

The Arnold Arboretum: An Historic Park Partnership

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Just over a century ago—through sheer force of willpower—Charles Sprague Sargent clinched a unique partnership that for the next 895 years secures the Arnold Arboretum to all the people of Boston

How often is a stroll through a beautiful city park also a tour of a university research facility? Not often, but if one is strolling through the Arnold Arboretum, it is. Designed for use by scientists and laity for the study and enjoyment of botany and horticulture and created with private funds, the Arnold Arboretum broke with tradition. For, although the late nineteenth century was a harvest time for museums, no university botanic garden or arboretum had yet been planned with the public in mind.

Following tradition, too, was the design of public pleasure grounds: the prevailing “picturesque theory” stressed naturalistic design, avoiding the use of specimen trees or plantings. No tree was selected to display the details of its bark, leaves, flowers, or fruit. The botanist, however, needed to focus on just these specifics for study and comparison. The challenge of meeting, in a single setting, the divergent needs and expectations of botanists and the general public alike required both an exceptional designer and “creative financing.”

Charles Sprague Sargent, a well connected Boston Brahmin and the Arboretum’s first director, was just the man to find both. He convinced Frederick Law Olmsted, America’s leading landscape architect, to create a design that would be naturalistic and that yet would arrange plants according to a specific taxonomic scheme. Then, in order to serve

the dual purpose he believed the Arboretum would have, Sargent had to persuade the City of Boston and Harvard College to undertake a joint financial venture. His motives were not entirely altruistic: he needed additional money to build and maintain the Arboretum.

The idea of shared financing occurred to Sargent as early as 1874, when the city began to hold hearings on a public park system. Although this was four years before Olmsted agreed to work on either the Arboretum or the park system, Sargent outlined his ideas: “It has occurred to me that an arrangement could be made by which the ground could be handed over to the City of Boston,” he wrote, “on the condition that the City spend a certain sum of money laying out the grounds and agree to leave the plantings in my hands. . . .” Evidently, Olmsted liked the idea, for he adopted and championed it.

By 1880 he would write to Charles Eliot Norton, professor of fine arts at Harvard, about his frustration with the Arboretum project. “The scheme is that the city shall lease the condemned . . . land to the college at a nominal rent for a thousand years and the college shall establish and maintain the arboretum. . . . This is the whole of the scheme as I would have it. I am sure that it is a capital bargain for both parties. . . . The sole difficulty is that nobody (feeling free to act) is alive to the opportunity. I have been shaking Dalton [chairman of the Park Commission] and



A view of Bussey Brook in the Arnold Arboretum, taken in 1949 by Professor Karl Sax, who was the Arboretum's Director at the time. Photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

Sargent and have tried to stir up Mr. Pulsifer at the *Herald*. . . ." Perhaps Sargent and Olmsted recognized a political advantage in its being Olmsted's idea, for Sargent's annual report for 1881 credits Olmsted with the plan.

The negotiations lasted four years. The Arboretum's nurseries were bursting at the seams. Sargent could not begin to implement Olmsted's design without commitment from the city. The proposition finally came to a vote by the City Council on October 13, 1882, after lengthy debate, but it failed to pass, receiving only 36 of the required 59 votes.

Proponents of the Arboretum on the Council quickly moved to set up an Arboretum Committee, and Sargent and Olmsted stepped up their efforts to rally support. A public-relations drive was launched that had the "Arboretum Question" debated in the city's newspapers. November's headlines read: "VOICES OF THE PEOPLE IN ITS FAVOR—THROWING AWAY A BARGAIN," "THE ARBORETUM'S VALUE TO BOSTON," "AN EDUCATIONAL PARK AT A BARGAIN." Sargent pulled out all stops with the circulation of a petition, to which 1,305 of the

most powerful people added their signatures. If Olmsted had failed to shake up someone at the *Herald*, the petition certainly succeeded. A story in its issue of December 1 read, in part:

The petition to the city council in favor of the Arnold Arboretum is probably the most influential ever received by that body. It includes almost all of the large taxpayers of Boston. . . . Nearly all of the prominent citizens are there, including ex-mayors and ex-governors. . . . The petition would be a prize to a collector of autographs.

The campaign worked. On December 27, 1882, terms similar to those Sargent had proposed eight years earlier were agreed upon. It took another year to work out the details, but on December 20, 1883, a thousand-year lease was signed, and an unprecedented agreement between the City of Boston and Harvard College began. As the earliest of Boston's "Park Partners," the Arboretum has had a long and celebrated history, and both the City of Boston and Harvard recognize the wisdom of this early arrangement, which is now in its 106th year.

Under the terms of the agreement, the Arboretum became part of the City of Boston's park system. The city was to be responsible for the construction and ongoing maintenance of the driveways and boundary fences throughout the Arboretum. Harvard Univer-

sity was to collect the plants, design the Arboretum, and maintain the collections and programs.

The Arboretum has been consistently well maintained since its beginning, and it stands out as the centerpiece of the famed Emerald Necklace. Its original master plan has been maintained to this day, although there is substantial restoration work to be done on the Arboretum's roads, walkways, drinking fountains, and benches. Happily, the Parks and Recreation Department is beginning a long-term program of capital repairs that one day will return the Arboretum to its former pristine state. Funds from the Olmsted Restoration Project will also contribute substantially to this effort when they become available.

The Arnold Arboretum's fame as a botanical garden has spread worldwide, attracting scientists and students from around the globe to study its vast collections. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people enjoy the Arboretum as a scenic and restful escape from the ever-increasing congestion of Boston. It is a rare jewel created through the inspired vision of people who believed in the value of urban open space, and who understand the ever more valuable role of botany in modern life.

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