

Making Historical Case for Marathon Park: From the Mayflower to the Marathon

SPECIAL REPORT / By Stephen H. Flynn
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A spot in sport's Parthenon is precious.

Witness the towns of Cooperstown, N.Y. and Hoboken, N.J., both which profess to be site of baseball's first organized game in the 1860s. Ditto for hockey. Two Canadian cities, Kingston, Ontario, and Moncton, New Brunswick, contend for that crown.

Surely unaware then of the significance and future import of any "first game", the mid-19th century press coverage was scant and regionally fragmented so much so that, in the fog of history, all these claims retain some credibility.

But, unlike these two sports, there is no doubt where the first modern distance running event was held. That's Greece.

Inspired by the ancient Greek legend of Pheidippides, when 25 intrepid Olympians raced from the village of Marathon through the hills of southeastern Greece and into a downtown Athens stadium on April 10, 1896, a new, modern sport, the 40-kilometer footrace or marathon, was born.

Later that same year, as Hal Higdon describes in his wonderful 1995 coffee-table book, "Boston: A Century of Running", there was an attempt to reconnect the Athens event, starting in Connecticut and ending in New York City.

Thirty men began the trek south from Stamford but a wintry weather mix made for muddy roads and a sloppy track, unusual for an early fall day. Even the leaders sometimes walked en route to Manhattan's southern tip, Higdon wrote. Despite its protracted conclusion, there was much fanfare at the finish line but also some discouragement and the race sponsors, the famed Knickerbocker Athletic Club, soon bowed out.

One year and nine days after the Athens race, Ashland's place in distance running history was secured when the first "American Marathon" was staged from there, Higdon enumerates in "Boston". Bound for Boston's Back Bay and the history books, just 15 runners crossed the makeshift starting line scraped by the heel of a race official across the rough roadway fronting the Metcalf's Mill property on Pleasant Street, now Marathon Park.

Obscured by the passage now of 15 years, several actions and events preceded that April 19, 1897 milestone but most important, in Ashland's case, was the task one fellow completed, thanks to plenty of pedal power.

The Knickerbocker AC's Copley Square counterpart, the Boston Athletic Association, which had a strong presence at the Athens Olympics, also harbored a desire to recreate marathon glory, this time in Massachusetts, Higdon recounts in "Boston". As shown in the intervening years, the BAA embraced the endeavor with a lot more dogged resolution than the New Yorkers.

But first there was a bicycle ride.

Details for the "American Marathon" began to emerge in 1896. According to Higdon, the BAA chose April 19, Patriots' Day, for its date and eyed Lexington or Concord for its starting point. Alas, although the historical tie-in at either location with Patriots' Day was perfect, the insufficient distances were not and Ashland's location then came into focus.

As Higdon details in "Boston", a BAA official, Henry H. Holton, mounted his bicycle and followed the Boston & Albany Railroad tracks west from the Irvington Oval, an indoor track and 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, Higdon wrote, Holton determined that Metcalf's Mill, across from the rail tracks and alongside the Sudbury River, was indeed 40 kilometers from that Back Bay oval. Holton marked the spot, therefore cementing the mill's and place in history and kicking off "The Ashland Era".

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, Marathon Park and Holten's "wheel counter."

The history of Framingham, Massachusetts states that, in the mid-1800s, a box-and-planing mill had been located at the Sudbury River site, built up by Josiah Cloyes who, according to the Ashland Historical Society website, was a scion of a family that had a member convicted in the Salem Witch Trials of 1693.

The Metcalf's family lineage was not as colorful but it does stretch back to the mid-1600s in the Framingham area and, according to the historical society's website, the family maintained several homes grand for the era in the vicinity of what is now Marathon Park. Josiah Cloyes was married to Lydia Metcalf, daughter of Fisher and Lydia Metcalf.

According to the "History of Framingham", the Sudbury River supplied power for and otherwise supported operations at many mills and factories along its banks, including mills for cotton, wool, paper and corn meal as well as shoe factories and Cloyes' wooden box concern.

