

# CHARLES E. BELKNAP

## BEST LOVED CITIZEN

Charles E. Belknap, Grand Rapids' most beloved citizen has passed on...

...Grand Rapids discovered that Charles Belknap possessed a secret: How to never grow old. The secret revealed itself gradually as the years passed and this brave, kindly and generous man availed himself of it to keep his shoulders erect, his eyes as flashing and clear as on the day Phil Sheridan commissioned him for bravery, a boy of sixteen with the heart and head of a captain.

The secret was that Captain Belknap exercised his soul by unselfish interest in others, unselfish service to the community he helped grow from a tiny settlement to wealth and greatness, an unquenchable enthusiasm for things that are right, and an ever renewing love of nature. He was a wholesome outdoor companion to thousands of Grand Rapids youngsters. The sincerity of their sorrow today is the highest of all tributes to the man. He was one of them, and younger in his last years than men of twenty. Perpetual youth through service and friendliness is open to all of us but only a few accept it.

Among older people Captain Belknap more than any other resident bridged the gap between pioneer days of free latchstring, and the bustling present. He helped us remember that we are a community, that we should take pride in our history and concern for our future, that there is something bigger than loyalty to our own set of books or our own retail district. The more we can think of Grand Rapids as the captain did—one great family which should work and stand together in civic unity as the little pioneer town did for protection and companionship—the more surely we shall progress as a city.

*Grand Rapids Press, January 17, 1929*

# Charles Eugene Belknap: His Life & Memorial Statue

October 17, 1846 – January 16, 1929

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Courtesy of GRPL: *Mayors of GR*

## Introduction –

I met Charles E. Belknap in 2001 while raising funds to restore the Kent County Civil War Monument and Fountain in Monument Park. While the funds were slow in coming, I felt it important to begin restoring other monuments and old Charlie was one of them.

Utilizing the known available resources, I conducted research at the Grand Rapids Public Library. Years later, I learned of the Common Council and City Commission Proceedings books and supporting documents and photographs at the Grand Rapids City Archives and Records Center.

I have used these archives for researching the Kent County Civil War Monument, Fulton Park/Veterans' Memorial Park, the Spanish-American Hiker, City Cemeteries, and now the Charles Belknap Statue and the parks where he has resided since 1931.

Here is the history.

## Article from the *Grand Rapids Press*, Wednesday, January 16, 1929 –

*Captain Belknap died Wednesday morning at 7:30 at his home, 516 Benjamin Avenue SE.*

*This simple announcement will bring reverent and sad pause to the minds and hearts of thousands who knew and loved the man. By the charm of his personality, his qualities of mellow friendship and his characteristic patriotism to country and community, Capt. Belknap endeared himself to man, woman and child near and far.*

*He began to lose his remarkable grip on health early last autumn, but he waged sturdy resistance to illness and*

INCIDENT IN BUSY LIFE  
JAN 16 1929

CAPT. BELKNAP, LOVED BY ALL, ANSWERS TAPS

In Public Eye Since Boy in Civil War, He Served City and Nation.

WAS "YOUNGEST OLD MAN"

Life Inseparably Linked with Picturesque Days of Early Grand Rapids.

Capt. Charles E. Belknap died Wednesday morning at 7:30 at his home, 516 Benjamin-av., S. E.

This simple announcement will bring reverent and sad pause to the minds and hearts of thousands who knew and loved the man. By the charm of his personality, his qualities of mellow friendship and his characteristic patriotism to country and community, Capt. Belknap endeared himself to man, woman and child near and far.

Funeral On Friday.

Capt. Belknap began to lose his remarkable grip on health early last autumn, but he waged sturdy resistance to illness and took pleasure in voting in the election of Nov.

Charles E. Belknap endeared himself not only to mature folk, but a friend of children. He was a boy to the Boy Scouts of Grand Is and interested himself also in the activities of the Camp Fire. This characteristic picture was taken on a nature hike with the two years ago.

BOARD SHOWS RESPECT

In the board of supervision

Courtesy of GRPM, GR Press Archives: *GR Herald 1.16.1929*

*took pleasure in voting in the election of November 6, using an absentee voter's ballot. Death was due to the effects of an intestinal growth.*

*Funeral services will be held at Fountain Street Baptist Church Friday at 2 o'clock. Rev Alfred W. Wishart, pastor of that church, will officiate. Burial will be private in Greenwood Cemetery.*

*Years rested lightly upon Captain Belknap. Their advance did not slow his step, their cumulation did not bend him. He loved the great outdoors, he loved the flowers and the birds, he loved his fellow men and to the end of his years his heart retained its youth. He was Michigan's youngest old man.*

*Captain Belknap's life was one of service. For four years he was in the army of the north, fighting for the Union. Returning to civil life he was a member of the fire department for ten years. He served as alderman of the old seventh ward for a term and in 1884 was elected mayor of the city. He served two terms as a member of congress.*

*He was a member of the board for the state institute for the deaf for six years and of the state hospital at Kalamazoo for ten years. He was chairman of the commission appointed to locate sites and place monuments and markers on the battlefields of Chickamauga and Chattanooga and through all the years he ever was the good citizen, good neighbor, good friend, ready to make any sacrifice of personal comfort or interest if he could be of help.*

*Captain Belknap was born October 17, 1846 at Massena, St. Lawrence County, New York. His home was on the Raquette River near its confluence with the St. Lawrence. His earliest memories were of the water and its sports. In 1853 his grandfather, John Joshua Belknap, a veteran of the War of 1812, came to Michigan to locate 160 acres on war scrip. He found a tract that suited him, near Jamestown, Ottawa County, and a year later moved in. With him came his son James A. Belknap and family. The son decided to locate in town. He was a blacksmith and iron worker and opened a shop on the canal front near the site of the present Pantlind Hotel. He did shipyard forging as well as blacksmithing and became an important factor in the local shipbuilding industry.*

*Capt. Belknap was 8 years old when the family came to Michigan. He attended the old stone school on the hill and later the old school where Union High now is located. In those days money was scarce and boys had to hustle for their own.*

*When his father moved his shop to the west side river front, where the Star Mills now stand, the boy found his opportunities in boating for the lumbermen. When the old Bridge St. bridge burned he operated a canoe ferry across the river. He carried a route for the old Grand Rapids Time when E. A. Gordon was its editor and slept in the office to be ready when the paper had been printed in the morning. Often he worked with his father in the shop and learned the rudiments of the trade as blacksmith and wagonmaker.*

*Capt. Belknap's father was one of the first to respond when the call to arms came in the Civil War. He enlisted in the 8th Michigan infantry and served four years. He was three times wounded at James Island, Knoxville and at St. Petersburg and returned home an invalid to retire to a farm near Sparta where he died in 1872.*

*When the war began, Captain Belknap, not yet 18 years old, was refused enlistment. He reopened the blacksmith shop which his father's leaving had closed, and for nearly a year carried on as best he could.*

*Then on September 12, 1862, he enlisted in Company H, 21st Michigan infantry, which rendezvoused at Ionia, and with his regiment moved into Kentucky by way of Detroit and Cincinnati. He became a Captain two years later. He fought at the battle of Chickamauga, where today there stands a monument of him. He was wounded four times. In 1864 he was the Chief of Scouts, of the left wing of General Sherman's Army on the march to the sea. The old 21st was one of Michigan's famous regiments serving as part of the Army of the Cumberland. The regiment was in 32 battles and was under fire 118 times. Capt. Belknap was with the regiment to the end of the war. He went in as a private and won promotion. Near the end of the war he was brevetted major and when the war ended he was made brevet lieutenant colonel. He was mustered out June 8, 1865 in Washington, D. C. He received his discharge June 23, 1865. He had ambitions to continue in the service and enrolled in the cavalry reserves but after a year and a half he let this lapse. After the war he was appointed historian of the Army of the Cumberland and served for twelve years.*

*After four years of strenuous battlefield and camp life Capt. Belknap could not settle down at once to peace vocations. He 'played around' for a year and then took odd jobs as paymaster of the lumber camps and for a time was with his father on the farm near Sparta. In 1870 he went back to the trade which his father had taught him. Two years later he started a shop of his own at Front Avenue and First Street and there he continued for nearly 50 years.*

*The Belknap wagon became famous in western Michigan for honesty of construction and durability. The Belknap logging truck, with wheels eight to ten feet in diameter, came to be used wherever lumbering was done. In later years the Belknap shop turned to wagon and truck bodies and then to motor truck bodies.*

