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PARK HISTORY TODAY

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/

Fall 2025

EDITOR'S NOTE: We were recently interviewed by the city's media group on a series of questions concerning Park history. One question in particular prompted us to discuss the public schools:

Q: Can you tell us a bit about the importance of certain landmarks in St. Louis Park, and why they are a pillar in the community?

A: The Park's public school system itself has been an institutional landmark from the very beginning of non-native settlement, beginning in 1855 when land was first made available for sale.

We devote this issue to recounting some of the main events in the Park's public school history.

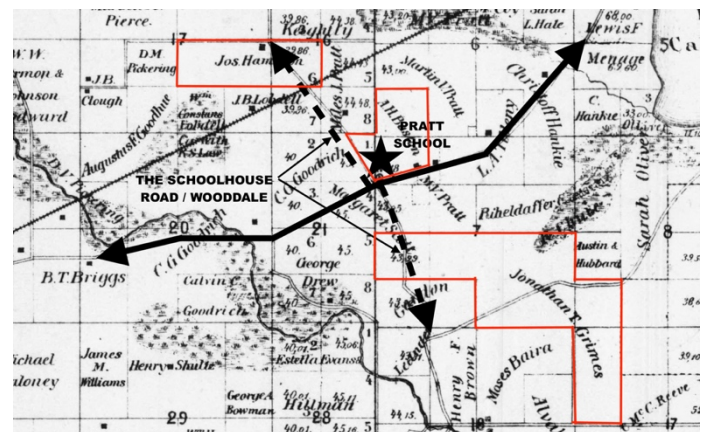
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At 373 miles long, equivalent to a water route between Minneapolis and Chicago, it opened the Great Lakes regions to migration from the east coast and New York City. Its traffic peaked around 1855 when land first became available for sale here and before the railroads arrived. The Canal figured prominently in bringing New Englanders to settle in Minnesota, especially families from Maine, who became the early movers and shakers in what would become St. Louis Park.



The Pratts, the Bastons, Joseph Hamilton and Jonathan Grimes made the intersection of Excelsior and what came to be called "the Schoolhouse Road," now Wooddale Avenue, the 100% corner of the Park for the next three decades, as shown on this 1874 plat.

WAY, WAY BACK TO SCHOOL ISSUE

PRATT, BASTON, WADDEL, RIXON FAMILIES AND THE BIRTH OF SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY CENTER

In elementary school, we all learned about the Erie Canal, but because most of us never actually saw the thing, it was easily forgotten. The canal was a wonder of the world when it opened in 1825, just after Fort Snelling was established at Bdote.

Scott Coltrane has compiled a detailed family history – “Those Harrowing Days; the Lost History of the Stumpfs” – which is part of SLPHS collections and documents the Pratt, Baston, Waddell, and Rixon families in St. Louis Park.

James Pratt was born in 1794, and married Sarah Spearin in 1817. In 1850, when James was an old man of 56, they moved from Clinton, Maine to St. Paul with their four children. By 1860 they were living in St. Louis Park. Their two sons were:

David Spearin Pratt; died in the Civil War in 1864; 120 acres deeded by federal government in 1854 straddling France avenue sold to Hanks in 1860; son Miles inherited the rest.

Martin Van Buren Pratt, unlike his brother David, survived the Civil War; came to St. Paul with his parents James and Sarah at age 17 and began buying land in Section 6 as early as 1855 at age 22. He married Harriet Hawkes on May 15, 1858 – described as the first “authentic” marriage in the township; in 1860 they settled on 210 acres in Section 6, with a farmhouse on Excelsior Road.

Job Pratt was born in 1800 in Maine; he married Mary Chesley, who died while they were still in Maine. Job and Mary’s children included Olivia Pratt, who married Joseph Hamilton. Olivia gave birth to son Chesley on November 24, 1857 – perhaps the first white child born in the area that would become St. Louis Park.

1874 plat shows Pratt lands in the Park totaling around 280 acres. The Pratts had owned almost 500 acres of land along the only official road in the area – Territorial Road No. 3, the Glencoe Road, or Excelsior Blvd.

The Pratt family was instrumental in settling the young St. Louis Park, and it was fitting that the Park’s first school, built on their land at Excelsior Blvd and Pleasant Avenue in 1859, was named after them. Pleasant connected directly northwest to the 120-acre farm of another Mainer, Joseph P. Hamilton, who had married James and Sarah’s niece Olivia Pratt, also of Clinton, Maine, in 1858.