The Metcalf Mill began operations in 1840, supervised by Henry Bacon and later Micah Priest before being sold in 1857 to a Maine native, Alvah Metcalf, according to an online historical archive of Greater Framingham's leading businessmen. Any

familial link between Alvah and Ashland's Metcalfs remains uncertain.

Alvah Metcalf was born in Appleton, Maine in May of 1824 and later married Harriet Hannah Vose, whose Franklin, Mass.-based family had connections going back to the Mayflower. According to an online Vose family genealogy summary, the couple had three children, two sons and a daughter. Alvah Metcalf was prominent in Ashland's town affairs, according to the businessmen archive, serving six years as a selectman and also on the school committee.

The mill, under Metcalf's "energetic management", quickly became an industry leader, according to the businessmen archive. Over 2 million feet of pine and 300,000 feet of hemlock boards were planed annually and fashioned into wooden boxes.

These boxes were then employed in the shipment of shoes from a large manufacturing plant located just down the street from the mill, Cliff Wilson, the president of the Ashland Historical Society, said.

The mill itself is described in the online businessmen archives as "The premises... comprise a main mill containing two stories and a basement... a two-story ell, 24 feet square, and a three-story ell of similar dimensions. Both water and steam power are available, the latter being furnished by a 25-horse engine, and employment is given to 15 assistants. These extensive facilities enable (orders to be filled) very promptly and at prices as low as the lowest."

Alvah Metcalf often worked alongside his employees and, Wilson said, he lost his left hand in 1881, taken off at the wrist by the planer at the mill.

A downeast Maine Yankee, Metcalf may not have understood or even cared about all the hoopla surrounding the fledgling marathon and, at any rate, did not live to witness the glory as well the chaos and a scandal that surrounded the early Ashland years of the "American Marathon." He passed away in May 1894, Wilson said, three years before the first race. Alvah and Harriet Metcalf's sons, Adelbert and George, operated the mill after his death, Wilson recounts, but never had much to do with the race itself. The mill subsequently closed in 1907.

David Foster, chairman of the Ashland Planning Board and a town employee, said the building remained shuttered for about five years after the mill closed until the Perini clan, an Ashland family buttressed by a vast construction fortune, bought the mill.

The Perinis converted the mill into an icehouse, employing waters drawn from the nearby Sudbury River and using the ice in their residence, a colonial they built next door to the mill, which after alterations through the years now houses the Ashland VFW Post.

Now a construction colossus, Perini Corporation had humble beginnings. Founded by stonemason and Ashland native Bonfiglio Perini three years before the first marathon, it now builds hospitals and casinos, has 16 divisions, a new name, an annual revenue of almost \$4 billion and is listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

The mill building burned down in 1932, according to Foster. The marathon starting line had already been repositioned several times at that point, switched around the neighborhood near Marathon Park as long-distance course measurement corrections were made, Higdon writes in "Boston". Then in order to finally comply, after some resistance from within its ranks, with the international Olympic standard recognized since 1908, Higdon wrote, the BAA finally relocated the line to Hopkinton in time for the 1924 race.

By then, Ashland had long since established its bona fides as "The Cradle of the Worldwide Running Boom," even if its recognition as such would have to wait almost 90 years.

Make no mistake about it, Athens was indeed the birthplace of the modern marathon in 1896, but New York's effort, in current parlance, was one-&-done that same year. Paris presented five marathons between 1896 and 1903 but, by the time Paris played host to the second Olympic marathon in July 1900, Ashland had sent off four marathons and continued to do so until 1923.

By April 1904, when the St. Louis World's Fair opened in tandem with the Third Olympic Games, bringing another marathon onto American soil, Ashland had already held the start to eight races.

In the beginning, the marathon's pioneers were a rough-&-ready band of ill-equipped students and tradesmen mixed with some eccentric professionals and a few professional eccentrics, all drawn to Ashland by an obsession with the race's daunting challenges and figuratively and liberally splashed the town with color for several days each April.

And while there were other endurance events available to fans as the 20th century began, marathons anchoring quadrennial Olympiads or long footraces, many just promotional gimmicks, at county, state or world's fairs or even days-long dance marathons, no similar event enjoyed the staying power or consistently captivated a huge annual audience like the marathon staged for its first 27 years from right here around Marathon Park.