*The business was reorganized in 1914, and in the deflation period following the war it met with disaster through the cancellation of contracts and defaults of those for whom work had been done.*

*For 10 years Capt. Belknap was a member of the fire department. He joined the department in 1870 soon after settling down to peace industry, became foreman of old No. 3 company which had its engine house on Scribner-av. just around the corner from his shop. For three years he was assistant to Gen. Israel C. Smith, chief of the department.*

*Fire service in those days was strenuous. The city was of wood construction, with frame store buildings lining the downtown streets and once started hard fighting was required to check the flames.*

*Between 1870 and 1875 in successive fires old Canal-st. was swept from Campau square north, and Bridge-st., N.W., was reduced to ashes. While in the department Capt. Belknap rode a high-spirited Kentucky bred, iron gray mare, Fly, and when the alarm sounded she was as eager as her rider to reach the scene of danger. When too old for further service the mare was sent to a peaceful pasture north of town and when she died two years later she was buried with her blankets in the woods. The mare was stabled in the barn? Near the Belknap home at night and in the day-time, had a stall at the shops, always the immediate reach should the alarm sound.*

*From his wagon shop Capt. Belknap had a view of the river from the dam to Bridge-st. and his shop became a life-saving station. An accident on the river, an overturned boat or boys beyond their depth, was the signal for a call and no matter what the work he had on hand, Capt. Belknap dropped everything to go to the rescue. He had grappling equipment and always knew where boats were to be found. Finding the body often was his job.*



*Soon after 'settling down' to business Capt. Belknap took an interest in city affairs. He served as a member of the board of education 1874-1881. In 1882 he was elected alderman from the old Seventh ward. In 1884 he was nominated for mayor with Adolph Leitelt as his opponent.*

*In those days the political lineup was the Republicans against the fusion Greenbackers and Democrats. E. B. Dikeman had served one term as a Democrat, then Crawford Angell was elected as a recognition of the Greenback wing. Mr. Leitelt was a Democrat, but the issue was not so much political as it was municipal policies.*

*The city with 45, 000 population had 216 saloons besides innumerable speakeasies. Public sentiment was awakening to a demand for better enforcement of the liquor laws.*

*Capt. Belknap was elected and during the single year of his administration succeeded in reducing the number of saloons and putting a reasonable amount of fear into the hearts of violators. This was the first real step toward curbing the liquor traffic in Grand Rapids. During his administration also the early steps were taken for the building of the city hall.*

*The plan favored was to acquire the entire block from Lyon-st. to Crescent-st. between Ionia and Ottawa-avs., but the demands for economy led to cutting this down to the present site. Capt. Belknap refused a second term, as business interests would not permit him to spare the time. The fusion forces won the three next elections and then as a forlorn hope he was nominated again in 1888, with Isaac M. Weston as his opponent. This campaign was one of the bitterest in the political history of the city, not so much between the opposing parties, however, as within the ranks of the Democrats and Greenbackers, Weston was elected by a majority of nine and this was so near a victory for Capt. Belknap that it put him in line for the congressional nomination the following fall.*

*The political situation in Michigan in those days was decidedly uncertain. The Republicans were in control but the margin over the combined Democrats, Greenbackers, Labor party and other opposition elements was narrow and in some sections had been entirely submerged. Grand Rapids was a fusion stronghold; in Kent county the opposition held all the offices. In this congressional district the combination of parties had been three times successful, in order electing Julius Houseman, Charles C. Comstock and Melbourne H. Ford. Grover Cleveland then was president with his first term drawing to a close, and in the campaign of 1888 was candidate for re-election with Benjamin Harrison as his opponent.*

*Capt. Belknap was nominated for congress. The campaign was one of the hottest this district ever knew, with an unprecedented massing of famous speakers, and with workers making door to door canvasses of the voters. Delos A. Blodgett was manager of the Republican campaign and he put into it all his zeal for the party and all his resourcefulness as a politician. Capt. Belknap was elected by a plurality of 2,667. In the national election Harrison was elected.*

*The Democrats had been in possession of the federal offices under Cleveland for four years. The Republicans were eager to get back. With his election Capt. Belknap's troubles began. Nearly every post office in the district developed a contest and the contests often became bitter. Two years gave Capt. Belknap all he wanted. He declined renomination in 1890, and Melbourne H. Ford was re-elected over Charles W. Watkins. Mr. Ford died soon after his term began and at a special election in the fall Capt. Belknap was prevailed upon to be a candidate and was elected over John S. Lawrence. In the campaign of 1892 the congressional opponents were Capt. Belknap and George F. Richardson, the latter backed by the fusion forces. On the face of the returns Capt. Belknap had 20,139 and Richardson 20,130. Capt Belk-*

*nap was given the certificate of election but Richardson contested and after a year a partisan congressional committee awarded him the seat.*

*In congress Capt. Belknap served on the military affairs and pension committees and was active in looking after the interests of his old comrades in the war. The tariff was the chief national issue and he voted with his party.*

*One incident in his congressional career not connected with statesmanship may be recalled. He joined the congressional party going to New York by special train for the launching of the New York. The train was sideswiped near Philadelphia, with cars derailed and many of the distinguished passengers injured. His old training as a fireman taught him what to do and he was foremost in the work of rescue. For this he was given a life pass on the Pennsylvania railroad division from Washington to New York and it was one of his treasured mementoes.*

*Retiring from congress Capt. Belknap returned to his wagon shop, but he did not lose his interest in public affairs. He was appointed a member of the board of the state hospital at Kalamazoo by Gov. Rich and served 10 years. Before that for six years he had been a member of the board of the state school for the deaf by appointment of Gov. Alger. In 1893 he was appointed chairman of the commission to locate sites held by Michigan troops and erect monuments on the battlefields of Chickamauga and Chattanooga, and this occupied his time for several years. The commissioner erected 11 monuments and 13 stone and many cannon ball markers. The report which the chairman compiled is regarded as high historical authority in all matters pertaining to this famous battle, the forces engaged and what they did.*

*In the Spanish war Capt. Belknap was recalled to service and at Chattanooga, under Gen. Brook, was assigned to service find wood for fuel and water for the camp. In the World war he was chairman of the selective draft board and gave unsparingly of his time and energies in patriotic services. He arranged parades and other public demonstrations, and if it were boys going away or boys coming home from the war it was Capt. Belknap who was called upon. In the Liberty loan, Red Cross, Y.M.C.A. and other drives he was tireless.*

*Capt. Belknap was a charter member of Custer post, G. A. R., a former member of the advisory board of the national G. A. R., a member of the Loyal Legion, member of the Army and Navy club, the Elks, the Lions and the Goodfellowship clubs, commissioner of the Boy Scouts, chairman of the commission to erect a memorial to John Ball in John Ball park and president of the Old Settlers Association.*

*With an education limited to such as may be gained in a small town school, Capt. Belknap was not equipped for literary work, but all his life he was a student and comparatively late in life he won recognition as a writer. This recognition was not because of grace in the use of words but because he had the message to deliver. Familiar from childhood with the ways of wild life, familiar through association with the Indians of western and northern Michigan, and with retentive memory for the pioneers and their strivings, he had the substance for authorship and style took care of itself.*

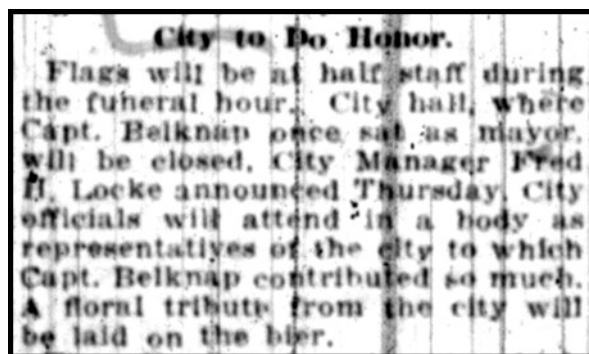
*Capt. Belknap began writing when he was in congress, chiefly special articles for the Detroit, Washington and Boston newspapers. He wrote a series of articles on the Indians for the bureau of ethnology and recalled a series of Indian myths for the National Folk Lore Society.*

*One of his folk lore contributions was the legend of the Arbutus and it became famous wherever arbutus grows. He was appointed historian of the Army of the Cumberland and served 12 years, compiling the*

annual publication. He was chairman and historian of the Chattanooga-Chickamauga battlefields commission. He was a frequent contributor to the local and other newspapers and his series of reminiscences of incidents and men published in *The Press* under the heading "Yesterdays of Grand Rapids", were published in book form as a valuable contribution to local literature.

