This issue of “Reprints” offers a preview of a document to be published in the next volume of the Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, *Volume 8: The Early Boston Years, 1882–1890*. This volume of the Olmsted Papers will make available fully annotated documents and reports written by Olmsted during the period in which he relocated from New York to Brookline, established his home and office at Fairsted (now Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site), and undertook dozens of important public and private design commissions.

Charles Henry Dalton (1826–1908) was a Boston businessman and member of the Boston Park Commission from 1875–1885, serving as chairman for much of that time. Until his departure from the Boston Park Commission, Dalton was a key supporter and ally, vital to the implementation of Olmsted’s Boston park designs. The text presented here is from the *Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Parks for the City of Boston*, for the Year 1883 (Boston, 1884). A draft of this report in Olmsted’s hand is in the Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted at the Library of Congress.

—Ethan Carr, Reprints editor

**REPORT OF THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT**

To: Charles H. Dalton, Esq., Chairman of the Park Commission—Boston, December 24 1883.

Sir.—No results intelligible to the casual observer have been heretofore apparent from the tedious and costly city work on Back Bay, the operations having been scattered and mostly under ground or under water. North of Boylston street, however, the work has, within a few weeks, become coherent, and in part assumed a finished appearance, and south of Boylston street the leading features of the superficial design in land and water may be readily traced. In the course of next summer the slopes...
now formed will become in some degree verdant; streets
will have been graded, bringing the whole under closer
observation, and it is much to be hoped that the public
will desire to be better informed about it.

The reason is this: The city has been for ten years pre-
paring to enter upon a far-sighted and comprehensive
scheme of public recreation-grounds which cannot be
fully worked out in many years, but to an economical and
successful pursuit of which an intelligent, steady, and patient
public opinion is of the utmost importance. Looking to
this object it is to be regretted that the first work of the
department charged with the promotion of the scheme
should be one in which recreation is but an incidental
purpose, and in which, though the work is known under
the name of a park, the principal circumstance that dis-
tinguishes a park from other pleasure-grounds will be
wanting. With a view to a public opinion sustaining true
economy and suitable design in park work proper, noth-
ing could be more unfortunate than that the work in
Back Bay should be regarded as park work, and, as such,
should be found acceptable.

A brief review of the history of the undertaking, and an
explanation of its controlling ends, may therefore be de-
sirably placed for reference in your next Annual Report.

1887 Plan for the Back Bay Fens. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.
The locality came to be known by the name of park,—“Back Bay Park,”—because ground was once bought upon it by the city, with a view to a public recreation ground. It was selected for the purpose because it could be obtained at a lower price than any other territory equally accessible. Its market value was low, because it was mainly occupied by a deep gullet, through which the drainage and sewerage of a large area of Boston and its suburbs passed out to Charles river, and the cost of preparing it for building purposes was likely to be so great as to leave no prospect of profit in the operation.

The project of a park, however, assumed that the body of water liable to flow through the territory could be as far as desirable, diverted and regulated consistently with the requirements of a park at reasonable cost.

With more exact knowledge of the circumstances, it not only became certain that this assumption was unwarranted, but that, before the adjoining region could be built upon, it would be necessary to provide a basin in which the waters of the two streams, here having a common outlet, could be allowed to accumulate, whenever the tide in Charles river rose so high as to prevent their outflow.

The quantity of water to be thus stored would be variable. In times of freshet the required amount would be many times larger than under ordinary circumstances. The fluctuations thus occurring would cause the basin to be often noisome, a breeder of disease and a very disagreeable object to the eye unless special means could be devised to avoid such a result.

The plan now being carried out was devised for this purpose.

It provides a basin with intercepting sewers, inlets and outlets, and a series of automatic gates so disposed that, under ordinary circumstances, the surface of the water within the basin will be at a level about midway between extreme high water and mean low water of Charles river, with a fluctuation not exceeding one foot, while that of the river may be sixteen feet. The water in the basin will then have the general aspect of a salt creek, passing with a meandering course, for the most part, through or along the border of a sea-side meadow; but will not be subject to fall with the tide, so far as to exhibit the disagreeable aspect which in natural tide-basins, twice a day, appears in the form of slimy mud-banks. The water, when the work is complete, will ordinarily be clean and wholesome, and its immediate banks verdant.

When freshets of the streams flowing into the basin rise concurrently with extreme and prolonged high stages of the water in the river, preventing an outflow, the waters of the creek will rise rapidly until they overflow its banks, and then more slowly spread over the surface of adjoin-
ing salt meadows, until they wash the lower part of the meadow banks forming the margin of the basin, within which they will continue to rise until the falling tide re-opens outlets into the river.

