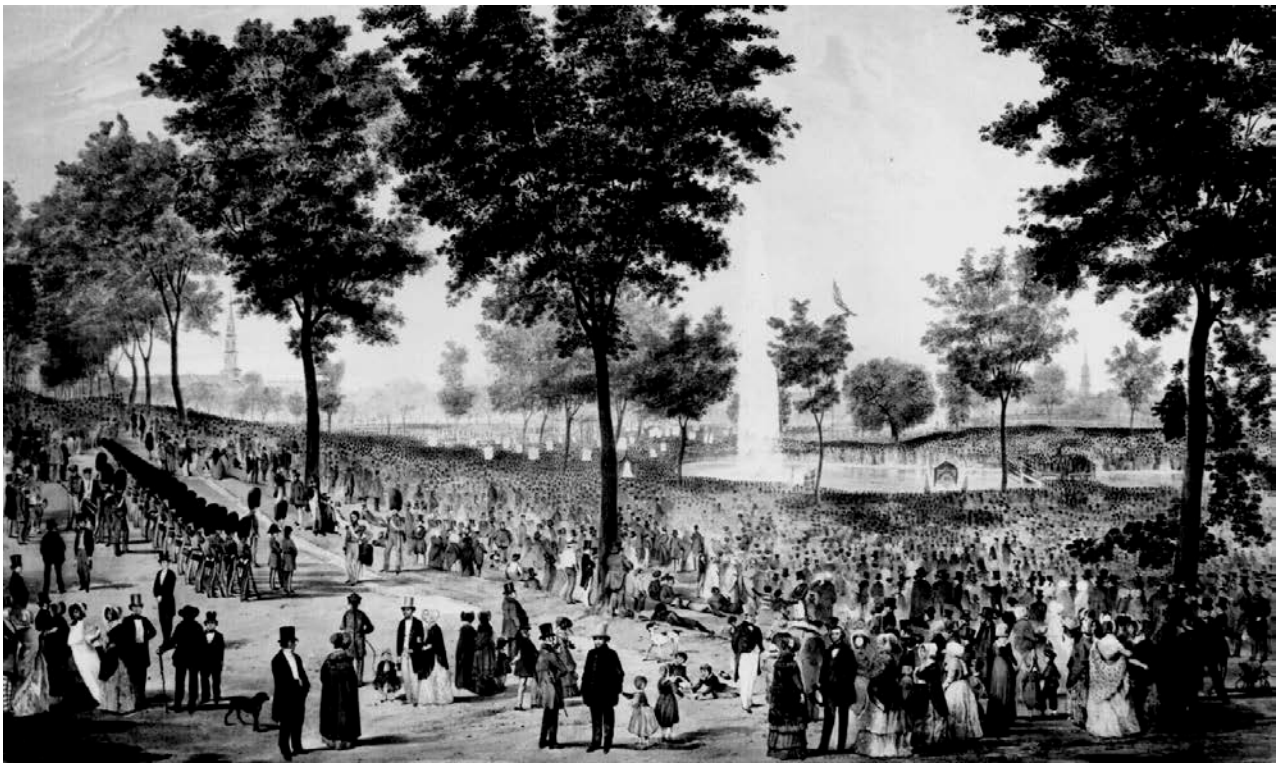
BOSTON COMMON:
A CULTURAL ICON OVER THE CENTURIES

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS



Extracted from Cultural Landscape Report prepared by:

Shary Page Berg FASLA

for

Friends of the Public Garden
Boston Parks and Recreation Department

May 2016

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Extracted from:

BOSTON COMMON
CULTURAL LANDSCAPE REPORT

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Cover Photograph: Water Celebration at Frog Pond, 1848
(Boston Public Library, Print Dept.)

BOSTON COMMON: A CULTURAL ICON THROUGH THE CENTURIES

INTRODUCTION

The Common has been at the center of Boston's civic life since its establishment in 1634. Despite physical changes, the Common has remained a focal place for the community -- from grazing cows and military activity to celebrations, punishments, protests, and recreation. Physically, as well, it has remained fairly consistent in size and character, a green respite in the midst of the city.