Around the turn of last century, distance running was gaining a

devoted core of international competitors but while there were other races, most were shorter while others were unique concepts or just plain odd.

The Hamilton Around The Bay race, 18.6 miles along the shoreline of the western crescent of Lake Ontario in Canada, actually began in 1894 and continues to this day at three-quarters of the original 40K marathon length.

During "The Ashland Era", many Hamiltonians came northeast and had great success running "Boston", with four titles over the 27 years. Fierce animosity between the locals and the Canadians also bred a rabid rivalry between the provincial gamblers and their Bay State counterparts.

Locally, the Brockton Fair Marathon started in Copley Square and finished 25 miles south at the fairgrounds during its 10 summer runs (1908-17).

The 1918 Influenza Epidemic forced that year's fair to be canceled which also spelled the end for that marathon, but not before Clarence DeMar set its course record in 1917.

The Detroit News held a 26-mile race at the Michigan State Fairgrounds during the century's early years, but the dizzy event was 26 directly around the one-mile oval.

Directly following the 1908 Olympics, New York City came down with "Marathon Mania" and held five marathons, on Thanksgiving, the day after Christmas, New Year's Day, Washington's Birthday, and Lincoln's Birthday. Five marathons in 12 weeks! More than a century later, there's still no word on any survivors.

Each April 19th, Ashland, Copley Square and points in between captured the attention of the sporting universe.

By Patriots Day, the Stanley Cup had been over for weeks while the Celtics were still years away in the future. The Derby horses had yet to be shipped to Kentucky but the baseball season usually kicked off around then, commanding some notice.

Boston's National League club did open its season on April 19 for the first six years of the marathon and the team was a force until the Americans, later the Red Sox, came to town in 1901 and raided its roster. After that the Senior Circuit team was so bad it used aliases.

First, they were known as the Beaneaters, then the Doves for a short while until they became the Rattlers for a season. In 1912 they finally became the Braves. Later they were the Bees, until Lou Perini of the Ashland Perinis bought the club as WWII was ramping up. Perini, whose family bought the shuttered Metcalf's Mill and made it an icehouse, restored the Braves name and some sanity and dignity to the franchise after its decades in the wilderness.

Meanwhile the Red Sox of Duffy Lewis, Tris Speaker, Babe Ruth, Cy Young and Smoky Joe Wood were among baseball's elite, winning seven pennants and five World Series, amongst the cream of the crop until The Babe was banished to the Bronx in 1920.

The Braves, on the other hand, had just one single taste of success. In 1914, the "Miracle Braves" were in last place on July 4 until they went on a tear, won the pennant and became the first team ever to sweep a World Series.

The team's owner was so emboldened by that true "miracle" that he built the major league's biggest ballpark, Braves Field on Boston's Commonwealth Avenue, in 1915. The team unfortunately reverted to its old mediocre ways and rattled around the cavernous field in anonymity, for the most part toiling in front of family and friends.

With the Braves mired in the middle of a half-century of morass, Red Sox opening games may have poised true competition for the race on Patriots Day, but that only happened twice, in 1902 and 1910. After the first six years, the Braves only opened once on April 19, in 1919.

For the great majority of years during "The Ashland Era" the race had a clear field and the Ashland starting line was thus the focus of the sporting public's attention.

With rival races running shorter distances or with even shorter life spans, the Olympic marathon once every four years and always at a different site was the only consistent alternative to the Ashland-to-Boston race until 1924, when a race in Kosice, now in current-day Slovakia and known as the International Peace Marathon, began as, coincidentally, the starting line moved to Hopkinton.

Year-after-year for the first quarter century-plus of distance running, Ashland nurtured and nourished the sport and played host to its annual gathering of the clan some 27 times, often at W.A. Scott's Hotel, later the Ashland Hotel and now known as John Stone's Public House.

Ashland truly is where distance running scuffed up its baby shoes, cut its teeth, suffered some growing pains but finally matured and came of age, hence its label... "Cradle of the Running Boom."

While the marathon was gaining in profile, the situation at the site of Marathon Park was the direct opposite. In Depression Era America, fame and fortune were fleeting.

