

Early History
of
Washington Park

1839 - 1925

by
Mrs. Lida B. Small

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EARLY HISTORY OF WASHINGTON PARK

1839 - 1925

by

Lida B. Small

I first recall hearing about "Washington Park" way back in 1901. My husband's father, Dr. Whitmell Pugh Small, a practicing physician, living in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, used to tell me, when I was teaching there, that he always had a longing to return to North Carolina - his homeland - and settle, for the remainder of his life, on the old homestead site. His wish was fulfilled in 1904.

To go back to the early history of Washington Park, it belonged to a William T. Bryan, ancestor of Miss Fannie Bryan. This owner sold it in 1839 to John Humphrey Small, Sr. Before then it belonged to Reading Blount, for whom the local D. A. R. is named. At the time of his possession, John Humphrey Small was 34 years old - in his prime. He was my husband's grandfather. He built his plantation there probably in 1839, on the location where Caleb Bell now has his home. It was called "Cedar Grove" by Mr. Small on account of the wonderful avenue of cedars which led up to the plantation house. A few of those cedars were still there when I lived right back of the house on Isabella Avenue. Mr. Caleb Bell has the original kitchen. The original house, "Cedar Grove," was burned by the Federals in the "War Between the States."

Mr. Andrew Hathaway built a new house around the original kitchen fireplace, placing it as the main feature of attraction in the living room. This old brick oven still stands there as quite a curiosity to tourists coming to Washington, North Carolina. So "Cedar Grove" was

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the summer home, the plantation of the Smalls. In the winter, the family, "Mr. John and Miss Sally," were poled by slaves on a barge up to town where they had their winter home on Water Street, not far from Mrs. Robin Hood's house. This winter home still stands with its piazza in front and kitchen separated from the rest of the house.

I can recall hearing Dr. Small (my husband's father) tell how as a boy he and his little brother, John (later the Honorable John H. Small) worked on that old plantation after the war. No money left, most of the slaves and all the mules gone; the main house burned down, just a shell left, with the brick kitchen left intact. His father (the first mentioned) seemed to have lost his grip on life. He was sixty years old when the war closed. At the time of his prosperity, between 1839 and 1860, he had been worth about \$75,000. The two boys, John and Whitmell, had to take charge of the plantation. Whitmell, Guy's father and the older, worked hard on the farm day after day - all day long, trying to piece the loose ends together to make a living. He was about 18 years old then. At night he would dress and walk to town along the "Brick Kiln Road" - the only way - for there was no bridge across Runyan's Creek then. Young Whitmell was studying to take the examinations to enter the New York University Medical School. He took Greek and Latin lessons in Washington from a very learned minister there, Dr. Nicholas Collin Hughes. Later when any boys told him, Dr. Small, how hard they were working, he would relate some of those grim experiences between 1865 and 1870, when he was a boy after the war, during the Reconstruction Period. He must have had a wonderful will and determination to carry on, as well as excellent health to continue his work.

Uncle John Small (Whitmell's brother), has often told me how as he grew up, he labored on the plantation. His only recreation being a little sail-boat he had rigged and in which he would spend his noon hour, his only free time. He would sail about on the Pamlico River where he found coolness and rest in the shadows. He loved to rest and gaze on that beautiful sheet of water after long hours of labor.

In 1904, Father Small, Dr. Whitmell, put his great longing to go South into action. He sold out everything he owned in Great Barrington, gave up the practice of Medicine after 25 years, and returned to Washington, North Carolina permanently.

It is strange how Washington draws so many of its Sons back home - it happens even now.

Just before 1904, Uncle John, Whitmell's brother, had bought the old plantation from Whitmell and Sister Fannie Lyon (grandmother of Mrs. John Leach), the elder of John Humphrey's children. Honorable John Small developed this land into a building project calling the old plantation by the new name "Washington Park," (I believe Aunt Bella Small, his wife, named it. She is sorry she did not think to call it "Cedar Grove" after the old plantation). Mr. Andrew Hathaway, of Norfolk, Virginia, helped lay out the lots, and long rows of Poplar trees were planted along the intended streets; these Poplars were planted as temporary shade; later to be replaced by more permanent and more beautiful shade trees.

Father Small was given his choice of lots. He chose 300 feet on the River front (now called Riverside Drive) and 300 feet depth toward Isabella Avenue. Uncle John Small selected the lots next to the West of Dr. Small

where the McCotters and the Marshes now have their home.

