that it was the community's responsibility to provide these boys with "a playground with opportunity to work off his superfluous energy, to satisfy his thirst for daring exploit."[84] The arrest record of children under fifteen years old from 1899 to 1901 averaged around 100 arrests monthly but almost doubled in the summer months when children were no

[82] Peterson, p. 158.
[83] It also must be stated that throughout his work to advance playgrounds and play for children stopped at citizens, Lee was staunchly anti-immigration. His personal papers document op-eds written to the *Post* and *Globe.* Along with this, Lee was a member of the Immigration Restriction League.
[84] Joseph Lee, "How to Help Boys", *Outdoor Philanthropies Bibliography of Boys,* V.II no. 2 (April 1902): 76-77.

longer in school.[85] By establishing playgrounds, boys would be given an opportunity to understand their energy and focus it in a more lawful manner. While organizations like the MEHA were doing great work in providing spaces for the children of Boston to play, there could not be enough of these play spaces. As Lee wrote "my conclusion is, in the main, summed up in one word, 'playgrounds.'"[86]

The Massachusetts Civic League

To advance this goal, he helped to found the Massachusetts Civic League in 1897. Its mission was to advance the forces of play through legislation at both the state and local level. In 1900, Governor W. Murray Crane vetoed "An Act to Authorize the City of Boston to Establish a Park or Playground in South Boston," legislation allocating $500,000 for Boston to expand its playground system, which consisted of twenty unsupervised lots. This led Lee and the MCL to begin to directly oversee playgrounds.

Lee agreed that outdoor gymnastics were made possible by individual and private enterprise but that these places were not enough. He wrote that:

> The street will continue, in many cases to be the children's principal playground for many years to come – until a playground with the block or within a radius of one quarter mile, reached by streets without crossing traffic streets, has been provided for the short legged children in ever residential district.[87]

This publication came at the same time that Lee wrote in article for the Boston Post decrying that no playground of any kind could be found at all in Boston's Wards 16,

[85] Lee, "How to Help Boys", p. 76.
[86] Lee, "How to Help Boys", p. 77.
[87] Ibid., p. 16.

13, and 15 even though they housed respective populations of 16,459, 22,547, and 16,251 people.

He believed strongly in the mission that Miss Tower and the MEHA had started all those years before. Further, he published in *The Community* that "the body is the product of the spirit" and that it was the job of every community "to make itself the sort of place in which children can grow up."[88] This could not be accomplished without adequate playgrounds to stimulate the children's imaginations and train them in the morals and life lessons required of adult citizens. To the critics who felt that the land could be utilized for better means by the cities than for open playgrounds he retorted:

> People reckon the original cost of playground as consisting of the value of the land they occupy, and argue that if the land were not so used the city would be so much richer. The same argument might be applied to streets. In Boston, the land now taken up by Washington and Tremont streets is worth many million dollars in the market. But if you filled up those and other downtown streets with office buildings, it would not be worth anything at all.

He truly believed that a city without playgrounds was not fit to be inhabited and lacked a heart. Because of this, he set out to make sure Boston had all the heart it could handle.[89]

Lee knew that it was not just a matter of money. He had witnessed the hands-on approach of the Committee on Playgrounds and knew that one had to do more than just "put money in at one end of a machine and have 'good' come out at the

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[88] Joseph Lee, Playgrounds and the Human Habitat. p. 3.
[89] Ibid. p. 3.

other" as he wrote for the *Boston Post*. In light of this, the Massachusetts Civic League began overseeing the construction and maintenance of multiple parks in Boston, the first and most prominent of these playgrounds being the Columbus Avenue playground.[90]

Columbus Avenue

The Columbus Avenue playground opened in 1901 and was a success from its first day. The playground itself was run and maintained by Lee, on behalf of the Civic League, and with meager appropriations from the Parks Commission, which at this time was just starting to come around to the idea of funding playgrounds. Work continued at the Columbus Avenue playground throughout the year while still hosting all of the children of the neighborhood.

