

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR FAVORITE OUTDOOR SPACE

*Full many years I loved to roam,  
These woods and hills in sight of home,  
Their cliff-crowned heights and  
Boulder-strewn vales,  
With fern-hidden walls and sidehill  
Trails.*

From *Walks Around Keene*  
By George A. Wheelock

On the east side of Keene is Robin Hood Park, which was chosen as the area's favorite public space. It features trails through the woods, plus recreational facilities including a playground, picnic areas, tennis courts, park benches, a playing field, and a swimming pool.

Robin Hood Park is a 130 acre forest park with a pond. Keene owes a debt of gratitude to George Wheelock for the gift of this park. According to the Keene Parks and Recreation Department, "In 1889, George Wheelock donated 12 acres of land to be called 'The Children's Wood.' In 1896 he added 83 acres, which he named Robin Hood Forest."

As stated in the deed, these lands were to be preserved for all time, "the pine trees growing thereon to be kept to their full age." Any income derived from forest management would be used for "constructing paths, cabins, grottoes, statues of animals, or other attractive objects" for the children of Keene.

Wheelock was a Harvard graduate and a man of vision. He studied law, but his real passion was nature. When he purchased these lands, dense brush and thickets of birch crowded the rocky hillside that had once been pasture lands. But his vision was of forest glades and woodland trails, of scenic views and children playing amidst shaded boulders.

Wheelock created the first trails that wind through the park and was known to have named the park's prominent rocks. He planted many of the tall pines that now tower over the park's field.

In his role as Keene's first Park Commissioner, he visited the park almost daily until a month before his death at 90. He cut, pruned, cleared, and set trees and shrubs which he often bought himself.

In 1908, Wheelock's work was commemorated with a map of the network of trails and roads built through the ever-deepening woods. "Jumbo," "Robin Hood Road," "The Blarney Stone" – the



fanciful names of the roads, ledges, and boulders give a glimpse into the poetic nature of the park's creator.

As the forest grew, the people came. By 1912, Robin Hood Forest and the Children's Wood had become a popular resort for church society and family gatherings. People brought picnics and climbed the hill to enjoy the view from Sunset Rock. The 1916 Park Commissioner's report notes that on one Sunday more than 600 people visited the park. In 1924, the Winter Outing Club cleared a toboggan and bobsled run that sent people flying across N. Lincoln Street just south of Woodland Cemetery. Later the city began plowing the ice for skating, as they still do today.

In 1929, the summer air rang with shouts and splashing when a public swimming beach was opened on the reservoir. Crowds of 400 to 500 enjoyed this convenient and scenic beach until 1947, when it was discovered that the shallow waters of the reservoir could not handle such heavy use and high bacteria counts forced the closing of the beach.

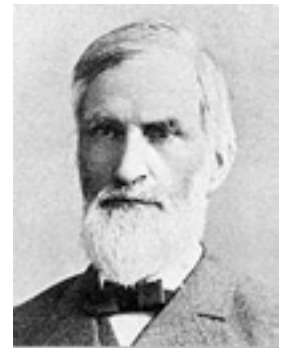
The financial disasters of the Depression brought unexpected benefits to the parks. From 1935 to 1940 WPA crews were put to work building roads, terraces, and picnic areas, and transforming the Octagon water tower into an outdoor amphitheater.

The Great Hurricane of 1938 had its own plan for the parks of Keene. When it swept into town that September, it brought torrential rains and 90 mph winds and left trees uprooted and flattened. In a single afternoon, 50 years of growth and development was reversed.

Keene's dedication to its parks was undaunted. For the next few years, crews labored in the parks to clear the downed trees. Huge numbers of seedlings, 45,000 in Robin Hood alone, were planted, and the forest grew back. Today wood thrush sing in tall trees again.

A detailed brochure on Robin Hood Forest and the Children's Wood is available from the City of Keene Parks and Recreation Department.

The park is located along Water Street, which is off Main Street. Parking is available.



**George Wheelock**



**Robin Hood Park and Beech Hill Reservoir are shown circa 1910 in this photo by Bion Whitehouse.**