Today, demands for use of the Common are constant and heavy. In 2013 alone, there were 700 events permitted by the city – from a five-person gathering to a concert for 55,000. About 200 permitted events drew over 10,000 people each. Tens of thousands of people come to enjoy the park from the adjacent neighborhoods and tourists begin the Freedom Trail at the Common's Visitor Information Center, which receives over a half million people each year. Pressures on the park – from illicit uses to surrounding development to its role housing the 4th largest transit station in the system and an underground parking garage – are relentless.

The Friends of the Public Garden has been a nonprofit partner with the City of Boston since 1970 with a mission to preserve and enhance the Boston Common, Public Garden, and Commonwealth Avenue Mall. The Friends was formed in response to citizen concerns about the three parks, which by the late 1960s were in deplorable condition. Over the next four decades, the Friends partnered with the city to restore, maintain and advocate for protection of the Common as well as the Garden and Mall. Much was accomplished over the next four decades, but the Common still suffers from a great imbalance between use and care.

In 2014, the Friends prepared a five-year strategic plan with four goals. Recognizing the importance of the Boston Common and the pressures it experiences as the most heavily used park in the city, one of the plan's four goals was focused specifically on this park. That goal is to "Revitalize the Boston Common so that it meets the needs of its constituents now and into the future." During the planning process, extensive stakeholder interviews expressed a near universal concern that the Common should be on a par with the best urban parks, and that it was falling far short. As a park receiving extraordinary use, it needs extraordinary care. One of the plan's recommendations was for a comprehensive plan for the Common.

Commissioned by the Friends in 2014, the *Cultural Landscape Report* was an important component of that planning process. Over the years much has been written about the Common, but there has not been a detailed history documenting the details of its evolution since 1634, both of its landscape and its use, and outlining the significance of its many features. As a Boston and a National Historic Landmark, it is important that the history and integrity of the park's features be addressed in making decisions about park maintenance and capital projects. The story of its use and protection by civic leaders and citizen activists over the centuries challenges this generation of stewards to continue that cause today.

The full Cultural Landscape Report as well as a detailed chronology can be found on the Friends website, friendsofthepublicgarden.org. It documents the evolution of the Common over time from 1600 to today, providing a historical framework for the landscape and its use, preservation, and management.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study of Boston Common's history has brought into relief several important themes and principles that have been recurrent since the park's earliest years. These themes reflect the original purpose and pivotal role of the Boston Common throughout the centuries. They underscore the central place that the Common has held in Boston's community life, as well as the threats it has faced and the public battles to protect it.

The 50-acre Boston Common is a cultural icon that has been at the heart of Boston's economic, civic, and recreational life for over 380 years. Two quotes, a century apart, capture the role that the Boston Common has played in the popular imagination. The first is from the Introduction to Samuel Barber's *Boston Common – A Diary of Notable Events, Incidences, and Neighboring Occurrences* and reflects in part the reverence that the Common gained from years of occupation by British soldiers before the Revolutionary War. The second is an email from a Member of the Friends of the Public Garden, referring to the Friends concern about a proposal in 2015 by the group that was working to bring the Olympics to Boston in 2024, for construction of a 16,000-person beach volleyball stadium on the Common.

> *"Boston Common belongs to the world. In or around it took place events which link it with the history of government for and by the people in this country….As the years have progressed, interest in the Boston Common has increased year by year."*
>
> *Samuel Barber, 1914*

> *"The Common is not just a Boston park, it is a national treasure, and not just Bostonians are concerned. Please convey to the planners that the nation is watching what they do."*
>
> *Friends Member, Dayton, Ohio, 2015*

The Common physically evolved over the centuries, changing as the urban population grew around it and the concept of a park in the nineteenth century as pleasure ground influenced decisions to remove cows, add paths lined with trees, and smooth the Common's rough surfaces. Although its boundaries have changed slightly over time, at 50 acres the Common's size remains very nearly the same as the land purchased in 1634. While the topography has changed through the leveling of hills and filling of ponds, in large measure the park forms a rare link to Puritan Boston.

