

“Parks for the People”: Reforming the Boston Park System, 1870-1915¹

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In his 1847 inaugural address to the Boston City Council, Mayor Josiah Quincy, Jr. raised an issue that many American cities grappled with for the next half century. This was the need to provide urban inhabitants with a New-World blessing that was fading beyond their reach—namely, open space:

We have also an inestimable treasure in the Common, and the lands adjacent. In monarchies, such pieces of ground are procured and ornamented at a great expense, for the benefit of the people; and why should we be behind them in a republic.

Quincy argued that Boston had a compelling obligation to provide her less fortunate citizens with “the means of obtaining some share in the glorious and beautiful aspects of nature, with which a beneficent Creator designs to minister to the physical and mental well-being of his children.”² The mayor envisioned the establishment of public parks, but his dream was slow in coming. Twenty years later, Boston’s park land was still confined to the Common and Public Gardens. By World War I, however, the city was surrounded by an “emerald necklace” of public parks. By 1920, her citizens had expended over twenty million dollars on the protection and operation of open spaces.³

The parks issue in Boston and other cities embodied many of the philosophies and arguments aired in communities rudely awakened to the fact that urban growth was not all positive. Commercial and industrial success rested on top of a much denser population which included hordes of immigrants; the byproducts of “progress” included an inexorable sprawl of housing, a choking pollution of the air, and the erosion of cultural homogeneity. In large part, public parks were first presented as a “reform” to many of these problems. But the record of park development reveals that simple solutions were not easily implemented. Urban growth had spawned widening divisions between social classes and interest groups within the city’s boundaries; new political ma-

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chinery had developed to represent the divergent interests. The following analysis focuses on the ways in which this changing social and political order complicated, challenged, and transformed the park system in Boston. At the same time it raises questions about the nature and process of nineteenth-century urban reform.

Most historians have viewed parks and their close relation, playgrounds, as the creation of middle and upper-class reformers who desired to provide order for both the urban landscape and its inhabitants. As a recent article on Frederick Law Olmsted, consultant and chief architect for the Boston park system from 1875-1895, maintains, “. . . Olmsted’s parks seemed to offer an attractive remedy for the dangerous problem of discontent among the urban masses. . . . By providing pleasant and uplifting outlets in the narrow lives of city dwellers, they promised a measure of social tranquility.”⁴ Historians have differed, however, in their interpretations of the motives behind this “reform” impulse. An older, “progressive” interpretation has held that parks and playgrounds grew as the handiwork of philanthropic reformers who worked to create a more beautiful and livable city for all inhabitants. A more recent and more cynical interpretation holds that these same reformers had motives that smacked more of “social control” than social uplift.⁵

Unfortunately, both interpretations have been anchored in the rhetoric of park advocates and planners. They have not examined the actual process by which plans were implemented. As a more careful analysis of parks and playgrounds in Worcester, Massachusetts has recently argued, such an omission ignores the likelihood that other interest groups “might have taken an active part in conceiving or advocating parks.” It assumes, instead, that they “. . . uncritically accepted the park programs handed down by an omnipotent ruling class.”⁶ While the rhetoric behind Boston’s early park proposals anticipated and received general acceptance, Olmsted and other early park advocates quickly and continually discovered that factional strife and class resentment could erupt and envenom the debates on the placement, benefits, and beneficiaries of nature’s blessings. In Boston, as in Worcester, the larger urban constituency—laborers and clerks, artisans and bookkeepers, natives and immigrants, men and women—expressed their interests, either directly or through their political representatives. Their pressure forced adjustments in the initial visions of genteel reformers like Olmsted and his supporters.

The implementation of park “reform” was complicated by the same social and environmental problems which parks were supposed to address. For one thing, from 1860 to 1900 Boston’s population experienced both a surge in size and a radical alteration in character. The population increased from 177,840 to 560,892. By 1880 the foreign element comprised $\frac{3}{5}$ of the city’s population; by 1900 nearly $\frac{3}{4}$. By the turn of the century, clusters of recent immigrant groups drew the attention and concern of social scientists and reformers.⁷

Worse than the change in number and birthplace of the population was the disruption of social and political order. Labor unrest was particularly alarming during the '70's and '80's in a city that had long felt its paternalistic attitudes toward labor to be insurance against radical ideas.⁸ Further, the political power of the city gravitated into the hands of the Irish, who would never relinquish it. Horace Cleveland wrote to Olmsted himself that "it is enough to make old Bostonians of past generations turn in their graves to think of the city being given over to Irish domination."⁹

The city was changing physically in many ways, the result of spacial reorganization. In seven years (1867-1873), Boston annexed five outlying suburbs, thereby increasing its territory by 441% and its population by 116%. The reclamation of land in the Back Bay area created a new haven for the wealthy and a source for brilliant displays of opulent architecture.¹⁰ But while some neighborhoods prospered, others languished. Those who could not or would not remember earlier slum studies were shocked to see accounts of the housing and living conditions in the North and West Ends. The physical shape of Boston had changed further toward a collection of areas more distinct in function, wealth, and health.¹¹

As the following description suggests, the park movement in Boston was part of an active, conscious search for order amidst these environmental, political, social, and cultural changes. Much of the initiative clearly lay with established middle and upper class groups who designed their programs for all Bostonians. But it would be wrong to think that the remainder of Boston's population sat passively as major public policy filtered down from above. On the contrary, both the form and essence of public parks developed in ways determined by interest groups representing a wide range of citizens. One senses this by comparing the early rhetoric with the later reality.