The public cannot be prudently admitted to any part of the basin except the slopes of its rim. Passage across it must be by causeways and bridges. Its boundaries, which will be over two miles in length, may, however, be followed by wheelways, bridle roads and walks; and these, together with any needed passages across the basin, will command views over it, and may be shaded by trees. This is what is intended. The exterior road will eventually be lined on one side by buildings, as the bounding streets of Boston Common are; on the other it will look into the basin, as Beacon street into the Common. It is thus of importance that the views over the basin should be made as pleasing as, at reasonable expense, and with a view to the highest efficiency of the drainage arrangements under all contingencies, they can be. To understand the design in this respect the following circumstances must be borne in mind:—

The water rising in the basin in times of flood will be less than usually salt; salt enough, nevertheless, to be destructive of turf or of ordinary park or garden plants. It follows that any beauty in the lower part of the banks must be obtained by a selection of plants specially adapted to the circumstances, and it will be evident to any one reflecting upon the conditions as now to be observed on the ground that these plants, together with the plants of the meadows subject to be frequently soaked by strongly salt water, will be the leading constituents of the scenery of the entire territory. There will remain only a narrow border of generally steep slopes forming the sides and rim of the basin. They will be winding and irregular, will play insensibly into the meadows and water-sides at their base, and must be so treated as to maintain a certain consistency with them.

It will thus be apparent that the superficial verdant features of the locality must grow out of the constructive features.
of the drainage works, and that whatever beauty is to be
looked for must be a very different beauty from that com-
monly looked for in parks and gardens. It does not follow
that it will be less pleasing in the long run, to good taste.

Two questions may be asked by visitors next summer
which the above explanation does not answer:—

1st Why should the water in the basin at ordinary stages
be kept in a narrow and crooked channel?

The principal reason is that otherwise the difficulty of
obtaining verdant shores and avoiding high, naked mud-
banks at the foot of the slopes would be greatly increased,
as, upon any extended surface of water, the wind would
create an undermining surf. It will probably be found to
do so to some extent with the designed arrangement, but
it is hoped in such moderation that, where necessary at
all, defenses will suffice scarcely perceptible to the observer,
and not at all destructive, when the foliage above them
shall be developed, to the naturalness of the scenery.

2d Why should the slopes on the outlet north of Boylston
street, and in connection with the Beacon street and
Commonwealth avenue bridges, be crowded with com-
mon wild bushes instead of being prepared in a lawn-like
way, with detached groups of trees, shrubs, foliage-plants,
and flowers, as other grounds bordering these streets
have been?

There are several reasons: First, because were it otherwise
practicable to obtain good results from this common
mode of gardening it would be impossible to associate
these results agreeably with what will be necessary upon
the lower parts of the slopes, subject to the influence of
salt water. Second, trees and delicate plants in this situ-
tion would suffer greatly from the unusual force of winds
drawing through the pass. Third, trees would close out
the fine view over Charles river from Boylston bridge.
Fourth, the slopes being often steep, narrow, and twist-
ing, it would be difficult and costly to keep turf finely, or
otherwise maintain them in full dress.

For these reasons the aim will be to clothe these slopes
with a dense, close, self-protecting hardy chaparral. It is
believed that in a few years this will be found to blend
genially with the rough and weather-stained massive
retaining wall of the road by which travel from Beacon
street and Commonwealth avenue will be connected with
the circuit road of the basin. It will also play suitably into
the salt shore plantations.

It was observed early in this report that the principal cir-
cumstance that distinguishes a park from other pleasure
grounds will be wanting in the pleasure ground to be
formed upon the basin of Back Bay. A park is a place
for the enjoyment of rural scenery in a sense that a gar-
den for instance is not. A town-park is a place of escape
to such scenery from scenery of a town-like or artificial
character. The circumstance that distinguishes a park,
therefore, is that of sylvan seclusion. All parks properly
so called are surrounded by screening plantations and
it is a leading motive in their design to shut out of the
view of those to be benefited by them whatever might
be unfavorable to a continuous impression of consistent
rural scenery. The site of the proposed park of West Rox-
bury is admirably adapted to this purpose; the require-
ments of the basin on Back Bay as distinctly exclude it. The
Thames Embankment of London which is also a great
drainage work though embellished in a much more park-
like manner than this on Back Bay can be is not called
a park. Nor is the Ring of Vienna; the Chiaja of Naples,
the Alameda of Seville or the Paseo of Havana. Not being
parks but public grounds of a distinctive character they
are all much better named than if called parks. It is much
to be desired that this designation for the basin on Back
Bay may be abandoned.

Respectfully,

Fred’k Law Olmsted.
Landscape Architect Advisory.