

# MARATHON PARK *IT ALL STARTED HERE*

## 1897: The 'American Marathon' Begins in Ashland

The very first of Boston's many marathons, the "American Marathon" began in a cloud of dust to the left of where you stand.

On Monday, April 19, 1897, 15 runners toed the line that BU law student Tom Burke, a double-gold medalist sprinter at the first modern Olympic Games in Athens just a year prior, scraped with his boot heel across the dirt road fronting Metcalf's Mill.

At the time, the very idea of running 40 kilometers or 24.85 miles was still thought to be foolhardy and somewhat fraught with danger. Eighteen had entered, but only 15 brave souls answered the call.

On the 122nd anniversary of the "Shot Heard Round the World", ironically there was no starter's pistol available that Patriots Day in Ashland. So, at 12:19 p.m., starter Tom Burke yelled "Go" and the fateful journey began, its first destination Boston's Back Bay and then finally the history books.

One newspaper report of that day stated that an immense crowd was gathered around the starting area and lining the course, while another described Ashland as a sleepy old town that rang out with cheers.

Some spectators were drawn by curiosity, others to witness the competition and still others in anticipation of a catastrophe.

Many shouted encouragements through cardboard megaphones, while some rang bells or gongs, creating an ear-splitting racket.

Most everyone present that day was enthralled by the spectacle.

Many in the crowd had ridden the rails west from Boston to Ashland that morning. As the runners disappeared from view, some climbed on a train heading east. The train stopped several times along the course to allow riders to check on the race as it progressed before carrying its passengers into Boston to witness the finish.

Besides the surging crowd sometimes choking the path, 14 of these runners weren't alone on their arduous trek.

Those 14 were accompanied by a soldier on a bicycle to provide water and attend to any medical needs. Men on horseback and groups in horse-drawn carriages also joined the parade along with many bicyclists and even a few of those new-fangled motorcars, together creating an ever-increasing cloud of dust darkening the skies that warm spring day.

The 15 intrepid competitors were split into two camps, one cohort from the Boston area, the other from New York. Two runners

**RECORD TIME.**  
J. J. McDermott Wins the "Marathon" Race.  
Belongs to Pastime A. C., New York.  
Takes Lead at Newton Lower Falls.  
Grant and Gray Had Led Till Then.  
Harvard Man Runs Pluckily After Being Overhauled.  
Kiernan Finishes Second and Rhell Third.  
Cheers for the Runners All the Way from Ashland.



John J. McDermott

surged to the lead and then settled into a duel at the head of the pack, New Yorker Hamilton Gray and Harvard man Dick Grant, a crowd favorite and

also a late entrant and therefore unaccompanied by any attendant pedaling a bicycle beside him.

The two raced through South Framingham and on into Natick with Grant in the lead, Gray close behind and another New York runner, John J. McDermott, biding his time and measuring the frontrunners, snugly sitting third.

McDermott was 25 years old and slight of frame at 5-foot-6 and 123½ pounds. A photo engraver by trade, McDermott had gained a small measure of fame by winning the much-maligned marathon staged from Connecticut to New York City in the early fall of 1896. Marred by bad weather and a soggy running track, that race became a drawn-out walking duel, disappointing many, and it was abandoned after its very first edition.

The hills of Wellesley and Newton have been the graveyard over the years for many who have

sprinted to the lead and so it was for Gray and Grant that first race.

The cagey McDermott first overtook Gray, who then slowed to a walk, and then he bested the game Grant on a downhill slope.

Grant gave chase for a mile or so before he finally succumbed to fatigue and collapsed. Revived slightly after being hosed down with water from a tank truck, Grant tried to continue but his blistered feet protested and he dropped out.

McDermott now had a comfortable lead in an uncomfortable situation.

The mobs of spectators sometimes blocked his path and the dust rustled up by those accompanying him was suffocating. And, of course, his real enemies, fatigue and foot blisters, were singing a siren's song.

In Newton, around 20 miles into the race, McDermott too slowed to a walk. But, sure that opponents were gaining, all at once he broke into a sprint, causing a terrible cramp. His leg was massaged by his attendant while the swarm following him stopped and waited with bated breath.

The gritty McDermott soon found a reservoir of inner strength to overcome these obstacles and hobble onward to Copley Square.

Sometimes running, sometimes walking, and once even having to navigate his way through a funeral

procession blocking the crossroads at Boston's Massachusetts and Commonwealth avenues, McDermott finished the grueling event in front of a packed house at the Irvington Oval in 2 hours, 55 minutes and 10 seconds.

Another New Yorker, John Kiernan, was second at 3:02:02. E.P. Rhell of Jamaica Plain was third, exactly four minutes behind Kiernan. Gray managed to rally and finished fourth, another five and a half minutes later.

There was no rally for Grant that day but he returned to Ashland for the next few races, running strong among the top finishers and even took second in 1899.

Attrition also played a role at the back of the pack with only 10 of the 15 starters ever reaching Copley Square.

While McDermott won that first race, it came at a steep price. He lost more than nine pounds from his already lean physique, finishing a race he began at 123½ pounds less than three hours later at 114½ pounds.

Immediately following the race, his body spent, his spirit depleted, McDermott spoke of leaving distance running to others in the future, but he did return to Ashland the following year for an encore, bettering his 1897 winning mark by 53 seconds while finishing fourth.



Metcalf's Mill, circa 1900.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### Why Start in Ashland? It Began With a Bicycle Ride

You may wonder why the Boston Athletic Association chose the spot directly to your left as the starting line for the marathon race it first championed in 1897?

Strangely, for a footrace, it was based in Ashland thanks to plenty of pedal power.

Details for the race, soon to be labeled the "American Marathon", began to emerge in 1896.

The BAA had chosen April 19, Patriots' Day, a state holiday just established in 1894, for its race date and eyed Lexington or Concord for its starting point.

Alas, although the historical link with either

town and Patriots Day was perfect, the insufficient distances from those colonial hot spots was not. Ashland's location then became the focus for the effort.

Once again in search of a suitable distance and course a BAA official, Henry H. Holton, mounted his bicycle and followed the Boston & Albany Railroad tracks west from the Irvington Oval, an indoor track & field facility and the already determined finish line once located near Copley Square, all the way out to Ashland.

Using a "wheel counter", a primitive measuring device, Holton determined that the road in front of Metcalf's

Mill, once standing on this very spot across from the railroad tracks and alongside the Sudbury River, indeed satisfied the requirement of standing 40 kilometers, or 24.85 miles, from that Back Bay oval.

Holton marked the spot, therefore cementing the mill's, and Ashland's, place in distance running lore.

Locations of historical import seldom start out that way. Most often it's just luck of the draw, a natural calamity, an act of war or just some random unforeseen action or event.

So it is with Metcalf's Mill, Ashland's Marathon Park and Holton's "wheel counter."