

Seger Playground: The Story Begins

By Jimmy Calnan

The south side of the 1000 block of Lombard Street is a beautiful little green oasis in a corner of Washington Square West. It provides an outdoor experience for many of us living in the area. The opportunity to sit under a tree, play a round of tennis, shoot some hoops, walk the dog, and watch our children at play with each other are all available in this little half-block park.

A history of the playground does not seem to be available from the Dept. of Recreation so I am piecing together my own story. The Recreation Movement at the turn of the nineteenth century led to the first forms of Municipal Recreation in Philadelphia and the first public recreation facility was built at Starr Garden in 1908. Municipal Recreation became a function of the Dept. of Public Welfare under the 1919 Charter and was called the Bureau of Recreation.

A study of Sanborn Atlas Maps from 1920 and 1922 indicates that Seger Playground was built around 1921. The 1920 map for the south side of the 1000 block of Lombard Street shows many business-dwelling combinations. These were long narrow building lots with rear yards facing onto Naudain Street with bars, lodging houses, small businesses, a stable, a Chinese laundry and a billiard room on the SE corner of 11th and Lombard. The blocks from Naudain to Rodman and then Rodman to South were also mixed use of houses, a wagon house, another Chinese laundry, and a stable, all on short building lots with common yards in the middle.

On the 1922 map Seger Playground is in place from 10th to 11th Streets on the south side of Lombard to the north side of Rodman. Naudain Street no longer existed. The south side of Rodman to South Street remained into the 70's as mixed use dwellings and businesses.

The photo here shows 1024-1026 Lombard Street in 1917 as the New Equity Hall. This was probably a social hall for the African-American community that populated the Seventh Ward as it was then. For the other fourteen dwellings on that street in 1920, all were occupied by renters with anywhere from three to nine residents who could be one family, two families, or a mix of lodging house boarders of varying ages and places of birth. An examination of the 1920 Federal census records provides this look into the area before the playground. The male residents were all laborers in a variety of jobs, many at the Navy Yard. Women were usually unemployed even if single. Those with jobs were maids, worked in laundries or did private housework. All of the



residents were Black or Mulatto as defined by the Census except for two houses of families from Poland and Russia who spoke Yiddish and owned shops. The Census also shows that the residents on the block of Naudain/Rodman were all African-American renters with jobs. These people were all displaced by the creation of Seger Playground.

One of the Playground workers has recently offered interviews with older family members who played ball here in the early 50's and have photos from the era. They will describe the park as it was laid out then and how it changed. Stay tuned!

By the 1970's, the Redevelopment Authority owned one-fifth of Washington Square West. Then federal funding for urban renewal slowed down and the area was left with decaying buildings and empty lots. In 1974 the 1000 block of Rodman/South Streets was approved for demolition for the development of a retail food market.

As we can attest, Seger Playground is a success and an asset to the neighborhood. The park is unique not only because it serves the needs of so many types of users in such varying ways, but also because the experience available in each area is qualitatively distinct from the others. Use areas are arranged to discourage disturbing intrusions between the users of different areas. More active adult areas, the basketball courts, tennis courts and the dog area have their own entrances away from the less active children's area. Small children are not trampled and seated users are protected from noise and flying balls. Erika Bruner, a graduate student in 1991 in Bryn Mawr College, provided much of this analysis and it still holds true for the park in the 21st century.

How the original playground was designed and how it was adapted to the needs of the neighborhood over decades would be interesting but for now we know our little oasis as it is. We also hope to find out who Charles T. Mitchell was since the park has a plaque dedicated to him just inside the front gate, right side.