Shortly thereafter, Jonathan Grimes, who owned and operated the Waterville Mill on Minnehaha Creek to the south, graded a road across the Great Swamp along 42nd Street, allowing his children to walk to the new Pratt School without wetting their boots. Pratt School served the early Park settlers and what became northern Edina until 1872. The original school building burned in 1866 and was immediately rebuilt on the same site.

By 1860 the Pratts had sold 120 acres to Charles Hanke and another 80 acres to **Alfred Harrison Baston**, another Mainer who had originally settled in Monticello, MN, but had been driven out by grasshoppers. Alfred and his wife had four surviving children – John, Charles, Emily and Sarah. Baston’s 80 acres included the just-established Pratt School. He died in 1869 and deeded his 80 acres to his four children in equal 20-acre strips. The westernmost strip included the Pratt School.

Albert Harrison Baston and Elizabeth Garvey Baston left Maine in 1859 and came to the territory of Minnesota, first locating in Monticello. Like many settlers they had grasshopper troubles. Albert decided to return to Maine but was convinced to stay when he visited his brothers and sisters-in-law who had settled in and near Minneapolis. On May 16, 1860, Albert and Elizabeth bought 80 acres in St. Louis Park, west of the Pratt farm, along Excelsior Blvd. When Albert died, Elizabeth gave 20 acres to each of her children, John, Charles, Emily, and Sarah.

Charles Baston married Ora Zillah Cooper; he died on July 29, 1908, at age 54, leaving Ora to manage the 39-acre Baston farm. From 1885-1934, the family lived at 3805 Wooddale, north of Excelsior. That house was removed to make room for Highway 100 in 1935. From 1935 to 1947, they lived at 5220 Excelsior Blvd. This house was across from the sand pit (later the dump) in front of the water tower. Charles and Ora’s children included:

Ethel Maud Baston was born on August 24, 1886, in what would soon become St. Louis Park. Ethel was one of seven graduates of St. Louis Park’s Lincoln High School in 1905. She became a schoolteacher, and she taught for 43 years, starting right after she graduated from high school. Her first 3-4 years were outside of the Park. In 1910 she became a teacher, then principal at Brookside School. She served as elementary education supervisor from 1928 to 1931 and then from 1938 to her death in 1954. She got her college diploma from the U of M in 1926 by attending night school, summer school, and correspondence courses. She earned a Masters, also at the U of M, in 1937.

Ethel suffered a cerebral hemorrhage on December 18, 1953, and was confined at Vocational Hospital in serious condition. She died at age 69 on July 28, 1954. **Ethel Baston Elementary School** was dedicated on October 9, 1955. Since 1982, it has served special-needs students as the private Groves Academy, a use Ethel would likely approve.



Charles’ sister **Emily Baston** married farmer and carpenter **Charles Rixon**, who had come to Minneapolis in 1873 and taught at the Whittier School and in Richfield before coming to the Park in 1887. Rixon served as the clerk of the SLP School Board in 1893-94 and also taught at Pratt School.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Each September we hold our Annual Meeting at which we elect our Board of Trustees to new terms. As I will do at the meeting, I want to thank the Board for their ongoing dedication to the Society and agreeing to serve! If you want to learn more about serving on the Board please reach out to discuss, we have a couple of open roles we would like to fill next year.

This meeting is a time to reflect on what we have accomplished in the past year and look forward to new ideas for the future. To highlight a few things from the year:

We now have over 1,000 items from our collection uploaded to Collective Access, which is a publicly searchable online database - you can find a link to it on our homepage.

Another set of walking tours of Skunk Hollow was held this summer in partnership with Hennepin History Museum.

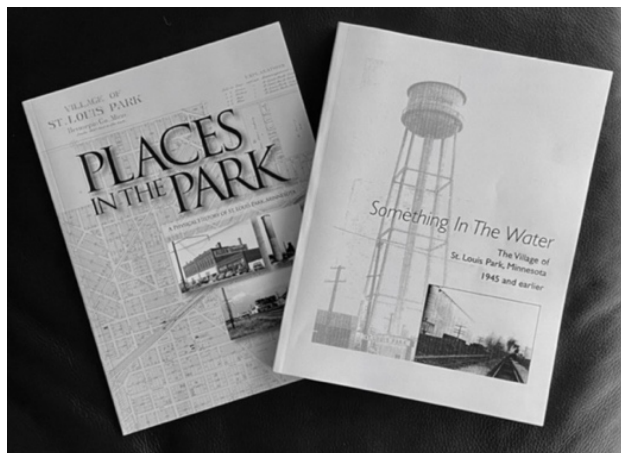
We held a variety of community engagement activities including hosting open houses at the Depot and our Office, tables at Parktacular, Lenox Senior Center and a Neighborhood Night Out, and presentations for Park Shores, Rotary Club and others.

