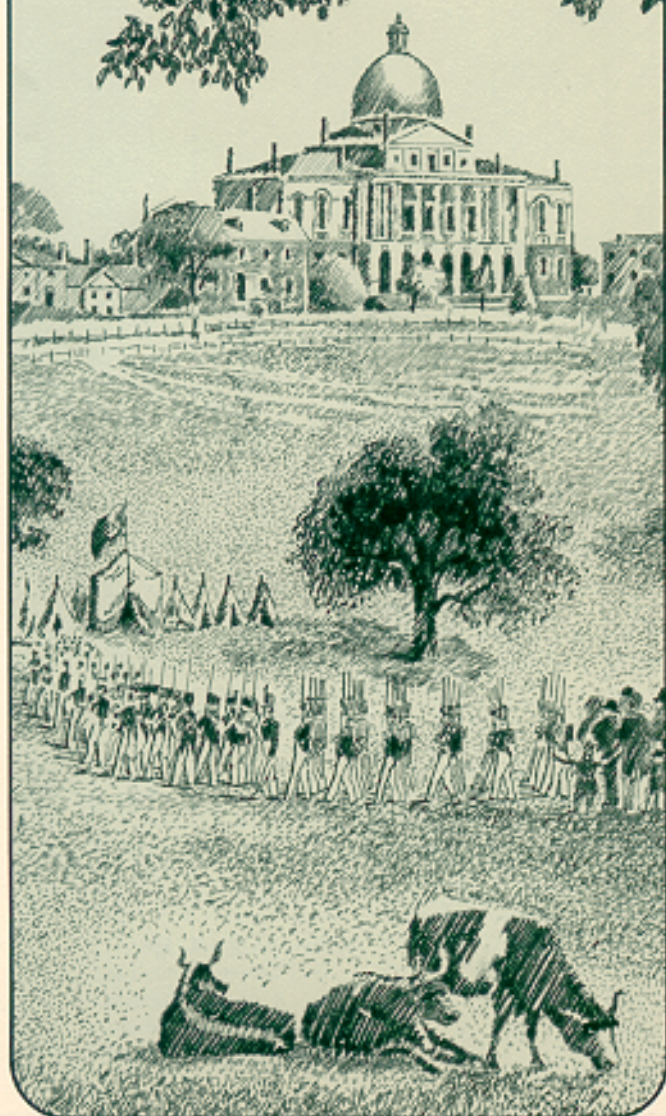


# The Boston Common

BOSTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS



# The Boston Common

## America's Oldest Park

THE LAND KNOWN AS THE BOSTON COMMON has belonged to the people of Boston since 1634, only four years after the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony arrived in the New World. Settling first in Charlestown, they soon moved across the bay to a rocky peninsula known to the Indians as Shawmut, which they renamed Boston after the Lincolnshire town from which some of them came. The peninsula was already occupied by a lone resident, a Church of England clergyman named William Blackstone (or Blaxton) who had informed the Puritans of an excellent spring on the site and invited them to join him.

Among other customs, the Puritans brought with them the English village institution of the common land or "common," a tract set aside from royal or manorial lands for the use of the townspeople. Thus, in 1634, when Blackstone decided to move on, the town purchased from him fifty acres of land, for which they assessed each householder a minimum of six shillings. Soon thereafter, according to later testimony, "the Town laid out a place for a trayning field, which ever since and now is used for that purpose & for the feeding of Cattell."

The common field was gently rolling scrubland, sloping gradually from Beacon Hill to the tidal marshes of Back Bay. The original water line roughly followed the present course of Charles Street. Like the rest of the peninsula, the Common was only lightly wooded, with perhaps three trees of notable size, including the legendary "Great Elm."

Early descriptions of the Common identify four separate hills and three ponds, of which only one hill (Flagstaff) and one pond (Frog) are now discernible. Today's Common, though undeniably altered, is nonetheless very nearly the same size and configuration as the tract purchased from Blackstone in 1634. It survives as a relic of an ancient landscape — all that is left of the rural aspect of seventeenth-century Boston.

In 1640 there were some men in Boston who advocated breaking up the Common and selling its lands. The town responded to this threat by ordering that

"... henceforth there shalbe noe land granted eyther for housplott or garden to any person out of the open ground or Comon Feild. . ." Again in 1646: "noe comon marish and Pastur Ground shall hereafter bye gifte or sayle, exchange, or otherwise, be counted unto property without consent of ye major part of ye inhabitants of ye towne." This commitment, repeated in the city charter of 1822, protects the Common to this day from sale or encroachment.

