

## Beyond “The Dry Highway and the ‘No Trespass’ Sign”:

### Albert Milford Turner, William H. Burr, Elsie Hill, and the Creation of Connecticut’s First Oceanfront State Parks, 1914-1942

In the warm, liquid summer of 1914, before the “Guns of August” erupted in the Great War, Albert Milford Turner, the thin, bespectacled Field Secretary for the Connecticut State Park Commission, set out to hike the shoreline of Long Island Sound from New York to Rhode Island. Exploring 618 miles of beaches, salt marshes, sand spits, coves, mud flats, and rocky promontories, Turner searched for a likely location for Connecticut’s first state park. His long walk marked the beginning of state parks in Connecticut, a process that by the time he retired in 1942 had culminated in the creation of 45 parks and 20 state forests, covering 80,487 acres. Today Connecticut has 126 state parks and forests, attracting 8 million visitors a year and covering 169,420 acres (0.8% of the state’s total land area), including six on Long Island Sound: Sherwood Island (1914), Hammonasset Beach (1920), Rocky Neck (1931), Harkness Memorial (1952), Silver Sands (1955), and Bluff Point (1963).

Agitation for public parks in Connecticut began in the middle years of the nineteenth century when residents realized that the “wilderness” of colonial days had



The State of Connecticut developed Sherwood Island State Park in the early twentieth century, to give urban and inland residents access to Long Island Sound. A beach lies just beyond the headland in the photo. Photo by the author.

somehow metamorphosed into an artificial patchwork of open farmland, steel-and-brick cities, and well-manicured suburbs. By 1880, 80% of Connecticut had been deforested, compared to less than 5% in 1600 (and only 20% today). Noise, congestion, and pollution had become acute. One of the first states to urbanize, by 1880 Connecticut had become a land of city-dwellers. Residents lacked easy access to the state’s dwindling resources of fresh air, breezy beaches, scenic vistas, green meadows, and shady woods.

The first public parks in the United States were municipal parks like New York City’s Central Park, conceived in 1851 and constructed with public funds beginning in 1857. In 1853 the Reverend Horace Bushnell proposed a similar park for Hartford, to be located on the banks of Park River. When it opened in 1861, Bushnell Park featured grassy lawns, winding walkways, and 157 species (1,100 individual specimens) of ornamental trees and bushes.

State and national parks came later, towards the end of the nineteenth century. The first national park was Yellowstone, established in the Wyoming

Territory in 1872, followed by Yosemite in California in 1890. The first state park was Niagara Falls in New York, created in 1883, followed by New York’s Adirondack State Park in 1885. The first national forests came in the early 1900s.

The original motive for establishing such public parks and forests was not to preserve wilderness—that would come later—but rather to provide for the health, relaxation, and exercise of the new urban masses, and to conserve vital natural resources such as timber for construction and ship-building.

Without parks, the nation’s rapidly expanding urban population lacked access to the ever-dwindling number of sites for nature recreation, which wealthy landowners were rapidly gobbling up and converting into private estates. Connecticut’s best-known parks advocate, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (the designer of Central Park), warned, “The enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and the means of recreation connected with them is...a monopoly...of a very few, very rich people.

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Jamie Eves is an instructor at Eastern Connecticut State University and the University of Connecticut, where he teaches Western Civilization, United States History, and Environmental History. A native of Maine, Jamie lives in Willimantic with his wife Katherine, two cats, and a rabbit. He has been researching and writing New England History since 1988. You may contact him at [evesj@easternct.edu](mailto:evesj@easternct.edu).

The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it.... It is [therefore] necessary that [nature] should be laid open to the use of the body of the people" in the form of public parks. Although Olmsted was writing about California, his words also applied to Connecticut.

Turner agreed with Olmsted. "So long as man is born with eyes and ears and arms and legs," he said in 1917, "he will continue to use them in various ways, and it turns out that some of those ways are impossible to him in the city. At the end of a week, or a month, or a year, or in some cases, possibly a lifetime, the city sights and sounds and pavements become unbearable and a rest and contrast become as necessary as sleep at night. To the fortunate few who may have a country house or a shore cottage with an automobile or so, the [solution to their] problem is easy. What for the rest? The dry highway and the 'no trespass' sign."

