Reprints
National Association for Olmsted Parks
Volume 4
Number 1

The Boston Park System

BY JOHN C. OLMSTED

(Meeting of July 7, 1905)

At this, the first summer meeting of the American Society of Landscape Architects, it seems appropriate that considerable attention should be given to the parks of this city. Because I had a more or less responsible share in, and at all times took part in the designing of them, it has fallen to me to tell you, before we visit the parks together, some points of design which may aid you somewhat toward understanding what you will see tomorrow...

The Common

The Common—the pride of patriotic Bostonians—is part of a farm bought of William Blackstone, the first settler who bought of the Indians, by the "Town of Boston," in 1634. The Town, thereupon, reserved from sale substantially the present Common for a public cow pasture and training-field for the militia. Charles Street was laid out by description in a vote of the Town in 1694, as was also an extension of Boylston Street westward to the channel...

The Public Garden

What is now the Public Garden was originally a part of the Common, but it was cut off by the vote defining Charles Street, passed in 1694. This vote seemed to have been intended to define and limit the Common proper, and to leave the area west of Charles Street to be treated simply as a piece of real estate to be sold off from time to time, as land south of Boylston Street had been, and continued to be, sold. At any rate, the same vote authorized the selectmen to sell, and they did sell, land west of Charles Street, beginning 500 feet south of Beacon Street, for rope-walks, which it was desired to get located out of the built-up part of the Town, as they were dangerous because of fire.

However, the land where these rope-walks stood was purchased back by the Town in 1824. In 1856 an agreement was entered into between the Commonwealth, the City, and the Boston & Roxbury Mill Corporation, by which Arlington Street was defined and some strips of land conveyed to the City for the purpose of extending what is now the Public Garden westward to Arlington Street and northward to Beacon Street. At that time there was a little upland in what is now the Public Garden, but it was mostly beach and salt marsh and mud flat exposed at low water...

Commonwealth Avenue

It is said that the late Arthur Gilman, architect of the City Hall, suggested Commonwealth Avenue from the Public Garden to Massachusetts Avenue as the central feature of the new residential district (the Back Bay). It is 250 feet wide between house fronts, and the central lawns are 100 feet wide, including a central promenade in which at intervals are... monuments... Unfortunately, this section of Commonwealth Avenue is lacking in suitable terminal features, doubtless because of the excessive utilitarianism of the commissioners and engineer of the Commonwealth.

When the next section of the Back Bay district west of Massachusetts Avenue came to be filled the engineer in charge, for utilitarian reasons—to avoid a
very long diagonal bridge over the Boston and Albany Railroad, and to afford regular blocks of land parallel with the railroad—diverted Commonwealth Avenue and again ignored the opportunity to create a dignified feature, such as a "public square" or circle, which would have afforded a suitable site for a great monument or public building facing east toward the older portion of Commonwealth Avenue.

The New Park Movement

Most of the parks and parkways of Boston form a connected system. One can drive, without going out of lands controlled by the Park Commission, from the Public Garden through Commonwealth Avenue, the Fens, Riverway, Olmsted Park (Arborway, Arnold Arboretum), Franklin Park, Columbia Road, and Strandway, to Marine Park...

The Boston Park System

The old Common and the newer Public Garden, together with numerous public squares which it was the custom for the land-owners to dedicate when they subdivided their lands into streets and lots, had been managed by a joint committee of the City Council. Notwithstanding the appointment of a Park Commission in 1875, this arrangement still continues. It is desirable for the practical reason that it keeps the later park system out of politics.

The Fens

The shape of the Fens can only be defined briefly as shapeless. It has an irregular central body averaging about 1,000 feet wide, with a length, from Boylston Bridge to Mrs. John L. Gardner's "Fenway Place," of about 3,500 feet. From this body project six arms. Northward of Boylston Bridge is the arm called Charlestage. This was laid out as a so-called "entrance" to the Park. It originally extended, for this reason, northward only to Beacon Street; but, when the waterway plan was adopted, it was extended a block further north to Charles River. It is now about 1,500

by popular vote in 1875. This act, however, left the supplying of funds to the City Council, requiring a two-thirds vote of each chamber. This practically blocked further progress until 1877, when, after much agitation, the City Council, fairly driven by public opinion and by the even more effective lobbying of land-owners and speculators, who expected to derive a profit thereby, finally authorized the laying out of a park in the unimproved

portion of the Back Bay, and provided, by borrowing, the funds necessary to pay for the land. This was the Back Bay Park, later called the Fens.
The Boston Park System

feet long. Its width was arbitrarily established at 300 feet, but as the landowners neglected to stipulate for a street within this area, the park Commission later secured a strip 50 feet wide on each side for streets, on condition of completely improving them at the expense of the park fund. The other entrances are Boylston Entrance, 30 feet wide, to Massachusetts Avenue; Westland Entrance, 300 feet wide, to Parker Street; Huntington Entrance, 200 feet wide, to Huntington Avenue; Parker Hill Entrance, from 300 to 500 feet wide, to Huntington Avenue; and Longwood Entrance, originally 200 feet wide, but, after the waterway plan was adopted, increased to 350 feet wide.