In 1904 - 1905, Dr. Small built his home in Washington Park. It was patterned after John Small's more elaborate home at 428 West Main Street in town, with the general similarity of pillars and big front piazza.

My husband, Guy, used to go down to his father's place, and when he returned to Boston (where we lived) he would describe the wonderful time he had there on his two weeks vacation on the Pamlico. I had a little son then and thought it wise to stay at home while he was so small - traveling in those days was not so very easy; so I did not go to Washington, North Carolina until 1909.

That year, as I recall Washington Park, there was the Hathaway House (the renovated homestead where Caleb Bell now lives); the new home of Dr. Small on the River front; Mrs. Tanfield's home on Isabella Avenue (built in 1908); the Wilson Russ house now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. S. H. Robbins (it was built by Mr. O'Neill (about 1909); then occupied by Mr. Sam Pegram, later by Mr. Wilson Russ, and now the Robbins. Later Mr. Sam Pegram built another house now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Buckman.

We stayed in Washington Park only a few days, as my little son, Bartlett, became ill. The Jersey Cow milk was too rich for the young child and I had not thought to dilute it. While I was there, June 17, the weather seemed terribly hot and muggy, with rain and heavy thunder storms daily. I was afraid I would lose my second boy, (I had lost my first, Guy, Jr. in 1905); so I hurried back to Boston, although the people in the Park were very kind to me and my little boy.

There is one incident of this special visit in 1909,

however, that I did not forget. To keep the grass down around the River Shore, Mr. Hathaway kept a herd of goats and several billy goats grazing there. I was walking quietly down the path from Father Small's house to the river shore - all so peaceful. Suddenly I felt something hit me hard in the back. Before I could look around I felt another resounding smack - down I went. As I got up, I saw it was one of those old billy goats who was just backing off to charge on me again. You may be sure I did not wait for a third impact! The other two had convinced me who was boss - that Mr. Billy Goat!

I was very much interested to learn that Mrs. Frank Kugler, when a child, used to go to the old "Small Plantation" on picnics. They would go around by the old Brick Kiln Road which seemed, to her, such a long distance. Then they would eat their luncheon at what was left of the old kitchen fireplace at "Cedar Grove."

When I went again to Washington Park in 1919, there had been a great change. The poplars had grown into tall trees. Father Small had a motor-boat and had built quite a substantial pier on the river shore. The piling is still there. Here we used to eat our suppers in the cool of the evening. Since I had been away the "Green House" on the river shore had been built by the Mortons; later bought, torn down, and remodeled by the Sandy Jennettes, and where the Ramsays now live. Mr. Harry McMullan had a beautiful home at the end of the Park. The Charles Flynns had come to the Park and built next to Dr. Small. The Norwood Simmons erected a carefully built home where Mrs. Homes later lived and now the J. M. Saunders live for the second time.

Washington Collegiate Institute was started about 1913, and the house where Jacob Williams now lives was

built for the President of the Institute. Formerly, Dr. and Mrs. M. O. Fletcher lived there. The land for this school was a gift from Honorable John H. Small, and was built under the auspices of the Northern Methodist Church. Mr. John Warren (Presiding Elder of the Northern Methodist Church) built the house now occupied by Mrs. Dempsie Grimes on Isabella Avenue. The little green house over towards the woods where Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Willis live was a student home for Mr. John Warren's brother. Guy and I lived there for about two years in 1923. It was built by Dr. Lewis' sister, Mrs. Foreman.

Mrs. Lyndon Shaw's family built on the corner diagonally from the McMullans, on Isabella Avenue; Mr. Roy Hardy had built on the river shore; the Greenleys later owned this home and afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Victor Shelburne lived there. It is now occupied by the W. E. Duncans. All around that section was vacant fields - very dreary at night.

Mr. Jim Eborn built a fine new home on the corner of Isabella Avenue and Riverside Drive in 1923. He rented it for two years to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Small. Then Mr. Eborn occupied it from 1925 to 1927. It was bought by Mr. Whitley, father of Bill Whitley of Aurora. Now Frank Finlayson, Mr. Whitley's son-in-law, lives there.

