

Gregory Kaliss, "Three Olmstead 'Parks' that Weren't: The Unrealized Emerald Necklace"  
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### **The Road Not Taken**

Parkways, like this one in Louisville, Kentucky, were meant to provide rural scenery for travelers. Olmsted's plans for Boston included parkways, but a road meant to benefit the residents of the South End and North Dorchester was never built. Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site (FLONHS).

# Three Olmsted “Parks” That Weren’t: The Unrealized Emerald Necklace and Its Consequences

GREGORY KALISS



**Abstract:** *Three unfinished projects in Boston, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, spotlight major cultural tensions accompanying the park-building craze of the late nineteenth century, especially class tensions regarding the “proper” use of leisure spaces. The incomplete “Greeting” of Franklin Park, the failure to build a parkway from the South End to South Boston, and the removal of a recreational ground from the South Bay to Roxbury led to numerous unintended consequences for the city as a whole, including the exclusion of some from public recreation sites, failed real estate developments, and unwanted intrusions in other Olmsted-designed parks. Dr. Kaliss co-edited Volume 9 of the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, The Last Great Projects, 1890–1895.*

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An unexpected green journey through the city of Boston starts at Park Street on the eastern edge of the Boston Common. Heading west through the Common and the Public Garden, and then following Commonwealth Avenue's tree-lined sidewalks, one arrives at the Charlesgate, the northern entry point to the Fenway and the Back Bay Fens. These artificially-constructed wetlands, begun in 1878 under the direction of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), mark the start of Boston's Emerald Necklace, an interconnected system of parks, parkways, and recreational areas primarily constructed in the last two decades of the nineteenth century under Olmsted's direction.

From the Fens, travelers can follow winding, tree-lined roads—past the Muddy River, Jamaica Pond, and the Arnold Arboretum, and then through Franklin Park. The wide Columbia Road, no longer as green as Olmsted once intended, leads from the park north and east, eventually meeting up with the scenic William J. Day Boulevard, whose tree-lined drives overlook Boston Harbor. Finally, the traveller arrives at Marine Park, a small green space overlooking the Olmsted-designed Pleasure Bay where Boston residents used to swim, boat, and promenade. It is a remarkable thirteen-mile journey that shows the breadth of Olmsted's parks and parkways in Boston, a testament to the lasting legacy of his genius.

However, while many continue to applaud the grandeur and sweep of Boston's interconnected parks and parkways, the system as it exists today (and even as it existed in the first decades of the twentieth century) did not contain all of the elements that Olmsted and Boston's park commissioners hoped for. A number of recreation areas were altered or eliminated altogether, usually because of budgetary woes, leading to significant changes in not only the shape of the park system, but also the uses of its remaining sites. Examining three of these only partially-completed or altogether-abandoned designs shows the extent to which Olmsted's park system worked as an interconnected system for the entire city, not as a collection of individual sites for local neighborhoods.

The failure to complete Franklin Park's "Greeting" district according to Olmsted's design, the decision to abandon a parkway linking the South End to South Boston, and the veto of the original South Bay site for Franklin Field, all had profound impacts on the rest of the Boston park system, leading to misuse of the other sites and creating a strain on park resources. These unrealized components also deprived some of the city's most deprived populations—including African Americans and recent immigrants—of ready access to the city's parks and recreation areas. Finally, exploring

the history of these three sites sheds light on some of the key tensions that divided Bostonians in their hopes for public recreation areas.

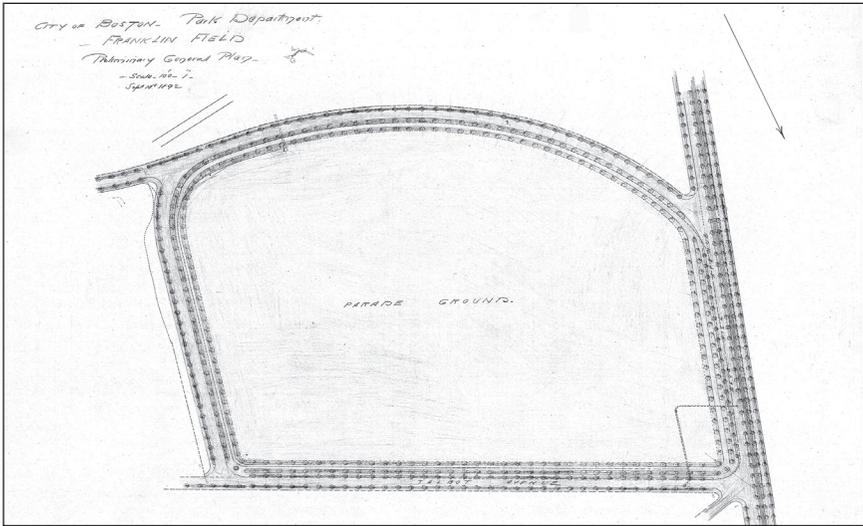
## FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED’S VISION FOR BOSTON’S PARKS

Olmsted first became involved in Boston’s park system when he delivered a lecture entitled “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns” to the American Social Science Association at the Lowell Institute in February 1870. In his address, Olmsted spelled out the many benefits of public parks for urban residents, highlighting their virtues in improving the health and morale of city residents and in building community.<sup>1</sup> In 1875 and 1876, he was invited to examine land that the city’s nascent park commission was thinking of acquiring for public parks.<sup>2</sup>