The peculiar shape of the Fens and its entrances was due mainly to the limitations of cost for the land which the opponents of the project in the City Council succeeded in fastening upon the ordinance authorizing the park. The limit of price of ten cents per square foot for the land was stipulated. It is probable that some of those who voted for this limitation fully believed that it would indirectly kill the whole scheme, thus saving the city much money. Not only did it not save money, but it resulted in a very great increase in the cost of construction in proportion to area. The original area of this park was about one hundred acres. This, at ten cents per square foot, made the cost of land, $435,000, or $4, 356 per acre. But the cost for construction has been over $18,500 per acre, a cost probably without precedent in the history of park making. Franklin Park, which is well supplied with stone bridges, buildings and other expensive structures, cost only $4,600 per acre for construction. The cost of filling the park in the Back Bay, had it been located on salt marshes not complicated by the channels of Stony Brook and Muddy River, would probably not have been more than $4,000 per acre; so it is safe to say that the necessity forced upon the park Commission, of locating and shaping the park to suit the demand of the landowners, even allowing for a greater price for salt marshes elsewhere but nearby, cost the city, so far as the park is concerned, over a million dollars more than it would if the park Commission had been left free to act on its own judgment. It is true the city in that case would have had to construct the Stony Brook flood-channel, now nearing completion, sooner than it did. Even if this park had to be located, as it was, where the deepest and widest channels intersected the salt marshes, and even if it had to be improved in such a way that the floods of Stony Brook could be taken care of in and through it, the park might have been twice as large, yet less expensive, if the shape had been a rectangle, with its length, say, three times its width. The present periphery of the park and its entrances is nearly three miles. If the park had been a rectangle half a mile wide and one mile long, its boundary drives would have been only a trifle longer than they now are, yet the park, including the border streets, would have had an area of 320 acres, instead of only 115 acres as at present. The enormous advantages of this increase of 205 acres in size may be gathered from the statement that it would have afforded space for a play-field of nearly that area, a most important feature in which the present park is necessarily entirely lacking. Or, as an alternative, this park, if limited to its present area (115 acres), might have been a rectangle as long as the present main body of the park (3,500), and 430 feet wider than at present; yet, in that case, the boundary street would have had a total length of one and three-quarters miles instead of two and seven-eighths miles. As by far the greater part of the expense of construction of this park has been its borders, it is obvious that a park having the same area could have been provided for about two-thirds of the actual cost of construction. The saving, amounting to some $700,000, might have been put into one or more great play-fields.

The acquisition of the land for the Fens was begun in 1877, and in deference to local political opinion a competition
for plans was held. An outsider, Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted, was invited to act as judge of the competition, after having refused to submit a plan in competition; but the proposed duty did not appeal to him and he declined. After the competition had taken place, and after the prize had been awarded, the same New York landscape architect was employed to review the problem and give some general advice. One of the first things he did was to have a thorough consultation with the City Engineer. He thus discovered, what the competitors who submitted plans had apparently not thought to ascertain, that there was a very serious problem as to what should be done with the floods of the Stony Brook. This brook ran through the low part of Roxbury at such a low level that the water in it was set back by the tides. As usually happens, the brook had been cribbed and confined by private land-owners and careless street-builders, and the buildings on adjoining lands had been set so low that cellars were frequently flooded, especially in the spring, and at intervals of a few years these floods occurring coincidentally with extra-high tides when the sea-water is driven into the harbor by easterly gales, flooded not only cellars but streets, deep enough for boating. The radical remedy since adopted—namely, the construction of a more direct underground channel as big as a double track subway tunnel—was at that time deemed utterly out of the question owing to the cost, which was estimated at several million dollars. The City Engineer’s idea was that the new park should be treated frankly as a storage basin, the water in it being ordinarily kept salt and the shores steeply sloped and pitched with large stones in the manner usual for reservoirs. By tide-gates the water-surface could be kept so low that the water of Stony Brook could be received and stored during high tide at a low-enough level to prevent much of the damage to the low portion of Roxbury. This simple but ugly improvement was, of course, felt to be extremely objectionable by the New York landscape architect, and he set himself the problem of devising some modification of it which, while answering fairly well the engineering requirements of the case, would appear natural and beautiful. A basin at a low elevation was taken for granted. It was assumed, too, that some sacrifice of area could be made for the sake of securing irregular shores and varying slopes such as would look natural and agreeable. The difficulty was to protect these banks from wash when they were partly submerged by floods and when violent storms would create considerable waves. The idea was then adopted of dividing the basin by curving across drives (which would eventually be much needed by the dense population which is expected to surround the park) and to still further diversify the water-surface by small, irregular islets. As a still further deterrent of destructive waves, a large portion of the surface was planned to be kept in salt marsh-grass but at a level two feet below the natural level, which is everywhere close to the elevation of mean high water. In figures the existing salt marsh was at elevation 10.5, and it was to be lowered to elevation 8.5.

