

Charles T. Mitchell, Jr. Park

Charles Seger Recreation Center

Philadelphia was part of a movement in the early 1900s to build play spaces in cities; quality recreation spaces were viewed as a way to improve the lives of residents. This park was part of that initiative. When it opened in 1921, the park sat in the center of the Seventh Ward, the city's historic Black neighborhood. The construction and naming of the park reflects the racial, class, and political power struggles of the time.

In 1916, the City purchased the block bounded by 10th, Rodman, 11th, and Lombard streets. The plan was to tear down all the buildings and build a new playground. Equity Hall, a Black meeting hall, would remain at 1026 Lombard Street. This effort was led by Councilman Charles Seger.

WWI stalled the construction of the park. The city-owned block gained the label "Hell's Half Acre." Some religious and political leaders decried the area's gambling, drugs, and prostitution.

This story continues on the other side.



Philadelphia children at play



Seger tennis courts



Charles Seger was a longtime leader in city politics and the Jewish community. He died in 1919 and was succeeded by his friend and protégé Charles Hall.

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In 1920, Mayor J. Hampton Moore pushed for the demolition of the homes on the site and the completion of the park. This was partly an attempt to increase his power in the Black community. The Mayor proposed naming the park in honor of Phillis Wheatley of Boston. This started a bitter battle with Councilman Hall who had planned to name the park after Charles Seger, "the man who made it happen."

Many in the Black community decried being used as pawns by Mayor Moore in his attempt to expand his power. Other Black political and community leaders made calculated moves to support Councilman Hall. This helped secure political support for Black Republican leaders.

In the end, City Council overrode the Mayor and named the park after Seger. Later, Hall secured funding to demolish Equity Hall and build a recreation center in the park which was named in honor of famed Philadelphia educator Fannie Coppin Jackson. The Coppin recreation building fell into disrepair. The City demolished it in the 1970s and built a new, smaller building which opened in 1974.



In 1976 an ordinance proposed renaming the entire site after Charles T. Mitchell, Jr. who was the first Black supervisor employed by the recreation department. He was employed here starting in the 1930s and continued in various roles through 1971. He also worked tirelessly to help people living with disabilities. He served as chairman of an organization that won a landmark lawsuit that gave disabled children the right to education.

Some in the community were reluctant to change the park's longstanding name. A 1977 ordinance created a compromise. The recreation building was named in honor of Charles Seger. The park was officially renamed in honor of Charles T. Mitchell, Jr.



Fannie Coppin Jackson was the first Black principal of a school in the nation and ran a school that became Cheyney University.

Phillis Wheatley was a former slave and the first published Black poet who achieved international fame in the late 1700s.



*Frances Jackson Coppin
Park Recreation Center 1957*