

Emerald Metropolis

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One hundred years ago the founders of Boston's Metropolitan Park Commission realized a transcendentalist vision by reserving as public open space "the rock hills, the stream banks, and the bay and the sea shores" of the region.

At the height of the Panic of 1893 Charles Francis Adams and his brother Henry "packed up our troubles and made for Chicago" to see the World's Columbian Exposition. Like thousands of others they were captivated and astonished by the fantastic ensemble of images they saw there—neoclassical buildings, all perfectly white, arrayed according to Frederick Law Olmsted's site plan to display "the successful grouping in harmonious relationships of vast and magnificent structures." Employing the talents of America's best architects, the fair's "White City" generated enormous enthusiasm for what soon came to be called the City Beautiful movement.¹

In his autobiography, Henry Adams puzzled over the exhibits and the architecture of the exposition. Given that these extraordinary white structures had been "artistically induced to pass the summer on the shore of Lake Michigan," the question was, did they seem at home there? More than that, Adams wondered whether Americans were at home in the fair's idealized New World city. But neither of the Adamses, in their published works or private writings, connected what they saw in Chicago with Charles' work as chairman of the Metropolitan Park Commission in Boston.

In January 1893 the six-month-old park commission had published its report, written by Sylvester Baxter and Charles Eliot, the commission's secretary and landscape architect; Adams wrote the introduction. Their re-

port addressed the urban environment, but not by focusing on the city center as Chicago's White City had done. Nor did they advocate taking control of suburban development—street plans and public transportation as well as parks—an approach that Olmsted and others had unsuccessfully urged in New York City in the 1870s. Looking instead to the margins and the in-between spaces of the region, they envisioned an "Emerald Metropolis." More than a city in a park, more than a second Emerald Necklace, more, even, than a *system* of parks, it was a visual definition of the region's structure that could be sustained, they were convinced, even in the face of unimagined growth. The Emerald Metropolis would help Bostonians feel at home by preserving what Eliot called "the rock-hills, the stream banks, and the bay and the sea shores" of greater Boston—the natural edges, paths, and landmarks of the region.²

The Idea Defined

Eliot and Baxter moved to shape the region by reserving as open space large tracts hitherto unbuildable but now on the verge of development; the shores of rivers and beaches still marshy or shabbily built up; and the most picturesque remaining fragments of the aboriginal New England landscape. The *natural* features of the region should establish the armature for urban development, not the existing haphazard assemblage of streets, lots, railroads, and



By the 1890s the Middlesex Fells was entirely surrounded by rapidly growing towns whose boundaries met in the middle of the woods. The towns had already begun to purchase land around the ponds to protect their water supply when the reservation was created in 1894, expanding the protection of the watershed. This view looks across Spot Pond toward Pickerel Rock. From Report of the Board of Metropolitan Park Commissioners, 1895.

streetcar lines. Once set aside, these reservations would forever enhance the city's fitness for human habitation, joining unique and characteristic landscapes to the placemaking power of the city's historic landmarks. The park commission's plan offered the citizenry of Boston an opportunity to see the metropolis in an entirely new way; the figure and ground of the region's topographical features would be transposed.

Baxter and Eliot had begun formulating these ideas several years earlier. In February 1890, Eliot responded to an editorial by Charles Sprague Sargent in his new periodical *Garden and Forest* that since the cities and towns around Boston had failed to act, the provision of "well-distributed open spaces" for public squares and playgrounds would have to wait for the establishment of a commission by the legislature. Eliot, however, was concerned

with another sort of open space. He looked out from the State House and saw, within a ten-mile radius, many still-surviving remnants of the New England wilderness. There were half a dozen scenes of uncommon beauty, "well known to all lovers of nature near Boston . . . in daily danger of utter destruction." He urged the immediate creation of an association to hold "small and well-distributed parcels of land . . . just as the Public Library holds books and the Art Museum pictures—for the use and enjoyment of the public." Generous men and women would bequeath these irreplaceable properties to such a group, just as others give works of art to the city's museums. Eliot helped organize a standing committee of twenty-five, which set to work in the spring of 1890. As an energetic member of the committee, Baxter drew on his ties to newspaper editors and writers across the state and to other

veterans of the twenty-year-old campaign to preserve the Middlesex Fells. The legislation to create a privately endowed Trustees of Public Reservations was signed in May of 1891.³

Though Eliot did not note the distinction in his letter, the analogy with the art museum and the public library suggested *two* approaches to preserving open space, one private and the other public. Even before the campaign to organize the Trustees was completed, Eliot and Baxter moved—first separately and then jointly—to promote a public regional park authority. Eliot wrote a letter to his boyhood friend Governor William Russell in December 1890, recommending that the State Board of Health develop a plan for metropolitan reservations. Three months later, Baxter wrote a series of articles in the *Boston Herald* about what he called “Greater Boston.” He too scanned the ten-mile view from the State House, but he described an image that was the very inverse of Eliot’s fast-disappearing landscapes. From that height he observed “a billowy sea of buildings stretching away in nearly every direction, apparently without interruption, as far as the feet of the chain of hills that encircles the borders of the bay from Lynn around to Milton.” The pattern of construction paid little heed to town boundaries, and the limits of Boston covered only a fraction of the true city. The proper management of this Greater Boston would be a regional commission with authority over all the major public services—water supply, sewerage, fire, police, schools, highways, transit, parks. Here Baxter’s perspective joined with Eliot’s. Of all these functions, Baxter reserved his lengthiest description for a chain of pleasure grounds extending (under regional administration) from Lynn Beach and the Lynn Woods to the “mountain-like” Blue Hills range. Taken together with the recently completed parks in the City of Boston, these large woodland reservations would constitute one of the grandest park systems in the world.⁴

Olmsted urged Baxter to publish the *Herald* articles in book form, and soon after *Greater*

