

Albert Rockwell: Inventor, Industrialist, and Philanthropist

Albert Fennimore Rockwell stands as the most significant historical figure in the history of Bristol Connecticut. After moving to Bristol and founding the New Departure Bell Company in 1888, Rockwell quickly became one of the most successful businessmen in the city. Rockwell's success was dependent on his various technological inventions and innovations, the first of which was a design for a mechanical doorbell. Over several decades New Departure grew rapidly and expanded its production lines to include a variety of different bells, bicycle coaster brakes, ball bearings, and even automobiles. Unfortunately by the early 1910's Rockwell's willingness to take risks and the increasing costs associated with New Departure entering the automotive industry led to a major dispute between A.F. Rockwell and the other board members of ND. In 1913 after having his responsibilities as General Manager of New Departure stripped from him, Rockwell retired from the company and filed a multi million-dollar lawsuit against it for the continuing unsolicited use of his ball bearing patents. Unfortunately this lawsuit was not settled until after Rockwell's death in February of 1925. Only three years after Rockwell had left the company the remaining board members sold New Departure to United Motors, which was in turn purchased by General Motors.

In the 11 years between his retirement from New Departure and his death, Rockwell maintained and gained management of several other local and regional companies including Bristol Brass, The American Silver Company, and Marlin-Rockwell Firearms. Under Rockwell's management, Marlin-Rockwell produced a large fraction of the Machine Guns used in World War I by the Allied forces. He also served as Bristol's state representative from 1907-1910. In addition to engaging in his business and political careers, Rockwell also dedicated himself to philanthropic endeavors. Beginning in 1914 he began to provide the city with land for the construction of what is now known as Rockwell Park. Rockwell's donations of land always took the form of a contract with the city, which stipulated that the city must develop the land in a stated period of time. Rockwell also made considerable financial contributions to the maintenance and development of Rockwell Park over the last decade of his life. On July 20, 1928 Rockwell Day was celebrated within the city park in honor of the late A.F. Rockwell's achievements and generosity.

Along with Rockwell Park, Albert Rockwell also engaged with the city of Bristol in an even larger philanthropic project. In 1910 Rockwell had purchased a large parcel of undeveloped land known as Dunbar Meadows with the original intention of building housing there for New Departure employees.¹ However, by the time of Rockwell's retirement at New Departure the land remained unused. By 1919 it had become clear that Bristol needed a larger high school for its expanding population. In September of 1919 Rockwell publically proposed to the city that he would provide his Dunbar Meadows property for the construction of a new high school and roadway leading into the city's downtown. As he had previously done with Rockwell Park, Rockwell stipulated certain

¹ Bristol Press February 3, 1910

requirements in order for the city to take control of the lands. His proposal to the city of Bristol was published on September 29, 1919 as follows,

“Honorable Joseph F. Dutton, Mayor of the City of Bristol:

I propose to quit claim to the city of Bristol for the sum of \$1 all of the land known as the Dunbar Meadows comprising twelve square acres more or less free of encumbrance provided the city shall build a bridge over the Pequabuck river at Mellen street and construct a roadway in extension to Mellen street to intersect with South street and a roadway approximately 100 feet in width from Main Street at the end of School street to intersect with the extension of Mellen street. Also the city is to construct a High School on the property to be finished not later than two years from date. The roadways [are] to be of construction equal to the roadway on Broad Street between King Street and the bridge and engineers advice followed as to grades and drainage. The road [is] to be finished before December 31, 1920. Also I propose at my own expense to develop the land east of [the] Mellon street extension for park purposes during the year 1920.

Respectfully Submitted, A.F. Rockwell”²

On October 6, 1919 Rockwell’s proposition was put to a public vote and was overwhelmingly accepted. The Bristol public also voted to go even farther and extend the proposed boulevard all the way across the Pequabuck to Downs Street in Eastern Bristol.³ However, by the Spring of 1921 the city had failed to begin work on either the school, the boulevard, or the two bridges across the Pequabuck at Mellon street and the Downs street intersection. On March 2, 1921 Rockwell publically announced that he had taken the initiative of finding bids for the roadway project and now believed it could finished for far less than had originally been thought. The city instructed Rockwell to coordinate with the street committee and Superintendent of Public Works in order to assist in the completion of the project.⁴ On June 6, 1921 a Joint meeting of the Board of Education and the City Council took into consideration a revised proposal by Rockwell on the construction of the school building in which he suggested **“that the city could save a considerable amount, undertaking the work directly and contracting only for separate details of construction”**. The city had already hired the prominent school building architect Wilson Potter, who had previously designed the Bristol Public Library, to design the school building. The Proposal also stated that Rockwell would accept a non-paid position as supervising head of the operation, which had been presented to him by the joint Board and Council.⁵ By September of 1921 work on the Boulevard and bridges was coming to a close at a total estimated cost of \$110,000 dollars, \$40,000 less than what Rockwell had initially claimed the project would cost.⁶ On August 16, 1922, due to

² Bristol Press September 27, 1919

³ Bristol Press October 7, 1919

⁴ Bristol Press March 2, 1921

⁵ Bristol Press June 7, 1921.

⁶ Bristol Press September 7, 1921

concerns about increasing costs associated with the construction of the high school, Rockwell was asked by the City Council if the construction of the building would be completed on budget. He responded that the building would meet its original plan on budget but that he would continue to oversee construction beyond that plan focusing on the final touches to the building at an increased cost. Rockwell defended this position, stating,

“When completed this building will cost just one half per cubic ft. content as did the John J. Jennings School on Burlington Avenue. On the same basis it will cost just half as much as the new high schools in Hartford will cost.”⁷

On January 30, 1923 the formal opening of the Memorial Boulevard School took place with Albert Rockwell, Mayor John F. Wade, Board of Ed. Chairman Noble Pierce, Principal Henry Cottle, Former Mayor Joseph F. Dutton, Judge R.S. Newell, and over three thousand audience members in attendance. In his speech, Chairman Pierce stated,

“The Honor of the city will dwell here; this building will give fame and glory to the city. It will hold here, and attract here, citizens of the very best class. It adds strength to all businesses and value to all property, every farm is richer, every piece of real estate in the city is worth more. The business of every merchant will be better. Relations between labor and capital in our manufactories will be more harmonious, the churches will be stronger and life in this city richer and better because of this building.”⁸

Albert Rockwell also gave a speech at the opening and was designated as an honorary graduate of the school. The total cost of the building was reported as having been \$770,015.28 without the architect’s commission of 6% of the total cost and \$816,216.20 with it. It was estimated that had the city not followed Rockwell’s advice in constructing the building independently and had instead fully contracted its construction the total cost would have reached \$1,040,000.00. It is clear that Rockwell played an integral role in ensuring that both the boulevard and school projects were actually initiated, completed in a reasonable timeframe, and produced in a way that mitigated the city’s expenses.

⁷ Bristol Press August 16, 1922

⁸ Bristol Press February 1, 1923