The main story begins in 1869, when the pressures of increased growth and a heightened awareness of the Common's inadequacies resulted in a series of proposals for public park systems.¹² But the fear of higher taxes, coupled with the belief that the nearby suburbs provided ample scenery, prevented the approval of early legislation such as the Park Act of 1870.¹³ The debate over parks continued unchecked,¹⁴ however, and within five years Boston's citizens had swayed enough to approve the Park Act of 1875.¹⁵ Accordingly, the mayor appointed three Commissioners (approved by the City Council) who were charged to entertain citizens' proposals and examine possible acquisitions "with regard to many different points such as convenience of access, original cost and betterments, probable cost of improvements, sanitary conditions and natural beauty." Frederick Law Olmsted served the Commissioners as a consultant until 1878, when he was officially appointed Chief Landscape Architect of the park system.¹⁶

The arguments of early park advocates claimed (convincingly enough) that the entire city benefitted from and supported the movement. As one newspaper urged:

A public park is now a great necessity and not an expensive luxury. It is the property of the people, rich and poor together, and the only place where all classes can daily meet one another face to face in a spirit of fraternal recreation.¹⁷

Another claimed on the eve of the park referendum:

. . . the moment anything is done under the act it will open a new field for laborers, and at the same time enlarge the possessions in which their wives and children will have an equal inheritance with the most favored. Indeed, the great benefit of public parks is gathered by those who are not rich.¹⁸

Park boosters, often from Boston's most prominent and established families, felt their arguments represented those of all citizens, rich or poor. Their formula for reform was simple. Parks would offer both escape from and control of the traumas wrought by urbanization and industrialization. Parks would provide something the much-revered small town always had offered; open space and rural scenery. Thus, while park proponents tended to revel in the prospect of a booming Boston, they also desired to brake its unchecked growth by the imposition of at least three qualities that the small-town community seemed to offer: fresh air and open space, healthy citizens, and pervasive morality. Parks were to offer all three at once.

It was not so much that park proponents wanted to make Boston a small town. They desired, rather, to balance urbanization with a form of ruralization. By means of parks the city would always retain part of what it had had in the past. Many realized the inexorable nature of the population's advance. A special committee of the City Council agreed that all experience indicated the nation's population to be concentrating in the cities; in their words, "centralization is the type of the age." Unfortunately, the congestion of humanity threatened the existence of open space and pure air, and so endangered the lives of individual inhabitants as to threaten the life of the city itself.¹⁹

During the heated debates of 1881, the critical year of parkland acquisition, one Alderman warned:

It is 37 years since I became a resident of Boston. There were then about 80,000 inhabitants, no annexation had taken place, and the extreme South End was Dover Street; the boys could go anywhere, the lands of all seemed to be public . . . now you will find a sign up, "No trespassing"; "Keep off the Grass." We are growing fast. The time is coming when, I fear, if we do not take hold of this question that we shall be sorry. We are not now called upon to vote for the benefit of this generation, but it is to keep open and public grounds for the use of those that follow us, fifty or a hundred or perhaps a thousand years hence.²⁰

To opponents who argued that Boston's sleepy suburbs provided ample rustic

scenery for city-dwellers, the Parks Commissioners retorted that “beautiful as these roads now are, they are, year by year, losing their rural character; their roadside hedges are giving place to sidewalks with granite curbs, and adjacent grounds are being cut up into house lots.”²¹ Parks would insure that a part of the country remained within the growing city.

Shaping the city environment by means of well-planned open-space was equalled in urgency by the concern for health. It was a well-circulated belief that parks were the “lungs of the city.” At a public rally, held in 1876 to promote parks, Dr. Edward H. Clarke warned:

We are in danger of forgetting that the importance of ventilating a city is as great as that of ventilating all the houses in it . . . parks are the lungs of the city. They are more than this: they are reservoirs of oxygen and fresh air. They produce atmospheric currents which sweep through and purify the streets.²²

Parks would be part of a triad of services which, along with pure water and efficient sewerage systems, would “make the cities in all ways healthful and beautiful.”²³ The weight of the medical profession aided the momentum for parks. Physicians cited numerous statistics and studies to show that urban areas suffered higher death and disease rates which could in large part be traced to foul air and insufficient sunlight. Particularly alarming were the facts disclosing high rates of cholera infantum and stillbirths in cities like Boston. The haunting conclusion remained that “unless open spaces of sufficient extent are provided and properly located, we shall create and shut up in this city the conditions, of which disease, pestilence and death will be the natural offspring.”²⁴

Others saw a different therapeutic value in parks. One Alderman brilliantly wove the logical pattern of relationships that comprised an organic community like Boston:

All wealth is the result of labor; individual wealth is, on the whole, increased by the labor of the community; labor is an expenditure of force, and it follows that without recuperation and recreation of force, the ability of each individual to labor is diminished and his power to add to the wealth of the community is lost. This recuperation and recreation can only be obtained by presenting to the senses and imagination scenes entirely different to those with which they are daily associated.²⁵

More than a sometime antidote to urban living, parks were thus a critical instrument without which the entire community system might fail.

Physical health, or the lack of it, was delicately entwined with the issue of public morality. To those concerned with a degenerating social order, the benefit of public parks in this area was unrivalled. The classical maxim of *mens sana in corpore sano* took a new twist in the modern city. In romantic prose,

Dr. Edward Crane outlined the link between public health and morality in a letter to a special joint committee of the City Council:

The evil of all evil agencies is intensified, and the good of the good ones diminished, by uncleanness and impure air. Clean hands and a pure heart go together. Foul air prompts to vice and oxygen to virtue, as surely as sunlight paints the flowers and ripens the fruits of our gardens. The tired workman, who, after a day's labor, needs the repose and relaxation of home, is apt to be driven from it by the close atmosphere of the street and house in which he lives. He would if he could, get into the fresh air of the country; but, as he cannot do this he seeks the relief which drink or other excitement yields. If there were a park accessible to him, he, with his family, would seek it as instinctively as a plant stretches toward the light. The varied opportunities of a park would educate him and his family into the enjoyment of innocent amusements and open-air pleasures. Deprived of these, he and his are educated into the ways of disease and vice by the character of their surroundings.²⁶

Somehow, by an association with nature, the workingman and his family would experience a florescence of morality previously stifled by the choking air of city streets.

This promise of the parks answered, at least in part, a need that urban reformers had noted even before the Civil War. That was the necessity of providing uplifting amusements which would both entertain and improve the city masses. This was a delicate problem, for the amusements considered "wholesome" by the church and state, particularly dramas and lectures, were seldom attended by the masses. At the same time, the favorite amusements of the masses, such as gambling, animal blood sports, and trips to the local saloon, were thoroughly denounced and frequently outlawed by sacred and secular powers. As Edward Everett Hale concluded in 1857:

So a sad public returns next morning to its filing of iron, its balancing of accounts, its sewing of seams or its digging of mud, without one wrinkle smoothed, without one care lighted. The killing of rats has not soothed it; the death-rattle of *Camille* has not soothed it; and the lecture certainly has not rested it. The evening has been killed, and that is all.²⁷

The need to find public amusements, at once interesting and uplifting for all classes of citizens, remained a problem for urban reformers and city governments alike.

