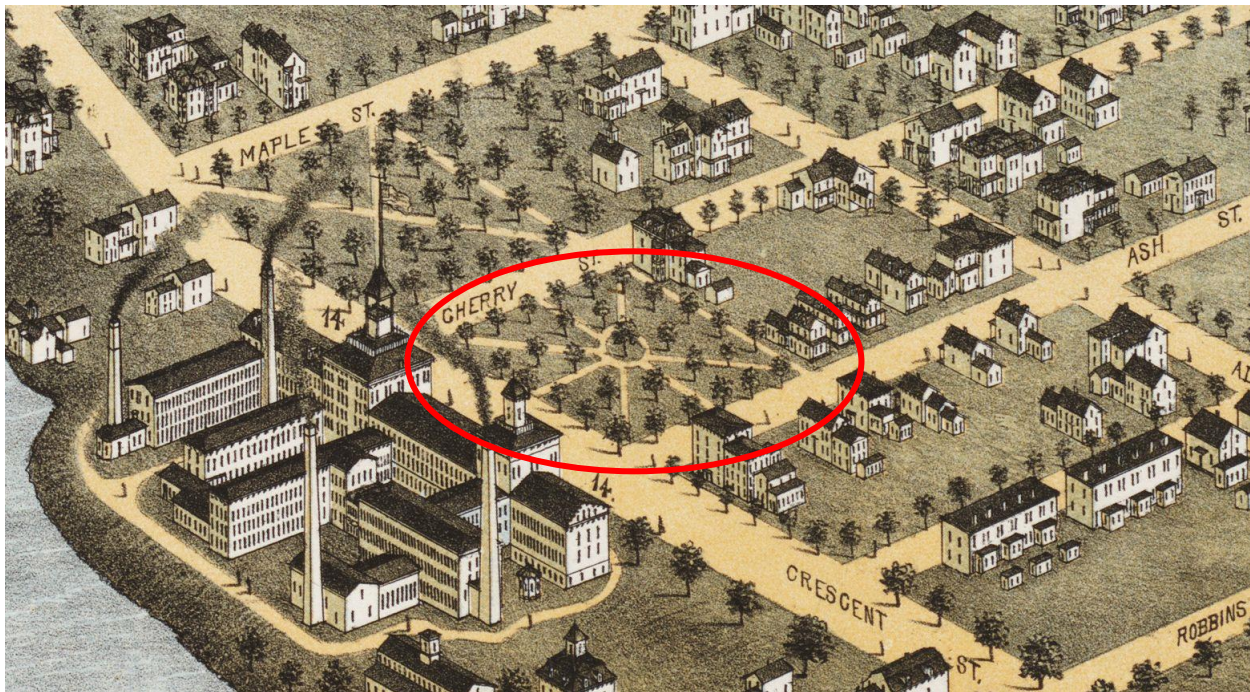


Ezra C. Fitch School Assessment (May 2021)

The former Ezra C. Fitch school is located at 14 Ash Street in the South Side of Waltham, in a neighborhood of 19th and 20th century houses that had been built by or for employees of the Waltham Watch Company. While much of the streetscape east of Adams Street has been recently replaced, Ash Street between Adams and Crescent still features an eclectic mix of older worker housing (with one exception). The school was built in 1932 on land that had formerly been Appleton Park, owned by the Waltham Watch Company. Originally called Robbins Park, the watch company commons dated back to before 1875.



1877 panorama showing Robbins (later Appleton) Park between Cherry and Ash Streets

Ezra Charles Fitch was born in 1846 in Bremen and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he learned the trade of watch making and repair. He began working for Robbins, Appleton & Co., the selling agents of the Waltham Watch Co. After serving as the manager of the company's New York office, he transferred to the watch factory in Waltham, where he worked as resident manager. He became president of the watch factory in 1886 and continued to 1923. He died in Brookline on 3 February 1932.