Lee wrote a journal documenting his near daily visits to the park and his observations on the state of the grounds and the activities of the children present. These notes show how much work went into a single playground and show how important it was for a larger entity, such as the city or state, to assume control of playground building and maintenance. By April 19, 1901, the sand had been placed in the children's corner but the ground was still waiting to be graded. At the end of the month, the park superintendent, Mr. Murdock, had to enlist the help of older boys that frequented the park to help him dig a trench to drain a part of the grounds. Lee describes in his journal on April 30th the park in its early stages as being

[90] "More Playgrounds", *Boston Post,* March 11, 1891.

popular but having ground that is "very rough and rather wet."[91] The ongoing planning of the playground including finding space for baseball diamonds and a back stop while allowing for the most play space, and a garden to be planted by volunteers from a local elementary school. On May 11, Lee wrote to the police commission in hopes that an officer could be stationed around the playground during the day to help maintain a sense of order. This in turn would make the playground more attractive to the neighborhood. Even with the rough ground and unfinished structure, the Columbus Avenue playground featured games every day for the month of May and these were accompanied by large crowds of spectators.

Throughout this first summer, crowds gathered to watch the games of baseball played, basketball posts were put up, and Lee offered his own money to begin building a shelter for the playground while they waited to hear about an appropriation from the Park Commissioners. At this point the Columbus Ave playground still had no apparatus, something that had made Charlesbank such a success. However, in light of this, the playground was still a resounding success with the local neighborhood. The cost of running this one playground was shown by a letter from Lee to the Park Commissioner in which he shows the cost of plants, the shelter, swings, and sand to put underneath at $945 which would be almost $26,000 today.[92]

The model of private citizens or organizations being able to supply playgrounds for the whole city was not a feasible idea. On June 26, the Park

[91] Columbus Avenue Journal of Joseph Lee, Joseph Lee Papers, Carton 12, Massachusetts Historical Society.
[92] Columbus Avenue Journal of Joseph Lee.

Commissioners informed Lee that they would not be supplying the playground with a bubble fountain because they were not authorized to expend any more funds on Columbus Ave. In spite of these obstacles, the playground, like the playgrounds established during the play movement, was a resounding success. Two anecdotes from this time show the positive progress. One note Lee made from January 12th shows that police reported a much quiter atmosphere on Columbus Avenue and on the adjacent Camden St. The other being three pro-playground headlines that ran in the *Boston Post* that January: "Prominent Men Demand Playgrounds for Children", "The Need of Schoolyards," and "Debt Due Ever Child." The need for playgrounds in Boston and other Massachusetts cities was reaching a crescendo and the elected officials of these metropolises would be forced to respond.

Chapter 4

THE PLAYGROUND REFERENDUM

While Lee continued his advocacy on behalf of playgrounds, other reformers also began to advance the playground movement. This led to a meeting on April 12, 1906, in Washington DC, of notable playground supporters. One of those was the highly respected Dr. Luther H. Gulick, who had been working for years on pushing the benefits of play for children and the development of playgrounds. At this meeting, many of the old ideas of the play movement were touted, all children should have a playground within walking distance of their homes, the lessons learned on the playground were vital to their development, and that this development was shared equally on the playing field as in the classroom. However, the attendees also pushed the idea of municipal funding for, and ownership of, playgrounds.

State legislators had voted on this same idea in 1900, only to have it vetoed, and pushing for public funding had been the one of the driving reasons for Joseph Lee and the MCL to begin running their own playgrounds. They resolved that:

> As playgrounds are a necessity to the well being of children, that they should be constructed on land owned by the city and operated at the expense of the same.[93]

[93] "Playground Association of America: Early Days", VCU Libraries The Social Welfare Project, August 19, 2015, accessed December 14, 2017, https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/playground-association-of-america-earlly-days/

This meeting also had staunch support from an impeachable advocate of play, none other than President Theodore Roosevelt, who even hosted a meeting at the White House.[94]

The Playground Association of America

During this time, a vote was held on whether or not a national organization should be established for the benefit of play in America. Many reformers in attendance believed that a national organization was not needed and that while play was a necessity in all localities, it was also a local issue that was capable of being run by local, private, groups. In the end, a majority of the conference believed that the play movement had grown too large for private groups and philanthropists to support on their own and voted to establish the association.