When the problem had first caught the notice of concerned citizens, however, there quickly arose as possible solutions such outdoor activities as flower gathering, horticulture, walking in the open air, and excursions for the study of natural history.²⁸ By 1876, as the speakers at a public park rally made clear, it was necessary for the city to provide asylums for these wholesome activities. The cost of parks would be far less than the cost of the jails, prisons, and police used in repressing wasteful indulgences like liquor and gambling. Parks would provide the blue sky, the gurgling brook, and the green trees that acted as immeasurable moral agents in the village. The country would elevate the minds and manners of the urban poor. If the masses could

not get to the country, let the city “bring the country to them, and give them a chance, at least, to experience its humanizing and blessed influence.” Since parks belonged to all the people, rich or poor, all could mingle freely in a neutral cultural asylum. Fresh air would naturally improve the temperament of the working class, for they would be induced “by public orders and public favor to elevate themselves and their condition in society” by associating with their betters through the medium of nature.²⁹

Boston needed parks to preserve her environment, her health, and her morality. But she also needed parks to prove her legitimacy as a first-class American city. Other great American cities could boast of established park systems, yet in 1875 Boston still had not begun to implement one. The best common schools, art museums, conservatories of music and schools of design could not insure Boston’s reputation as the “Athens of America” if she lacked the spirit by which public parks were developed. A City Council committee concluded that “if Boston cannot afford such an expenditure to secure the priceless benefit of parks, it must be because she has entered the ranks of cities like Newburyport and Salem, which have ceased to grow.”³⁰ Civic boosterism clearly accelerated the growing demand for public parks. Boston’s top business firms favored parks as a grand advertisement of the city’s commercial health, and claimed that their beauty would attract wealthy merchants from around the globe. Moreover, these plush pleasure-grounds would convince the prosperous classes to retain their domiciles within the city’s limits and eschew the flight to rural suburbs. As Oliver Wendell Holmes argued, parks would help provide the city “with the complete equipment, not of a village community, not of a thriving town, but of a true metropolis.”³¹

The argument supporting public parks was clear. They would improve the physical environment of the city and, more important, elevate the living conditions of her inhabitants. Rich and poor alike would enjoy the benefits of nature, placed “in perpetuum,” within the city limits. Families in either the impoverished North End or elegant Back Bay could rest assured that fresh air would be forever available to their children and to their children’s children. Finally, Boston, by displaying the spirit necessary for such a project, would reestablish her reputation as America’s premier city. There can be no doubt that a broad consensus of opinion supported the position of park advocates. By 1900, the park system surrounding Boston was, in large part, complete. The Park Department could, and still does, proudly point to the evidence of popular participation by all classes of the city. By means of parkways, expanses of greenery were effectively linked throughout the city. As a recent Bicentennial pamphlet could boast, “together, they form a five-mile corridor of continuous park land that has long been recognized as a landmark of urban planning.”³²

But while Bostonians agreed upon the general benefits which parks could pro-

duce, they differed over answers to several specific questions which arose during the implementation of the plan proposed by Olmsted and the Commissioners. These questions and their resultant friction revolved around three interrelated concerns. First, in what areas of the city should parks be properly located? Second, for whose benefit were the parks ultimately intended? Finally, how exactly were parks to improve the leisure, and through it the life, of all citizens? Bostonians did not passively accept the answers suggested by genteel reformers like Olmsted. Rather, they fought for their own solutions. The debates and lobbying over these issues continued into the twentieth century, and their ultimate resolution demonstrates the manner in which the divergent elements of an urban community could partially reshape the initiatives of one group to meet their own interests.

The task of locating a park or parks was not an easy one. While the rhetoric of parks stressed the benefits to be enjoyed by the entire city, politicians and citizens lobbied more concerned about the advantages or disadvantages of placing parks within their particular neighborhood. One finds this parochial attitude early and often in the public record. For instance, in July of 1877, the Common Council rejected an order for a \$450,000 loan to be used in buying land in the reclaimed Back Bay. This was to be the first park area, as determined by Olmsted and the Commissioners.³³ Councilor Coe noted the reason for much opposition:

[It is] not the question of the amount of betterments the city is to receive, not the question of nuisances to be abated, nor any other questions should be placed before the one, —where can you locate so as to benefit, for all time, the class of people (such as) clerks, bookkeepers, artisans of various kinds and laborers.³⁴

Each section of the city concluded that all would be best served by placing a park in their section.

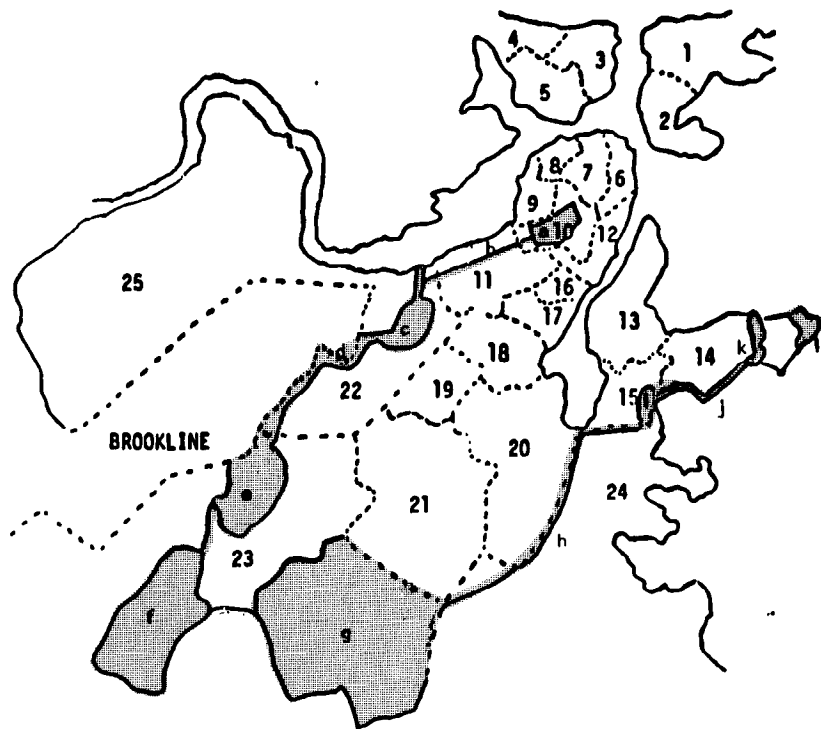
By 1881, the year in which the City Council considered the bulk of park bonds, the parochialism was so acute as to threaten the purpose of a park system. Olmsted complained to the Parks Commissioners:

There is a habit now of looking upon the proposed parks of the city, each apart and independently of its relations to others of the system, as if it were to be of little value except to the people of the districts adjoining it . . . It presents a difficulty which should be contended with; for unquestionably, if it is maintained and allowed influence in legislation, it will be likely to nullify half the value to the city of the properties now promised to be acquired for parks . . . It is not uncommon to hear [the West Roxbury Park] referred to as if it were to be a special property of the West Roxbury Community and its chief value lie in what that community would gain from it.³⁵

A City Council committee pleaded that “an end be put to sectional contentions respecting park lands.”³⁶ Yet as the votes in the Common Council indicate, local interests rivaled general concerns. Each area of the city, from East Boston to West Roxbury, was represented by a politician who steadfastly

maintained both the urgent need for a park in his district and the general benefits to be derived from such placement.³⁷

The voting patterns on three key issues are illustrated in the following maps and table. Each displays the type of parochialism that worried Olmsted. The city-wide vote of 1875, approving the Public Parks Bill, reveals that the greatest support came from the wards near the Charles River, where most of the proposed park systems were centered.



MAP 1
WARD DIVISIONS IN BOSTON, 1875-1888

SOURCE: Sampson, Murdoch and Co. Map, Rare Book Room, Boston Public Library

MAJOR COMPONENTS OF OLMSTED'S "EMERALD NECK-LACE":

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------|
| a. Boston Common | g. Franklin Park |
| b. Commonwealth Avenue | h. Columbia Rd. |
| c. Fenway | i. Columbus Park |
| d. Riverway | j. Strandway |
| e. Jamaica Pond | k. Marine Park |
| f. Arnold Arboretum | l. Castle Island |

TABLE 1
CITY-WIDE VOTE OF JUNE 9, 1875, ON THE APPROVAL
OF THE PUBLIC PARK BILL

Ward	Yes	No	Ward	Yes	No
1	110	224	12	173	268
2	151	210	13	114	87
3	141	127	15	256	75
4	179	71	16	146	97
5	130	34	17	312	76
6	295	115	18	189	159
7	226	133	19	265	11
8	118	49	20	106	88
9	288	83	21	96	234
10	299	90	22	89	55
11	312	111			

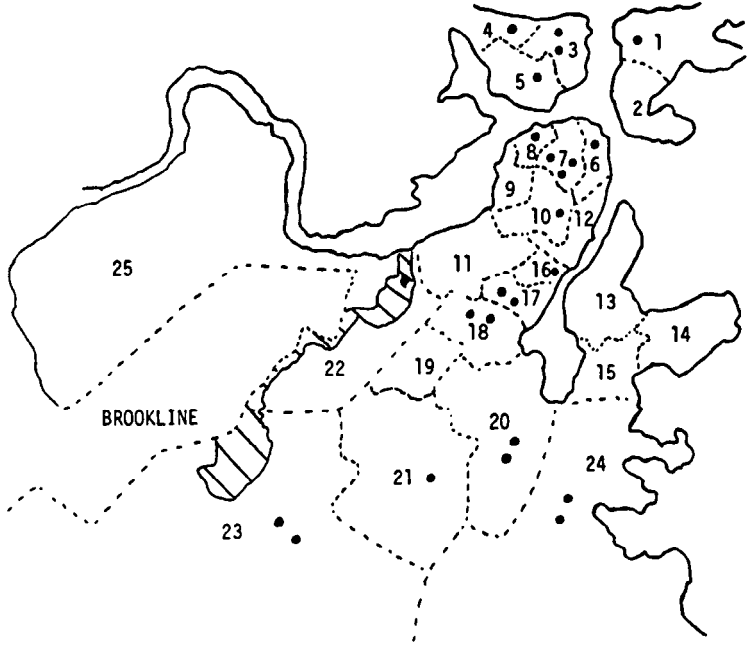
SOURCE: *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 10, 1875

NOTE: Wards 23–25 on Map 1 were part of new acquisitions.

In 1877, the first proposal to purchase land for a Back Bay park failed because of negative votes from Common Councilors representing the congested inner wards and the outlying suburban wards. The proposal succeeded only when it was reevaluated as a necessary instrument for the improvement of the city's sewerage system.

Finally, and more clearly, one can view the local-interest pattern in the December, 1881 vote on the purchase of land for the West Roxbury (Franklin) Park, the linchpin of Olmsted's system. Map 3 shows graphically that opposition to the suburban park came from congested wards in the inner-city. At the same time, councilors from wards adjacent to the park were almost unanimous in their approval of the costly (\$600,000) acquisition.³⁸ The message was clear. Many citizens viewed park benefits in local, not general terms. Debates and votes on the placement of public parks thus exhibited the polarity in urban politics so well-described in historical literature: centralized reform groups at odds with localized political machinery. In this case one sees Olmsted's grand vision matched against legitimate neighborhood and ward interests. The Parks Commissioners were forced to deal with an ever increasing parochialism that raised its head early and often, as when ward 3 voters qualified their rejection of the 1875 Park Act by voting "No, unless Copp's Hill is taken."³⁹

But despite Olmsted's fears, parochial interests never seriously threatened the success of the park system. On the contrary, they may have *insured* success,



MAP 2
 NEGATIVE COMMON COUNCIL VOTES ON BACK BAY PARK,
 1877

SOURCE: City Council Minutes, July 12, 1877.