The People's Park and Advocacy on Its Behalf

The Common has legally belonged to the people of Boston since its purchase for no less than six shillings by each household in 1634. In 1640, it was voted that "henceforth there shall be no land granted eyther for houseplot or garden to any person out of the open ground or Common field…" This was confirmed in the City Charter in 1822.

There has been a long history of advocacy on behalf of the people's park. Over the centuries, this principle has been called upon whenever there was a proposal to privatize the Common or construct structures on park land, even temporary ones for public purposes.

Private sector involvement and advocacy was prevalent in the 19th century. In 1869 and later in 1877, proposals for buildings to be constructed on the parade ground were defeated by vocal and widespread public dissent. A 50,000-seat Coliseum was proposed to be constructed in the Common for the 1869 National Peace Jubilee, commemorating the end of the Civil War. After strong opposition from the public and civic leaders, it was built near present-day Copley Square.

Coliseum built near present-day Copley Square (Boston Public Library, Print Department)

In the 1890s, loud public outcry against constructing trolley tracks across the park gave rise to the nation's first subway. A dramatic moment of opposition was the storming of a State House hearing by a group of angry women led by activist Julia Ward Howe, with a petition signed by 1500 people.

In the late 1890s the destruction and subsequent restoration of the grounds from the subway construction gave rise to the Boston Common Society, a group of civic-minded citizens that would lobby for the Common's continued care.

Subway construction along Tremont Street (The Bostonian Society)

There have been times of apathy as well, particularly in the middle of the 20th century, and deteriorating park conditions as a result. This led to the formation in 1970 of the Friends of the Public Garden and renewed advocacy for the Common as well as the Garden and Mall.

In the 1970s, the Friends and other civic groups and advocates fought against Park Plaza, a massive development that would have cast damaging shadows over the Common and Garden. After years of battle, the development was defeated and a Shadow Law was enacted in 1990 to protect the Common.

The inclination to see the Common as a venue for large-scale public events, that threaten the health of the trees and turf, has required regular oversight as well as advocacy. The beach volleyball stadium proposal referred to above for Boston's 2024 Olympics bid was opposed by the Friends and others from the community. The proposal was withdrawn from the bid.

Perspective of 16,000-seat beach volleyball stadium. (Boston.com)

The Center Stage of Civic Life

Since the earliest days, the Common has been Boston's primary public space. It saw the widest variety of utilitarian and civic activities, from grazing cows and beating rugs to punishments and protests. Over the centuries, it has been a place to gather, to recreate, to celebrate, and to stroll. In the rapidly developing city, it has been sought after as a green oasis open to all.

Tens of thousands of people came to Boston on October 25, 1848 to celebrate the city's new public water system. The Frog Pond fountain's debut was the highlight of day. The Common has also been the community's major gathering place for protests as well as celebrations since its earliest years.

1848 Water Celebration. (Boston Public Library, Print Dept.)

1970s Vietnam War protest, Shaw Memorial. (Nick DeWolfe)

As new residential neighborhoods grew up around the Common in the 19th century, it became a center for recreation for the community. Sledding was popular then, as it still is today, and many structured additions to the Common have been in support of recreational use.

Sledding on Boston Common, c. 1870s (FOPG)

