



BOSTON'S FRANKLIN PARK

OLMSTED, RECREATION, AND THE MODERN CITY

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AFTERWORD BY GARY HILDERBRAND

LIBRARY OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE HISTORY

AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS



View northeast over the Country Park section. Courtesy Reed Hilderbrand.

The story of Franklin Park is also the story of the modern American city as it grew with unrestrained vigor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There were precedents, of course, in both Europe and the United States, that had demonstrated the powerful economic and social dynamics of urban parks. But in Boston during the post-Civil War decades, circumstances and opportunities arose for the creation of a municipal park system unlike any that had preceded it. At the heart of that system was the 518 acres that in the 1880s became Franklin Park.² The design and development of the park was only a moment in that landscape's history, but it was a moment that permanently changed the disposition of the place and the experience of it for following generations.

Appreciating Franklin Park today, however, requires a consideration of its past and its future, not just its present. The park has suffered its share of vicissitude and mismanagement. Historians since the 1980s have suggested that the park “has not

functioned as Olmsted intended,” and have described it as unfinished, obsolete, or as an inevitable casualty of changing trends in public recreation.³ Other observers lament the twentieth-century development of a golf course and a zoo within the park, and the encroachments of a hospital and a small stadium. All would agree that the park has not been adequately maintained, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. Many visitors today perceive only a fragmented landscape—a golf course and a zoo surrounded by remnant edges—not the overall composition of a brilliant park design. But no great public landscape is static: it evolves to meet the needs and desires of its public, and Franklin Park, even in its current state, retains a remarkable degree of integrity to its original plan. Later adaptations, as significant as they were, did not negate its original purposes, nor did they preclude its continued social and environmental benefits. This book presents the history of Franklin Park's design and construction and, perhaps more important, an account of how the park was adapted to meet the programs and needs of the twentieth century while maintaining its most significant design characteristics.

A reconsideration of the twentieth-century history of the park is needed; perceptions of past conflicts and problems bear directly on how current public officials and their consultants plan for the park's future. The first phase of Franklin Park's construction, between 1883 and 1895, indeed left the park unfinished. The areas left undeveloped were to include a zoo, extensive playgrounds for children, ballfields, a concert ground, and a half-mile-long avenue called the Greeting, where large and diverse crowds would enter the park and gather, attracted by



Visitors at the Ellicott Arch. Photo by Millicent Harvey.



"Bird's eye view of Boston" showing the Common and Public Garden, c. 1850. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

civic leaders in New York were pressing for the creation of a large park in the still mostly undeveloped area of upper Manhattan. Both mayoral candidates in that city endorsed the idea in 1850, and in 1853 land acquisition began for what became Central Park five years later.⁶ If during its early years the park was appreciated mostly by upper-class citizens who were moving "uptown," it nevertheless benefited everyone, especially as neighborhoods were built around it and public transportation improved. The park stimulated development and vastly increased adjacent land values, facts that were not lost on public officials and real estate investors elsewhere. As other cities planned their own parks, Olmsted and Vaux were in demand as design consultants, notably in Brooklyn, where they began the design of Prospect Park in 1865. Olmsted was in Buffalo by 1868 consulting on a connected system of diverse public landscapes and boulevards that structured urban expansion in that city. In 1870 he and Vaux designed a park system for the Chicago South Park commission, and the partners were working on at least five other urban park projects at this time.⁷

Eventually a park movement gained momentum in Boston as well, and in 1869 the common council formed a special committee to hold hearings on the creation of new parks for the city. The public hearings drew intense interest from Bostonians and from farther afield. Expressions of general support were made part of the record, and so were specific ideas for individual parks and entire sys-

tems of parks, such as that of Uriel H. Crocker, a local businessman and civic leader. The public hearings revealed broad enthusiasm for new parks, and the common council requested that Mayor Nathaniel B. Shurtleff petition the state legislature to authorize the municipality to begin land acquisitions.⁸

Olmsted, however, initially kept his distance from the excitement stirring in Boston. He and Vaux were busy with a national design practice. "Landscape architecture" rapidly diversified not only geographically, but conceptually. The idea of "parkways," first conceived for Brooklyn, developed into a decentralized and varied system of connected public landscapes for Buffalo. In Chicago, two large parks connected by a "midway" further elaborated how a series of public landscape types could become the basis of urban planning that responded to the particularities and potentials of specific sites. As the innovators of this practice—and the renowned designers of Central Park—they could be forgiven if they expected to be solicited for a project as important as a new park system for Boston. In any case, Olmsted did not yet become directly involved in the somewhat chaotic hearings and debates going on there. But he did agree to give one public lecture on the subject, early in 1870 for the American Social Science Association. The association had been organized in Boston five years earlier to advance the organization of data and the distribution of knowledge relating to the nation's social welfare. The group included numerous colleagues and friends of Olmsted,



