

## Daniel Waldo Field



### A Short History Of The Life and Achievements of Daniel Waldo Field

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(Excerpted from writings produced in 1969)

#### Part 1

*It was June 9th, 1938. Hundreds of people had gathered at Field Park in Brockton, Massachusetts for the first "Daniel Waldo Field Appreciation Day." The 82 year old regional hero was greeted with an exuberant welcome as he rose to thank the audience. Wallace Nutting, author of "England Beautiful," "Ireland Beautiful," and similar works on landscapes and parks throughout the United States praised him for "all the good he has accomplished." Brockton's park commissioner proudly noted that "When Field's Park is completed, it will be larger than Boston's 'Emerald Necklace' and New York's Central Park..." Rev. David B. Matthews, who had long been Field's staunchest supporter, concluded the program by declaring that: "he has loved his fellow man . . . and he has brought new beauty to the earth."*

A book of Daniel Waldo Field's poems contains the lines: "Happy the town blessed with a few great minds and a few great hearts. One such citizen will civilize an entire community." Field's book of "Meditations" submits that man's power over nature should "make the earth a more comfortable and cheerful place." His writings further reveal that, although he was a shrewd Yankee businessman, he was wholly attuned to the moral and physical needs of his developing city. None of his contemporaries could match his stamina and rare ability to effectively argue the tough local conservation issues of his time.

It would be impossible to interpret the fundamental forces that shaped Daniel W. Field's unique personality without considering his deep roots in 19th century Anglo-American culture. Although he was descended from a family that had produced U.S. Presidents, justices, doctors, ministers, scientists and inventors, he was even more influenced by his beloved Plymouth County "motherland."

Field's home town of North Bridgewater, now Brockton, has a remarkable 350 year history. Brockton — the only city in Plymouth County — is called "The industrial-urban descendant of the Pilgrims." The huge tract of land in Brockton's Montello section that was once owned by Field's family, formerly belonged to Perrigrine White — the first white child born in America. Field's parents and neighbors took pride in the fact that that the fruit trees White had planted on their land in the 1600's still blossomed and bore fruit in the late 1900's. They were also deeply affected by the fact that the soil they walked over each day had been traversed by both Pilgrims and Puritans when they established "America's first boundary line" between the "Old" and "New" Colony.



The homestead in which young Daniel was born in 1856, was surrounded by beautiful meadows, trout-filled rivers and virgin woodlands. A mile to its south lay the village center. It featured a classic New England church — once attended by John Quincy Adams — a beautiful “common” and a typical New England green. These were just a few of the underlying elements that would later inspire Daniel Waldo Field to give his money, time and expertise to help assure that Brockton would endure as a beautiful American city, “Worthy of its special heritage.”

Daniel’s legendary success in the business world was first cultivated as a young child. He often recalled how his mother contracted with him to pick up any sewing pins she might have left lying around “never to pass one by. When I collected so many, I was paid a penny” he said. “That was my baptism into the world of business and industry.” Meanwhile, he gleaned his legendary sense of thrift from a trio tiny children’s books, ‘Self Help,’ ‘Thrift’ and ‘Economy.’ “I read and re-read those books, and folks used to laugh at me as I walked around with one of them in my hand perusing it. I could almost repeat their text by heart.”

At the age of 10 Daniel spent his afternoons walking the aisles of local shoe factories selling candy to the workers. “It was the old Jessup candy,” he said, “which I bought for 2 an a half cents and sold for 5,” adding that it was “a neat profit.”

Although Daniel attended the excellent local public school system, he was not an outstanding student. This was partly because he felt that learning obtained from the great out doors was as meaningful as that obtained within classroom walls. Also, he was always quite sensitive to the attitudes of a his uppity village peers. Their genteel noses sometimes detected the *smell* of the

barn in his overall bearing, if not on his spotlessly clean clothing. It is interesting to note that, although he would later change his mind about the value of formal education, Daniel never made any apologies for his rural background. One of dozens of related quotes states that “Five years on a farm educates any active mind.”

Daniel finally left High School in his junior year to take over the job of caring for 40 cattle on his family’s farm. During this period, he spent a his spare time in gardening, specimen collecting and taxidermy. He also became keenly interested in cattle breeding. After a few years, it appeared as though he might be “settling in” to the life of a gentleman farmer.

One of the aspects of Daniel’s public school days that stayed with him throughout his life was his love of poetry. Several of his teachers imparted to him a deep respect for the works of Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson (a distant relative) and William Cullen Bryant — America’s greatest poet. Like countless other local students, he was also taught to love and appreciate the poems that Bryant wrote when he lived in North Bridgewater.

When Daniel was 18 years of age, and still working on the farm, Bryant made his last visit to No. Bridgewater. At the time, a number of leading citizens had proposed that the community be renamed in his honor. Most of them politely dropped the idea, however, after hearing their hero roundly deplore the chaos and stress in their still beautiful, but rapidly changing village. Bryant, who pointed out that “the whole place clatters,” had worked for many years for the New York Herald. In this capacity, he sometimes wrote about the “poisonous” effects of industrialization and urbanization. He was also a friend and supporter of the great landscape designer,



Frederick Law Olmstead, who created Central Park, plus several beautiful landscapes in the bordering town of Easton. The upshot was that Bryant nurtured the seeds of 19th century "natural romanticism" in the hearts of many young men like Daniel Waldo Field.