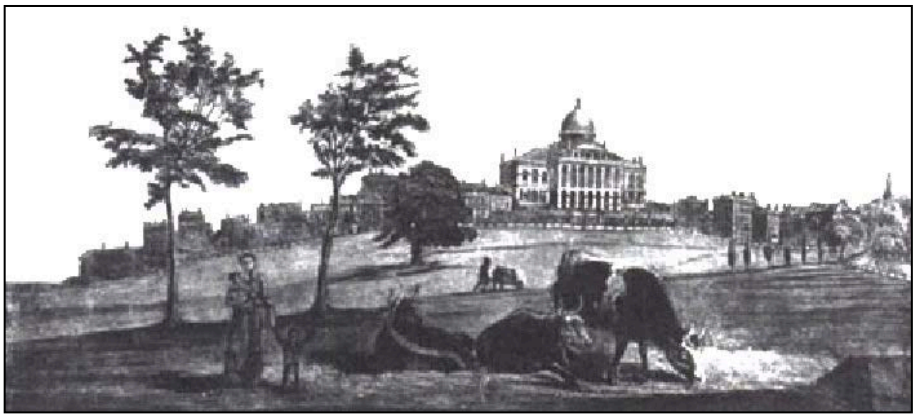
Given its central position both geographically and functionally, the Common has also served as a circulation space connecting neighborhoods and commercial centers, with paths created to accommodate passage through the park and around the perimeter. The first interior path, Railroad Mall, connected commuters from the then center of town to the railroad at Park Square. In 1889, 30,000 people a day used this Mall, which was reported in that year's Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Common and Public Grounds and based on an actual pedestrian count. Over time, the path system has been simplified, most notably in the eastern area of the park redesigned and formalized by landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff in the early 20th century.

Use, Overuse, and Management

While public access has been a legally protected right since the Common was established, at various times over the years limits were placed to prevent overuse and ensure sustainability of the resource.

While attention has ebbed and flowed, there are notable points over the centuries when the principle of balancing use of the Common with its care has been called upon to address the impacts of overuse or misuse. One constant from the beginnings of the settlement has been the concern about preserving the Common's trees and turf.

In 1646, Governor Winthrop restricted the number of milk cows to 70 to prevent overgrazing. These regulations were not enforced over time, and in 1823 Boston's second mayor Josiah Quincy had an ordinance passed to reinforce the restriction of one cow per owner.



1804 image of cows grazing on the Common (The Bostonian Society)

In the 18th century, the Selectmen regulated nearby construction, requiring that wooden fences be built to keep carts and horses from damaging the Common's turf.

In 1769, the Selectmen appointed a Committee to consider the best measures for "the preservation of the Common." British troops had been encamped on the Common for a year by then (soon to be seven more), and in addition to constructing earthworks and using the fencing for firewood, soldiers were horse racing around the Common on Sunday.

British soldiers on the Common (Boston Public Library, Print Dept.)

In the mid-19th century concern for the Common's trees, given the heavy use of the park, led to a tree inventory that was conducted in 1851.

The early 20th century saw renewed attention to the plight of the grounds, trees, and walks. The effort began with the subway construction of the 1890's but continued well into the late 1920s and saw soils amended and trees inventoried, pruned and relocated, along with drainage and walkway improvements. Landscape architects the Olmsted Brothers oversaw a multi-year restoration of the Common including an extensive soil improvement program adding new loam, compost, and lime to the existing soils, with three to four foot excavation in places.

1910 Soils work (Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)

The Common in the late 60s and early 70s was in dire condition. A 1972 study of the Common and Garden was commissioned by the city in response to public concerns about the parks' poor conditions, highlighted during the battle over the Park Plaza development. It documented the serious state of the trees, turf and infrastructure and the cost for renovation.

Boston Common in 1972 (Carol R. Johnson and Associates)

The Boston Common Management Plan of 1991, updated in 1996, was the next document and first comprehensive plan developed to address the deteriorated state of the Common, given its intensity of use, inadequate resources devoted to its care, and need to manage use by large-scale events.

Conclusions

Boston Common is the community's common living room and center stage. As a public space legally belonging to all the residents of Boston, it must continue to be an open, accessible, and welcoming place for all. At the same time, given its centrality in the life of Boston, the Common has needed the public to come to its aid when necessary to advocate against damaging uses, and for adequate care.

Brewer Fountain and Plaza, with State House in the background (David Rosen)

There have been many thoughtful plans with recommendations for improving the condition and management of the Common to balance use and care. There have also been successive inventories of the park's collection of trees over the centuries, out of concern for their well-being, and focus on soils and turf health.

The living landscape cannot sustain overuse or misuse, whether it be from cows or soldiers or special events. The balance between use and care has been reasserted over the centuries. Today, as the city grows around it and with that the pressures on the Common increase, this principle is all the more important to uphold.