Boston appeared, Eliot read it and proposed that they work together to realize the metropolitan park system. At their urging the newly organized Trustees of Public Reservations agreed to convene a meeting of park commissioners from across Greater Boston in December 1891. After public hearings the following spring, a temporary Metropolitan Park Commission was authorized by the legislature in June 1892.⁵

Baxter’s concerns were the administrative inefficiencies and parochial jealousies of the myriad cities and towns in the Boston basin, and Eliot knew firsthand how the wariness of town officials affected the development of public open space. From his extensive explorations on the region’s fringes, he knew that town boundaries often bisected the most scenic areas, especially along ponds and river valleys. It would be senseless, he said, for one town to act without the other, but too often one city had refused to spend money for fear that the adjoining city would enjoy what it had paid for.⁶

So when the park commissioners planned a series of daytrips through the district in September and October of 1892, they invited city officials and prominent residents of the towns to join them. The secretary’s minutes recount the itinerary of these ten excursions, which took the commissioners and their guests throughout the metropolitan district. Several required transit by train, carriage, barge, and steam launch, all in the same day. The places they visited were unfamiliar to most of the members, and Baxter wrote later that the outings “were like voyages of discovery about home.” Again and again the minutes of these journeys underline the fascination with obtaining grand and scenic views. On Milton Hill they found “one of the noblest prospects in the neighborhood of Boston.” The outlook down the valley of the Saugus River toward the meadowland, the serpentine stream, and the uplands “formed a picture of exceptional charm.” The view from the twin summits of Prospect Hill in Waltham was “wide and glorious.” On their inspection tours the travelers



The park plan was bounded by the rock hills—the forest reservations laid out along the ring of hills that surround Boston about ten miles from the State House. The radial spokes of the park system were the three rivers—the Mystic, the Charles, and the Neponset. The beaches of the bay and seashores comprised the third element of the plan. Parks and parkways were proposed along the rivers, and parkways also linked Revere Beach with the Mystic River and the Middlesex Fells, the Charles River with Fresh Pond, Stony Brook with the Arnold Arboretum, and the Blue Hills with Franklin Park. By 1899, over nine thousand acres of reservations and parkways had been acquired. Cartography by Olmsted Brothers; from Report of the Board of Metropolitan Park Commissioners, 1899.

Plans and Planners

What we now know as the Emerald Necklace was conceived and executed as a single, unified work by Frederick Law Olmsted. By contrast, it is impossible to attribute the authorship of the metropolitan park system to a single author. Except for relatively small parcels within the larger reservations—for example, Revere Beach (1895) and the Charles River Esplanade (1936)—MPC lands have been largely untouched by “design.” They represent the first metropolitan application of the idea of “reserving” natural landmarks that began with Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Niagara Falls.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, many people campaigned to preserve various woodlands and undeveloped areas around Boston—including the Lynn Woods, the Middlesex Fells, Beaver Brook, and the Blue Hills. Among the park advocates who took a comprehensive, metropolitan view, the most influential included Robert Morris Copeland, Sylvester Baxter, and Charles Eliot.

Robert Morris Copeland

A landscape gardener listed in Boston city directories from 1855 to 1872, Copeland prepared the plan for the village of Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard and wrote the popular book *Country Life: A Handbook of Agriculture, Horticulture, and Landscape Gardening*. During the park debates of post-Civil War Boston, Copeland wrote a remarkable editorial proposing a system of parks as well as a grand circular boulevard around Boston that would follow the its encircling ring of hills; bridges and ferries across the harbor islands were to complete the loop. Copeland suggested that the surrounding towns “were now Boston,” but their citizens “come here to earn money, and go home to enjoy it.” It should be possible, he thought, to choose park improvements that would benefit Boston as well as the surrounding suburbs, but this task was beyond the means of individual cities and towns. He appears to have been the first to suggest a “metropolitan commission” as the vehicle for this parkmaking.¹

When Copeland moved to Vermont, his ideas for a metropolitan system were advanced by his former associate, the engineer Nathaniel Bowditch. In 1874 Bowditch published a metropolitan park plan that included many of Copeland's ideas and anticipated Eliot's proposal of two decades later. For almost fifteen years Copeland had lived in a house along Beaver Brook in Belmont, near the famous Waverly Oaks, an area he included in his metropolitan system. When the MPC was organized in 1893, Beaver Brook was its first acquisition.

Sylvester Baxter

Having determined that he could not afford to attend the recently opened architecture school of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (the first in America), Baxter went to work for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* in 1871. It seems likely that he would have read Bowditch's 1874 proposal for a metropolitan park system in the *Advertiser*.

From 1875 to 1877 Baxter studied at the universities of Leipzig and Berlin and was especially interested in German municipal



Sylvester Baxter (above) and Charles Eliot (facing page) Photographs by Elmer Chickering, ca. 1893, courtesy of MDC Archives

administration. On his return to Boston he became involved with Elizur Wright in the campaign to preserve "Stone's Woods" in Malden, Medford, and Winchester. (He also promoted renaming the area "the Middlesex Fells.") In 1880 he wrote Olmsted, who had not yet moved to Boston, about the Fells.

Baxter's interests covered an extraordinary range. In 1881 he joined an archeological expedition to investigate Zuñi ruins in the Southwest, and the following year wrote an article about the visit of several Zuñi chiefs to Washington and Boston, where the Zuñi conducted a sunrise ceremony on the beach at Deer Island. He also wrote several books of poetry as well as a history of Mexican architecture. His abiding interest, however, was his vision for Greater Boston.²



Charles Eliot

Periods of elation and tranquility (especially when he was away from Cambridge in nearby countryside or the wilds of Maine) alternated with recurring episodes of self-doubt and depression in Eliot's early life. His mother died when he was nine. By the time he began his studies at Harvard, his father had been president of the college for ten years and was well on his way to Olympian status in American higher

education. The burden of family privilege and accomplishment heightened Charles' anxieties when as an upperclassman he realized he "could find no practical bent or ambition anywhere about me." At one point in his senior year he came near to giving up his studies entirely.

