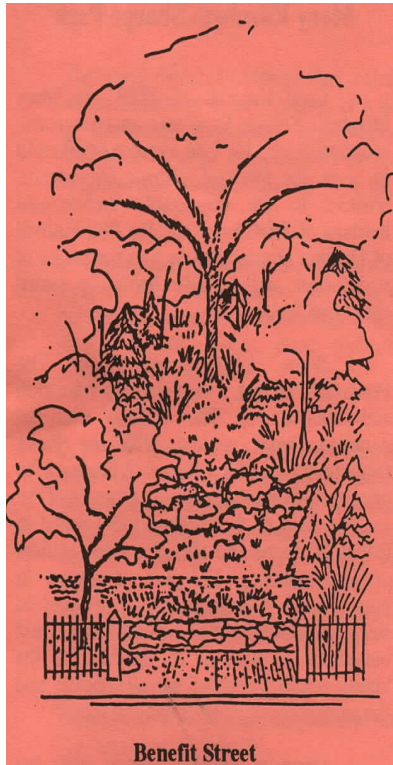


THE MARY ELIZABETH SHARPE PARK
141 Benefit Street, Providence Rhode Island 02903



(R.W.S. More)

The Good Neighbor Appeal, 1990s - annual Benefit Street neighborhood fundraising brochure

The City of Providence's **Mary Elizabeth Sharpe Park** was dedicated in 1989. Until the fall of 1988, the Mary Elizabeth Sharpe Park was an eyesore, an overgrown, abandoned lot in the heart of historic Providence. Visitors to the remarkable architectural heritage of Providence and the PPS Festival of Historic Houses had to pass a tangle of underbrush and garbage behind a rusted chain link fence.¹

The L-shaped Lot, which fronted Benefit St at 141 and extended behind 147 Benefit St, was part of the original 17th c. Benjamin Cushing Lot which ran from Town (N. Main) St to Hope St. A house was built on the Benefit to Wheaton (Pratt) St portion of the Lot in the 19th c., the outlines of which may be seen on the Park-side of 147 Benefit St. It was owned by "Dr." William Lincoln Bates who operated an electropathic sanatorium there until c. 1900.² It is possible that science-fiction author H. P. Lovecraft was inspired to write "The Shunned House," (1924) about the house adjacent at 135 Benefit St., because of its proximity to the controversial Bates Sanatorium.

In planning for the 1936 Tricentenary of the founding of Providence, the Roger Williams Association redesigned Prospect Terrace to feature the statue and remains of Roger Williams which overlooks the city today. Three of the Roger Williams Association committee members, Mary Elizabeth Sharpe, Helen Metcalf Danforth and Martha (Patty) B. Willson Day, all neighbors of the park, bought and gave Lot 141 to the City of Providence c. 1938.³ It was to be a link in an intended Walk to celebrate the founding of the City and the State of Rhode Island. It was projected to descend from Prospect Terrace, through Lot 141, down the Benefit Street State House Parade, across the Roger Williams National Memorial Park and finally up to the Rhode Island State Capitol. It was deed-restricted to that purpose in perpetuity.

However, the vision was never realized and the lot slowly grew into an unkempt site behind a rusted chain link fence. Between 1971 and 1986, the City attempted to sell the Lot to real estate developers on several occasions in violation of the deed restriction. Next door neighbors, Rebecca and Timothy More sought legal recourse and the support of the North Benefit Street Association to safeguard the Lot. Even if the proposed 1930s "Roger Williams Walk" from Prospect Terrace to the State House was not going to go forward, they believed the Lot could preserve a much-needed "Green Space" in the City as a "pocket" public park for visitors and residents alike.

