



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.



The Back Bay Fens in the early 20th century. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

The Boston/Brookline parks, later known as the “Emerald Necklace,” were the most important projects in the Olmsted office during the years covered in *The Early Boston Years*. In this 1883 report to the Boston Park Commissioners, Olmsted explains some of the purposes of the Back Bay Fens project, which at this point was under construction. The Back Bay Fens challenged contemporary assumptions about “parks.” Designed to function as a salt marsh in order to control flooding and improve sanitary conditions, the landscape offered none of the floral displays, fountains, monuments, or recreational amenities that characterized the Common or the Public

Garden. Olmsted was concerned that the public might anticipate this kind of familiar precedent and would need to understand that the “Proposed Improvement of Back Bay,” as the Fens project was first known, was designed to create a living, ecological infrastructure as well as a unique public landscape.

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.

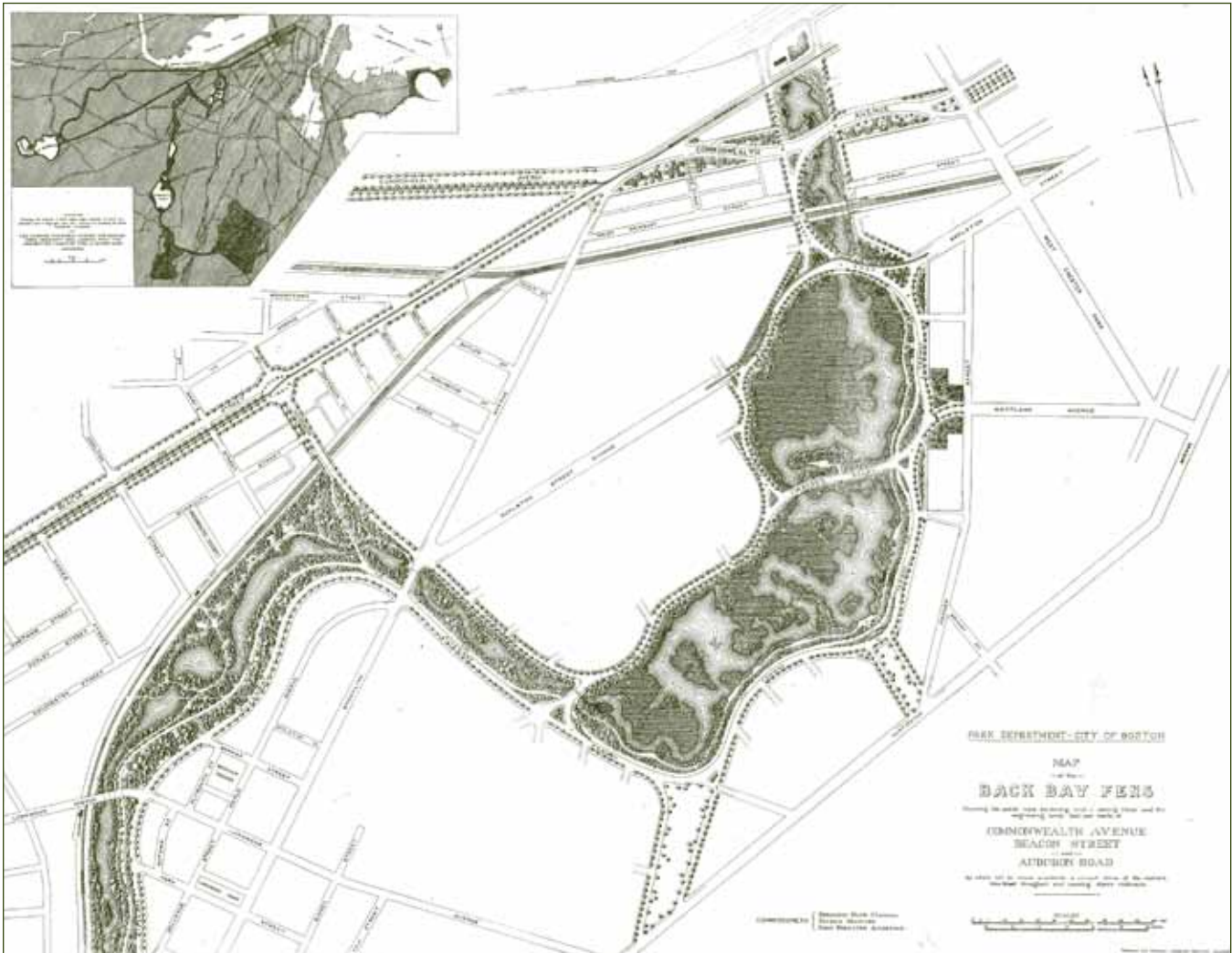
Sir.— No results intelligible to the casual observer have been heretofore apparent from the tedious and costly city work on Back Bay, the operations having been scattered and mostly under ground or under water. North of Boylston street, however, the work has, within a few weeks, become coherent, and 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 preparing 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 distinguishes 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, nothing 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 desirably 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



Boylston Street Bridge (H. H. Richardson, arch.) in the Back Bay Fens, photo taken in 1902. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.



The Back Bay Fens and Boylston Street Bridge today. Courtesy of Ethan Carr.

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-



Back Bay Fens. Courtesy of the Emerald Necklace Conservancy.



1903 drawing showing streets and Fens over original estuary. Courtesy of the State Library of Massachusetts.

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 commonly 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 common 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 situation 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 twisting, 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 circumstance 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 garden 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 Roxbury is admirably adapted to this purpose; the requirements 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.