Not long after graduation a conversation with his uncle Robert Peabody, an architect who lived near Frederick Law Olmsted in Brookline, persuaded Eliot that he should become a landscape architect. Since there was then no recognized training for the field, he entered Harvard's Bussey Institution, where the Department of Agriculture and Horticulture was located. The following spring Eliot was introduced by Peabody to Olmsted, who offered him an apprenticeship. Within a week he had dropped out of his classes and taken his first inspection tour with Olmsted as a full-time employee of the firm. He soon discovered how well his extracurricular pursuits had prepared him for his profession—the childhood drawing lessons, the long hikes around Boston, the adolescent mapping of imaginary towns and real neighborhoods (like Norton's Woods in Cambridge), the college summers organizing a group of college friends to study the natural sciences on Mt. Desert Island.

After an apprenticeship of two years, Eliot left for a year in Europe. On Olmsted's advice, he ignored the monuments of the "Grand Tour" in favor of public parks, botanical gardens, city streets, and landscape books in the British Museum. He returned with an extraordinary breadth of professional knowledge—from landscape construction to styles and philosophies of design. By 1892, after five years of managing his own office, he was well equipped for his part in the creation of the Metropolitan Park System.³

¹ Robert Morris Copeland, "The Park Question," *Boston Daily Advertiser* (December 2, 1869), 2.

² [Sylvester Baxter] "Sylvester Baxter," in James Phinney Baxter, *The Baxter Family A Collection of Genealogies* (N.p. 1921), 94–102.

³ [Charles W. Eliot] *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 1–34.

also noted unique and distinctive landscapes. They were deeply impressed with the remarkable beauty of the landscape of the ancient Waverly Oaks in Belmont and with the need to preserve them for the public.⁷

The commissioners were able to see beyond then-current conditions as well. The Charles River shore “was marred by industries merely in search of cheap land” and made ugly by “squalid hovels, dump heaps and other nuisances.” Its banks were “inky black” with foul sewage deposits, though they should be “a popular pleasure ground.” There were a “number of ugly fish houses and an equally ugly Hotel” on Nahant Beach, but it was nonetheless one of the most beautiful sites on the Massachusetts coast. After their ten outings, all the members presented their views before the board, and then Baxter and Eliot drafted the report.⁸

“Picturing” the Park System

The rationale for the Metropolitan Park System drew on a reservoir of ideas that dated back more than a generation, ideas that had now gained widespread acceptance:

The life history of humanity has proved nothing more clearly than that crowded populations, if they would live in health and happiness, must have space for air, for light, for exercise, for rest, and for the enjoyment of that peaceful beauty of nature which, because it is the opposite of the noisy ugliness of towns, is so wonderfully refreshing to the tired souls of townspeople.⁹

In Eliot’s summation, these general principles gave strong support for the *concept* of the park system. The real genius of the 1893 report, though, was its integration and extension of a series of earlier, less comprehensive proposals for the Boston region.

In 1844 an eccentric Scot named Robert Gourlay, residing in Boston for two years for the treatment of insomnia, had proposed “connecting and exhibiting to the greatest advantage those rare and beautiful features which Nature has here thrown together” so that “the

streams, the islands, and the promontories,—all may be made to harmonize in one grand panorama . . .” The landscape gardener Robert Morris Copeland had published a plan in 1869 that encompassed not only the ring of hills from Lynn to Quincy, but a grand circuit that linked the North Shore across harbor bridges and ferries to the southern beaches (though he believed the banks of the Charles would always be needed for wharves and docks). Copeland was probably the first to call specifically for a metropolitan commission to execute this ambitious plan. Separate campaigns had been forwarded for several of the large forests around Boston. Elizur Wright and others had lobbied since the 1870s to create a “forest conservatory” at the Fells, and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in its reports had urged the reservation of both the Fells and the Waverly Oaks. A “water park” for the Charles River Basin had many advocates in the 1870s and 80s, among them Uriah Crocker and Charles Davenport.¹⁰

The 1893 metropolitan scheme encompassed the rivers and the shores of Greater Boston in spite of their then-degraded state. Eliot sketched the symmetry of this plan near the end of his “Report of the Landscape Architect”:

As the ocean at Revere Beach was reached by a ten-mile drive from Winchester down the valley of the Mystic River, so now the bay shore at Squaw Rock is reached by a ten-mile drive from Dedham down the lovelier valley of the Neponset. Half-way between these northern and southern riverways we find Charles River, leading, by another course of ten miles, from Waltham through the very centre of the metropolitan district to the basin just west of the State House. Nature appears to have placed these streams just where they can best serve the needs of the crowded populations gathering fast about them.¹¹

Here, as throughout the two men’s writings, images were crucial to their visionary narratives. During the report’s preparation Eliot wrote to the commissioners that his “special work” for the park commission was “the picturing by printed words, photographs, and



The most visionary acts of the park commission were the schemes to reclaim the riverbanks and beaches, which were occupied by tenements and industry. The transformation of Revere Beach required the relocation of streets and railroads and the demolition of numerous shanties and saloons. Photograph by Nathaniel L. Stebbins. From Report of the Board of Metropolitan Park Commissioners, 1898

maps of those open spaces which are still obtainable near Boston." The "details of the legal machinery" could all be resolved once this "picturing" aroused the necessary public support.¹² Like others before and since who have projected greater Boston into the future, the two men appealed to the visual as well as the moral imagination.