We published quarterly editions of the *Re Echo*, covering the history of Dan Patch, STEP, craft brewing, and our early schools.

We will participate in Give To The Max, the annual Minnesota day of giving, again this year. And while we hope you will consider giving, what we are in most need of is volunteers for our organizational leadership as well as leading projects that would add to our community engagement. Please reach out if you would like to learn more about ways you could contribute your time.

With Park Pride,

Ted



CONNECT WITH US



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Founded in 1971, the St. Louis Park Historical Society collects, preserves, and shares the history of St. Louis Park. The *ReEcho* is an official publication of the Society.

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Charles' other sister, Sarah Baston, married Corwin B Waddell. The two families had houses next to each other on Excelsior Blvd. Waddell had gone to Nebraska with a carload of horses and in 1880, at the age of 20, came to Minnesota with horses being shipped there. He stayed in Minneapolis and drove a hack at E.W. Eddy and Sons, taking such good care of the beautiful black horses and his hack that he attracted more business than the others.

In 1886, Corwin and Sarah inherited one fourth of the Baston farm on Excelsior Blvd. The Waddell home was at 5100 Excelsior Blvd., next to Sarah's sister Emily Rixon's farm.

Daughter Mayme Elizabeth Waddell was commissioned as a missionary to China in 1915.

Daughter (Harriet) **Ruth Waddell** graduated from Lincoln High School in St. Louis Park in 1905, one of seven graduates. She went to Glencoe to be a normal school instructor in 1915.

During his time as Mayor and community leader, Corwin Waddell was a member of many organizations: The Odd Fellows, The Masonic Order, Scottish Rite, OES and Rebecca Lodges, The Shrine, Minneapolis Driving Club, Twin City Driving Club.

He was also a "fanatic" about sulky racing, where the horse pulls a two-wheeled cart, just as Dan Patch did. Family lore is that he actually raced one of his stallions against Dan Patch in Chicago in the very early 1900s.



Cousins Ethel Baston, Harriet (Ruth) Waddell, and Alice Rixon, grandchildren of A. H. Baston, all became teachers. Alice's father Charles Rixon was a carpenter by trade and also a teacher in Minneapolis; he retired to the Park in 1887 and stayed involved in local school affairs.

DOROTHEA NELSON

Children at school needed their exercise and games, and Dorothea Undine Nelson made sure they had them post-World War II. An advocate of women's and girls' recreation and athletics, Nelson was the first full-time director of a suburban recreation program, and the first woman director of recreation

in Minnesota. She became the Park's Recreation Superintendent in 1948.

In an article in the *Sun* dated June 9, 1986, Nelson was described as having a "flamboyant personality. She was always in the public eye and many times she expressed herself by wearing large, colorful hats and an abundance of jewelry."



Ms. Nelson retired as Superintendent of Recreation in October 1962 and the park at 26th and Florida Ave. was named Nelson Park in her honor. She tragically died in a car accident in Edina in 1967. From an article in the July 6, 1951, issue of the *St. Louis Park Dispatch*:

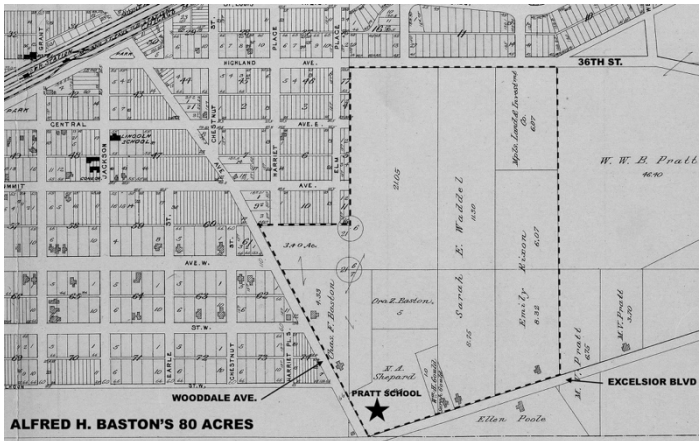
Miss Dorothea Nelson, director of recreation for St. Louis Park, after years of experience in this country and abroad, says: "There are always new fields to develop in the realm of recreation. Whether in a large city at home or abroad, the vocation of recreation holds a challenge for the director to do something new. It is necessary to find a program to build, or one is likely to go stale."

"Here in St. Louis Park, challenge is met at every turn. While the village government has had a ten-year program of acquisition of playgrounds and development, home building is now so widespread, that it is necessary to grab sections of ground in each new development, to meet the needs of the children for play places."

