The new community’s needs were obvious and urgent, most of them related to its utter isolation. Columbia Point had opened with no grocery store, no shops, no bank, no school, no churches, no health care, no buses. If you had a sick child, day or night, you had to make your way to City Hospital, miles away, as best you could. In the 1950s many residents did not have a telephone, and only a few had cars. In an emergency—a child with a severe asthma attack, a deep cut, or a broken arm—you had to run out to the single pay phone and then wait for an ambulance.

In addition to buying groceries from the bus that parked near the ball field at the back of the project, a resident could make the longer trek across the field and over Morrissey Boulevard to the First National—and back with a load of groceries. A succession of vendors, reputable and otherwise, filled the shopping vacuum, bringing their wares into the community. Residents recall the bleach man, the crab man, the candy truck, the ice cream truck, the Cushman’s bakery man, the egg man, Bert the fruit and vegetable man, the Hood milkman, the butter man, the dry cleaning man. “I remember a man named Mr. Bliss who sold furniture to people in the Point,” one resident recalls. “He would come in with his catalogues and books and people would pick out the furniture they wanted and he would deliver the furniture, and then he would come once a month, just like the insurance man, and make his collection.” Shortly after the project opened, a small group of stores was built across Mount Vernon Street from the project: the Beehive coffee shop, a drug store, and the superette. Mothers often sent their kids to the superette on errands—a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk, baseball cards, candy.

There was no school on the peninsula when Columbia Point opened. Kindergartners attended a half-day program at the administration building, and school children were bused to the William E. Russell School in Dorchester or the Thomas N. Hart School in South Boston. In 1957, three years after Columbia Point opened, the Paul A. Dever School was built directly across Mount Vernon Street from the project, serving some nine
The Mothers Club pays a visit to Mayor John Collins in the early 1960s to press for more programs at Columbia Point. Pat McCluskey is standing third from left. Courtesy of Erline Shearer.

Shops across Mount Vernon Street from Columbia Point. Courtesy of Father Larry Wetterholm.

hundred children from kindergarten through the third grade. The Dever School—named after the governor who was an early supporter of the housing project—was an important asset to the community. Not only was it more convenient to have young children go to school right across the street, but the same sense of expectations and accountability that pertained to building a strong community extended to its school. Children were expected to work hard and learn. “If you had a child that wasn’t doing his work,” one resident recalls, “his teacher or the principal would make sure they got in touch and would sit down and talk about it.”

Before St. Christopher’s Church was built on the peninsula in 1956, Catholics from Columbia Point attended St. Margaret’s Church in Dorchester or St. Monica’s Church near the Old Colony housing project in South Boston. The relatively affluent St. Margaret’s parish made it clear that Catholics from Columbia Point were not welcome. In fact, the parish had meetings before the opening of Columbia Point to discuss how to keep the church separate from “the project people,” who they feared would be a drain on their resources.

Similarly, some Columbia Point residents felt their children were not welcome in the Dorchester schools, particularly the William E. Russell elementary school. Dorchester politicians felt that the project would attract a “different element”: people who were poor and people who were “more diverse”—in other words, not white like most of the citizens of Dorchester and South Boston. They already had two projects—Old Colony and Old Harbor, both in South Boston—and they didn’t want a third nearby.

Indeed, in the 1950s the Dorchester community was already
stressed, as the Southeast Expressway plowed its way through to downtown Boston. John Aylward recalls watching streets of triple-decker houses make way for the new highway: “When we used to walk home from school at the Russell, we’d watch them jacking up three-family houses and pulling trucks underneath them and driving the houses off to a new location. I can remember watching them for hours, just pulling houses out and driving them away—driving a whole three-family house right down the street.”

Father Francis Moseley, who officiated at St. Monica’s, began saying mass for Columbia Point churchgoers in the gymnasium at B.C. High. When St. Christopher’s was built, he and Father James Rogers moved there permanently once the rectory was completed. St. Christopher’s received special permission from Cardinal Richard J. Cushing to say mass at midnight, and the service proved so popular that the church added two more, at 1:30 and 2:30 A.M. These masses were standing room only, filled not only with people from the project but also with workers from the nearby Boston Globe and Catholics from South Boston and Dorchester eager to meet their Sunday obligations early.

Black families went to the Pilgrim Congregational Church in Uphams Corner. A regular bus took kids from the Point to Sunday school in the morning, then brought them home, and back to the church for services later in the day.

Besides problems related to the isolation of Columbia Point, its other major problem was its nearest neighbor—the dump. Children from the project played at the dump and people scavenged there. One resident even recalls making her children skating outfits out of a bolt of material scavenged from the dump. But the dump was toxic to the community in many ways. Rats were a constant presence and a constant menace. Dump trucks roared up and down the Mile Road making hundreds of trips every day. And the dumps burned refuse all night, turning the sky red and black, and pouring acrid smoke into the project.

What the housing project lacked, its residents—particularly the mothers—were determined to get. The mothers at Columbia Point were, for the most part, young, energetic, and resourceful. The community was extraordinarily focused, with many of the mothers com-
ing together in a common space each morning. After they walked their kids to school, the mothers would pack up their babies and head over to the administration building, known as “the mini,” for coffee and visiting. They rarely met in one another’s apartments. As one mother explains, “We were all friends to a certain degree, but we never sat in each other’s house, because we didn’t believe in it. We weren’t raised like that.”