He was collector of information relating to pioneer days, the Indians and the war and often lamented he lacked the time to put this into permanent form. Following his retirement from business he devoted his time largely to writing, to speaking at patriotic and other gatherings and to public service.

Capt. Belknap was married on Christmas day, 1866, a few months after returning from the war, to Miss Cleo Maybell Caswell, daughter of David Caswell, the first chief of the fire department. She died in 1902.



Courtesy of GRPL: GR Press 1.17.1929

## Capt. Charles E. Belknap, Grand-Citizen, Is Dead

**Spirit of Perpetual Youth  
in Gallant Soldier  
Abides With Those He  
Served; Funeral to Be  
Friday.**

Capt. Charles E. Belknap, whose record as public servant in Grand Rapids extended over more than six decades, died yesterday morning at his home, 516 Benjamin ave., S.E., after a long illness. He was 82 years old last October.


Funeral services will be held Friday afternoon at 2 o'clock from Fountain Street Baptist church. Rev. Alfred W. Wishart, pastor, will officiate; burial will be private in Greenwood cemetery.

Members of the Army and Navy club, to be named by the organization, will serve as the active pallbearers at the last services of Capt. Belknap, who as Civil war volunteer, mayor, congressman and worker in scores of patriotic, civic and welfare organizations and enterprises, had served his city and county since boyhood.

**Honorary Pallbearers**  
Honorary pallbearers will be Charles W. Garfield, William H. Anderson, E. A. Stowe, Julius Tisch, John W. Blodgett, Benjamin S. Hanchett, Col. James Sinko, Mayor Elvin Swarthout, Clay H. Hollister, Former Senator William Alden Smith.

Capt. Belknap is survived by three daughters, Mrs. James S. Knox, Mrs. Bertha B. Elias, Mrs. Charles Bousfield, all of this city.

1846--Charles E. Belknap--1929



—Ouster Elias

Courtesy of GRPL:  
GR Herald  
1.17.1929

## A Memorial -

It appears that it was understood that there would be some type of public memorial erected for Belknap following his death, even going so far as to have photographs taken of him at the time the John Ball statue was being discussed. The newspaper accounts of his passing include references to a memorial or statue of some type.

**A BELKNAP MEMORIAL**

The death of Capt. Charles E. Belknap puts the Grand Rapids community under a challenging obligation. This remarkable man who combined the vision and vigor of youth with the benign tolerance of age has left a great impress upon the community. As Dr. Wishart said in his beautiful eulogy, Capt. Belknap in his grave can continue to serve the community he loved if the example of his life is kept consistently before the people. "May this life," pleaded Dr. Wishart, "with its simplicity, its integrities and its devotion, serve to awaken in every self-centered man and woman in this city an honest desire to use resources of time, energy and money in the service of others." We as a community owe a most beautiful memorial to Capt. Belknap. But more than that, in a purely selfish sense, we can benefit our community by perpetuating the memory of his exemplary life. Fortunately we have functioning for just such a need as this the splendid Council of Advice of which Mr. W. A. Jack is chairman. What better initial task could that council undertake than to conscientiously seek out the type of memorial which shall be erected to Capt. Belknap, serving as a clearing house for suggestions and perhaps as a treasury for funds? In such an undertaking the council will tread upon no one's dignities or prerogatives. The Herald for one will wholeheartedly give whatever aid it may as an agency for the receipt of contributions or in any other service to this cause. Capt. Belknap nobly earned the gratitude of this community. The time in which to make known our gratitude is in the immediate present while the example of his sacrificial service is bright in memory.

Courtesy of GRPL: GR Herald 1.20.1929

**STATUE PROPOSED.**

A fitting statue should be erected by the city to commemorate Capt. Charles E. Belknap. It was stated about city hall Thursday.

The city manager asserted if such a memorial is to be erected it might be appropriate to make it a grouping with the captain surrounded by Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls, to whom he was devoted.

Capt. Belknap was one of the committee which went east a number of years ago for the John Ball statue and at that time the sculptor obtained photographic likenesses of him.

Courtesy of GRPL: GR Press 1.17.1929

**FINAL HONORS FOR  
CAPT. C. E. BELKNAP  
TO BE PAID TODAY**

**Almost Pioneer Simplicity Will  
Mark Services; City Hall  
to Be Closed**

Simplicity will mark the last honors which Grand Rapids pays to Capt. Charles E. Belknap, veteran public servant, whose funeral services will be held from Fountain Street Baptist church at 2 o'clock this afternoon. There will be a tribute by Dr. Alfred W. Wishart, pastor of the church; there will be no music but the organ. The burial

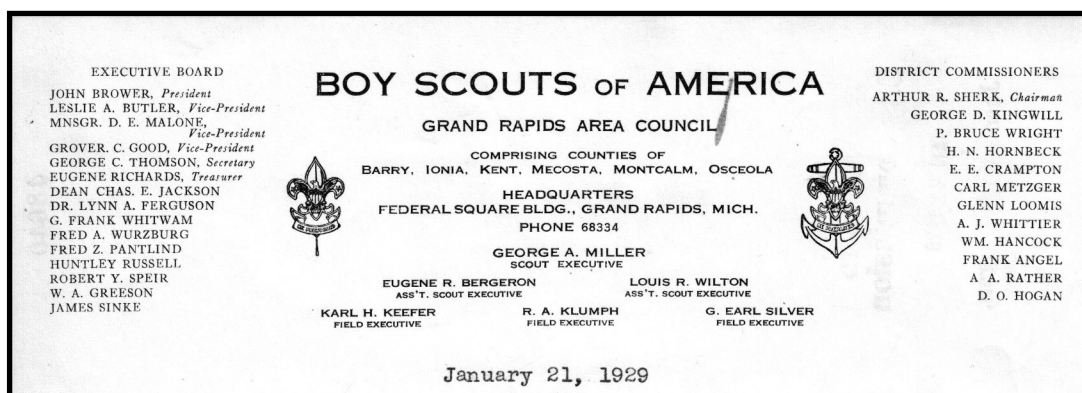
**FEELING GROWS FOR  
BELKNAP MEMORIAL**

A movement for a memorial to Capt. Belknap grew about the city hall yesterday. City Manager Fred H. Locke said last night it appeared to him that a citizen's committee appointed by the mayor could best handle the matter; it is probable action may be taken to bring such a committee into being next week, he said.

"It would be a fine thing," said Mr. Locke, "if we could get the captain in a group of Boy Scouts and Camp Fire girls, that would please him better than anything else. Some poses of the captain were taken at the time the John Ball monument was designed."

Courtesy of GRPL: GR Herald 1.18.1929

It appears that the Boy Scouts of America made the first official request to the City of Grand Rapids that a committee be named for the purpose of memorializing Charles Belknap in a letter to the City Commission dated January 21, 1929-



*"...We feel, in common with many other organizations and citizens, that the memory of a man so good and true should be kept alive through the means of some monument, or memorial, in order that coming generations may look back upon his life for inspiration and guidance. To that end we respectfully petition your Honorable body to appoint a commission, or committee, to decide upon such a memorial and recommend its erection to the citizens of Grand Rapids."*

- City Commission Proceedings  
 48640/1.21.1929 pg. 836

The Camp Fire Girls made a similar request in a letter dated January 21, 1929 -



*"We, the undersigned, representing the Camp Fire Girls of this district and the Officers and Board of Directors of the Grand Rapids Camp Fire Girls' Council, do hereby request and petition your Honorable body to favorably consider the erection of a suitable memorial to the memory of our friend and patron, the late Captain Charles E. Belknap..."*

- City Commission Proceedings  
 48641/1.21.1929 pg. 836

Mayor Elvin Swarthout wasted little time in recommending to the City Commission that a committee of fifteen citizens be appointed to *"...conduct a city-wide campaign for a fund of around \$30,000 to construct a suitable memorial...to commemorate the name and deeds of Captain Charles E. Belknap."*

*"...to insure the erection of a Memorial worthy of this life 'with its simplicity, its integrity and its devotion'; to the end that the Belknap Memorial shall for all time serve to awaken in every boy and girl and every man and woman who may behold it 'an honest desire to use their resources of time, energy and money in the service of others.'"*

- City Commission Proceedings  
 48642/1.21.1929 pg. 836



Two images of fundraising efforts that be undertaken by the Boy Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls. The first image is of two unknown Scouts with Mayor Swarthout and City Manager Locke. The sign behind them states funds for the Belknap memorial are collected there. The second image is the Camp Fire Girls in uniform with a donation basket.



