

Restoring Boston's "Emerald Isles"

Two special issues of *Arnoldia* on Boston's parks and open spaces

Boston rides the sea! Like Venus, she was born of sea-foam and spindrift, of ebb and flow. Her existence, her very identity, she owes to the sea. Like Venice, Boston is as much sea as land; the sea still flows in her veins. Some newer parts of Boston—some neighborhoods, some parks, even entire sections of the city—arose, quite literally, from out of the sea a mere century or so ago. Even now they are borne upon the salty underground waters that diffuse inland from the sea: much of the Public Garden and all of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, for example, were built upon what once were tidal flats in the Back Bay. Dwellings and other structures in the filled areas, built on wooden pilings during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are sustained to this day by the subterranean seawater, which keeps them from decaying, which keeps them, therefore, "afloat." Where the seawater fails, checked perhaps by a massive modern building, the pilings rot, and older structures founder.

Boston may have turned her sights inland or elsewhere at times, but she has never been able to cut herself off entirely from the sea: her soul still flows from, is still sus-

tained by, the sea; her heart of hearts beats yet to the systole, beats yet to the diastole of the tide.

In the late nineteenth century, after the Back Bay had been filled in, islands and peninsulas of another sort, anchored to the Common and Public Garden by way of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, extended inland into Boston's far-flung neighborhoods, at their outer limits arching inexorably back toward their source, the sea. The result was one of Frederick Law Olmsted's crowning achievements, Boston's famous "Emerald Necklace" of parks and parkways.

Boston's bay and harbor are, like the land, studded with islands and islets of an emerald hue, only these are actual islands surrounded by water, not urbanized land. Olmsted had hoped to make them part of the Emerald Necklace. They once supported lush deciduous forests, but the forests were long since cut off. Lately, however, many of the islands in Boston Harbor have become parklands, and their forests are beginning to return. Lately, too, Boston's landbound archipelago of parks—including the Emerald Necklace—has experienced a renaissance of sorts as a tide of prosperity has

swept the region. Attitudes toward parks and other kinds of open space have undergone a sea change. There is optimism in the air. Individuals, citizens' groups, private organizations, and government agencies, in diverse and ingenious ways, have set about polishing the gems of the Emerald Necklace, the islands in Boston Harbor, and other jewels in Greater Boston's system of parks. A century after that superb system was created—a century during which Boston's parklands have endured long periods of neglect—events have come full circle. The harbor islands have been secured as parkland, and Boston's parure of emerald islands—terrestrial and marine alike—is at last complete. This little gray dowager by the sea is gray no more: she begins to glow in resplendent ornament.

This and the Fall issue of *Arnoldia* chronicle a few of the many selfless efforts Bostonians have made over the years to create, to salvage, to complete, and to rehabilitate some of their community's most precious cultural assets—its parks and other public spaces. As the articles that follow show, today's efforts build upon the devotion, hard work, selflessness, and genius of past generations.

An Overview of Boston's Park System

Boston's park system is one of the oldest and most comprehensive in the country—an extraordinary resource for its citizens and visitors. Its 2,500 acres range from the famous and beautiful 1,000-acre Emerald Necklace, stretching through the city its woodlands and vistas, to 185 neighborhood parks, playgrounds, and play areas, nearly half of them under an acre in size, offering pockets of open space and recreational opportunities in every part of the city. The system includes cemeteries, golf courses, pools, monuments, fountains, statues, foot bridges, and street trees.

The history of Boston's park system has been varied. Although the Boston Common has been common land since 1634, and the Public Garden was laid out in 1838 and deeded to the city in 1852, in 1875 Boston lagged far behind other American cities in the amount of land and attention it had paid to public parks. Only 115 acres had been designated as public open space. All this changed, however, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, which saw the birth and development of one of the country's great park systems. Public discussion about the need for urban parks began in the 1860s and, through public hearings, press debates, and political battles, culminated in the creation of the Boston Parks Commission in 1875. A year later the Commission published its first report; a public meeting, "Parks for People," urged immediate adoption of the plan. The following year, the city set aside \$900,000 to acquire and develop land, and in 1878 Frederick Law Olmsted was hired to plan a park system for Boston.

Between 1878 and 1895, Olmsted designed, and the city eventually built, a city-wide parks and parkway system and five large neighborhood parks. His Emerald Necklace was designed primarily to create country parks and a continuous chain of green, but also to solve serious water pollution and health problems resulting from the flow of sewage out of the Stony Brook and Muddy River onto the tidal flats of the Charles River. The Emerald Necklace includes the Back Bay Fens, the Muddy River, Olmsted Park, Jamaica Pond, the Arnold Arboretum, and Franklin Park. As the Back Bay filling was completed, Commonwealth Avenue Mall became a link between the Emerald Necklace and the Public Garden and Common.

The Emerald Necklace parks and the parkways linking them—the Fenway, the Riverway, the Jamaica way, and the Arborway—were designed as one system. Today the parks are managed by the city, the parkways by the Metropolitan District Commission. An exception is the Arnold Arboretum, which is owned by the city but operated by Harvard University. Prior to construction of the Arboretum, the city bought the Arboretum land from Harvard in 1882 and leased it back to Harvard for a thousand years. Under this agreement the city accepted responsibility for building and maintaining the roads and for policing the grounds. From this point to the present, the Arnold Arboretum has functioned as a horticultural museum and as a park. Its splendid 265 acres of rolling lawns and walkways through carefully groomed trees, flowering shrubs, and rare plants make the Arboretum an especially well used and appreciated park, serving immediate neighborhoods and the entire metropolitan area.

—Excerpted from *The Greening of Boston: An Action Agenda*

Opportunities—Past, Present, Future

Twenty-one years ago an article by Edward Weeks, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, appeared in *Arnoldia*. It dealt with the state of Greater Boston's parks in particular and environment in general. Addressing many of the issues—problems to be solved, opportunities to be seized—with which the articles in the Summer and Fall 1988 issues of *Arnoldia* deal, it provides a revealing context for evaluating the current state of affairs. Thus, it is reprinted on the following pages. There follows an article by Mark Primack, executive director of the Boston GreenSpace Alliance. Written expressly for this issue of *Arnoldia*, it responds to Weeks' article and presents a picture of the situation today.