Eliot divided his report's twenty-five pages of "picturing" into three parts. First was a physical and historical geography of the parks district, followed by a study of "the way in which the peculiar geography of the metropolitan district ought to govern the selection of the sites of public open spaces." Finally, Eliot documented the opportunities still available to acquire open space according to the principles he had outlined.¹³

Those principles reflected widely expressed contemporary concerns for public order and rational structure in American cities. A study

of the natural features of the region, Eliot believed, would "bring forth the facts in the case" and result in "the scientific selection of lands for public open space." Such "scientific planning" would proceed from the greater to the lesser, recognizing that the larger spaces could never be had if they were not acquired at the right time. The larger reservations would offer not only the "fresh air and play-room" of smaller spaces but also the "free pleasures of the open world of which small spaces can give no hint." Executing these general principles would require particular attention to the visual and functional logic of the reservations' boundaries. Wherever possible the boundaries should be established on public roads or on lines where roads would likely be built. And the commission should avoid taking "only half a hill, half a pond or half a glen," since fragments of such landscape types would be less satisfying as natural scenery.¹⁴



The Park Commission was authorized to build parkways in 1894 to create jobs in a time of recession. Primarily intended for “pleasure vehicles,” the parkways provided scenic access to the reservations. The Speedway, a departure from the scenic values of the park system, was built near Harvard’s Soldiers Field. The tidal flats along the lower Charles offered the only place near Boston for a mile-long course uninterrupted by cross streets. From Report of the Board of Metropolitan Park Commissioners, 1902.

Picturing the park system also meant citing appropriate administrative models. Though Eliot hinted at the possibilities for parkways, Baxter’s “Report of the Secretary” addressed the issue of public roads in a regional context and strongly advocated “Special Pleasureways” to link the metropolitan parks and reservations. One precedent was the boulevards of Chicago, created by the Illinois boulevard act, which allowed the park commissioners to seek the consent of municipal authorities and abutting landowners to connect parks with such pleasure roads. Commonwealth Avenue, the parkways of the Emerald Necklace, the planned improvements to Blue Hill Avenue, and the proposed parkway from the Arnold Arboretum to Stony Brook were cited as examples, made possible because the annexation of several adjoining towns had given the City of Boston the necessary geographical range. By

contrast, the region north of the Charles River, carved up into many small cities and towns, lacked not only extensive parks but clearly delineated routes to the center of Boston as well.¹⁵

In Baxter’s view, the proper structure for “the peculiar political geography” of the region was not annexation, however; it was the Metropolitan Sewerage Act of 1889. Baxter also saw a fiscal precedent near at hand for the Commission’s plans to reclaim degraded natural areas. Olmsted’s recreative treatment of the Back Bay Fens was clearly both “the cheapest and most effective” remedy.¹⁶

Assembling the Reservations

The effort of “picturing” the metropolitan parks in the report, aimed at Boston’s “high-handed and liberal” Yankee aristocracy, was completely successful. The “legal machinery”

was passed by the legislature and signed by Governor Russell, permanently establishing the Metropolitan Park Commission on June 3, 1893. Charles Dalton, the chairman of the Boston Park Commission, thought the report would be one of the most important contributions to the literature of public parks ever made. Charles Francis Adams observed to the board that "Our work is chiefly educational. We cannot expect to accomplish practical results immediately, but to prepare the public to do something in these directions some years hence."¹⁷

Eliot, however, had other intentions. He moved with what now seems almost incomprehensible speed to map the reservation boundaries, and the Park Commission acquired almost seven thousand acres of mostly open land in its first eighteen months. Its first taking, in 1893, was Beaver Brook, including the Waverly Oaks. Responding to the depression, the legislature authorized funding for the development of parkways the next year. By 1899, only six years after the park commission was established, the park system comprised eleven reservations and seven parkways, totaling over nine thousand acres.¹⁸

At the heart of Eliot's vision for the derelict spaces along the rivers and shores was the Charles River Basin, extending upstream from the western slope of Beacon Hill. The basin, he predicted, would become the central "court of honor" of the metropolitan district. Gourlay's visionary drawings in 1844 had already imagined the basin as a single, designed space, but in 1893, the river was still a noisome expanse of sewage-laden tidal flats, unfit for the central role in any story of park design or civic foresightedness. The river's frontage was occupied by two prisons, three coal-burning power plants, and numerous shabby commercial and industrial structures. Two large slaughterhouses, one near the harbor and the other downstream from Watertown Square, dumped offal into the shallow waters. Even in the elegant Back Bay, said Richard Henry Dana, where a public roadway should face the river,

there was instead "a contemptible scavenger's street, thirty feet wide, backing up against the unmentionable parts of private houses."¹⁹

No single reservation took more of Eliot's time than the Charles. Before and during his tenure as consultant to the MPC, he served on several state commissions organized to study the river's sanitary problems, and was also the landscape architect for the new (1893) Cambridge Park Commission. Cambridge acted first, and at Eliot's direction the city acquired and began filling more than four miles of salt marsh, almost the entire length of the city's southern boundary. Though Eliot hoped that some of the region's riverine marshes would be preserved, he told the MPC that the ten miles of Charles River salt marsh below Watertown "must sooner or later be made usable." Like many others, Eliot was persuaded that damming the Charles near the harbor to create a water park would return annually increasing profits to the community. A separate MPC appropriation for land acquisition along the river was passed in 1894, and over five hundred acres were purchased during the next three years. In spite of these extensive investments, the opposition—led by residents on the water side of Beacon Street—successfully resisted the construction of a dam until 1903. (The Esplanade was completed in 1936.)²⁰