Courtesy of GRPL: *Morris Collection*



Courtesy of GRPL: *Morris Collection*

The members of the Belknap Memorial Fund Committee were:

Grover C. Good / George A. Miller/ A.P. Johnson / Helen Lussenden / Mrs. Grace Dillard  
Fred H. Locke / Clay Hollister / John Emery / Samuel Ranck / Leslie Butler / Lee Bierce  
Burton Saunders / Laurence Smith / Charles M. Mayne / Mrs. Dudley Waters / George Ames  
Julius Tisch / Miss Annette Richards / Leroy G. Withey

- City Commission Proceedings  
48685/1.24.1929 pg. 853

A Resolution recognizing the life of Charles E. Belknap was read into the public record and an embossed copy presented to the family of Captain Belknap.

- City Commission Proceedings  
48886/2.27.1929

Belknap's sister, Bertha Belknap Bliss, sent a thank you note to Mayor Swarthout and the City Commission on March 2, 1929. The note also added a supplement to the resolution by reminding them that her brother was also as *"...devoted and affectionate father, grandfather, and great-grandfather as any family could ever know..."*

- City Commission Proceedings  
49169/3.5.1929 pg. 1015

On June 24, 1930, Elvin Swarthout, now no longer Mayor, sent a letter to Mayor John Karel and the Commission suggesting several steps to take to move the project of erecting a suitable memorial for Belknap to a successful conclusion. (Money had been raised but no decisions made.)

- City Commission Proceedings  
54314/6.26.1930 pg. 127

On July 2, 1930, Swarthout clarifies his previous letter and states that possibly the best action would be to find a memorial with the \$7,500 that had been raised.

- City Commission Proceedings  
54365/7.7.1930 pg. 141

Commission recommends no further fundraising take place and that a committee of five citizens consider the type of suitable type of memorial.

- City Commission Proceedings  
54455/7.14.1930 pg. 157

Mayor Karel appoints Elvin Swarthout (Chairman) / Paul Averill / Clay Hollister / Frank Steinman and George Miller to select a memorial.

- City Commission Proceedings  
54548/7.31.1930 pg. 187

The committee is about to let a contract for a memorial. The location will be chosen by the artist and may require a background of foliage. The recommended location would be a City park.

- City Commission Proceedings  
55205/11.3.1930 pg. 367



## MEMORIAL TO CAPT. BELKNAP DESIGNED



ward lights or the place for a flare as seen at the right.

One the back of the statue will be the inscribed Scout oath and two fountains according to the plans of the sculptor. The plaza may be used for public gatherings and a gathering place for children, the sculptor hopes.

"No contract has been let for the erection of the memorial," Mayor Swarthout has announced, "but Mr. Nygard, who has proved himself a true artist, has given us a model of his conception of a fitting memorial." The miniature will be criticized soon by F. S. Robinson, architect, and other members of the memorial committee.

Courtesy of GRPL: *GR Herald* 1.2.1930

Courtesy of GRPL: *Morris Photo Collection*

One of the designs the committee looked at included this one designed by Alfred E. Nygard, a former Detroit sculptor and woodcarver, now living at the M.J. Clark Memorial Home. It would have included the Boy Scout oath on the back of the piece and two fountains.



The committee reported on March 17, 1931:

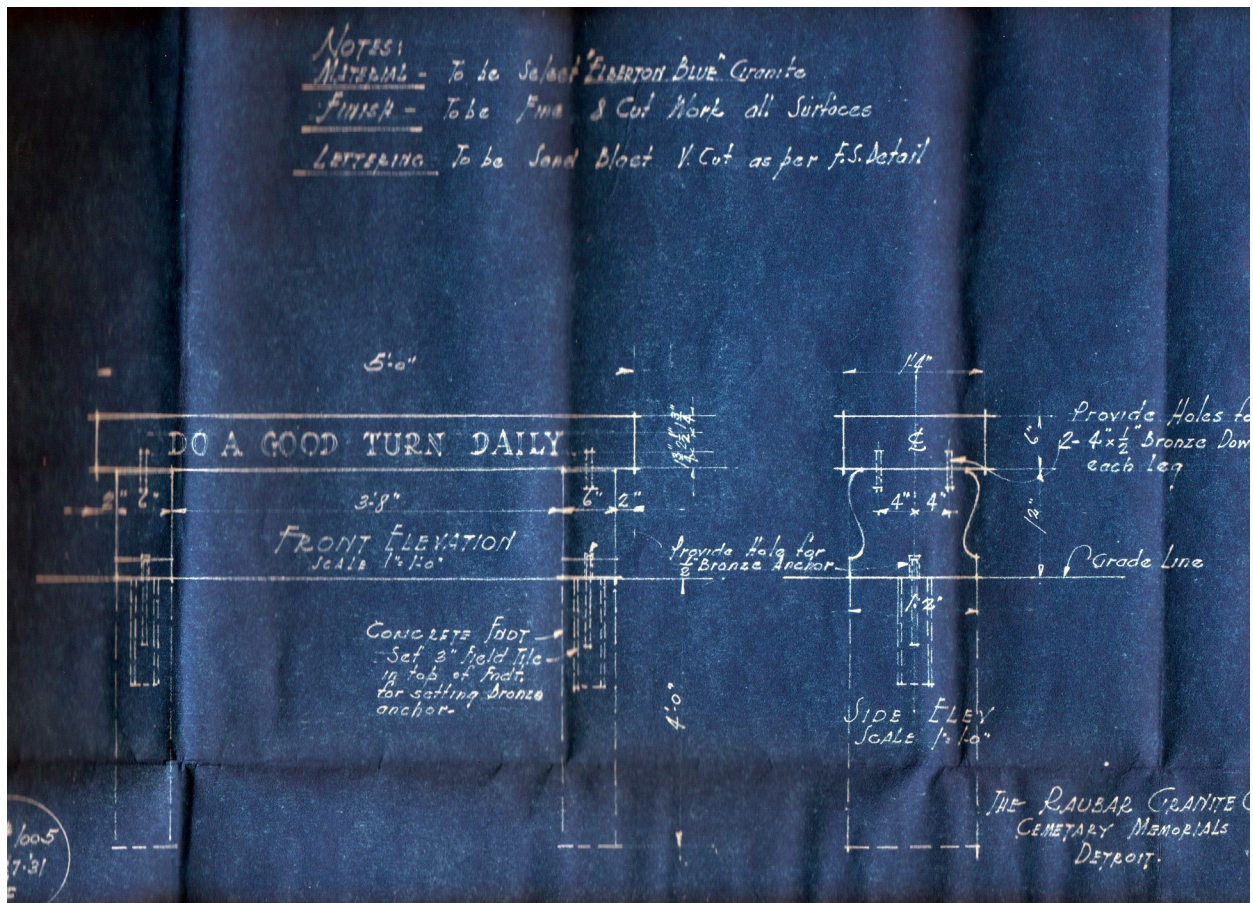
1. They had agreed on the terms of a contract with Horace F. Colby of Detroit for a statue.
2. The cost would be \$7,500.
3. The location chosen was Baldwin Park until a permanent setting could be upon.
4. The artist and committee recommended that Reservoir Park could be that destination if the park were improved.
5. That the name be changed from Reservoir Park to Belknap Park.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
55874/3.19.1931 pg. 558**

The contract documents for the “*public memorial statue of Captain Charles E. Belknap*” and memorial bench were dated April 22, 1931 but not turned over to the City until June 23, 1932, when Swarthout thought they should be filed for proper record keeping.

The cost was \$7,500; \$1,000 payable upon completion of the clay model and the balance payable after proof all payments for materials have been paid. (This was done December 26, 1931.) As part of the \$7,500, the bronze inscribed tablet cost \$125. The cast statue cost \$1,400.

The bench cost \$155 and was separate from the statue.