By this time, Olmsted was a well-known figure, widely celebrated for his co-design of New York’s Central Park in 1858, and the various parks and park systems he had designed and/or co-designed in Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, and Bridgeport, Connecticut. Olmsted was also one of the first landscape architects in the nation’s history, having received that title in 1860 while working for a commission to lay out streets and roads in northern Manhattan.<sup>3</sup> When Olmsted came to Boston, he saw a number of appealing properties that could be made into parks, especially a large section of rocky terrain in West Roxbury that would later become Franklin Park. Though he was only advising the commission, Olmsted suggested slight alterations to planned park locations and borders, but generally approved its vision for the city’s future parks. This early vision included a string of interconnected parks and parkways whose general shape followed the course of the present Emerald Necklace, although significant changes were later made.<sup>4</sup>

Two years later, in 1878, Olmsted was commissioned to design the first new “park” for the city—what would become the Back Bay Fens—after a design competition that Olmsted refused to enter did not produce a satisfactory plan.<sup>5</sup> Starting with the Fens, an innovative feat of engineering and landscape design that transformed a swampy, noxious waterway near Boston’s Back Bay district into scenic wetlands, Olmsted (with his landscape architecture firm) gradually came to oversee the design of the entire park system.

In the ensuing years, he and his partners made important changes to the park commissioner’s general plans, suggesting new boundaries, proposing additional parklands, and adjusting the routes of parkways. By the early 1890s, when each of the three projects to be discussed were abandoned, the Olmsted firm had already overseen the design and opening of parks



### Franklin Field

The firm's general plan for Franklin Field left an open space to be used for military musters, public gatherings and ball games—the types of activities Olmsted tried to restrict from his parks. Undated image. Courtesy National Park Service, FLOHNS.

and parkways including the Fens, the Fenway, the Arnold Arboretum, the Arborway, the Charlesbank Gymnasium, and portions of Franklin Park. Work on the Muddy River Improvement (later called the Riverway and Olmsted Park), Marine Park, and Wood Island Park was underway. The map of the Boston park system, the Emerald Necklace of the twenty-first century, had nearly been realized in its general shape and component parts.<sup>6</sup>

Olmsted's designs for Boston's park system came from his belief in the public utility of parks and other recreation areas—his idea that parks played an important role in ameliorating some of the evils that came with urban living. Olmsted had been awakened to the beauty of natural scenery as a child when he and his family took long sightseeing trips throughout New England and New York. These early impressions of natural beauty were further augmented by time spent in Europe in the 1850s, where he saw firsthand some of the earliest English parks—most notably Birkenhead Park, near Liverpool, and London's west end parks—and came away impressed by their display of pastoral and picturesque landscapes in an urban setting.

Olmsted believed that such landscapes were vital to the human psyche and to social interactions. Long passages of soothing scenery, unmarred

by buildings, pollution, and monuments, could uplift people by providing a break from the manic pace, disheartening grime, and stifling clutter of nineteenth-century urban life.<sup>7</sup> These parks could also serve a social role. As he wrote in "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," parks were the one place in the city in which people of all types congregated: "You may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile."<sup>8</sup> Parks, therefore, could bring about American egalitarian democracy.

Olmsted's vision for parks, though, necessarily precluded some kinds of recreation areas. Because he believed that parks served a vital soothing role that came from the consideration of expanses of natural scenery, he disdained certain activities and features in park spaces. Militia musters, with their turf-destroying marches, their loud cadences, and rowdy, alcohol-fueled revelry, were not suitable, according to Olmsted, for proper parks.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, grown men playing baseball and football were not to be tolerated in parks—the noise, tumult, and competition all contradicted Olmsted's vision of a park as a relaxing oasis from city life. These activities deserved their own spaces and separate facilities, but were incompatible with a proper park as Olmsted conceived it.<sup>10</sup>

One of the challenges Olmsted and the Boston park commission faced was how to manage their aspirations for public park spaces with competing public demands for alternative uses. While Olmsted hoped that parks would serve one goal, and other activities could be shuttled into smaller spaces elsewhere, the many users of these parks had alternative visions of their chief value, and clamor for changes to park designs almost always reflected these alternative impulses.

Another variable that complicated Olmsted's vision for Boston's parks, parkways, and recreation areas had to do with the financing of park-making. Large public parks could be notoriously expensive: when Olmsted started work on New York's Central Park in 1857, he had a budget of \$1.5 million for the entire project. By 1886, more than \$16 million had been spent on the 843-acre site. Getting public support for park undertakings, then, required a willingness to take on debt, and Olmsted and others often convinced hesitant city council members to fund these initiatives by promising increased tax revenues.

The addition of parklands to cities made the surrounding properties more valuable; as a result, new assessments led to higher property taxes and more development around the parks, thus leading to increased tax revenue for the city. In his 1886 pamphlet *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters*, Olmsted himself argued that the costs of building Central Park had

“been returned through the profit that has accrued from the attractiveness of the city as a place of residence for men of means.” The park’s appeal had led to an “increased value of real estate” that had filled the city’s coffers and reduced the tax burden on most city residents.<sup>11</sup>

Those arguments had merit. In New York, property values in the three wards surrounding Central Park increased more than seventeen million dollars in the four years after 1856, when the park land was acquired.<sup>12</sup> By 1868, property values in those wards had increased by nearly \$76 million.<sup>13</sup> Buffalo, too, saw “rapid and dramatic price increases for land” when it initiated its system of parks and parkways, and similar real estate booms and increased tax revenues were noted in Chicago, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> Of course, those who owned property near proposed park sites stood to benefit the most. If real estate values went up, they could sell or rent their properties and make a tidy profit.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Olmsted often found himself in a curious situation: those most favorable to the building of public parks did not share his high opinions regarding the moral values of parks for the public good; instead, they hoped for private wealth. This unlikely pairing of park supporters contributed to some of the problems Olmsted encountered in getting his vision of parks, parkways, and recreation grounds—in Boston and elsewhere—realized.