Turner was typical of the social reformers of the early twentieth-century Progressive Era, most of whom enthusiastically endorsed the idea of public parks. He was well educated, middle-class, and professional, with a background in science and an abiding faith in the duty of rational, democratic government to actively resolve social problems. On March 1, 1914, the newly formed Connecticut State Park Commission, created by the legislature in 1913, hired Turner as its first Secretary. His first task was to find a good

site for Connecticut's first State Park. The ideal location, he told the Commission, would be on Long Island Sound and have several hundred acres of undeveloped land, wide beaches, scenic vistas, and easy public access. It would also be free from contamination by industrial pollution. The urban masses, he believed, deserved a clean, cool park for swimming, picnicking, and camping.

Since the vast majority of land along the Sound had already been developed for housing, industry, or port facilities, Turner was able to find only four sites that met his criteria: Sherwood Island (a low, marshy, 200-acre coastal island with a broad beach, surrounded by several plush estates) in up-scale, suburban Westport; Hammonasset Point (a lonely 900-acre sand spit with a long barrier beach and an extensive area of salt marsh) in Madison; Rocky Neck (a 150-acre peninsula with a small beach and some salt marsh) in rural, arty East Lyme; and Bluff Point (an 800-acre sand-and-rock peninsula) in blue-collar Groton. Turner recommended that the Commission acquire all four sites.

For the moment, the Commission decided to focus on the Sherwood Island site. Located in populous Fairfield County, just a few miles from the teeming industrial city of Bridgeport (and only a short distance from Westport's Green Farms train station), it seemed ideal. Moreover, a local champion soon emerged: William H. Burr, Jr., a prosperous Westport fruit farmer and community activist who was willing to run interference with local landowners. An active member of the Westport Republican Party, the broad-shouldered, energetic, walrus-mustached, sixty-year-old widower was both a Theodore Roosevelt-type progressive (he even resembled TR physically) and an old-time Connecticut blueblood. A long-time park advocate, Burr was already on record as supporting public access to Westport's local beaches. With his help, between 1914 and 1923 the commission succeeded in purchasing approximately 50 acres of land on Sherwood Island for a total cost of about \$18,000.

Early state parks like Sherwood Island were meant for recreation, not nature preservation. Much of the land at Sherwood Island was converted into grassy picnic areas, as shown in this photograph. Photo by the author.

Nevertheless, strong local opposition to the park soon arose. According to a history of the park posted by the Friends of Sherwood Island State Park on their excellent web site, the chief naysayer was George W. Gair, a very wealthy Westport landowner whose own sprawling estate lay adjacent to the park. Privately, Gair and other wealthy Westport property-owners dreaded the incursion of Bridgeport's unwashed masses into their pristine territory and were concerned that the park might interfere with their plans to develop Sherwood Island as a middle-class beachfront cottage community. Publicly, they challenged the park because it would increase local property taxes. In 1924 Gair, who like Burr was active in the Westport Republican Party, persuaded the town meeting to vote "that the town of Westport does not desire a state park at Sherwood Island." A second town meeting in 1929 reiterated the position. In addition, Gair and his allies, including the speculative Sherwood Island Company and Pinehurst Realty Company, bought up land the park needed to provide access roads. Gair even attacked Burr personally, circulating a cartoon that showed "Billy B." holding a sign that read, "A Park on Sherwood's Island, for the benefit of non-residents." As Chairman of Westport's Board of Finance, Gair authorized the widening of a drainage ditch between the park and the town road, ostensibly for mosquito control, but also effectively barring the public from reaching the park. Finally, he lobbied the Connecticut State Park Commission to focus on alternative sites in other towns.

Later state parks, like Bluff Point State Park, focused more on nature preservation, retaining areas of forest and rugged shoreline. Photo by Joshua D. Eves.



Burr responded to Gair's attacks. "The people of Westport have made a terrible mistake with this blind and stupid vote," he told the *Bridgeport Post* in 1929, following the second town meeting. "The area belongs to the people of Connecticut [but] because of unreasonable opposition to the development of the property, the place has lain idle for many years and is inhabited only by cows." The *Post* characterized the contretemps as a "battle...between vested wealth and public rights." But the state legislature, which had not yet voted the money to finish the park, was reluctant to act in the face of what it saw as determined local opposition and declined to appropriate the money. The project languished.

Meanwhile, the Connecticut State Park Commission (renamed the Connecticut State Park and Forest Commission) continued to acquire properties elsewhere. By 1918 the Commission held 5,960 acres, mostly in the form of small parcels scattered throughout the state. But because of World War I, none of the land had yet been developed or opened to the public. However, in 1920, with the war over, the Commission returned to park building and opened the state's first fully functioning seaside state park, Hammonasset Beach State Park.