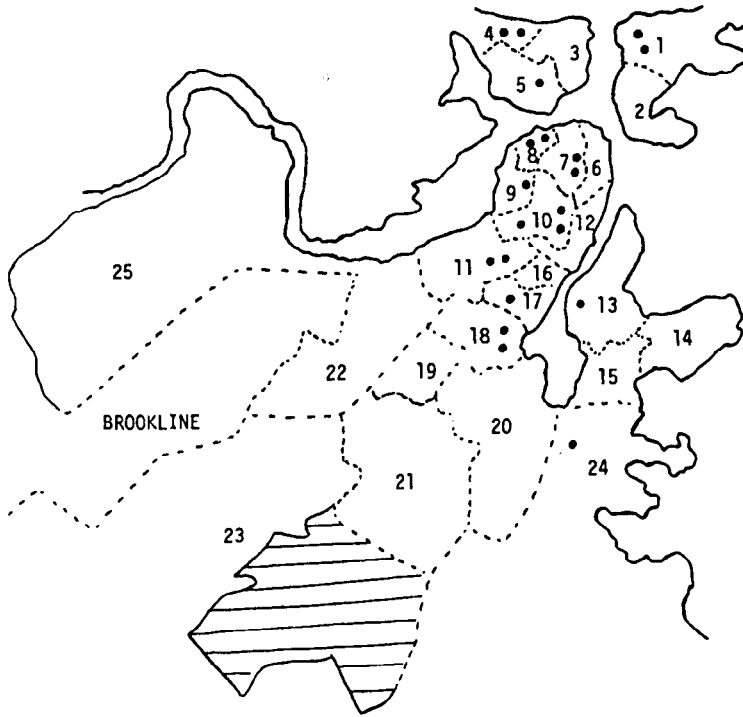
NOTE: The bond issue failed, 43–23–5, to get the necessary 2/3 vote. Each dot represents a negative vote.



Proposed Park Area

by forcing central planners to accommodate local interests. Olmsted and the Parks Commissioners might have had more in mind than topographical considerations when they designed a *series* of parks spread about Boston's various districts. Perhaps they realized the growing importance of neighborhood communities within the larger city boundaries. The overall park plan succeeded politically in 1881 because it offered a chain or package, with a little something for everyone. Further, as the minutes of the Parks Department constantly display, ad-hoc neighborhood lobbies were later the driving force behind the expansion of the system. Petitions from groups in areas like Brighton, Dorchester Lower Mills, and South Dorchester planted the seed for an extension of greenery by means of small parks and playgrounds.⁴⁰

More volatile issues remained, for much of the park system, as originally con-



MAP 3
 NEGATIVE COMMON COUNCIL VOTES ON PROPOSED
 WEST ROXBURY (FRANKLIN) PARK, DECEMBER 8, 1881

SOURCE: City Council Minutes, December 8, 1881.

NOTE: The proposed \$600,000 bond issue failed, 43–20–8, to gain 2/3 majority. While opposition came from inner city wards, the Councilors from wards 19–24 were near unanimous in support. (Each dot represents a negative vote).



Proposed Park Area

ceived and as expanded by local pressure, was situated in less-congested wards. While land was more available and cheaper here, the anomaly raised serious questions. For whom were parks really intended? The rich or the poor? Some of the early citizen-planners had no doubts. As Charles Davenport, self-styled “first projector” of the Charles River Embankment and Bay

concluded, parks would improve the city by housing the residences of the rich:

The territory that surrounds this bay is to be the great centre of attraction. Here will be the widest avenues and streets of the metropolis. Here the finest residences in our modern Athens will be found. Here will dwell the men of large capital and scholarly attainments and of public reknown, who give to the metropolis the character and enterprise for which she is famed throughout the world.⁴¹

Uriel Crocker, whose proposal for a park system contained many elements of the Parks Commissioners' basic plan, believed that "it increases the enjoyment of those who walk, to watch the elegant equipages of those who ride."⁴²

With such elitist sentiment lurking under the surface of public proclamations, it was no wonder that the *Boston Daily Advertiser* worried about approval of the Park Act of 1875, noting that "in some of the northerly wards there will be formidable opposition, the laborers and others having been made to believe that in some way the act will be against their interests."⁴³ Many continued to have doubts. The Common Councilors from inner-city wards realized that "the people" could not enjoy distant parks as easily as some believed:

Just fancy a poor man upon the South Cove, after his work is done, taking his children forth on a summer evening, marching to Corey's Hill, when the thermometer is up to 90°; just imagine these people of South Boston and the North End going forth on a summer's evening to enjoy the benefits of the park which Boston, in its wisdom and philanthropy, has furnished for the laboring classes. It is all well, sir, to put it down upon paper; but you will find that the public parks established upon that grand plan will not be so much benefit to those whom you propose to benefit, as it will those who can ride in carriages.⁴⁴

What good would "elegant equipages" provide, if working people could never reach the parks?

One clearly deduces from the public record a sense of working-class frustration with the outlying parks. As one Alderman sarcastically noted, in voting against a large appropriation for the Back Bay Fens:

The advocates of a park go down to the sickly district of the Back Bay and select a place for the poor man to eat his lunch and look over the \$75,000 houses and envy the people who live inside of them.⁴⁵

Many continued to regard much of the system as essentially "rich man's parks," for which one needed either a carriage or, later, an automobile.⁴⁶

But the changing political structure provided workingmen with more clout than they had previously enjoyed. Working through their local representatives in the City Council, the people of Charlestown and the North End effectively lobbied for parks in their districts. The poorest section of Boston, the West

End, could count on strong political support in its efforts to increase the capacity and facilities of its Charlesbank gymnasium. The inhabitants of the innercity did not reap the promised fruits of the outlying “emerald necklace,” but they traded’ off support for rural parks in return for open space in their local neighborhood. Much of this open space would take the form of small parks and playgrounds. These breathing spaces did not fit the classic model of an Olmsted park. They held only limited foliage or serenity. But they did offer working people something tangible, and their development represented an important accommodation in the original vision of the park system.⁴⁷

The final area of contention was closely related and involved the question of appropriate activities for park patrons. Park advocates claimed that properly placed enclaves of “rus in urbe” would elevate the life of all citizens. Parks would provide true “recreation” for Boston’s collective body and soul. But the practical question became whether or not the masses could be educated into the “proper” use of parks. Or, would parks become simply an open-air emporium of commercialized amusements? To find the answer, one must again compare the rhetoric of a reform vision with the reality of its implementation.

The central figure in this issue was, of course, Frederick Law Olmsted, who guided the Boston Park System until 1895, when his failing health forced him into retirement.⁴⁸ Throughout his career, Olmsted amply articulated his thoughts on the role of parks in city life. Because of his national influence and, of course, his position as chief architect, his views were indelibly stamped on the policies of the Boston Parks Commissioners. Yet, in the end, ideal philosophies had to make concessions to the realities of Boston’s changing social life.