## THE INCOMPLETE FRANKLIN PARK

The first incomplete Olmsted project, Franklin Park’s “Greeting” district, would have been located in the Emerald Necklace’s crown jewel. As the largest part of the Boston park system at more than 600 acres, Franklin Park contained within it a number of separate districts meant to accentuate the existing natural environment and provide spaces for activities appropriate to the setting. Most fundamentally, Olmsted divided the park into two unequal sections. The Country Park, the larger of the two, was for the most part completed according to the specifications of Olmsted’s original plan of 1885 and a revised plan of 1891 that incorporated scenic water elements. This area, which incorporated districts such as the “Wilderness,” “Ellicottdale,” and “Scarboro Hill,” was the section reserved for passive recreation, for the taking in of large, soothing vistas of scenery meant to combat the jarring sights and sounds of urban living.

The second section, roughly one-half the size, was the Ante-Park, wherein Olmsted intended a series of spaces for the more formal and vigorous activities that he hoped to restrict from the park’s pastoral areas. Here, for example, was the “Playstead” (the first section of the park to be completed), a large

field meant to provide space for school-age children to play and exercise. The remainder of the Ante-Park was to consist of three principal features: 1) sites for animals, including Long Crouch Woods (a wooded area meant to house small, unobtrusive exhibits of North American animals), and two deer paddocks; 2) the Greeting, a formal, tree-lined walk meant to serve as a promenade providing easy access to a formal music pavilion; and 3) a series of playspaces—including Sargent's Field, an eight-acre space for ball-playing, and the "Little Folks' Fair," a fourteen-acre site featuring playgrounds and tot lots.<sup>16</sup>

For the purposes of this article, the Greeting district encompasses all three of these additional aspects of the Ante-Park. Excepting the Playstead, little of Olmsted's vision for the Ante-Park was realized. The park commission had long hoped that a significant portion of the park's cost would be covered by a bequest from Benjamin Franklin's will (hence the park's name); that money, however, was never made available to the park commission, as Franklin's heirs contested the will's legality, and the money was instead used to found a technical institute.<sup>17</sup>

As costs for the park escalated—the addition of Scarboro Pond in the early 1890s, for example, necessitated significant excavation, planting, and the re-routing of water sources—and as financial constraints intensified in the wake of the Panic of 1893, park commissioners struggled to find the funds necessary to finish the park according to Olmsted's design.<sup>18</sup> In 1898, when estimates for the completion of the Greeting came to more than \$170,000, the firm adjusted its plans, creating an informal green space called the "Glade" to replace the formal mall and attendant music court. By 1909, Boston park commission president Robert S. Peabody lamented the failure to complete the Greeting, writing to Olmsted's sons, who had taken charge of the family business: "It seems to me that a formal large thing like this is greatly needed to ballast the Park system."<sup>19</sup>

One final element contributed to the Greeting's incompletion. When Olmsted had published his plan for the park, he had suggested that one small portion might be made available, as a loan, for the purposes of exhibiting North American animals in their native habitats. However, members of Boston's Natural History Society, led by zoologist Alpheus Hyatt, consistently pressed for more space for zoos and aquariums in the parks.<sup>20</sup> Franklin Park seemed especially appealing for these purposes, and in 1912, the Franklin Park Zoo, encompassing more than 70 acres of the Greeting district, opened to the public.

Although landscape architect (and former Olmsted firm employee) Arthur Shurtleff incorporated the general axis of the Greeting into his design

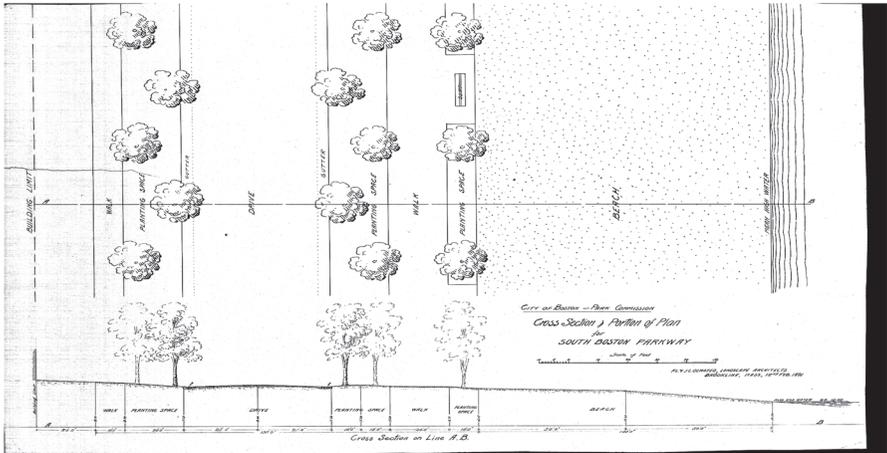
for the zoo, the zoo itself was a great departure from Olmsted's original intention.<sup>21</sup> Olmsted had meant for the Greeting to be a public "Meeting Ground," a place where all in the community might come to see and be seen. It was also the one part of the park in which human presence was not to be subordinated to natural beauty—"monumental, architectural, and various decorative adjuncts" were acceptable in the Greeting, and the attached Music Court provided a space for social performance.<sup>22</sup> Although the deer paddocks could be viewed by walkers on the promenade, they were secondary to its social dimension. However, with the creation of the zoo, that principle was reversed.

