

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHARLES RIVER SPEEDWAY



"Charles River Headquarters, Speedway." View of Superintendent's Residence and MPC Police Headquarters. Undated lantern slide 3.2.40, c.1900 (Courtesy of DCR Archives, Metropolitan Parks System Lantern Slide Collection).

In the late 19th century, the rapid growth of Greater Boston was having a significant impact on the urban landscape. Industrial and commercial activities had a destructive effect on many of the region's natural areas, and continued population growth and industrial pollution threatened the loss of publically accessible open space. Under the visionary leadership of Charles Eliot and Sylvester Baxter, and inspired by the example of Frederick Law Olmstead's Emerald Necklace parks, a movement began to create a system of protected parks and natural areas across the Boston metropolitan region. The establishment of the Metropolitan Park Commission in 1893 heralded a new era of natural conservation and public recreation. The centerpiece of this 9000 acre multi-city undertaking was the Charles River Basin Reservation. Once an unattractive and uninviting stretch of tidal mudflats accentuated with the sights and smells of industrial waste and sewer runoff, the river was transformed into a place for natural beauty and public recreation. One of the first major recreational facilities developed for the Reservation was the system's first parkway: A 1.75 mile scenic riverside drive and pedestrian path with a mile long harness racetrack that became known as the Speedway. Soon after its opening in 1899, the Speedway quickly became one of the city's most popular gathering areas, bringing together strolling pedestrians, bicyclists, horse racers and automobile drivers.

Another important development introduced by the MPC was the creation of an efficient park management administration and the construction of multi-purpose headquarters buildings. These facilities streamlined the management structure by centrally locating all management and maintenance functions for the reservation, in addition to providing onsite housing for park Superintendents. In 1899 the architectural firm of Stickney and Austin was hired to design the headquarters complex for the Charles River Reservation. The renowned firm built most of the fledgling agency's signature structures, designing similar complexes at Revere Beach, Nantasket and the Blue Hills Reservations. Their site

specific interpretations of contemporary architectural styles tied the facilities together while giving each property its own signature aesthetic. Construction began the same year, and the sprawling complex included offices, police headquarters, stables, and the park superintendent's residence, all gracefully connected through the elegant Shingle Style, and creating an inner courtyard which provided functional non-public space within the boundaries of the small lot. Shortly after its construction, an additional 2-story stable was added to the eastern end of the original stable. This original core remains intact today.

By the time the MPC became the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) in 1919, advances in technology had transformed park management operations, and the Speedway building changed as well. In 1923 many of the open storage sheds and stables were enclosed and in 1924 the 2-story stable was adapted by Stickney and Austin for use as a police station and dormitory, reflecting the end of the horsepower era and the beginning of the Automobile Age. This transformation came full circle with the addition of the concrete 9-bay garage added in 1940. The building continues to exhibit characteristics of both periods and stands as a living example of how a building can retain its historic integrity while adapting to changing uses and needs.

Horse racing remained popular at the Speedway until mid-century, when the track was razed and became integrated into Soldier's Field Road. The operational and management structure of the MDC changed over the proceeding decades, and the police force was absorbed into the State Police in 1970. By the 1980s park offices were moved to the adjacent Almy's Building and the Speedway Building lost its role of prominence as a park management facility. As is inevitable when activity wanes at a historic property, the building fell into disrepair.



“Charles River Headquarters, Speedway.” View of Superintendent’s Residence and MPC Police Headquarters. Undated lantern slide 3.2.41, c.1900 (Courtesy of DCR Archives, Metropolitan Parks System Lantern Slide Collection).



Metropolitan Park Commission Stable and Police Station, 1941 (Courtesy DCR Archives, Metropolitan District Commission Parks Buildings Photographic Survey Collection, 1941).

The buildings possess many characteristics common to the Shingle Style: an irregular roof-line with cross-gables, turrets, continuous wood shingle siding, porches, and wide eaves. The buildings retain most of their original features and have generally maintained their structural integrity. The elaborate Shingle/Colonial Revival style used has connotations to the importance of the Speedway complex when constructed.



Metropolitan Park Commission Police Headquarters and Superintendent's Residence, 1941 (Courtesy DCR Archives, Metropolitan District Commission Parks Buildings Photographic Survey Collection, 1941).