

## Ronaldson'd Cemetery - 1826 to 1950

The Palumbo Recreation Center is one of the gems of Bella Vista. It offers playing fields, baseball diamond, basketball courts and a playground for our youngsters. It also provides a recreation center with facilities for our neighborhood meetings, and community gatherings. It occupies a full block in the heart of Bella Vista.

It is not unusual that this parcel was once a cemetery, as were several other parks in our city, including Washington Square. This particular parcel was located in the burbs back in 1826. At that time James Ronaldson had become a prosperous businessman and one of the founders of the Franklin Institute. He had a novel idea to open a nonsectarian cemetery in the rural area of Moyamensing Township, which is now Bella Vista. Unusual since the other city cemeteries were all sectarian and available only to their church's congregants. Independent of any church, Ronaldson's burial ground was however only available to white Protestants.



At first, there was push back from the local churches and the neighborhood. The availability and price of entry led to the initial success. A non-sectarian, private, burial ground for those who did not have a church affiliation. It was also less expensive and since it was private, as opposed to public, future relocation was less of a threat. At its prime, it housed approximately 14,000 permanent residents – remarkable for the size of the property.

Ronaldson spent lavishly on his new venture. An imposing main entrance was constructed on Bainbridge St. with an attached caretakers house on one side and a bell house on the other. If a person died without apparent cause they were placed in the bell house with a string tied to their hands and the bell for 3 days. The caretaker would be alerted if the bell rang and this would prevent persons from being buried alive.

At the turn of the century and after 75 years of success, the cemetery began to show decline. The neighborhood was transitioning, and so was the cemetery. It was obvious by the 1940's something had to

be done. The eyesore needed to be removed. The city decided to relocate the graves. A site in Somerton (NE Philadelphia) was selected and the occupants of Ronald's Cemetery were moved to their new home in a mass grave.



**LOOKS LIKE A PLAYGROUND**—It's a graveyard. Boys have a grand time on the grounds of the Ronaldson Cemetery, at Ninth and Bainbridge streets. A recreation center may soon mark the site



One interesting fact – in the process, several Revolutionary War Soldiers were identified. These important residents were offered a special place to rest. Old Swedes Church in Queen Village welcomed the soldiers to their grounds which can be visited today.