Similarly, Shurtleff's changes to Sargent's Field also undermined some of Olmsted's original intents. Olmsted meant for this small area to include "tennis courts and a small ball ground ... to save players coming from the east from walking further to reach a playing ground." Instead, Shurtleff, in order to make the area coincide with the zoo, revamped the site by designing rock, rose, and herbaceous gardens. As a result, ballplayers would have to make the extra walk to the Playstead and tennis players to Ellicottdale—or they would have to engage in sports in sites unintended for them. Thus, the incomplete Greeting deprived Bostonians of a formal promenade, a site for live music, and additional play spaces for children and others.<sup>23</sup>

### **THE FAILURE TO BUILD A "SHORTER AND MORE AGREEABLE ROUTE"**

The second project left unfinished had been proposed by the residents of the South End, South Boston, and North Dorchester, a group predominantly Irish and working-class.<sup>24</sup> As Olmsted's plans for the city evolved, the various parks and parkways extended in a ring from the city's western border with Brookline, cut south through Jamaica Plain, turned east into South Roxbury, and then gradually moved northeast to eventually end at South Boston's Marine Park. Although this was an impressive network of parks and parkways, the main area of the city left without substantial recreation areas was the South End, especially the area where the South End intersected Roxbury and North Dorchester (present-day Orchard Park and Clifford Playground are located in this region).

Although the geography of the region was different in Olmsted's time—as the South Bay had not yet been filled and, thus, extended significantly farther south from the Fort Point Channel—there was still a substantial region of the city that was largely cut off from the city's park system. These residencies were south of the Common and Public Garden, east of the Fens,



### Vision of the Strandway

This plan for the Strandway, which linked Franklin Park to Marine Park, shows how Olmsted incorporated wide planting spaces to create scenic roadways. The shortcut parkway across the South Bay likely would have featured a similar treatment. Undated image. Courtesy National Park Service.

north of Franklin Park, and west of Marine Park and Wood Island Park.

Noticing this lack of park space—and probably observing the spike in real estate values that occurred in other areas of the city after parks were built—a group of residents offered to donate land to the city in order to build a parkway that cut across this area. The project had its origins in May 1890, when a group calling itself the Washington Village Improvement Association proposed the parkway through the marshy land near the southern terminus of the South Bay, arguing that “the rapidly increasing value of land herein specified would more than pay double the amount of cost to build the Parkway.”<sup>25</sup> The Olmsted firm prepared a plan for the project in December 1890.<sup>26</sup> Annual reports of the park commission for 1892 and 1893 mention the proposal, with the latter expressing the commissioners’ hope that “a shorter and more agreeable route from the centre of the city to the waterside” would be obtained.<sup>27</sup>

The Olmsted firm’s plan would have done just that. Starting in the west near the intersection of Swett Street and East Chester Pike (the present-day intersection of Southampton Street and Massachusetts Avenue), the tree-lined parkway would have extended east in a gently curving course until linking up with Columbia Road and then continuing east to the Strandway in South

Boston. Olmsted had high hopes for the scenic value of the parkway, writing to the noted art critic Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer in June 1893 that he saw the parkway and the firm's work on Jamaica Park as representative of "good, artistic work of design" that "[reconciled] the requirements of convenience for a community with the preservation and development of conditions of rural beauty."<sup>28</sup>

Although the parkway would not have provided expansive park space for the residents of this quarter of the city, its benefits would have been clear. While Massachusetts Avenue already provided residents of the South End a major thoroughfare to access the Back Bay Fens and the Fenway to the west, this shortcut to the east would have opened up access to the other side of the Emerald Necklace, making Marine Park, with its popular promenade, beaches, and views of the bay, much more accessible. It also would have made it easier and more pleasant for centrally-located residents to get over to Massachusetts Avenue and the parks and parkways in the west, including Leverett Park (now Olmsted Park) and Jamaica Park.

In addition, property along the parkway would have become much more valuable, spurring real estate development in the region. In fact, when promoting the value of the parkway in early 1894, park commissioners had suggested that it would help "in developing the waste lands, through which it would run, for a better class of buildings than would otherwise be erected."<sup>29</sup> When the South Bay was filled in, the presence of a scenic parkway may have even led some portion of the filled-in land to be devoted to park space.

Instead, the parkway remained an unrealized dream. Unable to acquire the \$50,000 necessary to purchase the remaining three-tenths of the land necessary for the parkway, the commissioners left the project uncompleted. Although small parks and playgrounds were added in later years in the general area, and Columbus Park (later renamed Joe Moakley Park) was built in 1916, much of the land remains something of a wasteland—factories, a public storage site, and a shopping center exist where the parkway would have been, and a large railroad depot sits to the north where the South Bay used to be. Even the 100-acre Columbus Park, designed by Shurtleff and located along the Strandway, was meant primarily to serve the residents of South Boston to the East, not those living in the South End and in northern Dorchester.<sup>30</sup>

Instead of that population having increased access to the benefits of Olmsted's park spaces, they remained largely cut off from the recreational values of the Emerald Necklace. Olmsted had warned against such an outcome, writing to park commission president John Andrew in 1895 that efforts to build an extension of the embankment of the Charles River near

the Back Bay were misguided, "while sufficient interior parks, parkways and playgrounds were still lacking."<sup>31</sup>