Reservations and Natural Scenery

For the forest lands, Eliot pressed vigorously to acquire as much of the identified reservations as possible, but he struggled in vain to educate the park board on the need for what he called "general plans" for each reservation before roads and structures were built. When the pace of acquisition slowed in 1896, he organized a project to classify the broad categories of vegetation throughout the park system. Published in 1898, a year after Eliot's untimely death, *Vegetation and Scenery* is a detailed complement to his planning principles outlined in the 1893 report. Though in the earlier document he had advocated a "scientific" selection of lands, the vegetation study would merely

record the existing conditions in the reservations; it was neither "an historical or even a scientific inquiry."²¹

Here we are left to puzzle over what Eliot meant by "historical" and "scientific." Certainly the *Vegetation* report corroborated his earlier statements that both the beauty and ugliness of the existing vegetation were primarily the work of men, "chopped over, or completely cleared, or pastured, or burnt over, time and time again." While the reservations differed sharply from each other topographically, recent human action had rendered the vegetation of the woodlands very much alike and "remarkably uninteresting."²²

Then why—apart from a few scattered natural and geologic oddities—had these forests been acquired? Natural reservations, Eliot had said, "were the cathedrals of the modern world," and the metropolitan reservations had been acquired as a "treasure of scenery." The beaches and the river shores offered expansive water views, but the scenery of the rock hills was problematic. Only on the rocky summits and in the swamps was the vegetation "natural." The opportunity of the park system's stewards was to "control, guide, and modify" the forest growth so that the reservations would be "slowly but surely induced to present the greatest possible variety, interest, and beauty of the landscape." Eliot encouraged his protégé Arthur Shurcliff to sketch before-and-after scenes in the reservations, and Shurcliff's drawings were included in the printed report to "picture" the enhancement of the landscape through the judicious use of the axe.²³

Standing in the way of such landscape improvements, Eliot wrote, was a "small but influential body of refined persons" who opposed these efforts to adapt parks and reservations to new requirements. He observed that these people could live in a little bower and read Thoreau with delight, but they could not understand a whole landscape. They "talk of 'letting Nature alone' or 'keeping nature natural', as if such a thing were possible in a world which was made for man." The idea that it

might be "sacrilegious" to control or modify the existing verdure was nonsense. Even the six thousand acres of the Blue Hills, situated as it was on the rim of the metropolis, did not constitute a wilderness—in fact, the vegetation was "really artificial in a high degree." Eliot's priorities for both the large and small reservations were clear: first, to safeguard the scenery of these natural areas before it was too late; second, to make that scenery accessible to the public; and finally, to enrich and enhance the beauty of the reservations.²⁴

Even if there should be sufficient public support to accomplish the first and second of these tasks, could the enhancement of scenery ever be justified at public expense, when "ordinary people will never appreciate the difference"? Eliot answered emphatically in the affirmative. Following Olmsted, he argued that in the presence of "unaccustomed beauty or grandeur," even the average person experienced "sensations and emotions, the causes of which are unrecognized and even unknown." This principle, he thought, was the basis for the public commitment to schools, libraries, and art museums. It was well exemplified in many already completed public parks, and in Eliot's mind it was the foundation for the metropolitan reservations.²⁵

The Park System Acclaimed

The significance of the metropolitan parks was widely acclaimed in Boston, in other American cities, and especially in Europe. In November 1893, after Eliot and Olmsted's son John had become his partners, Olmsted wrote to them:

. . . nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work, meaning the Metropolitan quite equally with the city work. The two together will be the most important work of our profession now in hand anywhere in the world. . . . In your probable life-time, Muddy River [part of the Emerald Necklace], Blue Hills, the Fells, Waverly Oaks, Charles River, the Beaches *will be points to date from* in the history of American Landscape Architecture, as much as Central Park. They will be the opening of new chapters in the art.²⁶



The popularity of canoeing on the Charles River peaked during the two decades after the construction of Norumbega Park and the Riverside Recreation Grounds in Newton and Weston in the 1890s. More than four thousand canoes were said to be moored along the middle Charles. The regatta shown here was held at the Waltham Canoe Club about 1912. Just downstream of the canoe club is the smokestack of the American Waltham Watch Company, and on the west side of the river is Mt. Feake Cemetery. Farther downstream, below the Watertown Dam, the riverbanks were lined with slaughterhouses, power plants, and other polluting industries, and boating was dominated by the colleges and the rowing clubs. Courtesy of the MDC Archives.

The endeavor of “picturing” the parks did not end with the first report, nor was the audience limited to Bostonians. The metropolitan park commissioners prepared a one-ton plaster topographical model of the metropolitan area for the Paris Exposition of 1900 that was later exhibited at the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo (1901), at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis (1904), and at the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland (1905). A 1905 article by the secretary of the City Parks Association on “The Development of Park Systems in American Cities” included a lengthy description of the Boston metropolitan parks, and suggested that “readers have

doubtless so identified the park movement with Boston as to be almost totally ignorant that anything of a similar nature has been undertaken elsewhere.”²⁷

In 1910 the international competition for the planning of Greater Berlin resulted in an influential exhibition and a widely circulated two-volume catalog. A lavishly illustrated chapter on American park systems described their significance as the basis for city plans and their importance in relieving urban congestion. Several pages were devoted to the Boston city and metropolitan parks, with a full-page map of the metropolitan park system and photographs of the Blue Hills and Revere Beach.