There was a "Club House" on the River shore not far from where John Mayo's home is - the piling (upon which the dance hall was built) still shows above the water at low tide. A pier led to this pavilion, a most attractive building built by Honorable John H. Small for the entertainment of the "younger set" from Washington proper. There they would dance over the River when

summer nights were warm and beautiful. Later, 1918 that building was moved inland and made into a most attractive bungalow and occupied by Mr. Beverly Moss, Senior's family. While the Mosses were there, it burned to the ground.

The Washington Collegiate Institute was such a wonderful school for girls and boys who could not attend any "home school;" the President, Dr. M. O. Fletcher, and the corps of teachers were wonderfully kind and did a splendid job of bringing out the best characteristics in each individual case.

My older son, Bartlett, entered the seventh grade in 1919 and my younger son, Whitmell, went to kindergarten in the big "Green House," now occupied by Dr. Ramsay. Miss Rae Cutler was the kindergarten teacher. Besides my little boy, there was Mrs. Flynn's little girl, Ada Martin, Sina Scott (now Mrs. Joe Marshburn), the Shaw children, Lyndon and Kitty; and Dail Tanfield also attended this school. The boys lived in the main building and the girls in two dormitories - one the Hathaway house (now Mrs. C. Bell's) where Mrs. Ruble was Matron and it was called the "Pamlicoan;" and the other called the "Emma House" where Mrs. Dempsie Grimes now lives - it was affectionately called "Emma House" after Mrs. Fletcher.

I often recall the very attractive picture of Mrs. Ruble, then a very young matron, in the early morning, in a bright red sweater going to the back door of the house; opening the screen door and calling her chickens to breakfast. She had wonderful Rhode Island Reds - some laying size and other pullets just ready for frying.

All the neighbors in Washington Park helped in the festivities carried on at Washington Collegiate Institute;

each contributing her or his best to make each social function a success. There were speakers like Honorable Josephus Daniels, Honorable John H. Small, Dr. Whitmell Small, Bishop Thomas Darst, Bishop Thiekeld, and Dr. Ralph Sorkman. Rev. Stephen Gardner delighted the students with his songs. There were debates and recitation contests; in fact the school was the social center - the nucleus for all social activities of the "Park". I recall Mr. Coolidge Morris would often come to the school at Chapel hour, make a good sensible talk, and leave behind a big box of oranges, grapefruit, or a bunch of bananas for the School. (At that time he was in the produce business).

I will mention just a few more things. We recall, especially, when Mrs. Harry McMullan and Mrs. Victor Shelburne started the "Washington Park Garden Club". It began as a sewing club, for the purpose of getting the Ladies of the Park together for a little chat. The first meeting was at Mrs. McMullan's house in 1923. The charter members were Mrs. McMullan, Mrs. Shelburne, Mrs. Lyndon Shaw, Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. Flynn, Mrs. Ivy Turner and her daughter (now Mrs. Roy Mayo), Mrs. Sam Pegram, and myself. By that time, Mrs. Julia Campbell (Miss Hattie Sizer's Aunt) had built a little house over towards the woods (where J. P. Rowlett, Sr. now lives); so she attended and later Mrs. Tripp and Mrs. Spruill; still later Mrs. Lillie Marslender, Mrs. Roberts, (Mrs. Shaw's mother); whose house was where the R. C. Floyds now live. Mrs. Kim Saunders became a member after they bought the Simmons home, where later Mrs. Chick Homes lived.

With that happy thought of a Washington Park Garden Club, it has been growing stronger and stronger

for over 27 years. Now under the guidance of its ever efficient presidents, it is a vital stimulant in the community life of the "Park".

There are some little recollections that may be of interest about the Park in the old days. With the exception of the few homes I have mentioned, most of Washington Park was a tangled wild wood. The old pines that stand so tall by the River Shore were grown trees when Father Whitmell Small was a boy, about 1860. A few have died and others blown down but some are still there - so straight and tall and full of the dignity of old age. I never tired of hearing the wind blow through those pines along the River Shore!

We used to hear the owls often at night, and one very early morning I saw a family of quail having a beautiful time in my back yard. The little rabbits used to run in the underbrush. At night, when the moon shone brightly, the mocking birds would sing in the middle of the night - their songs sounded so weird and sweet. I have never heard them sing at night since I moved from the Park.