### THE INCONVENIENTLY-LOCATED "MUSTER GROUND"

These same residents ended up on the losing end of yet another incomplete project—or, rather, a project that was located elsewhere. Since the late 1860s, Olmsted had been persistent in his efforts to have park commissioners create active recreation sites outside of his "rural" parks. When Olmsted and former partner Calvert Vaux had designed Brooklyn's Prospect Park, they had successfully urged the city's park commission to add a separate piece of land across Parkside Avenue from the park's southern border. Naming it "The Parade Ground," Olmsted and Vaux intended this space and the speaker's platform at Washington (or Fort Greene) Park to provide locations for the various activities Olmsted considered antithetical to proper parks: militia musters, with their rowdy marching; public gatherings, such as labor demonstrations and political meetings; and ball-playing by working-class men eager to let off steam.<sup>32</sup>

Olmsted and Vaux's plans for the Buffalo park system followed a similar plan, with one large park set aside for passive, rural recreation, and two smaller sites more accommodating of various physical activities.<sup>33</sup> Olmsted eagerly sought a site for similar activities in Boston—in 1876, before he had even begun to work in an official capacity for the Boston park commission, he had advised that "no part of [Franklin Park] was well adapted to be formed into a field for musters, sports, athletic exercises, for the display of fireworks, or for bringing people together in large numbers for any purpose." Instead, he had recommended that the commission should "make such provisions on land somewhat separated from a rural park, but at no great distance from it," as had been done in Brooklyn.<sup>34</sup>

However, by the early 1890s, the Boston park system still had no separate site set aside for such activities. The issue became especially prominent after a number of groups, including the local chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association, the Evangelical Alliance, and the Central Labor Union, petitioned unsuccessfully to hold large gatherings in Franklin Park between 1887 and 1891. Meanwhile, other Boston residents clamored for a pond well-suited to ice skating in Franklin Park.<sup>35</sup> Feeling pressured to incorporate such activities in his park, Olmsted wrote the park commissioners that finding a suitable site for skating, militia musters, and public gatherings was "the most important matter that has been before the Board for several years."<sup>36</sup>

The park commissioners were not immune to Olmsted's pleas. In 1889,

the commissioners had advocated the purchase of “a large area of South Bay, now under water ... centrally located, easy of approach from all sides by direct avenues” to be made into “an attractive and inviting spot for all out-door exercises.”<sup>37</sup> The 20-acre site, bordered by the New York and New England Railroad to the west, Swett Street (now Southampton Street) to the north, Boston Street to the east, and East Chester Park (now Massachusetts Avenue) to the south, would have been located right in the middle of the proposed shortcut parkway to South Boston. Thus, it would have served the same population as the ill-fated parkway.

As with that parkway and the Greeting area of Franklin Park, however, financial concerns prevented the site from being added to the system. Although the Olmsted firm prepared a plan for the site in October 1890, the board was distressed by the high cost of acquiring the land and making it suitable for park purposes. Estimates for purchasing the land and filling it in came to nearly \$600,000. Thus, the park board turned its attention to a second site, the so-called “Peat Meadow,” located to the southeast of Franklin Park. Consisting of mostly wet ground, estimates for purchase and draining only came to about \$260,000. The site was eventually chosen for Franklin Field, which was re-named Harambee Park in the mid-1980s.<sup>38</sup>

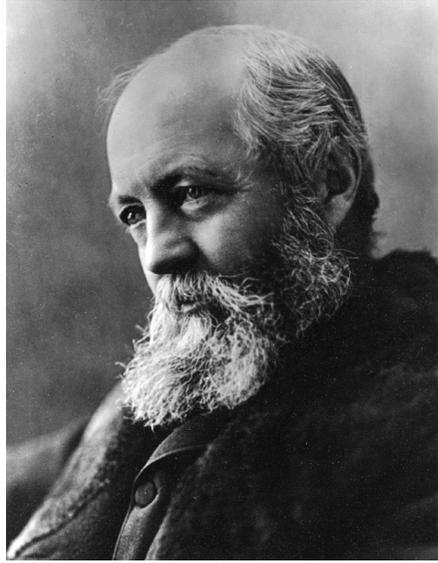
As was the case with the other uncompleted projects, the effects of not building this recreation area in the South Bay were numerous. Most significantly, the South Bay site would have provided a large space, relatively close to downtown, for the public activities that Olmsted hoped to exclude from his large parks. Clearly, the residents of the South Bay and of North Dorchester would have benefited from additional green space. Even today, this area of the city lacks the large park spaces available to residents of other neighborhoods.

Building the South Bay site also may have prevented the use and abuse of Franklin Park. Although Franklin Field was built in relatively short order, the site was so much farther away from the majority of city residents that it was not nearly as appealing as the South Bay site might have been. Thus, the pressures to use Franklin Park for ball-playing and other activities continued. Although the park commissioners banned the playing of sports in the park for anyone over sixteen years of age, public pressure forced the commissioners to relent in 1903, permitting the playing of baseball and football at the Playstead.<sup>39</sup> In later years, the Playstead itself was largely taken over by the creation of White Schoolboy Stadium, eliminating some of the space intended for casual ball-playing and forcing visitors to move those activities farther into the park’s rural areas. The park’s ban on large public gatherings was eventually overturned as well; by 1903, a large gathering sponsored by the

mayor took place in the country park.<sup>40</sup>

### LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF THE UNREALIZED EMERALD NECKLACE

What, then, were the cumulative effects of these three significant alterations to Olmsted's designs? Although speculative, all three impacted the broader Boston park system in ways that strained resources in some locations, neglected certain residents of the city, and had profound implications on the Boston urban landscape. The failure to complete these projects had two major effects.