Although Daniel was satisfied with his life as a farmer, he became ever more attracted to the new opportunities developing around him in his rapidly changing neo-industrial community. Fascinated by the potential of making a great deal of money, he finally decided to seek formal training in business. At age 19, he quit farming and enrolled at Bryant and Stratton College in Boston. Within 8 months he had earned a bookkeeping certificate and returned home to Brockton.

Not long afterward, Daniel chanced meeting Brockton's first millionaire, Daniel Howard. The area's largest shoe manufacturer was so impressed by the young man's demeanor, he promptly offered him a job. Initially Daniel was given the task of keeping a set of Howard's personal books for eight dollars per week. Gradually, he was required to make out the company payroll, pay all bills, supervise shoe repairs and collect the rent from Howard's numerous tenements.

Daniel was given his first exposure to marketing and sales when Howard appointed him as his emissary to the American Centennial Exposition in Chicago. While Field's attractive displays generated many orders for Howard's huge Brockton plant on Montello Street, Field personally benefited from the experience as well.

During his spare time at the Exposition, Daniel familiarized himself with the works of several leading figures in the flourishing *American Parks Movement*, including those of Frederick Law Olmstead.

He also marveled at the dioramas and architectural drawings on display depicting utopian visions of future cities.

After three years of successfully providing numerous valuable services for Howard, Daniel's pay had risen to only \$20.00 per week. Having saved some \$1,500, he decided to approach Howard and ask if he could join him as a partner. When the crafty Howard asked where he thought he'd get the *additional* funds necessary to buy into his business, Field countered by warning him that "You'll lend it to me or I'll go into business for myself." Howard, who was not disposed to sharing ownership of his factory with anyone, laughed at his cocky young assistant, but offered to help him set up his own business anyway.

At age 23, Daniel rented the basement of the H.T. Marshall factory on Ward Street. He then hired seven shoe workers and — with Howard's support — started making men's shoes himself. That same year he married Rosa Howes of West Barnstable. Like many other wives of great Brockton shoe men, she provided critically significant help to her husband by working in the office as well as in the production room. Within five years, Field's men's shoe business was well on its way to becoming one of the largest of its type in the world.

In 1879, Field began to get involved in local civic issues. First, his neighbors successfully persuaded him to lead a movement to provide street lighting in Montello. Later, in 1883, he became the spokesperson for a group that was critical of some of the features of Thomas Edison's plan to install his latest power plant in downtown Brockton.

Field fully appreciated the potential benefits of electricity. Relatives like Cyrus Field and George Field had already made names for themselves in this



burgeoning new area of technology. Nevertheless, a design issue eventually put the idealistic 27 year old Field and the pragmatic 37 year old Edison on a collision course that would make environmental history.

As soon as Edison's workers began nailing wires to trees and buildings along the streets of Central Brockton, Field and his associates voiced concerns over aesthetics. Recalling the unsightly layers of telegraph wires and arc light wires existing in New York City, they warned that Edison was about to introduce similar chaos in Brockton. Many citizens were responsive to their threat that a "river of copper" would eventually cut through the branches of the ancient elm trees and darken the sky over the village center. This beautification issue was the first of several that Field would address over the next 50 years.

The final outcome was that — even though the decision involved some untested changes — Edison agreed to hide all his wires at least 2 feet below ground. Fortuitously, the decision made Edison's "Brockton Standardized System" even more singular than originally designed. For the first time in history, it combined the high energy efficiency associated with type H (three-wire) generation and distribution with the aesthetics associated with underground wiring.

When Edison's son, Charles, made a commemorative visit to Brockton in 1958 — 14 years after Field's death — he openly acknowledged how his father had to yield to local civic pressure and incorporate the three-wire underground feature here for the very first time in history. He added that — in his later years — his father took great pleasure from the fact that, "along with its many other benefits, the Brockton model system led to the salvation of millions of trees throughout the world."

Shortly after the above encounter with Edison, Field made his first trip to Europe. He now witnessed for the first time the astonishing benefits of open space and green belts in and around urban-industrial centers. It was then that a long suppressed idea surged to the forefront of his mind. "What a fine thing it would be," he thought, "to create such great open spaces in Brockton where working men, tired mothers and romping children could relax and enjoy the benefits of God's great and open fresh air." Field would remain sharply focused upon this vision for the rest of his life.

*Today, Field's unique efforts to provide the working class of Brockton with perpetual access to over 600 acres of open space and beauty are often taken for granted. It is the writer's hope that this series of articles might inspire increased awareness of Field's life and the need to be ever vigilant in preserving his Park. It is also hoped that they might result in the 9th day of June being again locally recognized in local schools as Daniel Waldo Field Appreciation Day.*

### Next Time

**Fields historic preservation plans:**

*"The emerald broach" vs  
"The emerald necklace."*

*(Note: For more information on the fascinating story of Daniel Waldo Field as well as the accomplishments of Thomas Edison in Brockton, please see the Brockton Historical Society's internet page: [WWW.BrocktnMa.com](http://WWW.BrocktnMa.com))*