**City Commission Proceedings**  
**58828/6.23.1932**



## The Statue -

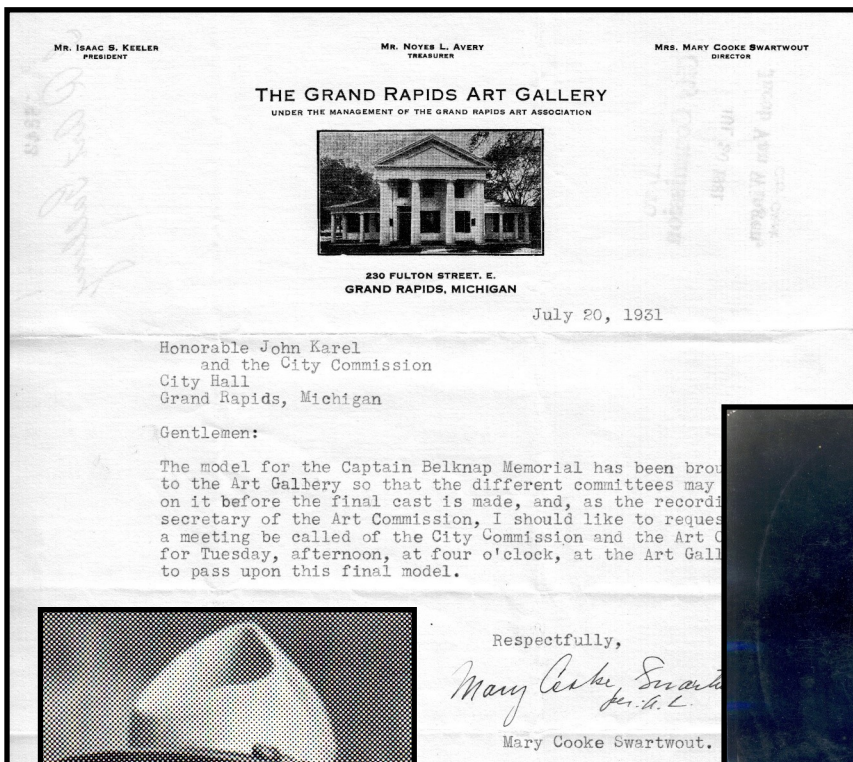
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- City Commission Proceedings  
55874/3.19.1931 pg. 558

The Grand Rapids Art Gallery was the location where the final model for the memorial could be viewed by the various committees.

- City Commission Proceedings  
56842/7.20.1931 pg. 121



Courtesy of GRPM: GR Press photo



Courtesy of GRPL: Morris Collection



The statue of Charles E. Belknap was unveiled and dedicated on Saturday, December 26, 1931, in Baldwin Park at Fulton St. and Lake Drive. Former Mayor and chairman of the Belknap Memorial Fund Committee gave an eloquent speech.

**UNVEIL STATUE  
IN MEMORY OF  
CAPT. BELKNAP**

Youth and Old Age Join In  
Impressive Ceremony  
at Monument

**SPEAKERS RECALL CAREER  
OF NOBLE, KINDLY CITIZEN**

Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, G. A.  
R. Comrades and Officials  
Pay Their Tribute



## Appreciative City Honors Capt. Belknap's Memory

Host of Local Boy  
Scouts, Camp Fire  
Girls, Civic and Mil-  
itary Leaders Hear  
Eulogy at Statue  
Unveiling.

REVERED

A city's recognition of a fine career of public service was rendered Saturday afternoon when the statue memorializing the late Capt. Charles E. Belknap, a leader in Grand Rapids life more than 60 years, was unveiled in Baldwin park.

Thousands of Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, members of military organizations, old friends and admiring citizens assembled in the east end park, where former Mayor Elvin Swarthout, as chairman of the Belknap memorial committee and long time friend of the late leader, recounted the life of the man who returned here as a youth after the Civil war and became a leading figure in the community's progress.

Mr. Swarthout presided. After Miss Madeline Stevens of Chilpanco, dr. S. E. E., unveiled the statue of marble and bronze she was recipient of the award of the Silver Beaver accorded relatives of Capt. Belknap by the national executive committee of the Boy Scouts for "distinguished service to boyhood."

Miss Stevens is a great-granddaughter of the late captain. Fourteen other direct relatives were present.

Horace F. Colby of Detroit, the sculptor who fashioned the memorial, addressed the large gathering briefly, as did Mayor John D. Karel in accepting the statue for the city.

The program opened with music by the Sea Scout band under direction of George A. Miller, Scout executive, Oaths of the Scouts and Camp Fire Girls were spoken. Clay H. Holister, member of the committee, introduced guests of honor, one of them Kommer Esvel, member of the regiment which included Capt. Belknap in the Civil war.

Capt. Belknap's remarkable career was outlined interestingly by Mr. Swarthout. The following paragraphs reveal his active years from the closing months of the Civil war and after returning to Grand Rapids from the conflict.

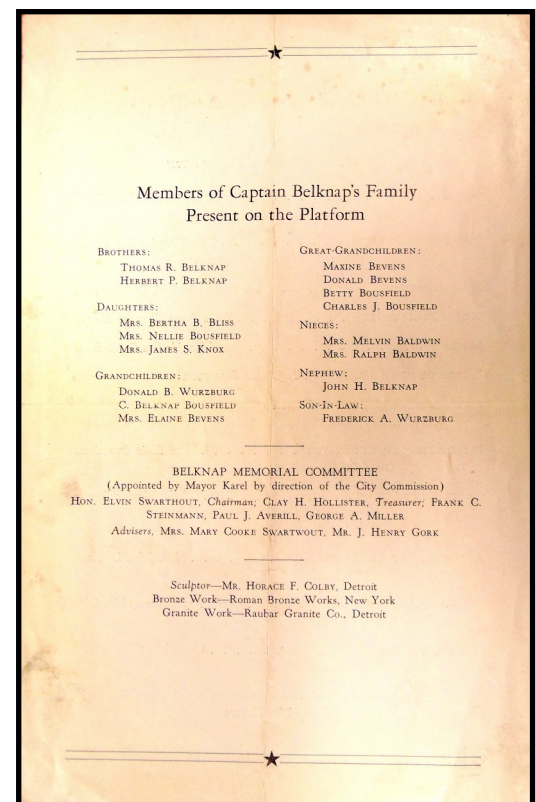
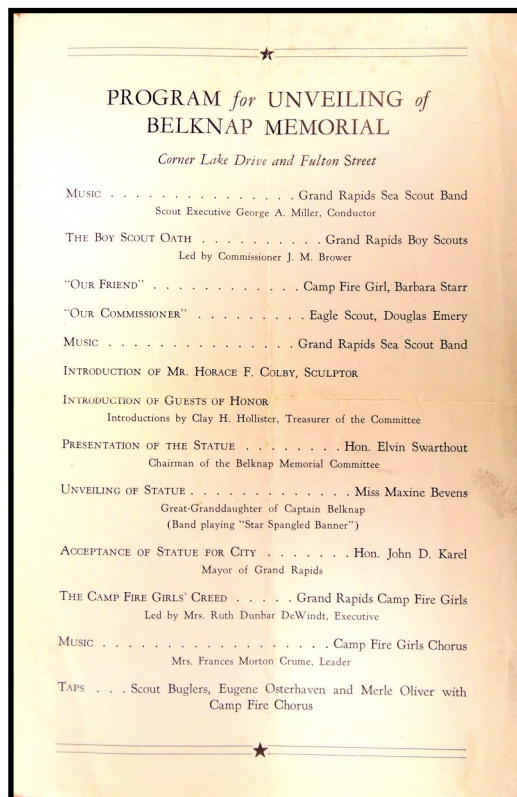
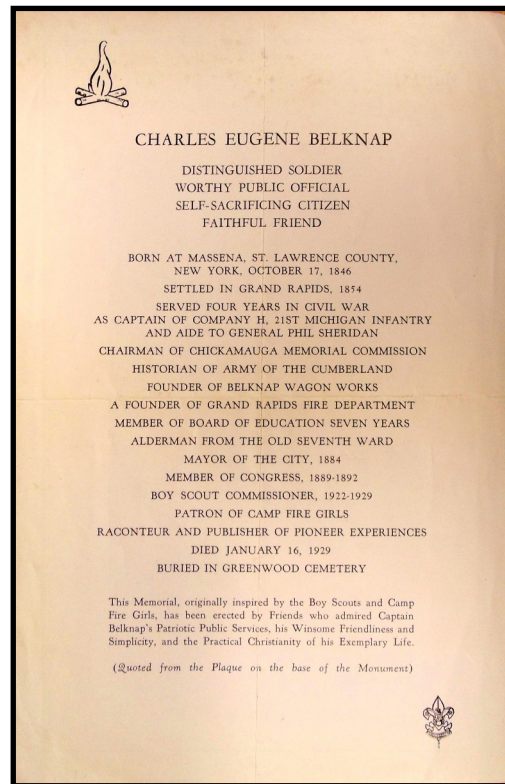
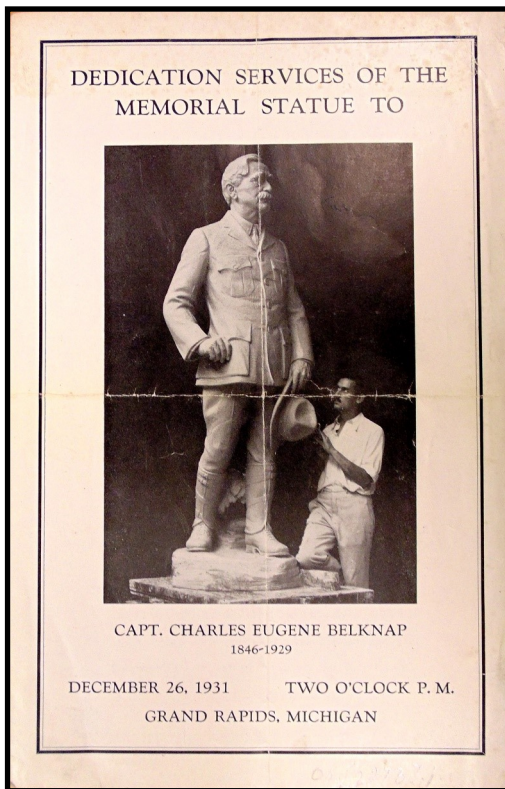