Beginning in 1987, with the leadership of Presidents Janet I. Field and Suzanne W. Parsons, More and other members of The Perennial Planters, a Providence garden club and member of The Garden Club of America, worked with the Parks Department of the City of Providence to preserve this small reminder of the terrain granted to Roger Williams and the other early colonial settlers in 1636. The aim was to preserve the natural landscape in order to sustain the fragile urban habitats of birds and butterflies as well as to provide for the visual enhancement of the streetscape and the enjoyment of visitors and residents. The Perennial Planters raised funds for a landscape design by Sara Bradford, FSLA of Bradford Associates, which would feature native, sustainable plant material and preserve rare urban green space. By the summer of 1988, work had begun. In May 1989, it was opened and dedicated by Mayor Joseph Paolino in honor of civic activist and Perennial Planters member, Mary Elizabeth Evans Sharpe. She is remembered today as the leader of the effort to create India Point Park from the wreckage of the Providence waterfront. The Mary Elizabeth Sharpe Street Tree Endowment Committee and its Providence Neighborhood Planting Program remain a vital part of the Providence Park Department's ongoing effort to plant, preserve and restore the arboreal heritage of the city. The Mary Elizabeth Sharpe Park was and is a fitting tribute to her tireless efforts on behalf of the city.

Over the past 34 years, the Perennial Planters have worked hard, and often without City support, to maintain the Park. However, neighbors gave generously to the Perennial Planters through the annual Good Neighbor Appeal organized by Rebecca More during the 1990s. In 1997, the club added the handsome wrought-iron fence behind the low sitting wall, steps up to an Anemone and Hosta Garden, concealed behind hemlocks to avoid distracting the impression of a natural landscape, and many other plantings. Around 1989, the City of Providence Parks Dept. agreed to lease the section of the Lot behind 147 Benefit St to its owners for temporary parking. In return, the rent was intended to provide monies to The Mary Elizabeth Sharpe Park for maintenance and improvements in the years to come.⁴ The parking area was to be restricted to a permeable surface (gravel) both for environmental (drainage) concerns and easy removal should the City and Parks Dept. decide to terminate the lease. However, the building was sold off as individual condominium units, and in 2004 the condominium association paved the City-owned parking space with impermeable asphalt without notice to the Parks Dept.⁵

For almost thirty years, until the appointment of Wendy Nilsson as Parks Superintendent in 2017, the 147 Benefit St Association rental monies intended to benefit Mary Elizabeth Sharp Park were largely used elsewhere. Now, with the support of and collaboration with the City of Providence Parks Dept., the Mary Elizabeth Sharp Park looks to exemplify sound stewardship of the urban landscape and provide a green space for the continued enjoyment of visitors and residents for years to come.

⁴ The club has a complete set of before and after photographs in its archives.

⁵ For "Dr." Bates Sanatorium: see: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol78/iss260/2/>; and <https://today.uri.edu/news/uri-library-hosting-exhibit-on-jamestown-sanitarium-that-used-electricity-to->

treat-maladies/; He was a graduate of the Philadelphia Electropathic Institute and did not have a medical degree.

³ **Mary Elizabeth Evans Sharpe** (1884-1985), founder of the Mary Elizabeth Tea Room in New York City, was married to industrialist Henry Dexter Sharpe. She had a successful career as a candy entrepreneur and owner of Mary Elizabeth's Tea Rooms in New York and Boston. She lived at 75 Prospect St. until her home at 87 Prospect St. was completed in 1929. Her legacy includes the Mary Elizabeth Sharpe Street Tree Planting Endowment and India Point Park; **Helen Pierce Metcalf Danforth** (1887-1984) was the granddaughter of Helen Adelia Rowe Metcalf who founded the RI School of Design. She was director of the RISD Museum of Art from 1927 and President of RISD from 1931-1947; **Martha Buttrick Willson Day** (1885-1983) was a 1906 graduate of RISD's "Day" program and a portrait miniaturist. She was the daughter of the architect Edward R. Willson (1856-1906) of Stone, Carpenter & Willson, a distinguished Beaux Arts practitioner. His house at 88 Congdon St. In 1926 she established the Congdon St. Association. See her collection of papers at the RI Historical Society: <https://www.rihs.org/mssinv/MSS1115.htm>).

⁴ In 1987 the owners were Frederick P. McClure and John McCann: Providence Tax Assessor Database: Lot #141, PID 33562, Plat Lot Unit: 10// //201// (2016). Providence Tax Assessor lists the Condo Assn. property as Lot 145. The correct postal address is 147 Benefit St.

⁵ In 2004, the 147 Benefit St Associates condominium association signed a 25 year lease with the City for 3,763 square feet of Providence Park land for parking for its residents. The lease was signed by Mayor David Cicilline, Robert McGreen (as President of 147 Benefit Street Associates) and Joseph M. Ferrandez, City Solicitor, but not by any Parks Dept. personnel.