Reforesting the Boston Harbor Islands: A Proposal (1887)

Frederick Law Olmsted

A century ago, the great landscape architect proposed replanting the islands' forests to soften their bleakness and to check their deterioration.

One hundred years ago the Boston Harbor islands were largely unwooded. Frederick Law Olmsted, in a report to the Boston Park Commissioners, recommended their reforestation. They are "generally hard-featured, bare, bleak, and inhospitable," he wrote. "Let any one, passing through the harbor, imagine them clothed with foliage of any kind, and it will be felt how much more agreeable its character would be if they were generally wooded." Today, the original Eastern Deciduous Forest has begun to reestablish itself.

Between the wharves of Boston and the sea, outside of Boston Bay, there are seventy-five islands and islets, fifty notable projections of the mainland with bays between them, some of which are the mouths of streams, and a great many shoals and reefs which are exposed, or upon which the sea breaks, at low water. Between all these there are innumerable sub-channels more or less navigable, according to the stage of the tide and the depth of any object to be floated through them. The aggregate area of the islands is a little more than 1,300 acres. Of this the city owns 439 acres; the United States, 241 acres; and, of the remainder, 500 acres have but five owners.

The rise and fall of the tide varies from eight to sixteen feet, according to the age of the moon and the condition of the weather, and the tidal currents are liable to be strong and complicated. These circumstances not only make the harbor interesting because of what meets the eye of those passing through it or along its shores, but they give fleet, nimbly-turning boats a more marked advantage than they would otherwise have, and make close calculations and tact in trimming and steering them of more obvious importance than they are in harbors with fewer elements of picturesque character. Add to this the further consideration that from the time of the first settlers the people in Boston have been much engaged in fishing ventures, not only on the deep sea, but of a class to be pursued with boats of light burden, and the fact will be accounted for that there has always been an unusual interest among them in modelling, building, rigging, and seamanship of small craft, both for commercial and for recreative use.

The city government has recognized this interest, and, in an exceptionally systematic way, wisely fostered it by the institution of an annual regatta with prizes to winners from the public purse. Latterly, at the suggestion of your Department, it has begun the building of a promenade pier, providing a fair outlook on the harbor, and of a large basin especially as a mooring-place for pleasure-boats. With a possible exception in Venice, it is believed that the people of no other city in the world make as much or as good use of their harbor, otherwise than commercially, as those of Boston have long been accustomed to do, and that none take as much or as justifiable pride in the character of their small craft, and their dexterity in handling them.

In what, then, is it to be asked, other than the play of its large and lively fleet of fishing and pleasure craft, does the special attractiveness of the harbor consist? The special attractiveness of the harbor lies partly in the contrast of the intricate passages and vistas among these, with the unbroken expanse of the ocean upon which it opens, and partly in the varied forms of the bluffs, crags, bars, beaches, and fens that form its shores.

What are the drawbacks to these attractive circumstances?

Chief among them must be recognized the generally hard-featured, bare, bleak, and inhospitable aspect of the headlands and islands. Let anyone, passing through the harbor, imagine them clothed with foliage of any kind, and it will be felt how much more agreeable its character would be if they were generally wooded.

Stumps, that still remain upon the mostly exposed, the rockiest, and bleakest of the islands show that they formerly were wooded. Once cleared, a second growth has been prevented by cropping and pasturing. The land being then much more open than before to frost and drying heat, rains, gales, and salt spray, it has ever since been losing soil and the soil remaining has been losing fertility. Hence the scenery of the harbor has
beauty; its artificial features are be-
been and is every year being de-
spoiled more and more of its original
features, and in these respects it is
becoming less and less attractive.

The question whether the waste
thus in progress can be arrested, and
whether what has been lost can be
recovered, is, happily, one to be an-
swered by reference to the result of
means used elsewhere for a similar
purpose.