With the starting line moved over the border, the mill building burnt down and forgotten, the Peasant Street site

lay fallow, overgrown with weeds, discarded. There was only one marker of past glories, the size of a puritan headstone with "B 25" chiseled on it, squatting across the street to the railroad tracks about 40 yards away from the riverside, hardly in plain sight. It remained that way for almost 70 years.

Then, two Ashland residents, disheartened by the condition of the starting line site and the loss of its legacy, took matters into their own hands.

One was the late Dick Fannon.

Fannon was formerly president of the Ashland Historical Society and probably the impetus for the park project, according to the society's current president, Wilson. "Dick was our resident expert on the marathon and he fashioned a sign similar to Hopkinton's 'It All Starts Here' sign," Wilson said via e-mail. "Dick's sign read, 'It All Started Here'."

Steadfast in his belief Ashland deserved its place in history, Fannon campaigned on that theme for many Patriots Days, Wilson said. "Dick would stand along the route on marathon day with his sign (approximately 4x6 feet) which he later mounted (on a tree) at what is now Marathon Park."

The other key figure behind the original effort was Foster, Ashland's planning board chairman.

A Brookline native and 26-year Ashland resident, Foster said he was approached in 2004 by two Ashland High students, Matt Meade and Ilon Keilson, with a drawing which would form the basis for Marathon Park's initial rehabilitation project.

Buoyed by the fact that within the boundaries of the projected park remained some of the mill's foundation stones as well as its grinding stone, both historically significant, Foster volunteered to lead that effort. "I thought Ashland had been ignored next to Hopkinton as far as the marathon start goes," Foster said. "Ashland had a lot of history, more than people realize, so I thought it was time for the town to make a statement."

Backed by a \$50,000 grant from the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and some funding raised under the Community Preservation Act, Foster set out on an ambitious path which included the completion of landscaping, brick and paved walkways, the construction of benches and podiums to hold informational placards and, as the park's centerpiece, a raised multi-use wooden fenced-in platform. All that was left in the short term was some decorative signage and those informational placards.

Foster also held long-range dreams of creating a large stone wall with all the Patriots Day winners engraved upon it. But then the money ran out.

After attempts to raise more funding failed, Foster found himself at loose ends as far as the park was concerned. Marathon Park once again was on the back burner, not quite finished.

In 2012, the Ashland Redevelopment Authority, or ARA, took up the task once again, this effort led by then-chairman Steve Greenberg and members Graham Ruggie, a local architect, consultant Enzo Scalora and Lt. David Beaudoin of the Ashland Police Department. Along with key members of the Ashland business community, this group produced the half-marathon and 5K races on the last Sunday of October. The Ashland Sports Authority, Inc., a non-profit 501(c)(4) corporation, was formed in 2013, and has assumed responsibility for the production of the race under the leadership of former ARA chairman Greenberg.

Proceeds from the annual event will be used to enhance Marathon Park and toward advancing a potential Marathon Hall of Fame to be located near the park on Pleasant Street.

When asked about these current developments Foster said that although he was no longer associated with the effort he was happy that once again it was moving forward. "I promised a lot of people, some who are no longer here, that this will get done, so I'm good with it."

"I'm the type of guy who's happy to plant a seed," Foster said, "Somebody else comes by and waters it, takes care of it, watches it grow. Well, that's all right with me."

Former ARA chairman Greenberg is a 27-year Ashland resident and a local real estate business owner who has served on many town boards and committees.

"The race is half the distance at 13.1 miles but twice as exciting because many types of athletes can compete and share in the nostalgia all while being the first participants at the original starting line's new beginning," said Greenberg in 2012, "lending new meaning to the slogan on the sign at Marathon Park, 'It All Started Here.'"

Distance running is now one of the top participatory sports in the world as well as a multi-billion dollar business. Residents of Ashland, indeed "The Cradle of the Worldwide Running Boom," certainly should agree with state Sen. Karen Spilka of the Second Middlesex and Norfolk district, who said at the March 29, 2012 dedication ceremony for the sign donated by The 26.2 Club to Marathon Park, "We have a jewel here."

(Some background material in this article was obtained from interviews or researched from online databases and newspaper and online archives. The content has been supplemented since its original posting.)