

HOW THE ICONIC MEMORIAL CAME TO EDGEMONT PARK (HISTORY AND HERITAGE)

Montclair lost 69 young men during World War I. As soon as the war was over the citizens of Montclair recognized their responsibility to honor them for their service. But how?

May 31, 2021



The monument at Edgemont Memorial Park honors the 69 Montclairians lost in World War I. (MIKE FARRELLY / FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL)

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For Montclair Local

The Edgemont Park memorial to all those who made the ultimate sacrifice while defending our freedoms has long been one of the most iconic images of Montclair. The image is

incorporated into the township logo. We all know it and couldn't imagine it not being there.

There was a time, however, when the citizens of Montclair did not know how to honor those who fought in the First World War, or where the memorial should be located.

Montclair lost 69 young men during World War I. As soon as the war was over the citizens of Montclair recognized their responsibility to honor them for their service.

The question was how best to acknowledge their efforts. Many suggestions were presented to the Township Council. There seemed to be a consensus that the town should create a public space and erect a flagpole, or a fountain, or a monument, or a memorial hall.

Percival Gallagher of the Olmsted Bros. landscape architects was asked to look at proposed sites and recommend the best to the town. At a town meeting on Jan. 7, 1919, Gallagher narrowed it down to two sites: the vacant Presbyterian church at the triangle created by Bloomfield Avenue, Church Street and South Fullerton Avenue (the Hinck building and the Clairidge Theater are on the site today) and a site across Bloomfield Avenue from the municipal building at Valley Road (Valley & Bloom is on the site today; the municipal building is now on Claremont Avenue).

Gallagher thought the second site was superior to the first because it was more central and was more accessible. A referendum question was added to the presidential primary election ballot on April 27, 1920, to decide between the two sites.

The Valley Road and Bloomfield Avenue site received more votes, but problems arose right away. It was estimated that it would cost about \$325,000 to buy all the properties needed to create a park, and that didn't include the cost of building the park itself.

That was too high a budget for most Montclairians at the time. The site also meant a loss of ratables for the town; many people thought that the diminished revenues would lead to

higher taxes. The project went into limbo.

Various people continued to suggest sites. The Connolly Real Estate Co. offered a site in Upper Montclair. Several citizens wanted to see it at the top of the mountain, where Bloomfield Avenue and Claremont Avenue come together. A resident of Brunswick Road wanted a cross street cut between Midland Avenue and Park Street near Watchung Avenue, with some kind of memorial constructed on the street.

Toward the end of 1922 and the beginning of 1923 the council put a committee of community leaders together and charged them to figure out where to put the memorial. On Oct. 23, 1923, the committee announced that the memorial should be placed in Edgemont Park.

Even then, the debate was not over. A hastily formed citizens committee took out an ad in The Montclair Times warning that Edgemont School would build playgrounds, expand into the park and crowd out the memorial.

Edgemont Park was created from an old golf course in 1906. The golf course had closed and moved to Verona and West Orange. Toney's Brook was dammed up, and a small lake was created. The town already owned the land.

The decision to build in Edgemont Park set off another series of debates. Should the memorial be built on the island in the lake, or on the mainland portion of the park? Many thought that the island was too small, and that it would require the construction of a bridge.

By the end of 1924, after many discussions, the island had become the prime location. Some people wanted to name the island Lincoln Island. Some people wanted to change the name of the park to Memorial Park. Others thought it was disrespectful to change the name of such a lovely, well-known spot. It is officially known today as Edgemont Memorial Park.

\$100,000 was raised, and on Memorial Day 1925 the cornerstone for the monument was placed on the island. Charles Keck was chosen to be the sculptor. The monument was finally complete by Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1925, seven years after World War I ended. Keck's design won the Architectural League Medal for Outstanding Work by an American Artist for the year 1925.

Since then, monuments honoring the soldiers from Montclair who perished in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War have been placed on the island.

In many ways the memorial on the island in Edgemont Park has become the emotional heart of Montclair. Every year on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Veterans Day we honor those who have given all to protect our way of life. We would be hard-pressed to think of a more fitting place to do so.

"History & Heritage" is a series on Montclair history written by representatives of the [Montclair History Center](#) and the [Montclair Public Library](#). Mike Farrelly is a trustee of the Montclair History Center and has been the official township historian, a volunteer position, since 2004.