...Here, an old house is almost a curiosity. The population is approximately 25,000. Of this number, about 10,000 are children under 12 years of age; and about 5,000 tots are under six years.

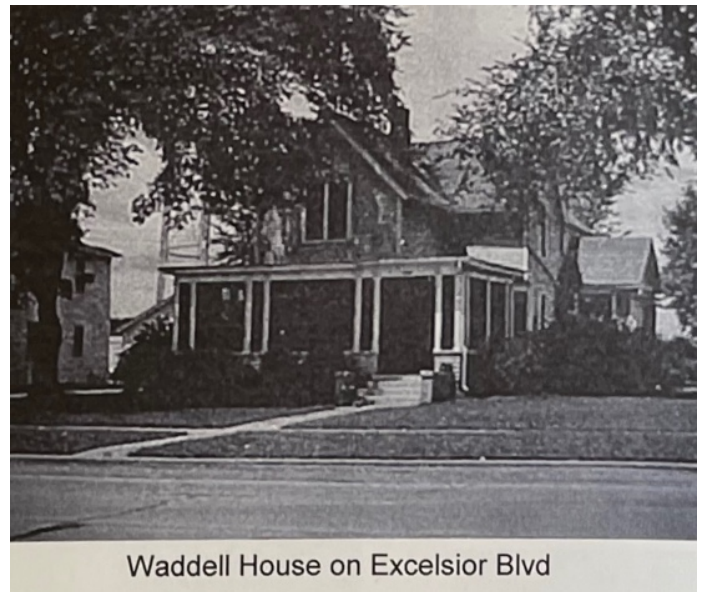
Sixteen playgrounds are in active use this summer, serving every age group with suitable programs. Some of the grounds are well developed and equipped, others are in the process of being developed. A city-wide cooperative program is financed by the Community Fund of St. Louis Park, the Park board through the village council and the school board.

THE BASTON 80 DIVIDES

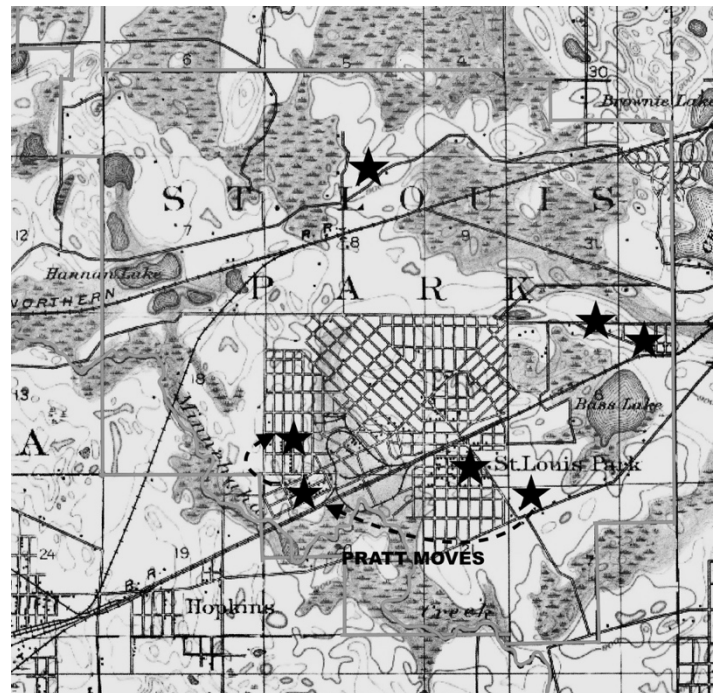


Alfred and Elizabeth Baston's 80 acres included the Pratt School and extended from what is now the Chipotle parking lot on Excelsior Blvd to 36th Street on the backside of Target. Later, Nathaniel A. Shepard, born in 1869 (or 1867) in New Hampshire, had a truck farm on the site that became Lilac Way Shopping Center. His specialty was asparagus. When Highway 100 was built in 1939 it went right through his property and put him out of the farming business. Nate's daughter Rita was born in 1895 and became a high school teacher.

The MnHS aerial below documented the opening of Miracle Mile in 1951 and shows the Waddell and Baston farmhouses side-by-side in the shadow of the water tower, next to Lilac Way shopping center. An early photo of the Waddell farm, bottom.