The City Engineer, after this scheme had been pleasantly explained and discussed, gave it his approval, in spite of the reduction of storage capacity of storm-water which it involved; and the Park Commission, impressed by the ingenious marriage of engineering requirements and park landscape beauty, employed its author to make plans for carrying it out. The preliminary plans were presented and approved in 1878... The portion of Commonwealth Avenue from Massachusetts Avenue to Brookline Avenue and Beacon Street had been turned over to the Park Commission for improvement; consequently its driveway was planned with long, sweeping curves to harmonize with and lead into the Fenway. The two driveways of Commonwealth Avenue were extended on curves and brought together with one driveway at Charlestown, thus enabling the waterway of that extension of the Fens to be crossed by a single bridge instead of two bridges or one bridge 200 feet wide, either of which would have greatly diminished the landscape value of the waterway...

Boylston Bridge was designed with a much wider and higher span than the engineering requirements called for, especially in order to afford a particularly attractive view of the Fens landscape southward.
The Boston Park System

of it through the arch from the important viewpoint on Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. Care was taken to design the railroad bridge (which, of course, had to be paid for out of the park fund) without side parapets or fences. With the usual obtuseness as to the beauties of landscape, the beautiful view has been blocked by high board fences. It only remains now to paint staring advertising signs on these fences to complete the offensive obstruction. It is to be hoped the Park Commission will some day substitute a woven wire fence on the south side... of this railroad.

Agassiz Road, which crosses the main basin of the park, was dipped down to the lowest possible elevation to keep open the view through the length of the park... The waterway was made crooked to simulate the windings natural for a channel through a salt marsh... As is usual in park designing in the naturalistic style, more variety of scenery was compressed into the design than would ordinarily be found in nature.

Agassiz Bridge was designed with five small arches, so as to gain headroom by diminishing the thickness of the arch in order to permit canoeing... Five arches were used partly for picturesque effect, but partly as expressing the greater accommodations seemingly needed for the waterway, which had to pass the floods of Stony Brook rapidly during the low stages of the tide. Not being necessarily an imposing mass of masonry like Boylston Bridge, it was designed in an ultrapicturesque style, almost suggesting the interesting effect of a partly ruined, but still standing and useful, ancient piece of comparatively unskilled masonry. The banks about it were planted, for the sake of harmony with this idea, as widely as possible...

The five-arch bridge at Huntington Entrance was designed with as marked formality as Agassiz Bridge was with complete informality. The reason for this marked contrast of motives arose from the circumstances of the case. Huntington Entrance was formal and the walks under and the foot bridge closely associated with this five-arch bridge, and the greater width and importance of the drive and walks and bridle-path tended to artificialize the surroundings and called, in the aggregate, for a more dignified treatment. The walks under this bridge were introduced in order to afford access from this important entrance, near a large population in which children abound, to the important shorepath. This would not only lessen the danger, and feeling of danger, of women and children, but would do away with the unpleasant alertness which drivers and riders have to exercise at a grade crossing, and would, especially, enable equestrians to "let out" their horses freely from the Agassiz Road crossing to the Parker Hill Entrance...

The Fenway Bridge and the facing of the culvert are modest pieces of boulder masonry intended to be almost concealed by vines. It is usually suggestive of quaint homeliness to use the characteristic materials and mechanicals of the locality in which a structure is built. This locality is covered with a network of stone walls put up by the farmers with the boulders which encumbered their fields; hence hereabouts a lowly structure of no great size or importance may well be built of boulders. The Fen's proper end at the Fen's Bridge; hence its name. The waterway from Fen's Bridge to the culvert at Brookline Avenue, although supplied like the Fen with salt water at every tide, is intended to take on more of the character of a river than of Fen's or salt marshes. This section was originally called the Longwood Entrance. As the design developed, its name was changed to Riverway, better to express its designed character, and it had also to be considerably widened.