Olmsted believed that the city was the source of civilization’s great advances, but he also saw that its population density could induce a reactive alienation, a “quickness of apprehension, a peculiarly hard sort of selfishness.” As an antidote to this pejorative side of urban life, Olmsted, along with other urban reformers, looked to recreative amusements. Expanding the concept of recreation, he noted:

. . . all forms of recreation may, in the first place, be conveniently arranged under two general heads. One will include all of which the predominating influence is to stimulate exertion of any part or parts needing it; the other, all which cause us to receive pleasure without conscious exertion. Games chiefly of mental skill as chess, or athletic sports, as baseball, are examples of means of recreation of the first class, which may be termed that of *exertive* recreation; music and the fine arts generally of the second or *receptive* division.⁴⁹

Olmsted clearly fashioned his views of parks around the notion of receptive recreation.

In outlining his plans for Franklin Park, the heart of his proposed system, Olmsted prescribed the form of recreation he envisioned within its boundaries:

A man's eyes cannot be as much occupied as they are in large cities by artificial things, or by natural things seen under artificial conditions without a harmful effect, first on his mental and nervous system and ultimately on his entire constitutional organization. That relief from this evil is to be obtained through recreation is often said, without sufficient discrimination as to the nature of the recreation required. The several varieties of recreation to be obtained in churches, newspapers, theaters, picture galleries, billiard rooms, baseball grounds, trotting courses and flower gardens, may each serve to supply a mitigating influence. An influence is desirable, however, that, acting through the eye, shall be more than mitigative, that shall be antithetical, reverse, and antidotal. Such an influence is found in what, in notes to follow, will be called the enjoyment of rural scenery.⁵⁰

To Olmsted, then, action had little or no place in a public park. Boston's Parks Commissioners took Olmsted's views to heart and banned all active pursuits in the park system. The rules allowed little legitimate activity beyond quiet picnics, meditations and tours.⁵¹

This tranquility would not last. The patrons had their own ideas about the activities which ought to occur in a park. They continually pressured for accommodation in the regulations and, to Olmsted, constantly threatened the integrity of his receptive-recreation grounds. Perhaps some workingmen were "educated" to the joys of nature-communion. But they, in turn, educated genteel Bostonians to the realities of urban leisure. And, in the end, this compromise transformed, but did not destroy, the essence and value of public parks.

The growth of interest in athletic sports proved to be a major problem for the Parks Commissioners. While the wealthy could join suburban country clubs for playing space, the majority of the population looked to the new parklands for sportgrounds. The Commissioners tried to suppress this appetite, particularly that of baseballers, until they declared in 1884: "no entertainment, exercises, or athletic game or sport shall be held or performed within public parks except with the prior consent of the Park Commission." Olmsted was in full agreement and cited similar rules in Hartford, Baltimore, Chicago, Buffalo, New York and Philadelphia. Only a corner of Franklin Park was allotted to active sports, and that for children only.⁵²

Yet by the turn of the century, the Commissioners had been forced by the City Council and public pressure to allow virtually every popular sport within the confines of the parks. Cricket clubs battled baseball interests for exclusive privileges. By the mid- 1890's several parks were the scene of scheduled football matches. As early as 1902, the Commissioners succumbed to pressure and allowed automobiles on the parkways. Further, Franklin Field and the

Charlesbank were designed specifically for active pursuits. Although certain sports were restricted to particular places and times and while much of the sporting activity was funnelled to the related playground system, the evidence in the Park Department minutes clearly indicates that the concept of public parks in Boston was altered, by special interest groups, to include provisions for active sport. To the end, the Olmsted firm warned that parkground was being “put to a use quite inconsistent with its purpose.”⁵³

If athletic sports were eventually accepted as legitimate park recreations, it was probably because they represented a less severe encroachment than commercial amusements. As soon as the parks neared completion, the Commissioners were inundated with license petitions from operators of hurdy-gurdy machines, merry-go-rounds, photo tents, refreshment stands and amusement theaters, to name but a few. In stating his case, the operator of one theater argued that “the purpose of amusing the public is a public benefit entirely consistent with the use of the public parks.” Further, the operators claimed that they desired only to satisfy an overwhelming demand for their services.⁵⁴

Alderman Martin Lomasney, Boston’s most powerful ward boss, accurately voiced the attitude of the inner-city when he opposed a rule outlawing flying horses or similar commercial amusements on the Sabbath:

I don’t believe we should be activated by the same spirit that prevailed in the days of the old Blue Laws, when on Sunday you would have to walk down Washington Street carrying a Bible in your hand and not speak to anybody on the street . . . Certain people in the North End and in South Boston can reach these parks Sundays who cannot reach them any other day, and I don’t believe they should be deprived of going on the flying horses if they wish to do so . . . the time will probably come when Boston will have other amusements on Sunday.⁵⁵

Olmsted’s vision had to accommodate Lomasney’s. Working through their connections on the City Council and even on the Parks Commission, commercial amusements operators succeeded in placing merry-go-rounds, photo tents, refreshment stands and vending machines among the elm trees and brooks.⁵⁶

By World War I, “receptive” recreation was no longer the rule on public parks. Active sports and commercialized amusements had secured guaranteed, if restricted, privileges. Conservative reformers like Olmsted and *Boston 1915*, a private reform group of prominent citizens, did not fully agree in principle with serious compromise in park use. But they wisely realized that they had to yield to popular attitudes toward leisure if the parks were to have any reforming value.⁵⁷

