

The Landscape Architect's Guide to **BOSTON**

Back Bay Fens

History

1875 A Park Act was passed by the legislature allowing the City of Boston to acquire lands for park purposes within the city and in cooperation with adjoining cities and towns. A referendum established a municipal commission and Olmsted was contacted informally and driven through the proposed park sites with the commissioners. An anonymous open competition was held, but Olmsted did not enter; when asked to judge it, he declined, but was given a contract in 1878 to design the Back Bay Park.

1879 Olmsted and John Charles spent most of this year on further studies and refinements of their plan, and the first plan for Boston, the "Proposed Improvement of Back Bay," was published. In Olmsted's mind, this was a sanitary improvement and not a "park" as such, and he eventually recommended that it be called the Back Bay Fens instead of the Back Bay Park. Because of the engineering requirements, only about half of the total acreage could be used for recreational purposes. "The park was simple by design, a passive park made up of walkways and a bridle path. Traffic lanes were segregated by slight grade changes and plantings. Architecture was kept to a minimum."

1880–1884 The Boylston Street Bridge, designed by H.H. Richardson from preliminary designs by John Charles Olmsted, was constructed; in 1882 Stony Brook Gatehouse, designed by H.H. Richardson from preliminary designs by John Charles Olmsted, was constructed.

1887–1888 Agassiz Road was designed as a traverse road that cuts the Fens into the upper and lower ponds. The bridge, a five-arched bridge faced with Roxbury puddingstone, was based on preliminary designs by John Charles Olmsted and working drawings by William Jackson, City Engineer. The Agassiz Road Shelter (Duck House) was based on a sketch by Olmsted, Olmsted, and Eliot, and was used as a public restroom facility. It is the only building structure within the Fens extant from the Olmsted design.

1902–1903 The Johnson Memorial Gates at Westland Entrance was constructed from designs by Guy Lowell, and in 1905 Stony Brook Gatehouse was constructed in the southern basin near Huntington Entrance from designs by Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge. Today the gatehouse is the Emerald Necklace Conservancy's Visitor Center.

1909 The Museum of Fine Arts relocated from its Copley Square site to a new building designed by Guy Lowell. Although not within the Fens, the Museum's Fenway elevation has dominated the southern basin since its construction.

1910 The Charles River dam was completed, causing the water flowing into the Fens from the Charles to be fresh instead of salt and making Olmsted's plan, especially his planting design, obsolete. From 1912–1921 Arthur Shurtleff (later Shurcliff) with Olmsted Brothers as consulting landscape architects prepared a series of studies; in 1921 plans and a report for a comprehensive redesign of the Fens were prepared. From 1910–1920 the Fens was used to dump fill from various sites, including the excavation for the Boston's subway system.

1925 Shurtleff prepared a special report that was published by the Park Commission. It included a section describing the progress of proposed projects for the Back Bay Fens, including a ball field and recreation ground, a redesign of the area facing the Museum of Fine Arts into a lagoon, and a plan for straightening and widening park roadways including rotaries. In 1927 the Boston Fire Alarm Headquarters was constructed in the northern basin on the park land opposite the Westland Entrance (designer unidentified).

1931 The Rose Garden, designed by Shurcliff, was constructed in the southern basin in the spot where Shurcliff, in his 1921 plan, had indicated a lawn and adjacent concert grove. By 1933 Shurcliff had designed an expansion of the garden. In 1975 the garden was named the James P. Kelleher Rose Garden to honor the former

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Boston Parks and Recreation Department's superintendent of horticulture.

1942 The Victory Gardens were established on the western side of the northern basin and are now named after Richard D. Parker, one of the original organizers of the garden, who continued to garden there until his death in 1975. Today, these gardens are cultivated by private citizens and are one of only two remaining victory gardens in the United States dating back to the Second World War.

1948–1949 Created by the George Robert White Fund, the World War II Memorial is erected in the southern basin. Tito Cascieri was the architect, and John F. Paramino was the sculptor. This was just the beginning of the memorialization phase, which continued during 1987–1990 with the creation of the Korean War and the Vietnam War memorials; it was during this time that this area became Veterans Memorial Park.

Mid-1960s The Charlesgate Interchange (Bowker Overpass) was constructed. It consisted of a network of overpasses from the Charles River at Storrow Drive to Boylston Street at the Fens. It completely obliterated what remained of Olmsted's original design for the Beacon Entrance as it met Commonwealth Avenue and towered over Arthur A. Shurcliff's design for the Charlesgate East and West connection at Commonwealth Avenue.

1977 The Boston Parks and Recreation Department (BPRD) had Carol Johnson Associates prepare a master plan for the Fens. By 1982, the roadway system around the park the Fenway and Park Drive had become a one-way system and Agasszi Road was narrowed and turned into a one-way.

1984–1989 The Emerald Parks master plan for Back Bay Fens, the Riverway, Olmsted Park, and Jamaica Pond was prepared by a Walmsley and Pressley joint venture under the Department of Environmental Management (DEM)'s Olmsted Historic Landscape Preservation Program for the

benefit of the City of Boston, the Town of Brookline, and the Metropolitan District Commission—the municipalities and the state agency entrusted with the care and control of the Emerald Necklace Park System, including the parks and parkways. In 2001 the master plan was published.

1986–1998 A series of projects were completed in the Fens by the BPRD in accordance with the master plan, including: restoration of the Agassiz Bridge, the first phase of the Emerald Necklace standard signage, re-roofing of the Duck House, Victory Gardens fencing and planting, Clemente Field House stabilization, and the Westland Avenue Gates restoration. Clemente ball field was also renovated with the bleachers removed on the river side, and the Mother's Rest play lot was rehabilitated.

2010 The H.H. Richardson Stony Brook Gatehouse was rehabilitated into the Emerald Necklace Conservancy's Shattuck Visitor Center.

Resources:

[The Cultural Landscape Foundation](#)

[Emerald Necklace Conservancy](#)

[Muddy River Restoration Project](#)