So, on April 12, 1906, the Playground Association of America (PAA) was established with Luther H. Gulick serving as President and Joseph Lee as a Vice-President. This new organization gained national notice by also having President Roosevelt and Jacob Riis agree to serve as Honorary President and Vice President respectively.[95] These appointments showed the seriousness of the new association as both men were household names, Roosevelt for being the President of the United States and Riis for his famous photojournalism in "How the Other Half Lives."[96] Playground Association was based on four founding ideals. First, it would study the general plans for playgrounds and look for constant improvement, second would to be collect in a playground library and museum all knowledge on the subject, third

[94] "Playground Association of America: Early Days".
[95] "Playground Association of America: Early Days".
[96] Alexander Alland, *Jacob A. Riis: Photographer and Citizen* (New York, NY: Aperture 1993).

was disseminating this information to the public, and finally to register and keep account of trained playground workers. "The Playground Association is interested in education through play."[97]

Following these ideals, the PAA published a monthly journal, *The Playground*, which helped to disseminate play information and to build popular support for playgrounds. Through this journal, they also began to advocate for cities to provide the play spaces that children needed. In a May 1907 article, they wrote that no one would argue that a school should have a desk and seat for every student, but that "no city has appeared to realize heretofore that it is quite as necessary to provide playground space" that was based on a "direct relation in area and location to the child population."[98] They believed that all cities should provide three types of playgrounds:

1. Neighborhood and School playgrounds that would consist of one or two acres and be able to support 500 children per acre.
2. Recreation Centers needing five to ten acres that would have a theater, library, reading room, study room, clubroom, gymnasium, workshops, kindergarten, public baths, and public comfort section.
3. Parade Grounds or Athletic Fields sprawling across 20-50 acres that could accommodate the large team games that were so vital in teaching team work and morals for the older children and teens.

Boston-based PAA Secretary Dr. Henry S. Curtis noted that: "The playground movement is already a great success and it seems on the eve of a new and great expansion."[99] This "expansion" was already in the works in his home state of Massachusetts and would be the culminating act for the play movement.

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[97] Seth T. Stewart, "Play Schools, A Necessity", *The Playground (July 1907)*, p. 7.
[98] Henry S. Curtis, "Playgrounds on a National Basis", *The Playground (May 1907)*, p. 5.
[99] *The Playground* (April 1907)

The momentum that had been building since Dr. Marie Zakrzewska mailed her latter from Berlin finally reached a crescendo in 1908 with the passage of the Playground Act, officially "An Act to Provide for Public Playgrounds in Certain Cities and Towns"[100], that mandated a referendum be put on the ballot in "every city and town in the Commonwealth having a population of more than ten thousand."[101]

Referendum

At the start of 1907, reformers inside the Playground Association of America and the Massachusetts Civic League felt that public opinion had built up enough in favor of playgrounds to ensure a referendum on playgrounds passage. They were not deterred by Governor W. Murray Crane's veto of a similar attempt to legislate the development of playgrounds, the 1900 Playground Bill, now was the time to make their push.[102] Joseph Lee and the PAA centered their plan of attack on a grassroots campaign that would attract all demographics. Their efforts were three pronged. One began with correspondence direct from the Massachusetts Civic League office, the next was flooding cities across the state with leaflets, fliers, and pamphlets touting the playground movements many successes and contribution to city life. Finally, they made personal visits to local organizations throughout the state, making sure to never settle on just one argument for the need for

[100]Archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/75500/1908acts0513.txt?sequence=18isAllowed=y

[101] Section 1, Chapter 0513 "An Act to Provide for Public Playgrounds in Certain Towns and Cities.

[102] Volume 121 Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Eagle Graphics, Legislative Printers. 1900.

playgrounds.[103] Their belief was that playgrounds helped with every facet of everyone's life and that was how this bill should be sold to the people of Massachusetts. Their message rang true for upper-class philanthropists, middle-class reformers, and working-class fathers who went to the polls and "agreed who most needed playgrounds: children who had nowhere else to play but the streets."[104] A typical PAA/MCL leaflet at the time espoused that the playground bill offered a chance for Massachusetts to lead the nation as they always had. This was coupled with a picture of a proposed playground showing the benefit that it would allow children to play out of the streets, which according to Lee were where "the first innocent step on the inclined path to the penitentiary" was taken.[105] On November 12th the headline in the *Fitchburg Sentinel* read "Playgrounds: Cities to vote on this Question at the December Elections." Public focus was now on the question of where towns would fall in December; it had become a "practical and immediate interest to all citizens." Boston Mayor George Albee Hibbard invited local leaders to Boston to hear Jacob Riis deliver a speech titled, "Playgrounds a Civic Need."[106]

The bill itself was introduced by Representative Ralph Doval of Taunton, to "consider the question of providing public playgrounds for the protection and

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[103] Sarah Jo Peterson, "Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playgrounds." *The Journal of the Gilded Age & Progressive Era 3*, no. 2 (2004): 145-175. p. 160

[104] Peterson, *Voting for Play*. P. 146.