**Frederick Law Olmsted**

The first was to neglect the residents of the South Bay and North Dorchester. Although the park system added Dorchester Park to its properties in the mid-1890s, that park was located far to the south of Boston's South Bay. For residents living near the South Bay, few park sites were close. Getting to East Boston's Wood Island Park or South Boston's Marine Park necessitated travel through the city's industrial wastelands. Travelling to the Back Bay Fens required navigating small city streets before finally getting to the more expansive Massachusetts Avenue. From the Fens or Marine Park, visitors could easily follow the parkway system and make their way to the Arnold Arboretum or Franklin Park, but these sites were far removed.

Not only did residents not have easy access to park spaces, they also did not see the benefits of real estate development that usually resulted from the addition of parklands. Although the project for the parkway and for the muster ground would have overlapped, it would have been conceivable (and indeed preferable) for the Olmsted firm to design them in conjunction with one another, with the parkway running, for example, along the northern border of the proposed muster ground site—thus providing views of the bay to the north and of the ball fields to the south. These green spaces would have almost certainly stimulated real estate investment in this section of the city to a greater extent than occurred. One can only imagine how the geography of Boston would have been altered by the presence of a popular recreation site

and a picturesque parkway in this section of the city.

Urban politics related to class, race, and ethnicity almost certainly played a role in the Boston park system that emerged. The residents most neglected by the incomplete park system were disproportionately poor and often of “undesirable” ethnic or racial status, which minimized their voice in civic affairs. At the western terminus of the proposed shortcut parkway in the South End, for example, lived impoverished African Americans and other scattered ethnic minorities; at its eastern terminus, near the southwestern corner of South Boston, lived recent Polish immigrants and poor Irish in tenements.<sup>41</sup>

Olmsted’s desire to put off work on the Charles River Esplanade recognized this disparity. In one of the reports published by the firm regarding the feasibility of extending the Charles River embankment in the Back Bay, the firm noted that the residents of that area of the city (at the time, one of the most fashionable districts, with some of the city’s wealthiest residents) already had access to a wide range of green spaces. At one end of the proposed embankment was the Back Bay Fens; at the other end, the Charlesbank recreation area. Running parallel to the proposed embankment was Commonwealth Avenue, with its broad, tree-lined median. Less than one hundred yards away was Boston’s Public Garden, which adjoined Boston Common. Although the firm prepared a plan for walks and drives and a modestly planted strip of ground for the embankment, the partners clearly felt the wealthy residents of the Back Bay did not need additional park-like spaces while so many others in the city lacked access.<sup>42</sup>

The second major effect of these projects’ abandonment was to channel a wide range of activities into park sites ill-suited for them. The South Bay muster ground, especially coupled with the proposed parkway, would have provided easy access to many for the turf-damaging activities that Olmsted fought to keep out of his parks. Not only would Franklin Park have been saved from public rallies, but also, perhaps, the few open spaces in the Back Bay Fens and Olmsted Park. Today, these sites are the locations of baseball diamonds, a use that Olmsted would have protested vigorously. Had more convenient facilities for ball-playing, militia musters, and public gatherings been available, perhaps these sites and Franklin Park might have been better preserved as Olmsted intended.

Similarly, the absence of a formal promenade in Franklin Park meant that people continued to attempt to include formal walks and monuments in places that Olmsted believed were not well-suited for them. Although Olmsted knew that refusing sculptural donations was “difficult on any grounds,” he encouraged Boston park commissioner Francis Amasa Walker

to be cautious in accepting such gifts, lest the parks become "largely sacrificed to the purpose of a gallery of sculpture" and lose their natural charms. During his lifetime, Olmsted had to ward off attempts to place a statue to Civil War hero Charles Devens in the Back Bay Fens and Franklin Park.<sup>43</sup> After Olmsted's death, groups introduced various formal features into spaces Olmsted intended to keep natural. The formal rose garden in the Back Bay Fens is one such example; the recent World War II monument erected in Marine Park is another.<sup>44</sup>

One might also argue that the lack of a formal mall hurt Franklin Park's popularity. Although the Franklin Park Zoo was very popular in the first decades of the twentieth century, when it offered free admission, Franklin Park did not lead to the significant real estate growth that large city parks had in other cities. The presence of a formal mall, with a music court and children's play areas, might well have encouraged greater residential growth near the park and, thus, led to a more lasting popularity for it. Instead, when the zoo's popularity waned, so too did attendance at, and public support for, the park.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, the abandonment of the South Bay parkway compounded the loss of the Greeting's mall and play spaces. After all, the



### **Lawn Tennis at Franklin Park**

Although Olmsted tolerated leisure sports in public parks, like these temporary lawn tennis courts in Franklin Park circa 1900, he vigorously opposed the inclusion of facilities for competitive team sports.

completion of the South Bay parkway would have afforded easier access to the formal promenade at Marine Park, and, thus, perhaps made up for the loss of the promenade at Franklin Park.

These unfinished projects are more than mere footnotes in Boston's parks history. They reflect competing ideals regarding the use of public recreational areas in the city. Olmsted's vision for the Boston parks system was surely not infallible. Although committed to ideas of democratic equality, Olmsted also operated from a Victorian mindset. He believed in a certain standard of "taste" that came from the elites and the upper middle class, and he was confident that he knew what was best for other people when it came to urban recreation.