The “Mothers Club,” as they called themselves, formed as a natural support group—mothers getting together for company, talking about their kids, finding they weren’t alone in their problems. They quickly formed strong bonds. “As parents, we kind of understood each other,” one mother recalls. “When it was time to shed tears, somebody was always there that you could shed your tears with, because basically we all were experiencing the same kinds of problems. You know, working husbands, limited incomes, desires—looking to really grow.”

Together, over coffee, it was only natural for the Mothers Club to begin thinking of ways to make their brand-new community better—to develop the tools they needed to grow. “We wanted the same things for our kids that everybody else wanted,” one of the mothers explains. “Regardless of whether you live in Columbia Point, Wellesley Hills, or wherever, we all had the same kinds of wants and desires and values.” Women who may have come to the project with prejudices soon set them aside because they discovered common goals. “There were white families from South Boston who did not associate with you because you were black, in the beginning,” one mother recalls. “But when they realized that, in order to become involved we all had to come together, you kind of set those racial attitudes aside because we all were experiencing the same thing.”

One of the projects the Mothers Club took on was getting bus service out to the project. The mothers formed a committee and handed out assignments, talking to Mr. Steele and going into town to talk to the mayor. They were successful in getting limited bus service. Under more pressure from the Mothers Club, the city also provided a shopping bus that took residents from Columbia Point into South Boston. The bus ran to the shopping area on Broadway every hour on the half hour, free of charge, as long as you got a pass from one of the stores. Families from the Point, black and white, would take the bus into South Boston on March 17, Evacuation Day, for the St. Patrick’s Day parade. “You wore green,” one black resident recalls of St. Patrick’s Days in Southie when she was a young girl. “You didn’t have to, but I’d always put on a little green,
just to blend in. And we never had any problems for that reason.”

Early on, the Mothers Club realized that, to get the city to pay attention to their needs, they couldn’t wait for City Hall to come to them—they had to go to City Hall. They would put on their hats and gloves, dress up in their suits and carry their pocketbooks, and ride the T to City Hall to take their concerns directly to the mayor. They recognized that it was important to have a say in designing programs for the community—the after-school program, for example. They believed their input was important, not only because they knew firsthand what was needed, but also because if new programs imposed by the city failed, they could be blamed.

The Mothers Club sponsored a dizzying array of activities for the community. They held spaghetti suppers, fried chicken suppers, and special suppers during Lent. They held fashion shows, modeling clothes from Lerner’s, a downtown clothing store that gave the women the opportunity to purchase the clothing afterward. They had “blitz” parties—playing a bingo-like game—dancing classes, and cooking demonstrations. The events were not just social occasions for the community members; they were opportunities to raise money for a variety of projects.

They formed Cub Scout and Brownie troops, with the mothers as den mothers. One mother organized a group of teenage girls called “the Debs,” who would have dinners and dances. The group sponsored teas for the senior citizens. Once a month, the mothers would take a group of children on a trip to the Fernald School, a residential treatment facility for the mentally disabled, bringing gifts and company. In 1955 and 1956 the mothers formed their own softball team, playing in several tournaments against neighboring teams, even challenging the maintenance men.

When basic things they needed—simple things, like a haircut—
The activists [at Columbia Point] were mostly women. Some had husbands in the service or working. “The women pushed for changes out here,” one now elderly father of thirteen explained, “while the men had to feed those babies.” In addition, from its earliest day, there were a considerable number of single mothers. Female-headed households tend to be under-represented in official BHA statistics because BHA tenant policies in the early 1950s required a husband to sign the lease; women who were separated or divorced had to ask former partners to help them hide their single status.

The first problem the women tackled was the lack of public transportation to the Point. With 1,400 units of low-income housing on a peninsula, the Authority seemed to assume all would have cars. The women... assigned each other different tasks; they hounded the BHA offices and they lobbied city councillors and the Metropolitan Transit Authority. For their efforts, they gained a fairly inadequate bus route—Mondays through Fridays from early morning until six in the evening. For those who worked later, or shopped on Saturdays, there was still no transportation. For some, [demanding bus service] was their first experience of organizing, of pushing for a common goal. For some, it was their first experience working in an interracial group as well.

The Mothers Club also organized countless field trips. One year a group of parents and children went to the New York World’s Fair, eleven dollars round trip for the day. Another group traveled to the Montreal Expo, leaving at three in the morning and returning late that night. Walter Brown, owner of the Boston Garden, would provide free tickets to basketball games, the circus, and the Ice Capades. Arthur Fiedler, conductor of the Boston Pops, provided free tickets to concerts at Symphony Hall.

One of the most active members of the Mothers Club recalls that her youngest son once participated in a program in which children from the project spent two weeks living with suburban families. “The family called me one evening and said, ‘I thought these kids that were coming to visit us were poor kids who didn’t get to go places. Everywhere that we plan to take your son, he’s been two, three times,’ she said. ‘He’s been to places that my children haven’t been to.’ ‘Well,’ I told her, ‘those are the kind of things our kids do.’”

The Mothers Club may seem quaint and anachronistic, with its fashion shows and spaghetti suppers. But what these mothers were doing was creating a community where there was none, giving their children everything any mother—“project mother” or suburbanite—strives to give her children. Soon enough, the Mothers Club would prove a formidable political force, one the city would have to reckon with, when a longtime threat to the community, one that they had worked for years to stop, proved fatal to one of its own children.