

Elm Park

CLOCKTOWER PARK

THE HEART OF WELLESLEY HILLS is Elm Park's 1.24 acre triangle of grass, trees and flowers at the foot of the Sprague Clock Tower. The park, named for the great avenue of elm trees that shaded this section of Washington Street at the turn of the century, marks the intersection of Washington Street with Worcester Street (Route 9).

During the late 1800s, when the villages that make up Wellesley were struggling for independence, North Needham—now Wellesley Hills—was the center of political and social activity. Since even earlier days, when this village was called Grantville, most of the athletic, social and literary clubs were here. Because the area was blessed with dry soil (meaning few mosquitos), pure water and invigorating air, the Elm Park Hotel was a favorite country retreat for tired or ailing city dwellers.

But times change and needs change, and in 1908 Town Meeting voted unanimously to issue bonds in the amount of \$10,000 for the purchase of the land for park purposes. After some delay in having the titles passed by the Land Court, the Park Commissioners completed the acquisition subject to access to the underlying Cochituate Aqueduct.

The aging Elm Park Hotel was quickly pulled down. Sale of its fittings raised almost enough money to pay for filling and grading the new park. Grading work was pushed to completion before the ground froze, and the Park Commission used the winter months to plan landscaping which would provide "a breathing space in the most approved form of landscape architecture."

The plan took shape in the spring of 1909. The lawn was specially seeded and gift trees and rhododendrons presented by leading citizens were clustered in a naturalized design. Bulbs were planted in the grass and throughout the borders. The Commissioners gave notice that changes to the apex of the triangle would be made at some future date.

In 1912 a plan was presented to the town by the Selectmen in conjunction with the Park Commission to swing the roadway across the narrow tip of the triangle. A large tree was saved by creating a safety island with an ornamental fountain. Although town

water lines still cross at that point, the tree and the island are now part of the intersection.

A major improvement to the park took place in the depression year of 1928. In testimony to the optimism and affluence of Wellesley, Town Meeting appropriated \$12,000 for a clocktower to house the Shaw clock and bell, which are of considerable historic interest. The clock is by Edward Howard, who built the country's first watch factory in 1840, and the bell was cast by William Blake. They were given by John Shaw in 1874 to the Shaw School, which stood at the corner of Forest and Washington Street. The top floor of the school was known as Shaw Hall, and Wellesley town meetings were held there until Town Hall was built.

AS IS CUSTOMARY IN WELLESLEY, a committee was formed to implement the clocktower project. Members of the committee included Park Commission Chairman Isaac Sprague, Holker Abbott, John Hopkins, Brainerd Bates and Richard Henry. Park Commissioner Benjamin Proctor, Jr. was selected to design the tower and Isaac Sprague supplied the local fieldstone. Today, the 65-foot-high Sprague Clock Tower marks the crossroads of Wellesley and the center of Wellesley Hills.