If the Boston case is at all representative, it cautions the historian to take special care in categorizing urban park systems as a vehicle of genteel reform or

social control whereby, in the words of one historian, “social and political intercourse could be defined for the popular mass by the cultured elite hovering above.”⁵⁸ Considerable evidence suggests this as the *intent* of many park advocates, but its basis lies largely in the arguments of early proposals. Herein parks were envisioned as large expanses of water, woods, and dales where all social classes might mix and be elevated in a fraternal communion with nature. An equally compelling body of evidence, the public record, displays the active role which the “popular mass” took in altering this vision. Special interest groups—neighborhood citizens lobbies, athletic clubs, amusement operators, all representing a wide range of social classes—continually worked directly and through their political representatives to influence major decisions in park placement and policy. These groups succeeded in getting parks where they wished them; they pursued their own choice of recreation on the playgrounds. Thus, the park movement in Boston was a reform which issued from the “bottom up” as well as from the top down. Because of this, the ultimate product of reform differed from the intended product. Only by an examination of the entire implementation process can the historian hope to discern the difference.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank the editor and referees of the *JSH* for the helpful comments they made on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. City Document No. 1, (Boston, 1847).
3. See Mayor Nathan Matthews, *The City Government of Boston, Valedictory Address* (Boston, 1895), p. 112; John Koren, *Boston, 1822 to 1922: The Story of Its Government and Principal Activities during One Hundred Years*, City Document No. 39, (Boston, 1922), p. 127. Urban park systems are an important area of American sport history. Parks were the first major civic response to the recreation “problems” discussed in antebellum literature. Indeed, park advocates echoed the arguments presented by earlier proponents of sport and exercise. See, for example, John R. Betts, “Public Recreation, Public Parks, and Public Health Before the Civil War,” in *The History of Physical Education and Sport*, ed. Bruce Bennett (Chicago, 1972), pp. 35-52. Further, as the 19th century progressed, parks provided much of the open space upon which the urban populace could actively pursue their favorite sports.
4. Geoffrey Blodgett, “Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative Reform,” *Journal of American History*, 62 (March, 1976): 869-889. For the Boston park system’s lasting impact on local environment, see Department of Landscape Architecture, Harvard Graduate School of Design, *Olmsted’s Park System as a Vehicle in Boston* (Cambridge, 1973); William Weismantel, “How the Landscape Affects Neighborhood Status: The Conserving and Renewing Influence of Boston’s Charles River Basin and Park System,” *Landscape Architecture*, 56 (April, 1966): 190- 194.
5. For the “progressive” interpretation see: Blake McKelvey, “An Historical View of Rochester’s Parks and Playgrounds,” *Rochester History*, (January, 1949): 1-24; Charles Doell and Gerald Fitzgerald, *A Brief History of Parks and Recreation in the United States* (Chicago, 1954); John R. Betts, *America’s Sporting Heritage, 1850-1950* (Reading, Mass., 1974), pp. 174-176; K. Gerald Marsden, “Philanthropy and the Boston Playground Movement, 1885-1907,” *Social Service Review*, 35 (1961): 48-58. The “social control” interpretation may be seen in Michael P. McCarthy, “Politics and the Parks: Chicago Businessmen and the Recreation Movement,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 65 (1972): 158-172; Lawrence Finfer, “Leisure as Social Work in the Urban Community: The Progressive Recreation Movement, 1890-1920,” Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1974; Dom Cavallo, “Social Reform and the Movement to Organize Children’s Play During the Progressive Era,” *History of Childhood Quarterly*, 3 (1976): 509-522; Cary Goodman, *Choosing Sides: Playgrounds and Street Life on the Lower East Side* (New York, 1979). A more balanced analysis may be found in Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 233-251.

6. Roy Rosenzweig, "Middle-Class Parks and Working Class Play: The Struggle over Recreational Space in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1870-1910," *Radical History Review*, 21 (Fall, 1979), 32. I have profited greatly from Rosenzweig's analysis which concentrates on the activism of working-class interest groups.
7. *Boston's Growth: A Birds Eye View of Boston's Increase in Territory and Population From Its Beginning to the Present* (Boston, 1910). "Foreign element" includes children of the foreign-born. See Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, 1973), table 6.1. On ethnic composition, see Frederick Bushee, *Ethnic Factors in the Population of Boston* (1903).
8. See Arthur Mann, *Yankee Reformers in the Urban Age* (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 2ff.
9. Quoted in Blodgett, "Olmsted . . ." 855; see also Martin Green, *The Problem of Boston: Some Readings in Cultural History* (New York, 1966), p. 103.
10. Allen Wakstein, "Boston's Search for a Metropolitan Solution," *Journal of American Institute of Planners*, 38 (September, 1972): 285-296; Walter M. Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History* (Cambridge, 1968).
11. See B. O. Flower, *Civilization's Inferno, or, Studies in the Social Cellar* (Boston, 1893).
12. Boston, Proceedings of the City Council, October 12, 1869 (hereafter cited as "City Council Minutes").
13. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 9, 1870.
14. See, for instance, Ernest Bowditch, "Rural Parks for Boston," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 24, 1875; or the debate, resulting in postponement of the issue, in Boston City Council Minutes, December 22, 1873.
15. For the important arguments see Boston, City Document No. 105 (1874), *Council Report on the Establishment of a Public Park*; Boston, City Council Minutes, February 18, March 1, April 1, April 5, 1875. The 1875 Act fared better than its predecessor in part because its approval required only a simple majority of votes. The 1870 Act had required a 2/3 majority.
16. Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of the Boston Parks Department, January 1, 1876, residing with the Executive Secretary of the Parks Department, City Hall, Boston, (hereafter referred to as "Parks Minutes"). See also the *Second Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Parks for the City of Boston* (hereafter referred to as *Parks Reports*) (1876), in which the Board cited their criteria as 1) *accessibility*: "for all classes," 2) *economy*: lands which "would least disturb the natural growth of the city in its business and domestic life, and those which would become relatively nearer the centre of population in future years," 3) *adaptability*, 4) *sanitary advantages*. On Olmsted's appointment, see Parks Minutes, December 10, 1878.
17. *Boston Post*, June 17, 1874.
18. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 9, 1875.
19. *Report on the Establishment of a Public Park*, City Document No. 105 (1874), pp. 11ff.
20. City Council Minutes, November 7, 1881.
21. *Second Annual Parks Report*, City Document No. 42 (1876), p. 13; see also *Report of the Council Committee on Public Parks Recommending the Purchase of Land for West Roxbury and City Point Parks*, City Document No. 61 (1880).
22. *Parks for the People. Proceedings of a Public Meeting held at Faneuil Hall, June 7, 1876* (Boston, 1876), p. 39.
23. City Council Minutes, December 3, 1874.
24. City Document No. 105 (1874), p. 8; City Document No. 123, (1869), pp. 58-59. See also two interesting "scientific" works, not specifically on Boston: John Bauch, M.D., *Public Parks: Their Effects Upon the Moral, Physical, and Sanitary Condition of the Inhabitants of Large Cities: with Special Reference to Chicago*. (Chicago, 1869); John Toner, M.D., "Free Parks and Camping Grounds or Sanitariums for the Sick and Debilitated Children of the Poor in Crowded Cities during the Summer Months," *The Sanitarian* (May, 1873).
25. City Council Minutes, May 28, 1877.
26. City Document No. 105 (1876), p. 6.
27. *Public Amusement for Poor and Rich* (Boston, 1857), pp. 10- 11.
28. *The Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities, By a Friend of Improvement* (Boston, 1838), pp. 55-56.
29. *Parks for the People*, pp. 12, 29, 42. See also comments in City Document No. 105 (1876); *Report and Accompanying Statements and Communications Relating to a Public Park for the City of Boston*, City Document No. 123 (1869), p. 18.
30. City Council Minutes, May 7, 1877.