[105] Peterson, *Voting for Play*. P. 146.

[106] *Fitchburg Daily Sentinel*, November 12th, 1908.

physical education of the young."[107] His goal in pressing forward the legislation was to help "the next generation enjoy life more fully than the present" and he believed fully in the idea that physical training and well being were equally as important as mental health, stating that "the athletic field is of equal importance with the schoolhouse and of equal moral influence." [108]

Doval had long been an advocate of play, and in turn playgrounds, ever since he was forced to leave college due to an illness that he felt could have been avoided if he had had a more active childhood. Along with his personal feelings, he had the support of the State Secretary of the YMCA, the *Journal of Education* wrote that they "commend this bill most heartily," and Jacob Riis went so far as to write the Speaker of the House in support of Doval's legislation.[109] Buttressing his bill was his six points explaining the importance of playgrounds, those being; the danger cars posed to children forced to play in the streets, the moral benefit of organized sports, disease control, especially in regards to the "white plague" known more popularly today as tuberculosis, the social growth inherent in all forms of play, the legal rights of children to play legally in a safe space, and finally, the fear that at the current rate of city growth, there soon would be nowhere left for a playground to be established.[110]

The wording of the bill is crucial in showing not just how important a step its passage was, but also in showing how much successful work had come before it.

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[107] Ralph Doval, "Public Playgrounds Bill Explained by Representative Doval," *The Playground* (December 1908): 20-22. p. 21.
[108] Doval, "Public Playgrounds Bill Explained by Representative Doval," p. 21.
[109] Ibid., p. 21.
[110] Ibid., p. 22.

Section I of the bill would require any town over 10,000 people that passed the referendum to establish, after July 1st, a playground and then to add subsequent playgrounds for every 20,000 residents. This would ensure the goal of early playground reformers, that every child have a playground be both nearby and accessible. Section II allowed the towns to appoint a qualified supervisor to direct the play of the children. This is a direct connection to the work done all the way back in 1885 by Ellen M Tower and the MEHA. Qualified professionals were seen as the most important piece of a playground being utilized to its fullest ability. Section III gave the towns the authority to take, purchase lands, or set aside already owned lands for the specific purpose of building playgrounds. No more would residents have to open up their backyards, purchase vacant lots with donations, or lean on the philanthropy of local school boards. Towns would now be fully committed financially to the goal of providing playgrounds for children of all ages.[111]

The measure passed on every ballot it appeared on throughout the state.[112] The Somerville, Malden, and Medford clerk's offices held the measure off through a loophole by declaring they already offered playground activities. The people of all making sure that their desire to provide the children of their cities proper and safe

[111]Archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/75500/1908acts0513.txt?sequence=18isAllowed=y

[112] Beverly, Brockton, Cambridge, Chicopee, Everett, Fall River, Fitchburg, Gloucester, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, Marlboro, Melrose, New Bedford, Newburyport, Pittsfield, Quincy, Salem, Springfield, Southbridge, Taunton, Woburn, Worcester, Adams, Attleboro, Clinton, Gardner, Framingham, Hyde Park, Leominster, Milford, Peabody, Plymouth, Wakefield, Watertown, Webster, Weymouth, and Westfield all voted yes.

play spaces was heard to the tune of 154, 495 for to only 33,886 against.[113] Just a year later the Boston Park Commissioners went on record saying that

> No better use of city funds can be made than for the purchase of new playgrounds, and no citizen of Boston can make a better gift to his fellow citizens or one of more enduring value to many generations than a playground[114]

The reformers' goal of playgrounds for all children no matter where they lived, an idea that began in 1885 with a pile of sand had now been given a realistic chance of being achieved. This dream would still need to be continuously fought for in the years that followed, but playgrounds and the importance of play were now ingrained in the culture of American cities. Playground Association of America President Dr. Luther H. Gulick summed up the importance of this moment:

> The general sentiment of the voters of a state has been tested for the first time in America with reference to their estimation of playgrounds. *It is fortunate that this test occurred in Massachusetts because Massachusetts has had a longer playground experience than any other state in America.* The overwhelming vote in favor of playgrounds is additional evidence that the American people propose, first of all, to take care of their children.[115]