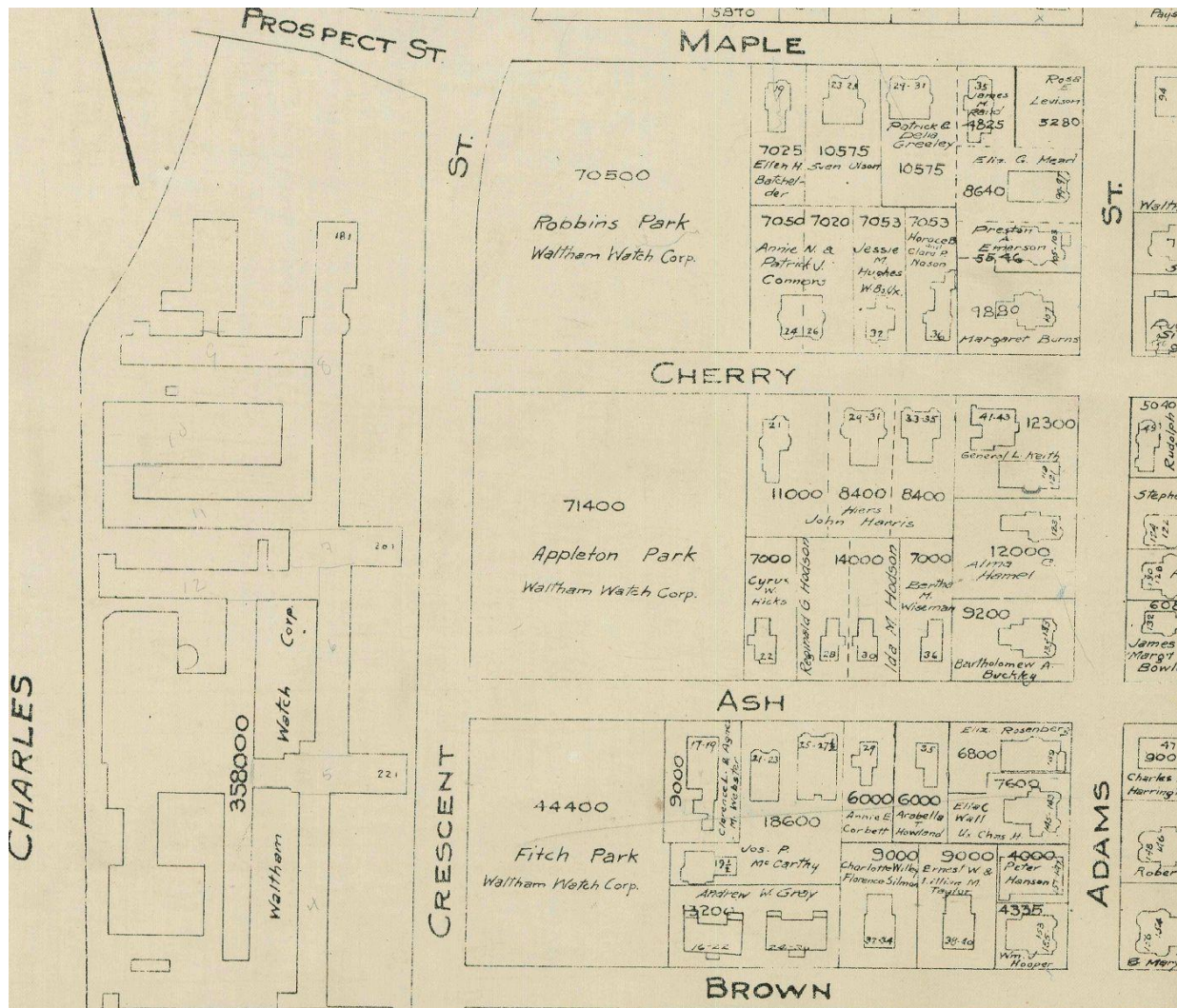
The Ezra C. Fitch Elementary School was designed in an Art Deco style by architect, Ralph Temple Jackson who worked with Fay, Spofford and Thorndike engineers, and the school was built in 1932. The school is one of three Art Deco style buildings in Waltham, the other two being the District Court Building on Linden Street, and the former Grover Cronin department store on Moody Street. The Art Deco façade of the Grover Cronin store was preserved and incorporated into the new building. The Fitch School is on the National and State Registers of Historic Places, primarily because of its architecture. The 1986 National Register report states that the school "possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, details, workmanship, feeling and associations." The report goes on to explain the architectural significance:

Architecturally, the Ezra Fitch School is significant as a locally sophisticated example of early 1930's Art Deco School design. It is one of only three examples of this style in Waltham and is the only Art Deco school building in the city. The original building is of a T-shaped configuration. Its walls are faced with buff brick. Its main facade is characterized by a projecting center pavilion flanked by wings. Access to the main entrance is provided by cast stone stairs. The center pavilion's entrance bay is flanked by brickwork piers with stylized Art Deco plaques near the top of each. The front doors are surmounted by a square metal panel which contains a Z-shaped form composed of the words "A.D. 1932, Ezra Fitch School." The upper portion of the entrance bay features a steel sash multipane window, which in turn is surmounted by a ribbed, T-shaped metal panel with Art Deco treatments. In general, the planar surfaces of the masonry walls are pierced by large multipane steel sash windows. The overall effect is one of a streamlined and stylish primary school building. A two to three story rear addition has not impacted the quality of the original design.

The architect was Ralph Temple Jackson, who worked with the engineering firm of Fay, Spofford and Thorndike. Ralph Temple Jackson had been born in 1879 in Great Pond, Maine, graduated from MIT with a Bachelor of Science in Architecture in 1906, and a Masters in Science in 1907. He worked as both an architect and engineer. He supervised the construction of the New Union Hospital in Fall River, & worked mainly in reinforced concrete construction. He worked laying out shipyards and the Boston Army Base with Fay, Spofford and Thorndike. (Journal of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers, Vol. 6, 1919) Fay, Spofford and Thorndike was founded by three engineers with ties to MIT in 1914, and continued as an engineering firm until 2015. Among the more notable projects were the Bourne and Sagamore bridges over the Cape Cod Canal.

An RFP for the sale of the school was put out in 2015, and the city received three bids, for a hotel and restaurant, an assisted living facility and multifamily housing. The RFP called for the preservation of the historic building (not the addition), and approval of the plans by the historical commission. The school was not sold, due to neighborhood opposition to the plans.

Led by Mayor McCarthy, members of the Waltham Historical Commission, accompanied by some city councilors and members of the public, toured the Fitch School on April 21. The school had not been used in a few years, but was in fair condition. The floors were covered with vinyl asbestos tiles. The Art Deco architectural elements are intact at the front and side entrances, and in some of the windows. See photos below. Otherwise, it is an ordinary school building.



1928 map showing three parks on Crescent Street.

Of the three parks that the Waltham Watch Company owned in 1928, Robbins Park and Fitch Park were turned into parking lots, and the Fitch School was built on Appleton Park. Considering the history of the site as a park prior to the construction of the school, returning the site to a park would be historically appropriate. Since the most prominent Art Deco architectural details are limited to some entrances and windows, these features could be saved and incorporated into the design of a park and the gymnasium. Especially appropriate would be their use in the reconstruction of the doors of the gymnasium, if it is to be saved, along with use on any new doors incorporated into it during its rehabilitation. The restoration of Appleton Park would help alleviate the dearth of parkland on the South Side and would support the original intentions of the Waltham Watch Company.



Front entrance



Side entrance



Front detail



Side detail



Full window



Window detail