

Burbank



Burbank, ca. 1940 SPSA 391-22

The origins of Luther Burbank School date to 1890, when Major Cicero Newell and his wife Emma started a semi-private residential school in Seattle in a rented house on East Union Street and 35th Avenue “in an effort to aid neglected, indigent, and unfortunate children.” The Boys’ and Girls’ Industrial School was operated by the Boys’ and Girls’ Aid Society under a board of directors that included a number of leading men of the city.

Overcrowded, the school was moved to a large hotel on the northwest side of Mercer Island, near present-day Calkins Landing, in a residential community called East Seattle. The Calkins Hotel was built by Charles C. Calkins in 1890 and hosted President Benjamin Harrison during his 1891 visit. The hotel closed during the national depression of 1893 and was destroyed by fire on July 2, 1908.

In order to provide an education for the children, Newell sought assistance from the Seattle School Board in March 1901. The following month, the board agreed to maintain a school “furnishing teachers, books and supplies and to pay [King] County a reasonable rent for rooms or building used for school purposes.” That same month, the board agreed to purchase the Calkins homestead on the northeast shore of Mercer Island for the site of a parental school, with the condition that the property could be legally placed within the limits of the Seattle School District. Parental schools were residential schools where school-age youth who were headed for delinquency were sent to be reformed.

In September 1901, the Newells moved with 40 boys and girls to a rented building in Seattle called The Pontius Residence (500 Second Avenue N). There they opened the Industrial School with Major Newell serving as superintendent and Mrs. Newell as matron. Major Newell took the boys to the purchased land on Mercer Island during the summer of 1904, where they lived in tents. This experience was hampered by an outbreak of diphtheria, but all of the children recovered. In 1905, the state legislature passed a bill authorizing cities with a population over 50,000 to establish parental schools under the newly formed Juvenile Court.

Details:

Name: **Parental School**
Location: 8400 SE 24th Street,
Mercer Island
Building: Wood
Architect: n. a.
Site: 16 acres (increased to 77 acres)

1905: Opened on June 10
1908: Addition (n.a.)
1914: Renamed Parental
Home for Boys
1929: Addition (Floyd A. Naramore)
1931: Renamed Luther Burbank
School for Boys on November 6
1957: Closed in Seattle School
District; leased to the state
1965: Closed as a school
1969: Site sold to King County;
City of Mercer Island took
control January 1, 2003
Present: Luther Burbank Park

The Parental School formally opened on June 10, 1905, with a ceremony attended by Seattle's mayor and school board. The school had two buildings, and the upper floors were used as dormitories. A third building was added in 1908. Sixty boys and girls attended and were taught farming, housekeeping, and academic work up to the 8th grade. Because of his wife's ill health, Major Newell retired soon after the opening of the school, and William and Minnie Baker became superintendent and matron. They served in this capacity until 1909 when Willis and Martha Rand succeeded them. Mr. Rand served as superintendent until 1942, completing 38 years with the school.

Under Rand's supervision, the school continued to expand. In 1914, a hospital, laundry, and barn were constructed. During the same year, the girls were transferred to a school of their own, the Parental School for Girls in Ravenna. Enrollment at the Boys' Parental, as it was then called, was 84 students. The site was expanded by 50 acres between 1920-25. In 1921, an additional cottage was built to the north. To relieve crowded conditions and reduce fire danger, a brick dormitory in the French Provincial style and a central heating plant were constructed in 1929.

The Boys' Parental School housed boys aged 9-17 who were committed to the school by the Juvenile Court of King County. It operated under a semi-military system, with the boys organized into three companies, each led by a captain and lieutenant. A brass band of 27 boys played for military maneuvers and entertainment. Parts of the grounds were devoted to agriculture, with the boys preparing the harvest for meals in the kitchen.

In 1931, Boys' Parental School was renamed Luther Burbank School for Boys to eliminate the stigma attached to the name "parental" and to provide inspiration by association with a person of high ideals.

Luther Burbank was a famous horticulturist who died in 1926 at the age of 77. Burbank pioneered the hybridization of plants and "grafting" trees, and is credited with creating the baking potato and the Himalaya blackberry—loved by some for its luscious fruit, despised by others for its invasiveness. Ironically, many of the site's delicate native vegetation are choked with Himalaya blackberry bushes to this day.

The Luther Burbank School, with an expanded program, accepted not only boys from Seattle and King County but also from other neighboring counties. It was linked to Seattle by ferry from Leschi until 1939 when a floating bridge was constructed.

In 1944, Burbank's enrollment peaked at 137 students and the average stay was nine months. The classrooms resembled those of any other Seattle Public School but with a smaller class size. Testing, in which the students ranked second in the district in IQ scores, demonstrated that the students were, for the most part, "boys of good intelligence from bad backgrounds." Services offered by the school included diagnostic service from the child guidance department, curriculum revision, parent and school relationships, placement, and follow-up. Seattle was one of the few cities in the nation where a school district provided this type of program. Detroit and Chicago had similar schools.

The school's agriculturist, James C. Johnson, retired in 1944 after working there for 29 years, teaching dairy farming, animal husbandry, and gardening. He observed, "Taking care of the horses is the job they all want, so I make them work up to it through poultry, truck gardening, pig-feeding and milking."

In September 1954, the school board ordered the closure of the school because the acceptance of students from outside the district “imposes on Seattle taxpayers an unfair and inequitable expense.” On July 1, 1957, the Seattle School District relinquished operation of Luther Burbank School to the State of Washington. The state agreed to pay \$50,000 annual rental on Burbank and Martha Washington School combined and to reimburse Seattle schools for supplying teachers. At this time, a portion of the property was sold to the Mercer Island School District.

Luther Burbank School operated as a school until 1965 when the boys were transferred to Echo Glen, which today is a medium/maximum security facility for juvenile offenders. King County purchased the site in 1969 with funds from the Forward Thrust Bond. The Mercer Island Community Center occupied the old dormitory building from 1970 to 1984, until parks department administrative offices took up residence. In addition to the 1929 dormitory, the steam plant and the foundation of a dairy barn survive.

In 2001, a \$52 million general fund shortfall led to the closure of 20 parks throughout King County, and Luther Burbank Park was one of them. In 2002, the King County Council approved the transfer of the ownership of the park to the City of Mercer Island, which took over operation and maintenance on January 1, 2003.

Today the park has an off-leash dog area, three tennis courts, a public boat dock and fishing pier, a swimming beach, children’s play area, and an outdoor amphitheater that was rehabilitated in the 1980s. A regional bike trail along Interstate 90 connects the park to Bellevue across Lake Washington and downtown Mercer Island via a landscaped lid over the freeway. The dormitory is being used by the Mercer Island Youth and Family Services (MIYFS) Foundation for many of their services.



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