

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

Boston Common

History

1634 The Common was established for the people's collective benefit. Each household was charged six shillings to buy "The Commonage" as pastureland for all. It was a utilitarian and functional landscape of open pasture, which ran downhill to salt marshes along the river's tidal edge. The Common became a training ground for local militia, a place for hangings and a place for public strolling. The site contained four hills and three ponds; only the now formalized Frog Pond and Flagstaff hill remain.

1728 First tree-lined pedestrian mall was the Tremont street edge, which was a double line of American Elm with a wide promenade down the center. Park Street Mall, Beacon Street Mall (1815), and Charles Street Mall (1823) followed soon after, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century the Common had malls around its entire periphery. In 1824 Tremont Mall became the Lafayette Mall.

1756 The Central Burying Ground was established on the Boylston Street edge. It is one of Boston's 16 ancient burying grounds. Soldiers who died at the Battle of Bunker Hill are buried here, as well as such famous citizens as the artist Gilbert Stuart and Samuel Sprague, who participated in the Boston Tea Party.

1766 A great celebration took place on the Commons for the repeal of the Stamp Act. By 1768 British Redcoats had encamped on the Common, where they would stay for eight years, but in 1789 a victorious George Washington returned to this site for a celebration there.

1830 The Common began to change into the pleasure and recreational grounds we would recognize today. The cows were banished and the grounds were significantly regarded by leveling hills, filling ponds, adding paths, and planting 600 trees. Expanses of open lawn replaced the pasture, and by 1836 the entire perimeter of the Common was enclosed with a decorative cast iron fence. In 1848 the then-muddy spring that fed "Frog Pond" was turned into a formal pool with a 90-foot high water plume to mark the opening of the municipal water system into the city.

1867 Gardener Brewer purchased a monumental fountain at the 1855 Paris Exposition, which he gave to the City. It is erected on the Common near Beacon Street in 1868 and moved to its current location near Tremont and Park streets in 1917.

1895 The nation's first subway is built at the Common, changing the character of the Common along Tremont Street. The underground construction for the tunnels resulted in the removal of the trees on the Lafayette Mall because of the shallow depth to the top of the tunnels. The cast iron fence along Tremont Street was removed and never replaced.

1897 A memorial erected to honor Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the Union's first free black regiment. Augustus Saint-Gaudens was the sculptor, and Charles McKim was the architect. It is considered by many to be the nation's finest public work of art.

1910–1913 The Olmsted Brothers firm oversaw extensive landscape renovation. A 1910 plan indicated a total of 812 trees on the Common, and that paths had been paved. The Parkman Memorial Bandstand was added in 1912. It was designed by Robinson and Shepard to honor George F. Parkman, who willed money to Boston parks.

1920 Liberty Mall was designed and built between the Bullfinch State House and the relocated Brewer Fountain by Arthur A. Shurtleff.

1950s The Freedom Trail was established starting, on Boston Common and linking with 15 other sites associated with the Revolution.

1961 An underground parking garage with four kiosk entrances was completed beneath the Carty Parade Ground. The Parkman Plaza was redesigned with four sculptures, flagpoles, and a central fountain was added by Shurcliff and Merrill.

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1972 A master plan addressing rehabilitation needs for the Boston Common and Public Garden was developed for the Boston Parks and Recreation Department by Carol R. Johnson Associates. Over the next few years fencing, new tot lot equipment, and other amenities were added and pathways were improved. The plan ushered in improvements aimed at the 1976 Bicentennial year and confirmed Boston's commitment to historic preservation.

1972 Boston Common was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1975 the Boston Landmarks Commission was created and designated the Common as a landmark in 1977. In 1987 the Boston Common and the Public Garden were listed as National Historic Landmarks.

1990 The Walker-Kluesing Design Group prepared the Boston Common Management Plan; it was updated in 1996.

1993 A new visitor information center, formerly the Women's Comfort Station, opened at Parkman Plaza. Other work included the restoration of Frog Pond and additional perimeter fencing along Charles Street, the installation of refrigeration for skating, the rehabilitation of Parkman Bandstand and Curtis Guild memorial steps.

2012 The fountain was restored, and the plaza was rehabilitated by the Friends of the Public Garden from private donations. Today, it is an activity node with table and chairs, a piano, and library books. In good weather it is hard to find a seat.

Resources:

[City of Boston](#)

[The Friends of the Public Garden](#)

[The Cultural Landscape Foundation](#)