For example, even as competitive team sports became more popular as the nineteenth century progressed, Olmsted limited the amount of space devoted to these activities in his parks and recreation areas, usually only approving areas for school children to engage in those sports.<sup>46</sup> His own son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., while in his first year at Harvard University in 1890, did not bother to recap the exciting Harvard-Yale football game of the week before, knowing that his father "could not understand" the game.<sup>47</sup> Had Olmsted's original designs been more open to incorporating competitive sports, formal parades, political rallies, and ethnic festivals—activities usually, although not always, promoted by the working class—some of the problems encountered in later years might have been avoided.<sup>48</sup>

After all, the residents who wanted to make ball fields out of Olmsted's idyllic pastures in Franklin Park likely would have dismissed Olmsted's contention that such activities were antithetical to the true purpose of a park, as would the labor organizers who hoped to rally public support for the eight-hour day and other causes. For these city residents, park spaces were meant to be open spaces where town residents could indulge in a variety of activities difficult to pursue in the cramped quarters of the city. And yet, in town after town, Olmsted fought battles to build larger parks that enabled contemplation of scenery, instead of building smaller parks that emphasized fresh air and places to unwind.

It may well be that Olmsted's vision was wrong in this regard, that scattered, small places would have suited the city's residents better. One might argue that the commissioners—with Olmsted as their advisor—ought to have prioritized their initial park selections differently, setting aside more recreation space for sports, gatherings, and formal promenades at the outset. Once the park system was underway, the cost of adding these lands proved prohibitive. Nonetheless, once the decision was made to pursue Olmsted's vision for the park system, the piecemeal and incomplete implementation of

the Olmsted-designed parks, parkways, and recreation areas compounded these issues. Had the parks been built as Olmsted had hoped, residents' desires for those alternative activities would have been more readily met, with easier access to playing fields, muster grounds, and formal promenades.

And yet the lack of foresight regarding the development of parks marks another important lesson from these three incomplete sites. In an era when American city governments face considerable budgetary woes, these abandoned projects speak to the necessity of taking on debt to build infrastructure for future growth. In all three cases, the real estate development of these areas lagged behind other sections of the city, hurting the city's tax base as a result. Although Boston had been willing to take on debt in the 1870s through the early 1890s to fund the city's parks, the Panic of 1893 led to a retrenchment.<sup>49</sup>

Had the two South Bay projects been completed, Boston might well have had another prosperous section of the city close to downtown for residential life. Instead, most of this area remains an industrial and commercial wasteland. Similarly, a completed Greeting might have bolstered Franklin Park's prestige, making it similar in popularity to Brooklyn's Prospect Park and, thus, increasing the value of its surrounding real estate. Instead, for much of the twentieth century, Franklin Park fell into disrepair, becoming a site for vice and a location for active physical recreational facilities, including a golf course and an athletic stadium, that marred the natural scenery and hindered its ability to function as a place of repose for all Boston residents.

Although it is necessarily speculative, the map of Boston today, with these projects completed, would likely have been a greener one—with more open spaces retained in places such as the Back Bay Fens, with more tree-lined drives, and with multiple stylish residential districts fronting on park borders. In short, the Emerald Necklace, with a few more links in its chain, might come closer to providing all of Boston's residents with the benefits that come from easily-accessible parks, parkways, and recreation areas.

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HJM

## Notes

1. See Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Supplementary Series I*, eds. Charles E. Beveridge and Carolyn F. Hoffman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 171–205.

2. Cynthia Zaitzevsky, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Boston Park System* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 43–44.
3. See Charles E. Beveridge and David Schuyler, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Volume 3: *Creating Central Park* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 267.
4. Zaitzevsky, *Olmsted and the Boston Park System*, 43–44.
5. Other recreation areas existed before the founding of the Boston Park Commission in the mid-1870s—most notably, the Boston Common and the adjacent Boston Public Garden.
6. For an in-depth summary of the Olmsted firm’s work in Boston, see Zaitzevsky, *Olmsted and the Boston Park System*.
7. For more on Olmsted’s aspirations for parks, see Charles E. Beveridge, “Frederick Law Olmsted’s Theory on Landscape Design,” *Nineteenth Century*, 20 (Fall 2000): 32–37.
8. Olmsted, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” 186. Olmsted had made a similar claim in an 1853 letter to his friend Charles Loring Brace, writing that Americans ought to “get up parks, gardens, music, dancing schools, reunions which will be so attractive as to force into contact the good & bad, the gentlemanly and the rowdy.” See Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 2: *Slavery and the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 236.
9. See Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 143.
10. See John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 13 and David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 6.
11. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters* (Boston, 1886), 99.
12. Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Fourth Annual Report* (New York: William C. Bryant & Co., 1861), 80.
13. “The Central Park,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1868, 4.
14. Francis R. Kowsky, *The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 111; W. H. Eckman, *Public Parks. A Compilation of Facts and Statistics* (Cleveland: J. B. Savage: 1888), 11–12. As Zaitzevsky notes, Boston’s park financing was predicated on increased tax revenues. The Park Act of 1875 gave commissioners power to “assess betterments on real estate directly benefited by an adjacent park” as a way to bring in increased tax revenue to the city. See Zaitzevsky, *Olmsted and the Boston Park System*, 68.
15. For more on the aspirations of real estate developers for public parks, see Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 208–09 and Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 272–73.