The Parker Hill Entrance at the time the land was taken... was intended as the start of a broad parkway to the top of Parker Hill and down the opposite side and thence to Jamaica Pond; but it would have been very steep, and the comparatively level Riverway affords a far more convenient and pleasurable drive...

The Riverway

The idea of having the Riverway and the Leverett Pond section of Olmsted Park, instead of the proposed formal boulevard by way of Parker Hill, originated from the creative imagination of the designer of the Fen's, Frederick Law Olmsted. The idea was based on the general principle of looking for every available opportunity for preserving, in connection with park work, such beautiful elements of existing scenery as can be used directly or by adaptation. Here was a salt creek fringed with salt marshes...

The idea of preserving the valley and making it a feature of the parkway system was accepted. The greatest care had to
be taken to adjust the boundary on the Boston side, which was also the line of the main drive, between the trees and topographical conditions on the one hand and the houses and demands of land-owners on the other. The waterway was changed to fresh water, being supplied by abundant springs and by the brook flowing through Brookline. Various bridges were introduced where necessary or desirable... The exigencies of design required most of the old creek channel to be filled and a new waterway to be created. A border mound was raised along the railroad to hide it. The shores of the waterway were everywhere filled with gravel, to hold back the more or less movable mud. As in the case of the Fens, every portion of the surface, except such limited areas as had trees growing upon them, were regarded according to carefully studied grading plans.

**Sooner or later experience proves that such things get into parks, and the prudent designer will plan a suitable concentration of them in a place where they will do the general rural landscape of the park little or no harm...**

**Olmsted Park**

The two parks originally named Leverett Park and Jamaica Park were combined and named Olmsted Park out of compliment to Frederick law Olmsted, after he retired owing to feeble health. This park comprises an unusual variety of scenery, including Jamaica Pond, Leverett Pond, and other ponds and pools, two wooded knolls, a brook and extensive wooded banks. With so many interesting and picturesque scenes, the main effort of the designers was to preserve and develop each according to its essential characteristics.

The site of Leverett Pond was a much larger cat-tail swamp, extending on the west to Pond Avenue. To provide an attractive, secluded drive and walk entirely within the park on this side of the swamp, a rather wide strip had to be filled in. The mud was excavated 8 feet deep and gravel dikes filled along the shore where mud was left, to prevent the mud from sliding. Where land was cheaper, east of Leverett Pond, the bordering parkway was swung well up the hillside, to broaden the park...

Willow Pond, the next pond above Leverett Pond, was relocated, but in such away that it looks just as natural as before, in fact more so, because it originally had a narrow dam with a row of willow trees growing upon it. The brook, too, existed, yet is now quite different. It is not quite natural in appearance, because it was thought preferable to introduce into it a series of little boulder dams, so as to hold back enough water to show.

Ward’s Pond, the next pond below Jamaica Pond, was less radically changed. A walk was filled in around the margin, and the narrow dam was widened, so as to disguise its artificial character. All these and other changes were carefully planned on paper and carried out by means of plans and specifications by a contractor. The engineer in charge estimated that the grading would have cost 25 per cent more if done by the regular park day’s-work gangs.

**Jamaica Pond** is in general landscape effect what it was, except that numerous houses and two great ranges of ice-houses were removed, and that a good deal of the margin had to be filled to afford room for a shore walk below the steep banks where most visitors like to go. The only house originally on the park which was retained was Pinebanks. This house was burned out after the land was acquired, but its walls were so well built that it was remodeled for a public shelter and for the business offices of the Park System... An interesting fact about Jamaica Pond is that it is so deep that at one spot its bottom is actually several feet below sea-level.

**The Arborway**

This parkway was designed to connect Jamaica Pond, the Arnold Arboretum, and Franklin Park. The land where it had to run, being already in the main provided with streets, was expensive, so it was limited to a uniform width of 200 feet. It is an excellent example of what seems to be the best way to utilize that width where the main object is to provide a through line of pleasure driving, walking, and riding between parks where there is no brook or other interesting natural feature to be preserved...