The referendum itself shows that the final playground reform was brought about through overwhelming public support. The bill mandating this referendum was made possible by the positive results of the tireless efforts of play reformers in the late 19th century. Because of their efforts, parents were given the opportunity to

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[113] Fitchburg Daily Sentinel. April 9th, 1909.
[114] *The Playground* (March 1908) p. 127.
[115] Fitchburg Daily Sentainel, March 11th, 1909.

see these play spaces in action and were able to reflect on the positive impact they were capable of having on the nature of their communities and the lives of their children. The vote totals in each city in Massachusetts, with Boston included, were the culminating expression of residents' support for publically funded playgrounds.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Today, we pass by playgrounds without paying them a second thought, as they are such a common sight in our daily lives. Every city and town has a designated play space for its children to use with varying degrees of apparatus to play on and open space for team games, running, and the expenditure of energy. Whether these are shared elementary school playgrounds, or larger parks that incorporate the playground into them depends on the size and, unfortunately, the wealth of the town. Nevertheless, playgrounds dot the landscape across the country and are used by millions of children on a daily basis to flex their imaginations, struggle through a team contest, or just to run freely and laugh.

Thinking about playgrounds today, they seem inevitable, we cannot imagine a time when play space was not offered for children and adults. This was not the case in turn of the century American cities and would not be the case today if not for a determined group of reformers who knew the importance of play to children and the set out to uncover, tinker, and perfect the means with which to provide them this play. The play instructor is not as fashionable as it once was for weekend and summer use of playgrounds, but the playground itself remains.

In 1885, Dr. Marie Zakrzewska sent a letter from Germany to an acquaintance in Boston and a revolution was sparked. Dr. Zakrzewska could not

have had any idea the incredible impact her observations of play in Berlin would bring to America, but it did. The Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association saw the part that safe outdoor play could have on a child's growth and well-being and through the tireless effort of volunteers such as Ellen M. Tower was able to show the rest of Boston, and large cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, how successful playgrounds could be and the type of overwhelming local support they garnered. Professor of Anthropology Suzanne Spencer-Wood wrote that "Playgrounds and children's gardens material symbolized and implemented a transformation in Western cultural conception of childhoods and child-rearing."[116] "Play" was now the buzzword in child-development circles and in time following that first sand garden on Parmenter Street, others, such as Joseph Lee and the Massachusetts Civic League, would replicate Miss Tower's work. In 1909, 336 cities had built 1,535 playgrounds; by 1948 those numbers had skyrocketed over 800 percent to 1,917 cities for a total of 13,520 playgrounds.[117] That number has continued to grow over the decades that followed and is the reason that playgrounds are such a normal piece of the landscape today.

Ellen M. Tower, Joseph Lee, and countless others are the parents of this movement, but it was the public support that finally brought playgrounds into the forefront of municipal policy. Wards across Boston demanded playgrounds for their neighborhoods, playgrounds that were safely accessible and able to accommodate

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[116] Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood. "Gendering the Creation of Green Urban Landscapes in America at the Turn of the Century," in *Shared Spaces and Divided Places: Material Dimensions of Gender Relations and the American Historical Relationship* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press 2003)

[117] George D. Butler, Pioneers in Public Recreation. Minneapolis, MN: Burgess Publishing Company, 1965. p. 99.

the needs of their children. Philanthropists and reform groups provided as best they could, with Ellen Tower noting in an April 19, 1890, *Boston Globe* article that they had supported 1,000 poor children each day over a long vacation, but these were only stopgap measures.[118] The continual and growing demand for adequate play space, coupled with the unarguable success of the playgrounds already existing, came to a head in 1907 with the passage of the playground referendum. A bill that was approved by the state secretary of the YMCA and had none other than famous reformer Jacob Riis remark "the Massachusetts Legislature has a chance to lead the country as it has so often done. We commend this bill most heartily."[119]

From that vote on, all cities with more than 10,000 citizens would provide their residents with playgrounds. Over the course of twenty years, public support built and slowly pushed for municipalities to assume responsibility for the provision and upkeep of local playgrounds. The aforementioned support, coupled with the cost of maintenance for an adequate playground system, assured that this would need to happen. It was the actions of the local volunteers and charitable organizations that put this movement into motion and allowed this amazing turn of events to occur.

[118] "Playgrounds for Little Children." *Boston Globe,* April 19, 1890.
[119] Rep. Ralph Doval, "Public Playgrounds Bill Explained by Representative Doval," p. 21.

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