Waddell House on Excelsior Blvd



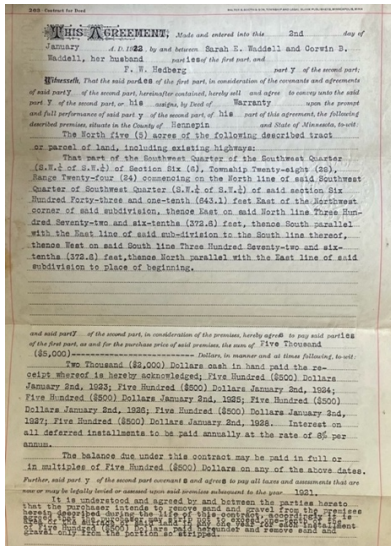
After construction of the Lincoln School in 1900, the one-room-peripatetic-Pratt was moved across the Great Swamp to a site at Pennsylvania and North where it was expanded to two rooms (Oak Hill I), then a few blocks north in 1918 to Walker and Quebec (Oak Hill II), where it was replaced by a brick edifice in 1950 and expanded again. The first seven school sites in the Park, (shown starred), were on the highest available ground, a reflection of the exalted place public education ranked with Park's pioneers.



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THE BASTON 80 EVOLVES

Alfred Baston's original 80 acres at the NE corner of Excelsior and Wooddale was mined and filled and developed and redeveloped over the years.



In 1922, Corwin and Sarah Waddell sold off their back acreage up to 36th / Highland Street to Frank Hedberg to be mined for sand and gravel. Vast quantities of that stuff were needed to fill the low spots along the new Hwy 100 Beltline construction in the mid 1930s, as shown in the aerial photo below from 1937. To fill the topographic void left by sand and gravel mining, a dump was operated from 1947 to 1960, creating the new land where Park Nicollet and AAA Minneapolis now stand. The retaining wall in the Lunds-Byerly's parking lot (opposite, top) shows how deep was the sand/gravel mine and how high the dumped stuff was piled. The approximate original site of Pratt School, today's Chipotle parking lot, (opposite, bottom), is also cut down from the original grade along Excelsior Blvd.



GOLDEN GOPHER SIDEBAR

Fall is also back to football time, and it's worth noting that Ethel's little brother, Albert Preston "Bertie" Baston, born in 1894, was the first player in Golden Gopher history to win All-America honors in two seasons back-to-back, 1915 and 1916. Playing end, he was one-third of the Gopher triple threat of the era, with quarterback Pudge Wyman throwing him the ball, and running back Bernie Bierman (who would become a legendary Minnesota coach) carrying it into the end zone. The team scored an average of nearly 50 points per game and posted a 12-1-1 record across Baston's junior and senior seasons. Bertie later served for nearly 20 years as a Gopher assistant to former teammate Bierman and was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1954.



PHOTO ALBUM



- Joseph Hamilton was elected President of the Village Council (Mayor) on December 6, 1886. He held that position until 1894, and again in 1895-97 and 1899-1900. From 1888 to 1895 Hamilton served as the Village's first Superintendent of Schools.
- Corwin B. Waddell, a generation younger, followed Hamilton as the second Mayor from 1894-95, and also served from 1900-01 and 1904-06. He was a member of the school board from 1902 to 1906, serving as president the last year.
- Albert H. Baston bought his 80 acres, which contained the Pratt School, from the Pratt family in 1860.
- Ethel, Albert's granddaughter, was one of the early high school graduates from Lincoln School in 1905 and went on to teach in and serve the St. Louis Park public schools for another 40 years.
- Ethel's cousin, (Harriet) Ruth Waddell, graduated with Ethel in 1905 and taught school in several cities around the state.
- And, her other cousin, Alice Rixon, graduated in Lincoln School's third class in 1902, taught school in several cities and in Long Lake in 1912-13 where she met future husband, August Stumpf.



Lincoln School opened in 1890 and became the Park's first high school. It remained in service as a school and as Village Hall until 1966. Daredevil highschooler Margaret Fornell (SLPHS Class of '37) photographed her friend Dorothy Strate popping up through the roof hatch of Lincoln in the 1930s (the village water tower and 1914 high school in the background). Not satisfied with that view, Margaret scaled the village water tower to photograph the 1914 High School and new (1935) Hwy 7 to the northwest, plus a lookback down at Lincoln to the southeast. Before World War II, the Park was still deeply rural.





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STUDENTS NEED TO EAT

The Lincoln School Mothers' Club was organized in 1916, providing hot lunches for the students, and later raised funds for a cook. The 1970s-era lunch ladies of Peter Hobart School posed for a photo that was recently gifted to the Society. Left to right: Sophie Nelson, Dee Wuollet, Eleanora Otto, Sharon Bukstein, and Bea Voss exhibit Park Pride.