"Boston Common," 1829. Digital Commonwealth, Boston Pictorial Archive.

some consistent policy as parties and coalitions traded control of city government. Ideally above politics, they were often retired businessmen, lawyers, or politicians who took the unpaid position on the (usually) three-member board as a service. If they answered to the mayor in office, they also represented a successful and privileged sector of society.²⁰ Regardless of their backgrounds, the commissioners were not expected to be professional park planners. As the makeup of the board shifted between 1889 and 1895, it continued to be guided by Olmsted and his office in the design, construction supervision, and now, the operation of Franklin Park.²¹ And one of the first operational issues requiring resolution was how and where baseball and other organized sports would be allowed in the park.

As in many cities, Boston sports leagues and clubs proliferated during the post-Civil War decades. The demand for more ballfields was not new in Boston and had been a political issue since at least 1869, when the city attempted (unsuccessfully) to ban baseball on the Common.²² The park system built since 1875 included numerous small parks and playgrounds distributed through the city's wards; but it had not kept up with the steadily growing demand for ballfields, especially facilities suitable for adult leagues and the crowds of participants and spectators they drew. Regardless of their political affiliations, the park commissioners increasingly were concerned with the acquisition of "athletic grounds" to meet the demand. In 1889 two areas were made available, located on the "South Boston Flats" and in Brighton. Neither was permanent or large enough, they admitted, for "friendly games of rivalry at foot and base ball and other athletic sports," and for the "open-air meetings" that had "grown in favor among workingmen." So the commissioners sought the purchase of a larger, open ground to "prevent the constant demands upon Franklin Park for such purposes, for which it is ill adapted."²³

Olmsted shared their concern and urged additions to the park system, such as Franklin Field. But he also intended to assure that Franklin Park would be maintained as a setting for "receptive recreation." The issue was not a new one—certainly not to Olmsted (and park managers today still work to find a balance of uses that meets public demands without physically destroying the landscapes affected). There were many solutions and compromises that varied from park to park, with mixed results. In 1888, Olmsted's office provided the commissioners with suggestions for the "provisions for the playing of games" in Franklin Park. Examples from other cities were cited, where "great dissatisfaction [was] constantly expressed" with "the restrictions which those in charge think it necessary to impose on the use of its turf." The Playstead was intended to accommodate sports, as well as many types of gatherings and events. But even here there needed to be limits to maintain healthy turf.

Organized sports should be restricted, the landscape architects advised, to



View from the Overlook Terrace of games on the Playstead, 1905. Digital Commonwealth, Boston Pictorial Archive.



Gathering on the Playstead, c. 1900. FLO/NHS.



Group picnicking near the Ellicottdale. Photo by Millicent Harvey.

AFTERWORD

AN ACTION PLAN FOR THE RENEWAL OF BOSTON'S FRANKLIN PARK

GARY HILDERBRAND

Ethan Carr's exceptional study describes Franklin Park as "one of the great urban parks in the world," with its remarkable passages of scenery and its rich offer of both exertive activity and quiet solitude in the geographic heart of a bustling city. He also relates how the City of Boston failed its great park and its surrounding communities during a long period of social displacement and economic disinvestment across much of the twentieth century. But he continues with the story of how struggling neighboring communities of color would reclaim the park as their own. During the past three years, after a half century of misfortune and strife only partly reversed by the persistence of citizen resolve, the city has undertaken a major examination of the potential renewal of Franklin Park. The project is preemptively backed by a sizable reinvestment fund and an endowment for perpetual maintenance. What principles should guide reinvestment in a great urban park that is both a distinctive national treasure and a site and source of local self-determination?

For one hundred years, the City of Boston's power structure, mostly a parochial stronghold of powerful white men of Irish and Italian descent, held fast. But the city's mid- and late-twentieth-century demographics paint a different picture. The reality of workaday life in the city has been shifting away from an outmoded dynastic mythology for decades, even if leadership did not visibly reflect that shift. Since the 2000 U.S. Census, Boston has been a majority-minority city, and, in 2021, the sudden departure of the city's mayor for a cabinet post in Washington resulted in the appointment of a Black female city councilor as acting