Turner had outlined plans for both Sherwood Island and Hammonasset in his report to the Commission in 1914. Typical of Progressive Era park advocates, he had focused on recreation rather than preservation. The salt marshes would be drained to eliminate mosquitoes. Wide roadways would be constructed along the beaches and to the nearby state highway (today's U. S. Route 1) to provide access. There would be running water and sewage, restaurants, bathhouses, campsites (some with cabins), and open areas for sports and aviation.

In 1919 the Commission acquired 565 acres (75 parcels) on Hammonasset Point at a cost of \$130,960 as the core of the new park. It constructed a large parking lot, a boardwalk, and a pavilion. The park opened on June 18 and closed for the season on September 1, attracting an unexpectedly large total of 75,164 visitors in only two-and-a-half months. In 1921 167,622 visitors came. In 1922 there were 220,600. The park was consid-

ered a success. Madison, unlike Westport, was just a small farming and fishing community and lacked the type of wealthy property owners who had opposed the Sherwood Island project. Without powerful opposition, the Commission had been freer to act.

The unexpected success of the Hammonasset Park gave renewed impetus to the Sherwood Island project. In 1932 supporters organized the Sherwood Island Park Association to push for its completion. That same year the Fairfield County Republican Party came out in favor of the project. Connecticut's two other important political parties, the big-city Democrats and Socialists, had long supported the park on egalitarian grounds, but the Republicans, who were strong in the rural and suburban communities, had until now opposed it as a tax-and-spend boondoggle, so its support was an important switch.

The park also acquired a new champion, the redoubtable and resourceful Elsie Hill. An active feminist and key member of Alice Paul's National Women's Party, Hill lived in nearby Redding, an inland town that lacked access to the Sound. Hill successfully extended the argument for the park by pointing out that it would provide access to the Sound for all of Connecticut's inland residents, not just city-dwellers, a tactic that increased its popularity. In 1929 she organized a mass public picnic on parkland for the residents of Westport, Redding, Ridgefield, New Canaan, and Bridgeport, fording Gair's ditch to reach the beach. She also organized petition drives on behalf of the park and engaged in a lively newspaper debate with E. T. Bedford, Gair's chief ally.

But the biggest factor favoring the park occurred when the progressive Democrat Wilbur Cross—riding a wave of popular discontent with the Great Depression and supported, according to the late historian David M. Roth, by the votes of the newly militant "urban workmen"—captured the governor's mansion in 1930. Cross easily won reelection in 1932, carrying his fellow Democrats to victory in the State Senate. In 1934 he won again, and the Democrats captured both of the branches of the legislature. Pro-park progressives were now firmly in

power. In Cross's view, state parks were not only good things in their own right, but also potential public employment projects. He therefore included them in his own Connecticut version of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Federal money, Roth wrote, now "flowed into the state," and Cross gladly spent some of it on parks and forests.

In 1937 the legislature finally allocated the funds to finish developing Sherwood Island State Park. Cross recalled the event in his autobiography: "The General Assembly took favorable action on a number of my recommendations.... The old question whether Sherwood Island in Fairfield County should be developed into a state park was settled by an appropriation of several hundred thousand dollars for the purchase of land and land-rights on the island and adjacent shore." A new paved road connected the park to U. S. Route 1, and a second connector was planned (but never built) to the Merritt Parkway, another one of Cross's Depression-era public employment projects.

Thus it was that by the time Albert Milford Turner retired as Field Secretary for the Connecticut State Park and Forest Commission in 1942, the state had established 45 small state parks and 20 somewhat larger state forests, including three seaside state parks at Sherwood Island, Hammonasset Beach, and Rocky Neck. The biggest roadblock had been fierce opposition from wealthy property owners who sought to limit access to the shore for themselves. The greatest support had come from progressive Democrats, Republicans, Socialists, and Feminists. The parks were not intended to be nature preserves, but rather well manicured, artificial sites for the recreation and relaxation of the state's urban and inland masses. Salt marshes were drained and filled, trees and brush cleared, and sprawling parking lots constructed. Thoughtless visitors, arriving in greater-than-expected numbers, would trample the dunes and frighten away nesting shore birds. Attracted by handouts, seagulls and Canada geese would quickly multiply, overflowing the parks with their excrement. The drive for nature preservation would come later, after 1945. But that effort—and the saga of the state forests—is a story for another day. 