The difficulties to be overcome lie
chiefly in the bleakness and dryness
of much of the land most desirable to
be planted; somewhat, also, at cer-
tain points, to its exposure to salt
spray. They are such that trees of the
sorts more commonly seen in the
lawns, parks, cemeteries, and road-
sides of the landward suburbs of the
city could not be wisely planted. The
suggestion offered by the Memorial
Association is that the original forest
may be restored. Should this be at-
ttempted no results are to be expected
can be brought in comparison
with those which are, unfortunately,
associated in most minds with the
term landscape-gardening.

The beauty to be gained through
such an operation is not the beauty of
clusters, clumps, groups, or any art-
fully studied combination of trees,
much less is it that of trees admirable
for their beauty singly. It is the
beauty of large compositions as these
may be affected, to one looking in
any direction across the harbor, by
broad masses of foliage palpitating
over the rigid structure of the islands
and headlands, lifting their skylines,
giving them some additional, but not
ever excessive, variety of tint, greater play
of light and shade, and completely
overcoming the present hardness of
outline of their loamy parts, without
destroying the ruggedness of their
rocky parts.

Having such an end in view, the
trees to be planted will be of the same
kinds with those formerly growing
on the ground. That they may help
one another to overcome the difficul-
ties of the situation they will, when
planted, be small, pliant and adapt-
able, offering little for the wind to
tussle with; they will be low-
branched, and will be set snugly
together. A large proportion of all,
influences mingled with the others,
will be of species the growth of
which, like that of the little white
birk of our rural roadsides, is rapid
while young but not of long continu-
ance. These, after a few years, will be
overtopped and smothered by trees
of slower and larger growth, greater
constitutional vigor, and more last-
ing qualities. The former will have
served as nurses to the latter while
they are becoming established, and if
timely thinning should be neglected,
as it is so apt to be, they will gradu-
ally disappear by natural process
before the permanent stock will be
fatally injured by crowding.

Years must pass before the perma-
nent growth can acquire a full-grown
forest character, but almost at once
the sapling plantations will give a
pleasing softness and geniality to
those elements of the scenery that
are not contributive to its pictur-
esque ruggedness. Three years after
the planting is finished the harbor, as
a whole, will have acquired a deci-
dedly more good-natured, cheerful,
and inviting character.

An impression is common that at
most points of the harbor trees can-
not be got to grow satisfactorily, and
instances are referred to in which
they have failed or, at the best, have
grown very slowly and with dis-
torted forms. So far as it has been
practicable to ascertain, the trees, in
these cases, have been ill-chosen and
ill-planted, and the result has no
bearing upon the proposition favored
by the Memorial Association.

Reasons for confidence that, under
a course of management judiciously
adapted to the special difficulties
of the situation, an undertaking of the
kind that has been outlined would be
successful, are found in experiences
of which those of Mr. Joseph Story
Fay, at Wood's Holl, supply an ex-
ample.

The outer part of the sea-beaten
promontory of Wood's Holl, had
probably been devastated in the
same manner as the islands of Boston
Harbor. Thirty years ago it was even
more bare of trees, bleak and cheer-
less than they are. As the result of
operations which have been carried
on within that period by Mr. Fay,
about two hundred acres of it is now
covered with dense woods of well-
grown trees. Mr. Fay, visiting Boston
islands last summer with the Com-
missoners, could see no reason to
doubt that by similar operations
upon them equally satisfactory re-
results would be secured.

There is a large tract of barren land
in a most exposed situation on the
west coast of Lake Michigan which,
a few years ago, was covered with
drifting sand. Because it was sup-
posed to be worthless, and that any
attempt to improve it would be re-
garded as a "Folly," Mr. Robert
Douglass chose to take it as a place to
demonstrate the practicability of
establishing forests under such spe-
cial difficulties as the situation pre-
sented. He has been entirely success-
ful, the sand is fixed and sheltered,
leaf mould is beginning to accumu-
late upon it, and the ground is be-
coming comparatively moist and
productive. . . .

—Excerpted from: Thirteenth An-
nual Report of the Board of Com-
missioners for the Year 1887.
Boston: Department of Parks, City
of Boston, 1888, pages 52 to 62.