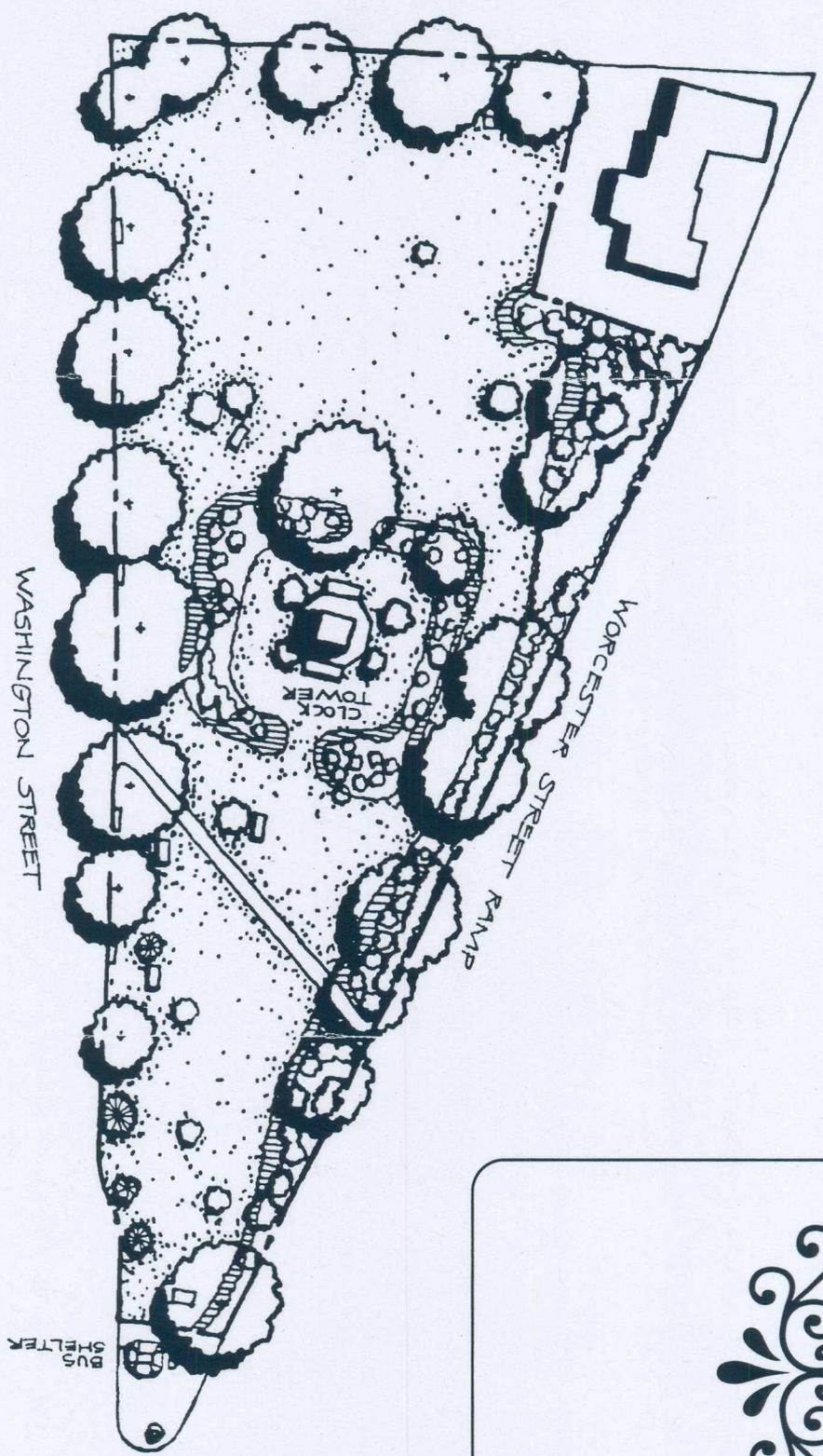
Wellesley's garden clubs inherited the traditions of our 19th century village improvement societies. Elm Park's award-winning landscaping has been cared for by the Hills Garden Club for over 40 years. Working with the DPW Park & Tree Division in keeping with the policies of the Natural Resources Commission, the Hills Garden Club has redesigned the plantings around the base of the clocktower on several occasions and has purchased and planted the trees, shrubs, perennials and thousands of bulbs that make the park so inviting. The brick pavilion is also a gift from the Club. Thanks to the Club's continuing contributions, Elm Park today offers relaxation and refreshment to the entire community at a major crossroads in the center of a lively shopping area.

Wellesley's park system relies on this time-honored tradition of caring and giving. So, when you pause at a summer's flea market or enjoy an ice cream cone in the shade, take a moment to remember why these simple, irreplaceable things are possible.

—Natural Resources Commission 7/95



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*One of a series from the Town of Wellesley Natural Resources Commission
and the Public Works Park & Tree Division*