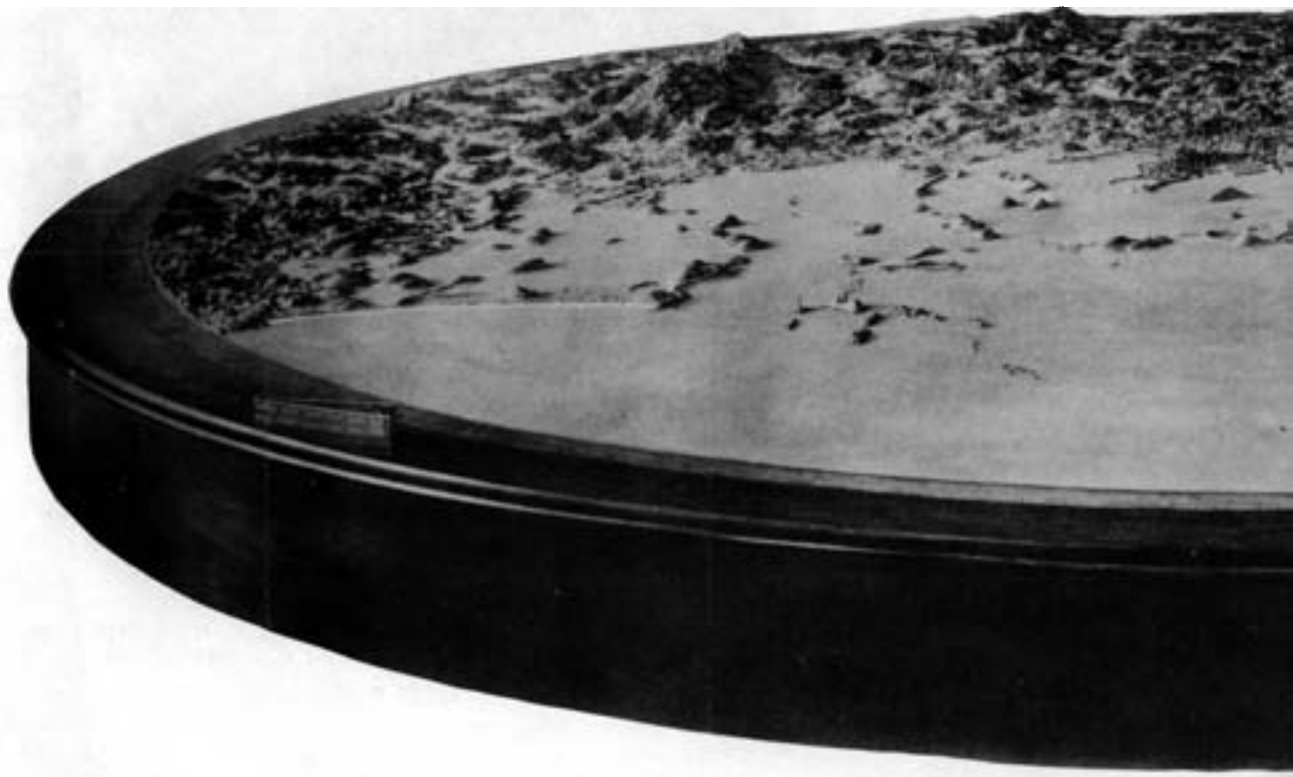
The section of the exhibit on American parks was later mounted separately in several German cities.²⁸

The judgment of planners and civic officials at the turn of the century has been echoed by modern urban historians. In their view, it was in America that "open space first emerged as a potential structural element for the entire city." The work of Baxter and Eliot has been called "the most notable scheme of comprehensive metropolitan park planning" in the United States and "the first such organization of land in the world." Closer to home, an eloquent study of the Back Bay Fens authenticates the reservations' importance: "If Mount Auburn Cemetery was the forerunner of the Fens,

the Metropolitan Park System represented its evolutionary glory."²⁹

The Fate of the Idea

In 1919, the Park Commission merged with the Metropolitan Water and Sewerage Board to create the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). More than a dozen new parkways were constructed in the next decade. The passage of open space bonds in the 1980s funded significant additions to the reservations, and today the park system comprises more than 16,000 acres. After a hundred years' experience with this regional pattern of open space, it is fair to ask what these reservations now mean in our urban lives.

