

“Parks For The People”: Transforming the Concept of Parks in Boston, 1870-1915

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The development of public parks in America's cities is an important concern for sport historians. Parks represented the first major public response to a growing awareness of the need to provide recreation for urban inhabitants. Moreover, parks acted as the playing fields for the popularization of sporting activities among many of the city's inhabitants during the late 19th century.

Historians have generally focused on the rhetoric of park designers and park proponents in interpreting the role of parks in urban history. Consequently, they have viewed parks as a vision handed down by a centralized elite to a passive, albeit receptive, populace. In this light historians have described parks in terms of either progressive, philanthropic reform or social control. Research in Boston's public records, including minutes of the city council and the park department, suggests the need to consider broader popular participation in the implementation of public parks.

The rhetoric of park designers and advocates like Frederick Law Olmsted emphasized the value of parks as solutions to the growing problems that increased population, immigration, and industrialization had elicited in Boston. Specifically parks offered a solution in their ability to control the environment, improve health, improve morality, and improve the city's image. While these views were articulated by a centralized elite, it is clear that broader popular participation occurred in answering the following basic questions: 1) where would parks be placed? 2) who would be the beneficiaries of their blessing? 3) what activities would be allowed in the parks?

Through effective neighborhood lobbying and representation through local politicians, Boston's citizens transformed the visions of elite reformers. In this way, parks better served the recreational needs of the city's many constituents.