I recall one night, in the darkness, my husband fell over a sleeping cow that had been tethered in the pathway. My husband's brother Robert, shot a terrible snake that was stretched out dozing on the pier underneath the planking. It was six feet long with a most horribly ugly triangular head.

In front of our house on Isabella Avenue was a line of old worn out telegraph poles. Here the downy woodpeckers used to rear family after family each year. I enjoyed watching them. One morning, about 4 a.m., I heard a knock at what I thought was the back door. It was repeated several times, and when I got up anxiously

to look out, there was a woodpecker eyeing me and then knocking at the roof just above the door - pecking away just as if his life depended on it. After five years the Telephone Company put up new poles and I lost my little bird neighbors as well as the squirrels who had taken possession of the woodpecker's holes.

One morning early, I went to my back porch, where I had placed several lovely bunches of long stemmed gladioli which were left with me by Dean Schaub's wife from Raleigh. The gladioli were upright in the jars, and two of the loveliest humming birds were flitting up and down among the blossoms. The pink of the glads and the iridescent colors of the birds made a beautiful color study for a screen - if only I could have painted it.

I think it was Mr. Charles Meekins who raised quite a few pheasants thinking it would be attractive to have them in the "Park". One gorgeous looking cock used to come just at dusk to Father Small's yard. He was a beautiful specimen! He would give a strange, wild, little call, fly down, slip quietly through the foliage, and eat the grain Father Small always put out for him. He came for almost two weeks and then he disappeared, a great disappointment to us all.

In 1913, they had the "Great Flood", when the water rose to the floor in the living room at Father Small's house. This has been mentioned lately in the "Daily News". A boat was carried over into the woods and left there high and dry when the flood subsided. Mules were drowned in the barns and chickens went floating from the back yard coops. Mrs. Tanfield told me when the waters rose, many people went to Mr. Sam Pegram's house for safety, this being the highest point of land in the Park. That was when the Southeast wind blew

up the River. Not many years ago we had the opportunity to see the Northwest wind blow the water away from the Park. For yards there showed the muddy bottom of the River with all sorts of odd articles exposed after years of being buried there.

In the past, Washington Park had three big fires. One, when the first Country Club bungalow (built by Honorable John Small as a dance hall for young people) burned to the ground.

The second fire was the first Guano factory beyond Mrs. Ramsay's house. It burned briskly to the fire wall. This was about 1920. The section is now built up and called "North Shore".

The third fire was Miss Violet Alexanders's bungalow, unoccupied at the time. This was the site of Mrs. Floyd's house.

When the new girls' dormitory (now Green Court Apartment) was added to W. C. I. in 1921, the laying of the corner stone was quite a social event. The Methodist Bishop, Mr. Briscoe, of the Northern Methodist Church, was in charge.

An annual event every spring was the Washington Park Picnic. Long tables were spread on the river shore and fried chicken, cakes, lemonade, and ice cream were served. That same annual picnic is still held each June by the Garden Club of Washington Park and every one has a wonderful time, as of old.

I must not forget how a story of Mrs. John Mayo's helped give a little life and romance to the Park. There were Dan Mayo, Jimmie Hill, Brad Morton, and Lee Cooper - a group of boys who, after school used to play around a very big old tree close to the Asa Roberts' house. In the vacant lot to the West, a huge wild grapevine

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wound its branches around the tree. The boys would climb the tree and swing out on the vines into midair, pretending they were Tarzan. This tree was cut down, when Mr. J. S. Hill later acquired the property and cleared it.

It is interesting to note that the old brick chimney (a very fine one) was left standing after the fire in Mr. Beverly Moss' home. It stood almost intact in the field for several years - a sentinel of the past. Then when Mrs. Jenkins built her home in the Park, she used this chimney brick for the main chimney in her bungalow on Riverside Drive, next to John Mayo's.

So, Washington Park as a suburb has been in existence about fifty years. It is one of the most beautiful spots in the world in which to live. When Father Small returned to the Park in 1904, he greatly lamented the fact that more families did not move there. All the 25 years he had been a physician in Massachusetts, he had dreamed of coming back to Washington Park, his father's old plantation to live in his old age, and die there. If he were living today, he would see his fondest wishes and desires for his beloved Park being fulfilled. He died in 1933 before all the lovely homes had been built. He was greatly honored by being selected the first Mayor of Washington Park - about 1926 or 1927.

Sincerely,
Lida B. Small
1950.

