

Franklin Field once served as speedway

by Anthony Sammarco

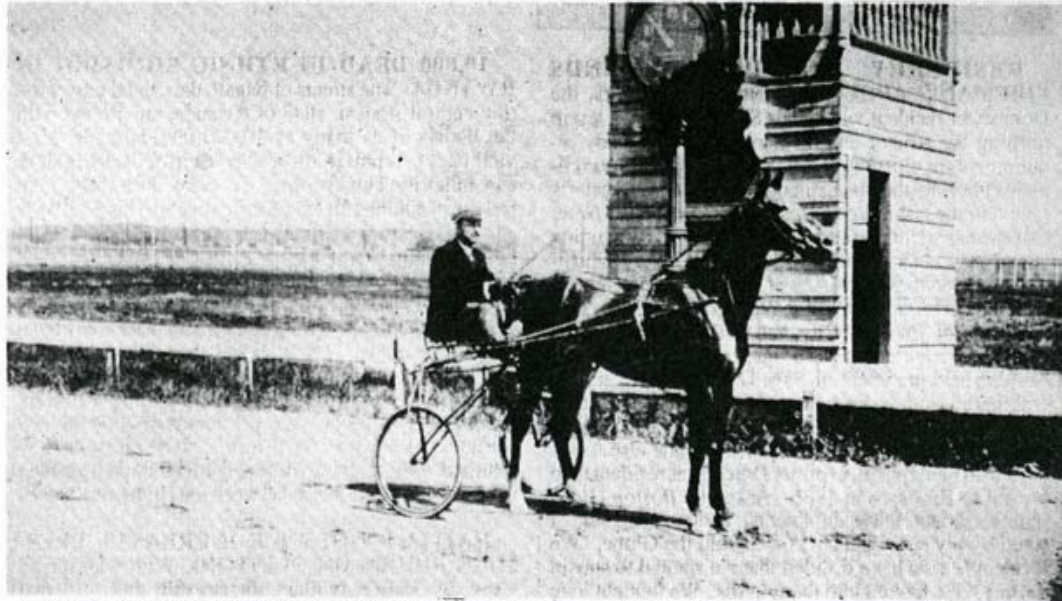
Franksin Field, located at the corner of Blue Hill and Talbot Avenues, is not as vast an open area as it was in the late 19th century. Still, it creates a dramatic vista in the densely settled area just west of Codman Square.

In the 1930s, the area was a favorite promenade on Sunday afternoons when families walked to Franklin Field for socials and children frolicked in the field. When I was a child, fireworks were set off on Franklin Field during Dorchester Day and we ogled at their brilliance as we watched from our family's third floor observatory. However, at the turn of the century, Franklin Field was the site of the driving course of the Dorchester Gentlemen's Driving Club.

The Dorchester Gentlemen's Driving Club was chartered in 1890, but not organized until 1899 at a meeting held in the stable of H.P. Gallup on Barnes Street in Dorchester. The club was composed of men who enjoyed racing their horses in a competitive manner for awards and recognition. The first president was Charles L. Young, and the club was "the first driving club in this country whose by-laws and constitution called for weekly meeting of its members and weekly racing of horses for ribbons." The club membership was largely composed of Dorchesterites, and proved an immediate success.

Originally the weekly races were held on Blue Hill Avenue, between Talbot Avenue and Callender Street, on a "quarter-mile speedway that had been granted the club by the city and which was kept in condition for racing by money secured from among the members, many of whom went down into their pocket for as high as \$25 each."

SLOWLY THE LAND AROUND THE FIELD became developed for residential use. As Blue Hill Avenue became more active with traffic, the members of the club petitioned the city of Boston to allow them to grade a portion of Franklin Field for a speedway and grandstand. By 1911, the new speedway was completed and a large celebration was planned with Mayor "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald leading a parade of carriages down Talbot Avenue to the new half-mile speedway. A popular club, "the Dorchester Gentlemen's Driving Club was the leading social club in the Dorchester



Once Franklin Field was the site of weekly horse races. Soon, one of Dorchester's largest open spaces will be the site of a \$4 million youth center, to be constructed across from Hicks Auto Body at Blue Hill and Talbot Avenues.

district, and if 'by thy works thou shalt be known', the speedway of Franklin Field stands as a monument to the power of these members as a political organization."

The weekly races, in which members raced horses attached to one-seated carriages, were never more popular than during Dorchester Day. In 1912, Mayor Fitzgerald, the father of the future Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy (and thus grandfather of the future President John Fitzgerald Kennedy), who lived on Welles Avenue near Codman Square, participated in the races and won! He was presented with a large silver cup (which was recently sold at an auction) by Councilor Collins for his win, and after receiving his cup, he entertained those in attendance with his trademark song, "Sweet Adeline". It is said in the club's records that on this day over 15,000 people attended the races and participated in the activities of Dorchester Day.

The club competed with other driving clubs around Boston, among them the Lynn Driving Club, the Old Colony Club in South Weymouth, the Metropolitan in Boston and Quannapowitt Driving Club in Reading. Competition was always conducted in the best of spirits. At a race in Readville (a section of Hyde Park) in 1901, the Dorchester Gentlemen's Driving Club "staged the first handicap race for harness horses ever given in this country." As the need for horses began to wane in the first decade of this century with the rise of automobiles, the driving club's membership began to decrease. Still, for nearly two decades Dorchesterites created good-hearted fun and excitement at the Franklin Field Speedway.

Anthony Sammarco is a volunteer history reporter for Dorchester Community News.