16. The best source of Olmsted's plan for Franklin Park is his published report for the site, *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters*. The summary of Olmsted's vision for the various sections of the park can be found on pages 49–60. The report is also available in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Supplementary Series 1*, 460–534.
17. See Zaitzevsky, *Olmsted and the Boston Park System*, 66, 77, 234, n. 50.
18. Regarding the additional work necessary for Scarboro Pond, see, for example, City of Boston, Board of Commissioners for the Department of Parks, *Twentieth Annual Report* (Boston, 1896), 53.
19. Robert S. Peabody to "My Dear Olmsted," Oct. 31, 1909, B49: 466, *Olmsted Associates Records*, Library of Congress.
20. See, for example, Olmsted to Alpheus Hyatt, May 6, 1889 and Olmsted to Charles Sprague Sargent, Feb. 7, 1891, A4: 654 and A7: 770, *Olmsted Associates Records*, Library of Congress. See also Alpheus Hyatt, "The Next Stage in the Development of Public Parks," *Atlantic Monthly* 67 (Feb. 1891): 215–24.
21. Shurtleff later changed his last name to Shurcliff.
22. Olmsted, *Notes on Franklin Park*, 58.
23. *Ibid.*, 59.
24. For more on the changing ethnic character of these neighborhoods, see Thomas H. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 37 and Stephen Puleo, *A City So Grand: The Rise of an American Metropolis, Boston 1850–1900* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 152, 197.
25. City of Boston, Board of Commissioners for the Department of Parks, *Proceedings*, May 19, 1890 (Boston, 1890).
26. F.L. & J. C. Olmsted, "Study for a Parkway from East Chester Park to South Boston Parkway," Dec. 10, 1890, Plan 931-6, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site (FLONHS).
27. See City of Boston, Board of Commissioners for the Department of Parks, *Eighteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1893), 22–23 and *Nineteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1894), 44.
28. Olmsted to Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, June 11, 1893, 22: 713, *Olmsted Papers*, Library of Congress. Olmsted did not identify the parkway by name, instead referring to the firm's work along "the shore of Roxbury Bay." Roxbury Bay was another name for the South Bay, and this proposed parkway was the only project in 1893 that was located in that area.
29. Boston, Board of Commissioners, *Nineteenth Annual Report*, 44.
30. Keith N. Morgan, with Richard M. Candee, Naomi Miller, Roger G. Reed, and contributors, *Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 230.
31. Olmsted to John F. Andrew, Jan. 28, 1895, A20: 796, *Olmsted Associates Records*, Library of Congress.
32. See Olmsted to Thomas Livermore, Feb. 4, 1892, A11: 139, *Olmsted Associates Records*, Library of Congress, and David Schuyler and Jane Turner Censer, eds.,

*The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 6: *The Years of Olmsted*, Vaux & Company (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 23.

33. David Schuyler, "Cityscape and Parkscape," in *The Best Planned City: The Olmsted Legacy in Buffalo*, ed. Francis R. Kowsky (Buffalo: Buffalo State College Foundation, 1992), 10–11.

34. Olmsted to Livermore, Feb. 4, 1892.

35. For agitation for public demonstrations and ice skating in Franklin Park, see Committee of the Evangelical Alliance of Boston, "Boston Common Under Gag-Law," *One Day* 1 (May, 1888): 424–35; City of Boston, Board of Commissioners for the Department of Parks, *Sixteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1891), 36–37 and *Seventeenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1892), 41–45.

36. Olmsted to Livermore, Feb. 4, 1892.

37. City of Boston, Board of Commissioners for the Department of Parks, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1890), 47.

38. City of Boston, Department of Parks, *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 45–46 and *Seventeenth Annual Report*, 45–47.

39. Alexander von Hoffman, *Local Attachments: The Making of an American Urban Neighborhood, 1850 to 1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 85–86.

40. See Julie Arrison, *Images of America: Franklin Park* (Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia, 2009), 32 and Zaitzevsky, *Olmsted and the Boston Park System*, 78.

41. For African-American enclaves in the South End, see Violet Showers Johnson, *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston, 1900-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 37–38. For Polish immigrants living at the border of South Boston and Dorchester, see O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 153. For poor Irish living in the lower end of South Boston, see Gerald H. Gamm, *The Making of New Deal Democrats: Voting Behavior and Realignment in Boston, 1920–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 144.

42. City of Boston, Department of Parks, *Nineteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1894), 57–65.

43. See Olmsted to Francis A. Walker, Feb. 5, 1895, A20: 900, Olmsted Associates Records, Library of Congress.

44. Zaitzevsky, *Olmsted and the Boston Park System*, 58 and Tom Farmer, "Southie Remembers WWII Vets," *Boston Herald*, Oct. 14, 2002, 5.

45. For more on fluctuations in the popularity of the zoo and park, see Arrison, *Franklin Park*, 53–74.

46. Olmsted supported the provision of facilities for exercise, but favored grounds that encouraged individual sports instead of team ones: thus, the Charlesbank included gymnastics apparatus and a running track, but no baseball diamond or football field. In this way, Olmsted fell in line with older Victorians who distrusted the passions that came from participation in competitive sports. For more on Victorians' attitudes towards sports in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Elliot J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 79–149.

47. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to Olmsted, Nov. 25, 1890, 21: 750, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress.

48. For more on working-class activities in nineteenth-century public parks, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 232–37.

49. Jon C. Teaford argues that city governments were cautious about taking on high debt levels in the 1880s and 1890s as a result of the Panic of 1873. After that financial collapse, a number of American cities neared insolvency as deflation and declining tax bases nearly crippled municipal economies. In that context, Boston's caution in the wake of the Panic of 1893 is understandable. See Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 283–84.