Statue of Charles E. Belknap unveiled Saturday afternoon on its temporary base in Baldwin park, the bit of triangular land at the junction of Lake-dr. and Fulton-st.

Photos and top newspaper  
clipping courtesy of  
City Archives:  
George Welsh Collection

Lower newspaper clipping  
courtesy of:  
GRPM, GR Press Archives  
GR Press 12.26.1931

## The dedication program -



Courtesy of GRPL: *Belknap Collection*



In a letter to the City Commission, the Treasurer of the Belknap Memorial Fund Committee and President of the Old Kent Bank, Clay Hollister enclosed a check for \$28.33. which was the balance of the fund.

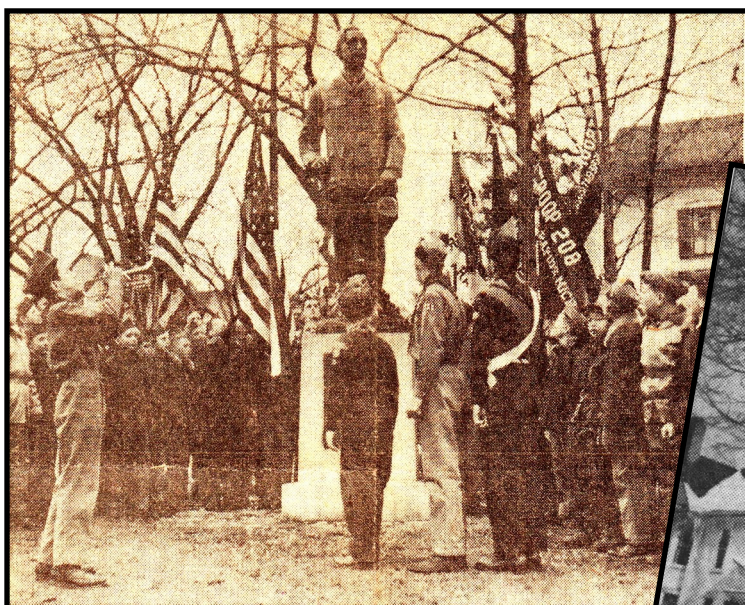
- City Commission Proceedings  
63062/5.10.1932 pg. 14

The Committee recommended sending a letter of appreciation and thanks to Mr. Hollister and that the money be placed in the Baldwin Park Fund to be used only for the Belknap Monument.

- City Commission Proceedings  
63100/5.14.1934 pg. 22

From this point until the present, there are no entries into the City Commission Proceedings regarding the Charles E. Belknap statue. That is not the end of the story for old Charlie.

I have not discovered the entire timeline, but have verified that the Boy Scouts conducted annual pilgrimages to the Belknap statue to honor his memory. I would assume that these events would have also been conducted in the 1930s, 1940s and into the 1960s but more research would be needed.



Courtesy of GRPM: GR Press Archives,  
(left) GR Press 2.8.1953  
(below) GR Press 2.6.1959

**FEB 8 1953**

### They Pay Homage to Father of Scouting

Scouts of the Grand Valley Council, Boy Scouts of America, gathered in Baldwin Park, corner of Lake Dr. and Fulton St., SE., Saturday to pay homage to Capt. Charles E. Belknap, the father of the Boy Scout movement in Grand Rapids.

The colorful ceremony, attended by more than 150 Scouts from the Grand Rapids area, opens observance of Boy Scout Week, which will include attendance by Scouts and their families at church-

es throughout the City Sunday and various events during the week.

Pictured (left to right) before the statue of Capt. Belknap are Robert Murray, bugler, of Troop 208, East Grand Rapids; Jeff Atkinson, Cub Scout of Pack 3257, Alger School; Boy Scout James DeYoung; Troop 211, Grace Episcopal Church and Explorer Scout, Donald Creighton, Troop 208, East Grand Rapids.

The ceremonies included

presentation of short talk by W. Peek, Assistant Scoutmaster, Grand Valley Council, and prayer by W. Scheid, Pastor of the Congregational Church, Troop 229, of which P. Scoutmaster, idea of a Belknap statue hoped will event for community

**9 1959**

### HONOR LOCAL DADDY OF BOY SCOUTS—Dr. Douglas J. Emery, OD, right, addresses about 150 Boy Scouts and leaders Saturday in Baldwin park at Lake dr. and Union av., SE, opening Scout week. Scout guard members, left to right, are David Lewis, 13, Tom Campau, 9, Gary VanEerden, 9, Fred Osgood, 17, James Harris, 13, and Ronald Merrill, 13. The Scouts laid a wreath at the statue of Capt. Charles Belknap, father of Grand Rapids scouting.

—Grand Rapids Press Photographers



By July 1959, old Charlie was starting to look older than he ever did during his lifetime.



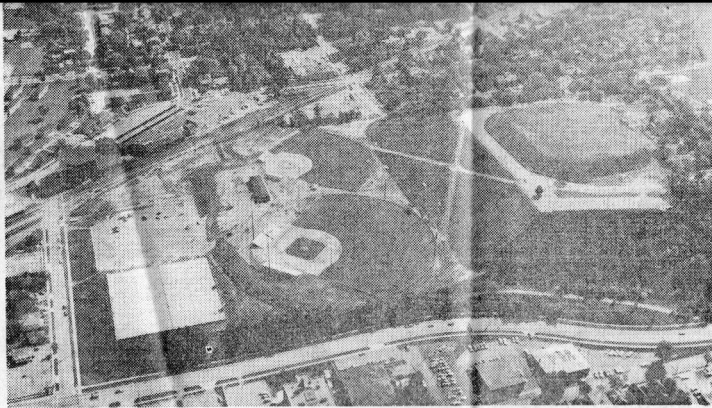
Courtesy of City Archives: (left and below)  
*Parks and Recreation Series, Parks and Recreation  
Department, Parks Progress Collection*



He wasn't looking any better by 1975,

Courtesy of GRPM: *GR Press Archives*

In 1975, Charlie took a short 4-hour trip from Baldwin Park to Belknap Park.



GR Press Photos by Marvin Loring

BELKNAP PARK, marked by the huge X earth sculpture, is nearing completion, and soon the statue of the man after whom it was named will be in its proper place.

