

Re-dedication of Shaw Park

(Prepared by Paul Lovett, Rehoboth Historian)

In 1920, Benjamin F. Shaw gave the City of Rehoboth the property we know today as Grove Park. It was given by Shaw to the City for the purpose of providing visitors to Rehoboth a place to camp. The half-acre property, in a shaded grove of trees, was adjacent to and on the north side of the railroad tracks next to the canal. The Park became highly popular, particularly for those arriving by the newly invented automobile. For seventy years it was known as Shaw Park. Many folks today have fond memories of camping in the park...fishing, crabbing, swimming and boating in the canal...and near enough to enjoy Rehoboth's beach and boardwalk. By the 1990s, however, the camp had fallen into disrepair and the townsfolk voted to discontinue leasing to campers. The property was cleaned up and re-purposed. In the transition, the park took on a new name, Grove Park. It is likely that those who transitioned the name were unaware of the historic significance of its benefactor, Benjamin F. Shaw.



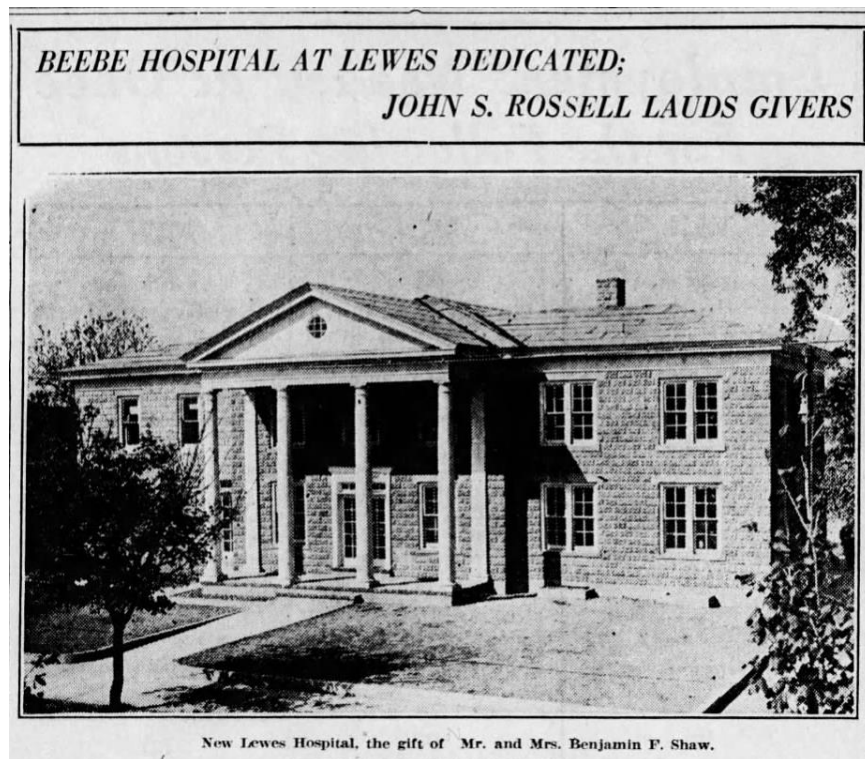
Benjamin F. Shaw

Benjamin F. Shaw had a "Cottage" on Surf Avenue (Boardwalk) on the north side of Baltimore Avenue. He was one of several wealthy cottage owners on Surf Avenue in the early 1900s. Shaw made his fortune as the founder of a steam piping company in Wilmington, Delaware. During the early 1900s the company grew to provide steam piping systems for municipalities and companies throughout the United States and even the UK. Shaw was a prominent and benevolent figure in Wilmington, on the boards of several organizations, civic and philanthropical. He initiated the Washington Heights Park commission and was the central figure in the establishment of the Brandywine River Zoo. Shaw purchased the Webster Cottage in Rehoboth, on Baltimore Avenue at the Boardwalk, in 1911. After retirement from the City of Wilmington Board of Water Works, Shaw summered at his new home in Rehoboth, frequently entertaining guests from out of town.

In 1914, Benjamin Shaw transitioned his managerial capabilities into assisting Rehoboth. He became a commissioner of the city in 1914. During his 11-year commissionership, he oversaw the Streets and Real Estate Committees. He was instrumental in the creation of the Rehoboth water system, a project that began after a particularly damaging fire in 1913. Shaw contributed his own funds to initiate the project rather than wait for a bond issue to be completed to fund the project. Shaw also was a major factor in reorganizing the Rehoboth beachfront after the devastating storm of January 1914 that destroyed Horn's Pavilion, the boardwalk, and Surf Avenue itself.

Benjamin F. Shaw headed the automobile, yachting, and gunning clubs of Rehoboth and was an organizer of the Kent and Sussex Fair. With the Red Cross, Shaw initiated the Rehoboth Beach patrol with two lifeguards. His contemporaries in Rehoboth management included Willard Truitt who established the town's electric system and power plant; Charles Horn, whose Pavilion over the beach at the end of Rehoboth Avenue was legendary; Edward Hill, who established the City's first bathhouse at the end of Rehoboth Avenue; Robert Hinckley, nationally famous portrait artist who owned the Belhaven Hotel; John Townsend, Cannery owner, Governor of Delaware, then Delaware's Senatorial Representative in Washington; and Richard and James Beebe, founders of Beebe Hospital.

Benjamin F Shaw completely financed the construction and fit out of the first Beebe Hospital in the mid-1920s. And he financed a major addition to Beebe Hospital in 1927 that he dedicated to his deceased daughter.



Benjamin F Shaw sold his holdings in Rehoboth in 1927. He died in December 1929 at the age of 71.

Shaw Park History

Benjamin F. Shaw gave the property that became Shaw Park to the City of Rehoboth in 1920. Shaw paid for clearing the lot of underbrush and added picnic tables and facilities to the grounds. Several enhancements to the park were made by the City in the years that followed including a dancing pavilion, a boat dock on the canal, three wells for drinking water, and toilet facilities. It was opened for free camping in 1924. Streetlights were added to the park in 1927. A new American Flag was raised over the park by Mayor Satterfield in a Memorial Day ceremony in 1926. The ceremony was financed and presided over by Benjamin Shaw. The Park became an important attraction touted by the city.

The park was listed among National Automobile Parks. Cars with licenses as far away as California, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Illinois were among those who stayed at the park in 1924. Some campers stayed for two to three months. Forty people in pitched tents occupied the park on a July day in 1927. A month later locals took Shaw Park campers into their homes to ride out a severe storm. The Park was used for a variety of meetings, events, and gatherings in the late 1920s and 1930s. By 1950 camper trailers were common at the park. Rental was \$1/night or \$5/week, payable to the city.

The Park was known as Shaw Park until the late 1980s. By that time, however, it had fallen into disrepair, occupied by older trailers that had been there for decades. Rehoboth residents began to propose ideas to convert the property for other uses. City residents voted to discontinue leasing for campers in 1990. Long time Camp Shaw residents were disappointed to learn the park would be closing. Shortly thereafter Rehoboth began re-investing in the park, adding the new comfort station and the tot lot. In the process, City management began referring to the property as Grove Park.

The folks who re-named it may not have known why it was called Shaw Park. If it was not a purposely made change, it is probably time to re-dedicate the space as Shaw Park.

Paul Lovett is the creator of the diorama of Rehoboth Avenue during the Railroad Era. To arrange a visit to the diorama, which is currently at the Main Street Offices by Grove Park, contact him:

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