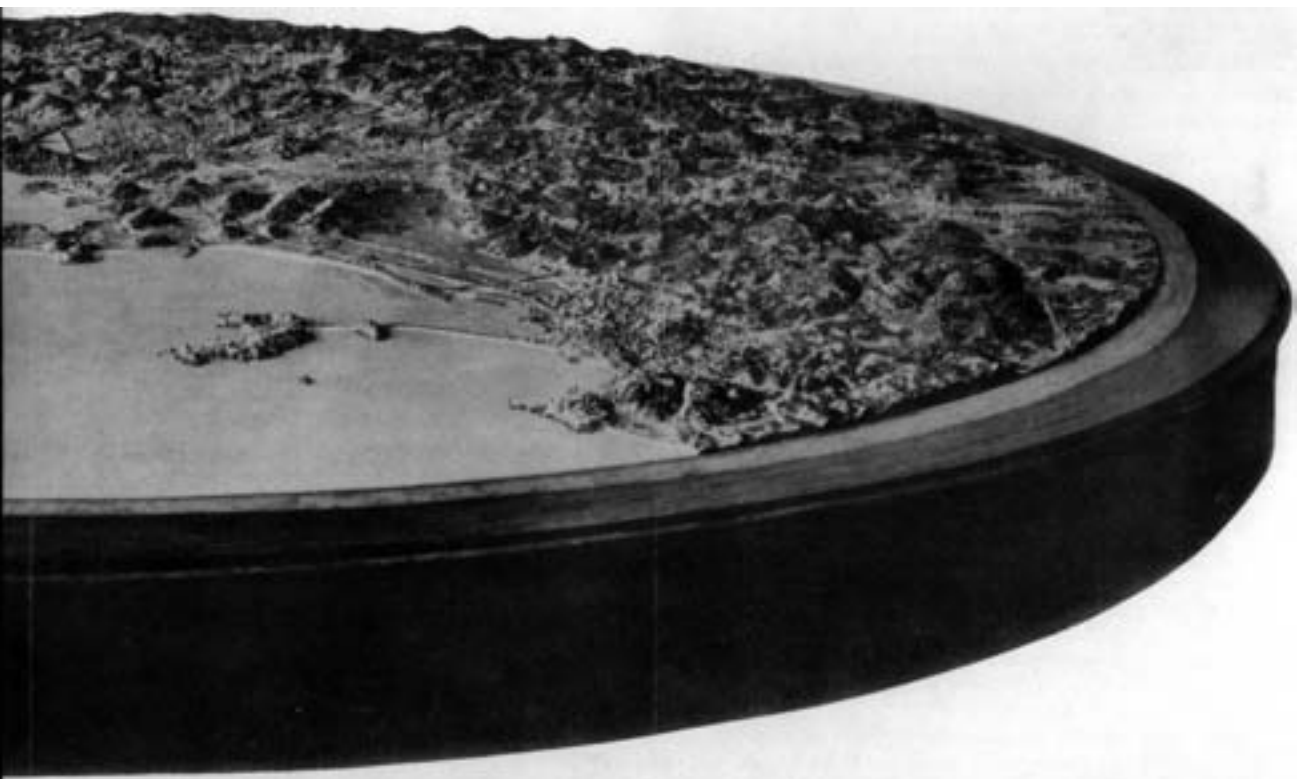


Working double shifts for eight months, twenty-one people built this model under the direction of the "geographic sculptor" George Carroll Curtis. It took six months to make a wax model, then plaster casts were made in ten sections. The finished model was almost eleven feet in diameter and weighed one ton. Its handpainted surface was "planted" with 200,000 evergreen and deciduous trees and depicted 250 miles of railroads, 300 miles of streams, 2,750 miles of streets, and 157,000 dwellings. Even the Frog Pond on Boston

The founders of the park system were practical enough to see that the water edges of rivers and shores could provide open space without taking large tracts off the tax rolls. The city's ponds and rivers, as Eliot told the Cambridge park commissioners, offered "permanently open spaces provided by nature without cost"; capturing their edges for the public opened "these now unused and inaccessible spaces with their ample air, light, and outlook." But behind these matter-of-fact statements was a transcendentalist vision of the mystical power at the edges and margins of the natural world. The human craving for landscapes is most deeply realized where earth connects with water and sky. Emerson, whose

writings these park advocates knew well, declared that "in every landscape the point of astonishment is the meeting of the sky and the earth." The New England teacher Horace Mann put it more plainly: "Water is to the landscape what the eye is to the face."³⁰

A hundred years ago Eliot was convinced that reservations of scenery had become the cathedrals of the modern world. Are they now? The historian Sam Bass Warner has argued that at the end of the twentieth century "we are escaping a different city; we are in search of a different Mother Nature." It is not just the highways everywhere, splitting the Blue Hills and the Fells, and separating the Esplanade from its neighborhood. Across the



Common and the bridge over the lake in the Public Garden were shown in scale. The model was exhibited first at the Paris Exposition of 1900, then at international expositions in Buffalo, St Louis, and Portland. For almost eighty years the model was displayed at Harvard University museums. In 1980 it was moved to the Boston Museum of Science, at the geographical center of the Metropolitan Park System. From G. C. Curtis, A Description of the Topographical Model of Metropolitan Boston, 1900.

country “greenways” are created on former railroad beds, along canals, and in other once-unimaginable “public open spaces,” and Olmsted is acclaimed as the “father of the greenways.” Greenways, however, are no longer peaceful byways for “restoring the tired souls of townspeople.” We now jog, sunbathe, cycle, and skate in many reservations where, until recently, such activities were forbidden. Scenic reserves for many people have become landscapes of speed and motion.³¹

The incursion of structures, highways, and wheels of all kinds notwithstanding, the natural landmarks of Greater Boston, drawn into the public domain according to the park system’s visionary scheme, have shown surprising steadfastness. Perhaps the past hundred years have vindicated the definition of stewardship that Baxter and Eliot propounded: first, secure open spaces that reinforce the park system at every opportunity, even if they cannot be developed immediately (remembering the lesson of the reclaimed rivers and shores—that it is never too late to acquire or recover public spaces); next, offer access for people without destroying what has been reserved; and then when the means permit, improve the natural domain—the hills, the rivers, and the shores—of the Emerald Metropolis.

Notes

¹ Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 424. Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago. Architect and Planner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), quotes Daniel Burnham, the chief architect of the Chicago Fair, on the color of the buildings, 101; and Charles Eliot Norton, Harvard professor of fine arts, on their arrangement, 115.

² Walter Creese unnecessarily simplifies the Metropolitan Park System by mapping it as “Eliot’s Emerald Necklace” in “The Boston Fens,” *The Crowning of the American Landscape: Eight Great Spaces and Their Buildings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 340. For a discussion of Olmsted and J. J. R. Croes’ 1876–77 plans for the Bronx, see David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 174–79. Charles

Eliot, “Report of the Landscape Architect,” *Report of the Board of Metropolitan Park Commissioners* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1893), 91, cited below as *MPC Report* (1893).

³ Charles Eliot, “The Waverly Oaks,” *Garden and Forest* (March 5, 1890), 117–18. Eliot first proposed that the association be called “The Trustees of Massachusetts Scenery.” The name chosen, “The Trustees of Public Reservations,” was the source of some confusion since the organization was privately organized and funded. In 1954 it became “The Trustees of Reservations.” Its history is described in Gordon Abbott, Jr., *Saving Special Places: A Centennial History of the Trustees of Reservations: Pioneer of the Land Trust Movement* (Ipswich, MA: Ipswich Press, 1993).

⁴ Charles Eliot to Governor William Russell, December 19, 1890, in [Charles W. Eliot] *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 356–57, hereafter cited as *Charles Eliot*. Sylvester Baxter, *Greater Boston: A Study for a Federalized Metropolis Comprising the City of Boston and Surrounding Cities and Towns* (Boston: Philpott, 1891), 8 (reprinted from the *Boston Herald*).