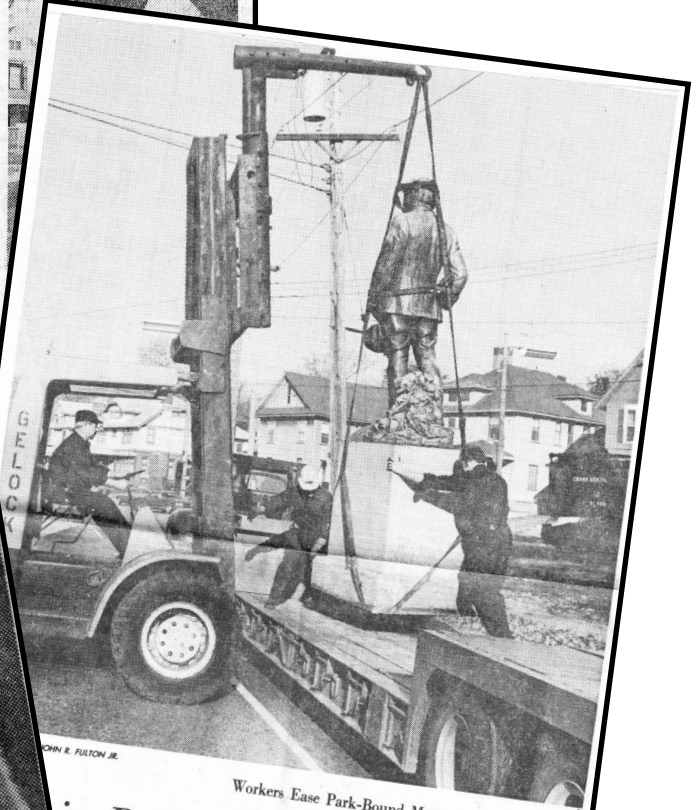
## Belknap Statue Finally to Match Park as Captain Moves This Week

By Paul Chaffee

Oh! Cap'n Belknap at long last is due for a change of scenery.

At hand, the weathered statue of the hero and "father" of the city.

"As soon as heavy equipment is off the park, the danger of damage is past the statue. We'll be moving it this week."



JOHN R. FULTON JR.

Workers Ease Park-Bound Monument To the Truck

Paul Chaffee

the likeness of Capt. Charles E. Fulton, through the streets of the city he was shot in a sharp, new park

tall monument's location of Lake Dr. SE and E. Fulton legend: "Do a Good Turn

## in Belknap Makes His Move

10/23/75 P.I.A

The transfer was Gelock Heavy Movers good turn.

Four "donated" men, a crane, a hydraulic lift truck and an equipment van teamed up to gently shift the six-ton statue of the famous former citizen to a slab just west of the recently-finished building at new Belknap Park.

Hat in hand, the old captain — "distinguished soldier, worthy public official, self sacrificing citizen, faithful friend," according to the base of the bronze statue — now faces north a few feet from the Belknap baseball field.



Grand Rapids Press Photos by JOHN R. FULTON JR.

On the Ride Through Traffic

Images courtesy of:  
GRPM, GR Press Archives  
GR Press 10.6.1975

GR Press 10.23.1975

GR Press 10.24.1975

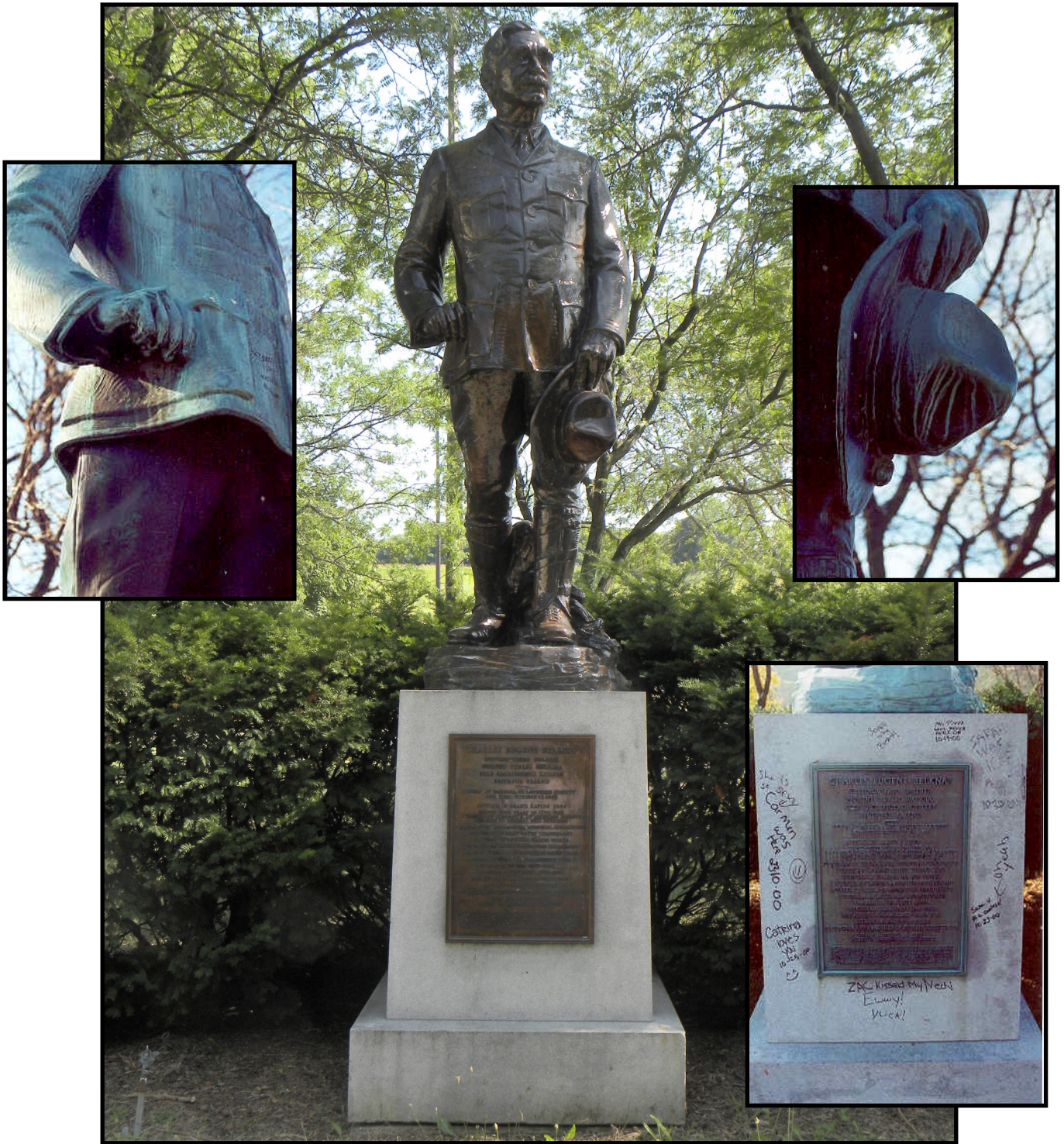


The Statue in Belknap Park. 1975-1976.  
There was no attempt to refurbish or re-  
store the statue.



All images courtesy of City Archives:  
*Parks and Recreation Series*  
*Parks and Recreation Department*  
*Parks Progress Collection*





*All photos personal photos of Bruce B. Butgereit*

## **Baldwin Park -**

Baldwin Park, located at Lake Drive Ave. and East Fulton Street, was donated to the City by Susan N. Baldwin, May 11, 1908. Named in honor of her late husband, ex-Alderman Simeon C. Baldwin.

It was agreed from the outset that Baldwin would serve as a temporary location for the statue until improvements could be made in Reservoir Park.

**- Common Council Proceedings**  
**36515/3.16.1908 pg. 854**  
**36513/4.20.1908 pg. 937**  
**36710/4.30.1908 pg. 976**

In order to recognize the gift of the property to the City, it was recommended that a bronze tablet be applied to a boulder in the park containing the name of the donor, date of the gift and in whose memory given.



**- City Commission Proceedings**  
**57487/11.19.1931 pg. 286**  
**57540/11.30.1931 pg. 298**

*Courtesy of City Archives: Parks and Recreation Series, Parks and Recreation Department, Parks Progress Collection*

## **The Reservoir Property -**

The first reference to improving the reservoir property was on September 5, 1899.

**- Common Council Proceedings**  
**5569/9.5.1899 pg. 451**

Mayor George Perry recommends improving the reservoir area and placing it under the control of the park committee.