31. See the comments of Dr. Holmes in *Parks for the People*, p. 25. See also, City Council Minutes, May 28, 1877; *Second Annual Parks Report* (1876); City Document No. 72, (1876), p. 4; City Document No. 61, (1880), p. 3.
32. "Boston's Uncommon Parks," *Boston 200 Broadside Series* (Boston, 1976).
33. See the *Second Annual Parks Report*, City Document 42 (1876) which outlines the proposed system. The Common Council was the large, representative body which, along with the small Board of Alderman (elected at-large), comprised the bicameral City Council.
34. City Council Minutes, July 12, 1877. The Back Bay loan was passed only when it was cloaked in the garb of sewerage improvement. See City Council Minutes, July 19, 1877.
35. *Seventh Annual Parks Report*, (188 1) pp. 24-25.
36. *Report of the Council Committee on Public Parks*, City Document No. 93 (1881), p. 2.
37. See City Council Minutes, July 7, October 3, November 7, December 8, 1881.
38. Although distance from proposed parks appears to have influenced voting patterns, one might also pursue the effect of ethno-cultural tensions. While the Irish-Yankee division comes quickly to mind, however, the suggestion is complicated by the fact that at least one powerful Irish politician, who became a Parks Commissioner, had real estate interests that begged support of the suburban parks. See Blodgett, "Olmsted . . .", 885. Also, by 1880, the Irish population had spread out into suburban areas as well. It was no longer clustered in the inner city. See Sam Bass Warner, *Street Car Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (New York, 1972), pp. 79-80; Thernstrom, *Other Bostonians*, pp. 163-165.
39. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 10, 1875. Many groups joined to oppose the development of parks in their neighborhood, largely for fear of increases in local property taxes. See Parks Minutes, December 15, 1879; June 14, December 11, 1880; September 15, 1885; April 21, 1892; May 8, 1894. For a recent critique of the central reform vs. local politics model see David Thelen, "Urban Politics: Beyond Bosses and Reformers," *Reviews in American History*, (September 1979): 406-412.
40. Parks Minutes, April 29, May 13, 1887; June 19, 26, 1891; December 7, 1893; December 8, 1902; *Annual Parks Report* (1891), p. 35. For the close relationship between the park and playground movements, see Stephen Hardy, "Organized Sport and the Search for Community: Boston, 1865-1915," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1979.
41. Charles Davenport, *The Embankment and Park on the Charles River Bay* (n.d., (n.p.), pamphlet residing in the Boston Athenaeum.
42. Uriel Cracker, *Plan for a Public Park* (Boston, 1869), p. 6.
43. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 9, 1875. Indeed, wards 1 and 2 voted heavily against the Park Act.
44. City Council Minutes, April 1, 1875.
45. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1877.
46. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1908.
47. See Parks Minutes: February 14, 1889; January 27, 1891; March 6, 1891; April 10, 1891; May 22, 1891 for Charlestown pressure. See June 20, 1892; December 7, 1893; February 26, 1894; September 30, 1895; November 19, 1896 for North End pressure, orchestrated largely by John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald. See the amazing speed with which \$5000 was appropriated to open the Charlesbank, in City Council Minutes, April 28, 1892.
48. Blodgett, "Olmsted . . .," 886ff., suggests that "Olmsted was able to respond to the growing public taste for active recreation. . . ." I would suggest that his response was a result of considerable pressure and was, in the end, unsatisfactory to the "new tastes." On Olmsted, see also Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore, 1973); F. L. Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds., *Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architect, 1822-1902* (2 vols., New York, 1922); Leonard J. Simutis, "Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.: A Reassessment," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, (September, 1972): 276-284.
49. See F. L. Olmsted, *Public Parks: Two Papers Read Before the American Social Science Association in 1870 and 1880*, entitled "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns" and "A Consideration of the Justifying Value of a Public Park" (Brookline, Mass., 1902), p. 37.
50. "Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters," in *Eleventh Annual Parks Report* (1885), p. 42.
51. See *Thirteenth Annual Parks Report* (1887), pp. 86-87.
52. See Parks Minutes, September 9, 1884; "Report of the Landscape Architects on Provisions for the Playing of Games," *Fifteenth Annual Parks Report* (1889), pp. 14-19.

53. Parks Minutes, November 17, 1890; December 19, 1892; November 20, 1893, December 23, 1895; December 21, 1896; October 17, 1898; October 11, 1902. Letter from the Olmsted firm in City Council Minutes, June 25, 1896. Public pressure for small, local playgrounds begins to appear in the Parks and City Council Minutes during the 1800's.

54. Parks Minutes, June 1, 1885; August 5, 1885; June 12, 1886; June 3, 1895. For an interesting interpretation of the role played by commercialized amusements in the modern city see John Kasson's analysis of Coney Island, *Amusing the Millions* (New York, 1979).

55. City Council Minutes, July 31, 1893.

56. Parks Minutes, April 24, May 22, 1893; May 21, 28, 1894; October 7, 14, 1895; April 6, 1896; May 22, 1914.

57. See the evaluation by the Olmsted firm in the *36th Annual Parks Report* (1910- 11). See also the comments on parks in *1915: The Official Catalogue of the Boston Exposition* (Boston, 1909), p. 31.

58. Blodgett, "Olmsted . . . ," 889. Blodgett is clearly describing intent here. But while his fine essay indicates an awareness of popular pressures, he does not adequately highlight their influence in major decisions. The Boston case was similar in many respects to that of Worcester, Mass. See Rosenzweig, "Middle Class Parks. . . ."