⁵ Baxter’s recollection that Eliot proposed a joint effort to realize the park system is found in his “Wonderful Progress During the Past Seven Years of Work on the Great Metropolitan Park System,” *Boston Sunday Herald* (May 20, 1900), 41; and in Baxter, “Greater Boston’s Metropolitan Park System,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, Part Five (September 29, 1923), 1.

⁶ Eliot to Russell, quoted in *Charles Eliot*, 356.

⁷ Minutes of the temporary Metropolitan Park Commission, 1892.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *MPC Report* (1893), 82

¹⁰ Robert Fleming Gourlay, *Plans for Beautifying New York and For Enlarging and Improving the City of Boston* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1844), 17; Robert Morris Copeland, “The Park Question,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* (December 2, 1869), 2; “The Waverly Oaks,” *Transactions of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society for the Year 1884, Part II* (Boston: Massachusetts Horticultural Society, 1884), 272–73. According to Baxter, painters connected with the Boston Art Club had suggested that the club purchase the Waverly Oaks in the 1870s; “By Bicycle to the Waverly Oaks—II,” *Garden and Forest* (August 17, 1892) 3(234): 387. Beginning in the 1870s, the Charles was frequently compared with rivers in European cities, especially Hamburg’s Alster Basin, which served in a general way as the model for the development of the Esplanade in the 1930s. See City of Boston, *City Document No 128* (1869), 7, 264

¹¹ *MPC Report* (1893), 106. Baxter considered Eliot’s

- "comprehensive reservation of the banks of the three rivers" unique in a system of park development, see Baxter, "Wonderful Progress," 40.
- ¹² Charles Eliot, 383.
- ¹³ MPC Report (1893), 82–110.
- ¹⁴ MPC Report (1893), 83, 92; MPC Report (1894), 14. For a broad view of the period, see Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967).
- ¹⁵ Baxter included a draft "General Parkway Law" in his part of the report. MPC Report (1893), Appendix B, 62–66.
- ¹⁶ MPC Report (1893), 3–19.
- ¹⁷ The characterization of Boston politics in this period as "both high-handed and liberal" is from Martin Meyerson and Edward C. Banfield, *Boston. The Job Ahead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 106; Dalton's comment is cited in Baxter, "Wonderful Progress," 41.
- ¹⁸ Two decades later, Adams was still startled by the speed of the Commission's progress: "Wholly opposed to the policy of rapid growth and what I could not but regard as premature development, I found myself powerless to check it. I was, in fact, frightened at our success in the work we had to do." By June 1895 Adams was "bored to death and fast getting cross" with week-to-week administrative matters, and resigned from the board. Writing at the end of his life, however, he doubted "whether at any period of my life, or in any way, I have done work more useful or so permanent in character . . . as saving to the people of Massachusetts the Blue Hills and the Middlesex Fells." Charles Francis Adams, *Diary, June 10, 11, 1895; Charles Francis Adams, 1835–1915, An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 185.
- ¹⁹ Charles Eliot, "The Boston Metropolitan Reservations," *New England Magazine* 15: 1 (September 1896), 117–118. Richard Henry Dana, letter to the editor, *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 13, 1874.
- ²⁰ MPC Report (1897), 43.
- ²¹ Charles Eliot, *Vegetation and Scenery in the Metropolitan Reservations of Boston* (Boston: Lamson, Wolfe, 1898), 8 (hereafter cited as *Vegetation and Scenery*).
- ²² *Vegetation and Scenery*, 9; MPC Report (1895), 31.
- ²³ Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot to the Metropolitan Park Commission, June 22, 1896, quoted in *Charles Eliot*, 655; Eliot, *Vegetation and Scenery*, 9, 22.
- ²⁴ Charles Eliot, "The Necessity of Planning," *Garden and Forest* (August 26, 1896), 342; Arthur A. Shurcliff, "What Mr Eliot Said," 1897 ms. Houghton Library, Harvard University; Eliot, *Vegetation and Scenery*, 9, 22, MPC Report (1895), 32. For the cultural roots of urban landscape improvement, see Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).
- ²⁵ MPC Report (1897), 51.
- ²⁶ Olmsted to Partners (John Olmsted and Charles Eliot), October 28 and November 1, 1893, Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress. As Keith Morgan has pointed out, all but the first of these parks were initiated and directed by Eliot; Keith Morgan, "Held In Trust: Charles Eliot's Vision for the New England Landscape" (Bethesda, MD: National Association for Olmsted Parks, 1991), 1.
- ²⁷ MPC Annual Report (1905), 30–31; Andrew Wright Crawford, "The Development of Park Systems in American Cities," *Annals of the American Academy* (1905), 223
- ²⁸ Christiane Crasemann Collins, "A Visionary Discipline: Werner Hegemann and the Quest for the Pragmatic Ideal," *Center: A Journal for Architecture in America* 5 (1989), 79–80
- ²⁹ Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph. City Government in America, 1870–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 256–257; Creese, 168; Anthony Sutcliffe, *Toward the Planned City. Germany, Britain, the United States, and France, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 197; Creese, 183.
- ³⁰ Eliot, *Preliminary Report on the Location of Parks for Cambridge* (October 16, 1893); quoted in *Charles Eliot*, 423–24. George H. Snelling, "Testimonials in Favor of the Modification of the Plan of Building on the Back Bay Territory: April 2, 1860"; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Brooks Atkinson, ed., *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (NY: Random House, 1940), 410; Horace Mann is quoted in Creese, 192.
- ³¹ Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot to the Metropolitan Park Commission, June 22, 1896, quoted in *Charles Eliot*, 655; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "Open Spaces," *New Republic* 170 29 (March 23, 1974), 30; Noel Grove, "Greenways: Paths to the Future," *National Geographic* 177: 6 (June 1990), 93.

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