

More Franklin Park Stories

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Blueberry Hill Has History

Once part of a large tract owned by the pioneering Skiles family, Blueberry Hill Park was farmed until 1946 when it was converted into a dump site for a refuse hauling business. By August 1950, complaints about odor and rodents emanating from the site had grown to where Franklin Township officials sought an injunction against the daily dumping of forty tons of refuse. One neighbor testified that her doors and windows always had to be closed and that she was unable to invite visitors to her home. Another, who had moved to the township for the fresh air, reported that her family could not eat in its dining room, which faced the dump. It was also reported that cattle would no longer drink from the stream that ran through the property. A restraining order limiting operations was issued. Dumping rubbish would be allowed to continue, but garbage was banned. Problems persisted, however.

In July 1958, a massive fire ravaged the site. Despite the best efforts of five area volunteer fire companies, flames could not be contained. The decision was made to allow the fire to burn itself out, which ultimately took thirty hours.

Franklin Park firefighter Paul Hague explained that water had no effect on the deep layers of debris, most of which was piled at the bottom of a hill. An adequate water supply was also a problem. The nearest hydrants were in North Park. It was only after Ingomar Junior High School [Ingomar Middle School] was built that the borough had its first hydrant where firefighters could fill their pumper truck. Until then, water was pumped from residential cisterns.

Former Franklin Park resident Patricia Webb Richardson recalled this particular fire from her childhood. "We could see the fire from my parents' bedroom window [Crestview Drive] and spent much time looking at it. My mom was worried to death about my dad fighting a fire in that environment. It seemed to go on forever. When he came home, he ran directly to the shower, needless to say. He said the fire was horrible. He talked about rats running everywhere and how difficult it was to fight."

Firefighter Gene Six remembered a series of dump fires, due in part to the oil in the Allis-Chalmers transformers that were hauled to the site. He also told of seeing rats "as big as cats" that became a widespread problem when I-79 highway construction disturbed the site.

As complaints about odor and vermin continued to mount, the Allegheny County Health Department carried out a series of inspections and by 1964, a contempt of court hearing resulted in the dump's closure. Property owners attempted to convert the site into a golf course, but the project was never completed. Instead, PennDot covered the hillside with about fifty feet of fill from the construction of I-79 through the adjoining valley.

In 1975, borough officials bought thirty-nine acres of the property for Blueberry Hill Park. Two years later, eleven acres were added to the northern side of the park where the log house and all purpose field stand. Thirty-five undeveloped acres between the park and McDevitt Road were bought in the mid-1990s. A donated acre of ground at the park's Nicholson Road entrance was the most recent addition.

At first, the property was used for storage, but by the 1980s, improvements were begun with the construction of a ball field and the first of what has become the annual Festival in the Park.

It was during a routine inspection in the summer of 1988 that the County Health Department determined Blueberry's water well along with that of a nearby home was unsafe for use, whereupon, local officials took immediate steps to lay temporary water lines into the park and neighboring Lin Point Court until permanent water service could be installed.

Demands for recreational facilities grew along with the borough's population. By 2001, a much needed activity center opened and quickly became a popular spot for wedding and graduation celebrations. October 2001 saw the first luncheon for seniors that have been held every month since. As more athletic fields and facilities were added, recognition was also given to the community's heritage. In 2002, the 200-year-old Jones-Neely Log House, which originally stood on Brandt School Road, was rebuilt in the park where it has since been used for recreational programs. A gazebo, picnic pavilion and maintenance building have also been added.

Blueberry Hill is the best known and most used of the borough parks. Recreational facilities include baseball, football and multi-use fields along with basketball and volleyball courts. The fenced Blueberry Patch playground built by volunteers is a popular spot for families with young children while the nearby pavilion and activity center are in heavy demand for recreational classes as well as private and community events.



Blueberry Hill Park's first Festival in the Park (1989), looking South.
Lin Point Court is seen across top of photo.