**Arnold Arboretum**

... When the landscape architect took up the planning of the Arboretum on behalf of the University, it was of course under-
The Boston Park System

stood that, so far as was compatible with its scientific and educational purposes, it was to be made beautiful and to be adapted for enjoyment by the public, and the parkway had, from the beginning, been intended to connect it with the Boston Park System. Study soon developed the fact that its boundaries were not everywhere suitable, and that there were no funds available for drives and walks and other usual park improvements; also that there was only a very remote prospect of sufficient funds becoming available from private munificence. It was then suggested that the Park Commission should add the needed land, should build and maintain drives and walks, water-supply, drainage and other construction, and police and maintain them, leaving the University to attend to planting and gardening matters and to care for the grounds, except certain reservations intended for the exclusive use of the public, and to erect and maintain the museum. The city took title to the land and leased to the University the parks intended to be developed and maintained by it. The arrangement has worked well. The city has a park of two hundred and twenty-three acres, at a cost for land of about $80,000, including that covered by the parkway.

The scenery of the Arnold Arboretum is varied and interesting, the principal features being two hills of considerable size, one of which commands extensive and beautiful views, and the other is valuable because extremely rugged and wild, having upon one part the largest patch of wild hemlock woods in the vicinity of Boston. Partly, perhaps, because of the rarity of a hemlock wood close to a dense population, owing to the ease and completeness with which it is destroyed by forest fires, and partly because of the fact that hemlocks are abundant in remote mountainous districts, the effect of a remote, wild forest could hardly be as well produced by any other tree.

Franklin Park

As an illustration of park designing, the plan and report on Franklin Park is probably the best piece of work, in spite of some disappointments in execution, done by its designer, Frederick Law Olmsted. The topography and ledges and trees lent themselves not only to many picturesque bits of landscape designing, but afforded, with moderate grading, excellent fields for such sports as are permissible in a landscape park. It is fair to say that much of the landscape was designed, because in its original state it was decidedly different in effect. It was a district of suburban and country residences, with all the usual artificial improvements of similar suburban districts, such as houses, stables, greenhouses, barns, sheds, retaining walls, earth terracing, flower and vegetable gardens, orchards, drives, rows of shade trees, walls, fences, streets, electric poles, gas-lamp posts, hydrants, quarries, fields, and woodlots...

Another feature of the plan of Franklin Park—The Greeting—has never been carried out, but appears to have been definitely abandoned, presumably owing to a preference for extending the open-field treatment and a dislike for such artificial aids to enjoyment as the Mall in Central Park, New York, the Rotten Row in Hyde Park, in London, and the corresponding drive in the Bois de Boulogne, in Paris. The idea in each case is a social congregating place, and in such a case a considerable degree of artificiality is not only appropriate, but actually essential for neatness and convenience.

Another feature designed in contiguity to The Greeting was The Little Folks’ Fair. This was intended to contain the means of amusement permissible, or more or less customary, in parks, such as a path for pony riding, another for goat carriages, smoothly paved places for scups and swings, and the like. Sooner or later experience proves that such things get into parks, and the prudent designer will plan a suitable concentration of them in a place where they will do the general rural landscape of the park little or no harm, rather than leave them to be scattered here and there haphazard and often with no regard to the effect upon the general design or the need of reserving certain parts of the park for quiet enjoyment of the landscape. It was for this sort of protection of the park proper that The Parade was created as an adjunct to Prospect Park, Brooklyn, and Franklin Field as a supplement to Franklin Park...

The introduction of golf-playing is an unwise sacrifice of the pleasure and comfort of many in the quiet enjoyment of the park. Not only are the attractive and harmless sheep driven out,
but the gently rolling slope, with the picturesque slight roughness incident to sheep pasturage, and so appropriately suggestive, to the nerve-wearied visitor, of the peace and quiet of the real country, is replaced by the hard, artificially smooth surface made by constant clipping and rolling, and, what is worse, the nerves of the visitor are still further irritated by the anxiety as to being hit by the hard and swiftly driven balls. It seems too bad that a few scores of people should be allowed practically to monopolize a hundred acres, or perhaps two hundred acres, of the most beautiful park pastures, excluding, or at any rate causing discomfort to, thousands of other visitors...

Time is lacking for describing other parks and playgrounds belonging to the city. As a concluding statement, the City has paid out for parks up to a year and a half ago just about $18,000,000, and is satisfied she got her money's worth.

from Transactions of The American Society of Landscape Architects, Volume 1
From its inception in 1899 to the end of 1908
Edited by the Committee appointed for the purpose:
    Harold A. Caparn
    James Sturgis Pray
    Downing Vaux

Reprints • National Association for Olmsted Parks • 19 Harrison Street • Framingham, MA 01702