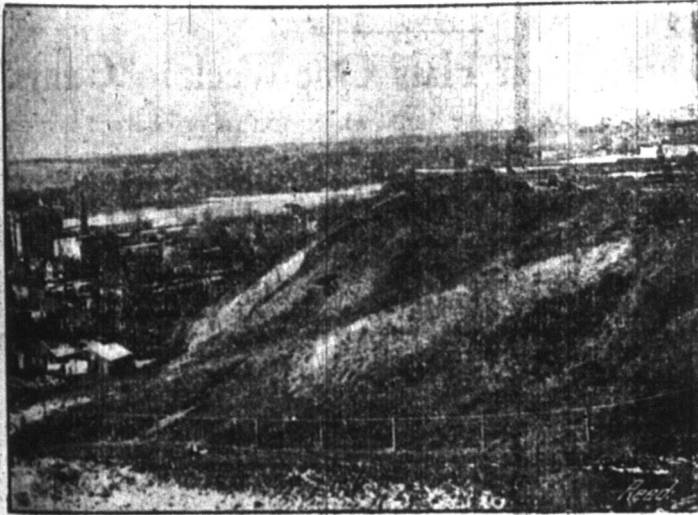
**- Common Council Proceedings**  
**8794/9.4.1900 pg. 305**

## **Observatory Park -**

Today, to the west of the reservoir, is a small parking lot. At one time between Mason Street and Observatory St. (to the north of the small parking lot) and between North Division Ave. and Livingston Ave. this area was known as Observatory Park and was fenced off and signs posted to not remove any sand, dirt, or gravel.

**Common Council Proceedings**  
**9432/11.26.1900 pg. 498**

## GRAND RAPIDS' NEW OBSERVATORY PARK.



The site on the bluff, north of Lookout park, as it appears at present.

After an examination of the land records for the property known as Observatory Park, it was determined that some delinquent taxes were due to the State of Michigan. The State agreed to give up any claim in exchange for a payment of \$82.69.

- **Common Council Proceedings**  
**19118/8.24.1903 pg. 335**

The City of Grand Rapids, by vote of the people, was required to purchase large amounts of land for public parks. This included all of the property that we now call Belknap Park.

- **Common Council Proceedings**  
**47967/2.6.1911 pg. 740**

### **Reservoir Park -**

The first reference to the Reservoir property being named Reservoir Park was in October 1911 when Public Works was asked to lay a sidewalk on Coldbrook adjoining Reservoir Park.

- **Common Council Proceedings**  
**50840/10.9.1911 pg. 429**

In March of 1912, there was a request "that the new park on reservoir hill (so called) recently purchased by the City be named Fairview Park."

- **Common Council Proceedings**  
**52181/3.18.1912 pg. 823**

In order to fill-in the area referred to as Reservoir Park (so called), it was suggested that the dirt from the new Butterworth Hospital construction could be used.

- **City Commission Proceedings**  
**23204/11.22.1923 pg. 614**

An effort to construct a new sports stadium on the reservoir property was supported by local veterans groups who wanted the stadium to be named *General Earl R. Stewart Memorial Stadium*."

- **City Commission Proceedings**  
**23425/12.13.1923 pg. 658**

While the City Commission Proceedings don't share all the details, various newspaper articles referenced the visions for the 23 acres that became known as Reservoir Park. Old photos indicate that improvements were made piecemeal.

### **Belknap Park -**

Proper site for the proposed Charles E. Belknap Memorial: Your Planning Department concurs in the recommendation of said committee, that the proposed memorial be placed in Baldwin Park, between Fulton Street and Lake Drive until such time as so-called Reservoir Park is properly improved as befits a memorial of this type; and further, that said Reservoir Park be renamed as "Belknap Park".

- **City Commission Proceedings**  
**55923/3.26.1931**



The recommendation of the Planning Department was tabled until a public hearing could be set and objections heard.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
55969/4.2.1931 pg. 577**

Resolved, That the name of Reservoir Park be and the same hereby changed and shall hereafter be designated as “Belknap Park.”

**- City Commission Proceedings  
56076/4.20.1931 pg. 607**

Your Planning Department would respectfully suggest that your Honorable Body reconsider its recent action changing the name Reservoir Park to “Belknap Park,” by including the word “memorial” - or, “Belknap Memorial Park.”

Your Department feels that this park is, in the first introduced, a memorial to Capt. Belknap and that, without doubt, other memorials will be erected in this park from time to time.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
56429/5.14.1931 pg. 28**

### **Belknap Memorial Park -**

Whereas, the City Commission has heretofore changed the name of Reservoir Park to “Belknap Park,” and

Whereas, request has been made that it again be changed to “Belknap Memorial Park,” and

Whereas it is the sense of this Commission that such a name more properly designates this park as a memorial to the late Capt. Charles E. Belknap, therefore be it

Resolved, that the name of said park be and is hereby designated as “Belknap Memorial Park,” and that the same shall hereafter be known as such.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
56458/5.18.1931 pg. 34**

In 1926, the Camp Fire Girls had planted 40,000 seedling pines. These have grown to a good size and the P.T.A. and Camp Fire Girls, with the help of the Parks Department, are transplanting 65 of these trees in the new Belknap Park, formerly Reservoir Park.

The tree planting ceremony is to be held Thursday evening, May 13th at 7:30.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
69374/5.6.1937 pg. 14**

In June 1938, Mayor George Welsh received a proposal for \$1,087,792.50 worth of W.P.A. work in Belknap Park. The City’s portion would be \$7,800 and cover 40 acres of ground.

**City Commission Proceedings  
71751/6.13.1938 pg. 72**

Between 1931 and 1973, there were various uses of the park and numerous improvements made to the grounds. WLAV and WOOD also requested a lease for the purpose of erecting a radio tower. During WW II, Belknap was used for training infantry soldiers and was home to the Meteorological School.

There were four tennis courts installed in 1941.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
76839/2.27.1941 pg. 440**

The United States of America (military) requested to lease several sections of Belknap Park.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
79789/4.33.1943 pg. 345**

The City received several petitions to rename the park or portions of the park in honor of the Air Force Weather School.

**- City Commission Proceedings  
80181/10.4.1943 pg. 163**

In April 1959, Bob Sullivan sent a handwritten letter to the City Commission requesting to lease the ball diamonds for a 60-game season.

**City Commission Proceedings  
8614/4.28.1959 pg. 640**

In 1951, The Michigan State Highway Department entered into an agreement where they could take fill dirt from Belknap Park to build U.S.131 for 3¢ per yard. The park would never look the same.

**City Commission Proceedings  
9141/9.1.1959 pg. 223**

The City purchased the last home on the Belknap Park property for \$25,000 from the Frey family. (The Frey family had owned and operated the Coldbrook Brewery on Coldbrook St.)

**City Commission Proceedings  
10468/9.20.1960 pg. 218-219**

The Belknap Park that we know today began taking shape in October 1973.

**City Commission Proceedings  
2628/10.16.1973 pg. 256**

Reservoir Park, Belknap Park, and Belknap Memorial Park over the years -



Courtesy of City Archives:  
*Engineering Dept., Reservoir Park 1927*



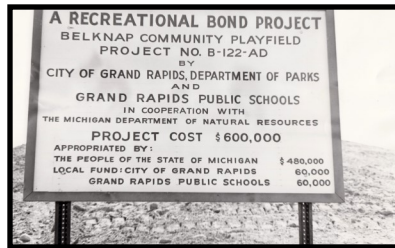
Courtesy of City Archives:  
*George Welsh Collection  
Scrip Program Belknap Park 1931*



## Belknap Memorial Park over the years -



Courtesy of City Archives:  
*Engineering Department Division Ave. Extension 1932*



Courtesy of City Archives: *Parks and Recreation Series, Parks and Recreation Department, Park Progress Coll. & Aerial Photos 1940 and 1954* 1) Camp Fire Girls bench 1937, 2) 1940 Aerial, 3) Entrance to Belknap Memorial Park 1942, 4) View from top 1942, 5) W I & WW II Memorial 1950, 6) Ball diamond 1953, 7) Aerial view 1954, 8) The last project begins 1974, and 9) Aerial view 1976

## Questions & Comments -

As a historian, I love telling stories about past events and those no longer with us. Telling a great story doesn't always mean it is the most factual and so I also love conducting research. When I restored the Belknap statue back in 2001, I only researched the man and the statue. This project and some of the questions asked gave me reason to go back and research more about the parks where Charlie has resided and even more about the man himself. I spent a week in the Grand Rapids Public Library and in the City Archives and Research Center and I now believe, I have the rest of the story.

Conducting research such as this helps give me a better overview of not only the item in question, in this case the Charles Belknap statue, but what other related events occurred and why. It sometimes uncovers the original intent of those involved. It also helps give a historical timeline to look at.

Research can also raise questions about why some events took place and why others didn't. Some of those questions may never be answered.

I have hi-resolution scans of everything in this publication if you need them.

Researched and Compiled by Bruce B. Butgereit in 2016

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Courtesy of: GRPL, Belknap Collection