Thus established and secured, the Common has continued to be closely associated with the events of the town, the commonwealth, and the nation. Indeed, because of its extraordinary participation in history, it has been likened to an outdoor stage, upon which each generation has enacted the passing dramas of civic life. Upon this stage, each century provides its particular scenes:

The seventeenth-century Common, rough and rural, was well suited as a pasture. Contained by a rustic post-and-rail fence and watched over by a town-appointed keeper, the village herd of "70 milch kine" grazed peacefully. As a military training field, the Common needed slightly more attention. The higher and drier fields were roughly graded, and regulations imposed against littering with "stones outt of ye bordering lotts" or "any intralls of beast or fowles, or garbigd, or carion, or dead Dogs or Catts, or any other dead beast or stinkeing thing."

In an intolerant time, Puritan Boston distinguished itself by its harshness. The Common was a frequent site for hangings and other forms of execution. The condemned included murderers, thieves, deserters, pirates, "witches," Indians, and religious dissenters, especially Quakers.

From the Common troops departed for Indian and Colonial wars, including the attack on Louisburg in 1745. It became, too, a forum for speakers like the great evangelist George Whitefield, whose eloquence induced young Ben Franklin to part with all his savings. The story of the eighteenth-century Common, however, is dominated by the events surrounding the



Revolution. In 1766 a joyful celebration marked repeal of the Stamp Act; two years later, effigies were hung in protest against the odious tax on tea. British troops soon occupied the town, and for the next eight years the Common was almost constantly a place of encampment. By 1775 it was an entrenched camp with a garrison of 1,750 men, who burned the fencing for firewood and scarred the landscape with trenches and redoubts, remains of which would still be visible one hundred years later.

Troops set off from the Common for encounters at Lexington and Concord and later at Bunker Hill; casualties of those battles were reportedly buried here. Following the British evacuation in March 1776, General Washington reviewed his victorious troops on the Common. Here, too, in 1781 a huge bonfire blazed to celebrate the surrender at Yorktown.

Prior to the Revolution, Bostonians had taken some small steps to improve the Common. In 1780, John Hancock planted a row of elms on the Beacon Street bank opposite his house, the last of which survived until 1975. A double row of trees was also planted along Tremont Street, flanking a neatly graveled path. This was "The Mall," along which ladies and gentlemen of leisure would promenade "every afternoon, after drinking tea." It was the first and once the finest of the five malls that encircled the Common.

As Boston grew and prospered in a new nation, its inhabitants saw in their historic Common a precious heritage, which they now lavished with care and affection. In 1830 a municipal order banished the cows to outer pastures, all but completing the Common's conversion to pleasure ground and park. Six years later the entire space, a mile in perimeter, was enclosed with a handsome iron fence financed in part by public subscription. Outer malls were established or enhanced, interior paths straightened and planted with bordering rows of shade trees. The Frog Pond, once a mere mud hole, was curbed to create a miniature lake, to which was added in 1848 a splendid fountain with a jet of water 90 feet high.



In an age of optimism and public display, the nineteenth-century Common played host to an extraordinary chronicle of events, both serious and fanciful: receptions for famous visitors with military reviews, expositions, celebrations, and political conventions, parties on the Fourth of July, the appearance of an elephant in the Frog Pond, Indian dances, balloon ascensions, speakers of every persuasion, and always games and sports from early football to elaborate sledding contests. During the Civil War era the Common witnessed antislavery protests, recruitment rallies, tearful farewells as regiments mustered to depart for war, a wild victory celebration, and then a mass demonstration of grief at the death of President Lincoln.

With the enthusiasm for public art typical of the period, Bostonians adorned the Common with plaques and monuments of varying quality. The most notable was Augustus Saint Gaudens' Shaw/54th Regiment Memorial, widely considered the finest piece of public art in the city.

The Common in the twentieth century has continued to reflect the world around it. Malls have accommodated subways and garage; tennis courts, baseball fields, and a tot-lot have added recreational facilities; and more than ever it has been a scene of large events like Boston's tercentenary celebration of 1930, speeches by national figures such as Martin Luther King, the protest rallies of the 1960s, and in 1979 on the visit of Pope John Paul II the first papal mass in North America.

The extraordinary demands upon the Common have raised, indeed, important issues of space and maintenance. The Friends of the Public Garden and Common, a citizens group supporting public efforts, has worked since 1975 to address these needs. In 1986 Mayor Raymond Flynn made the care and preservation of this historic ground a goal of his administration. William B. Coughlin, Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, is carrying out the mayor's mandate with commitments to increased maintenance, critical repairs, and long-term planning.

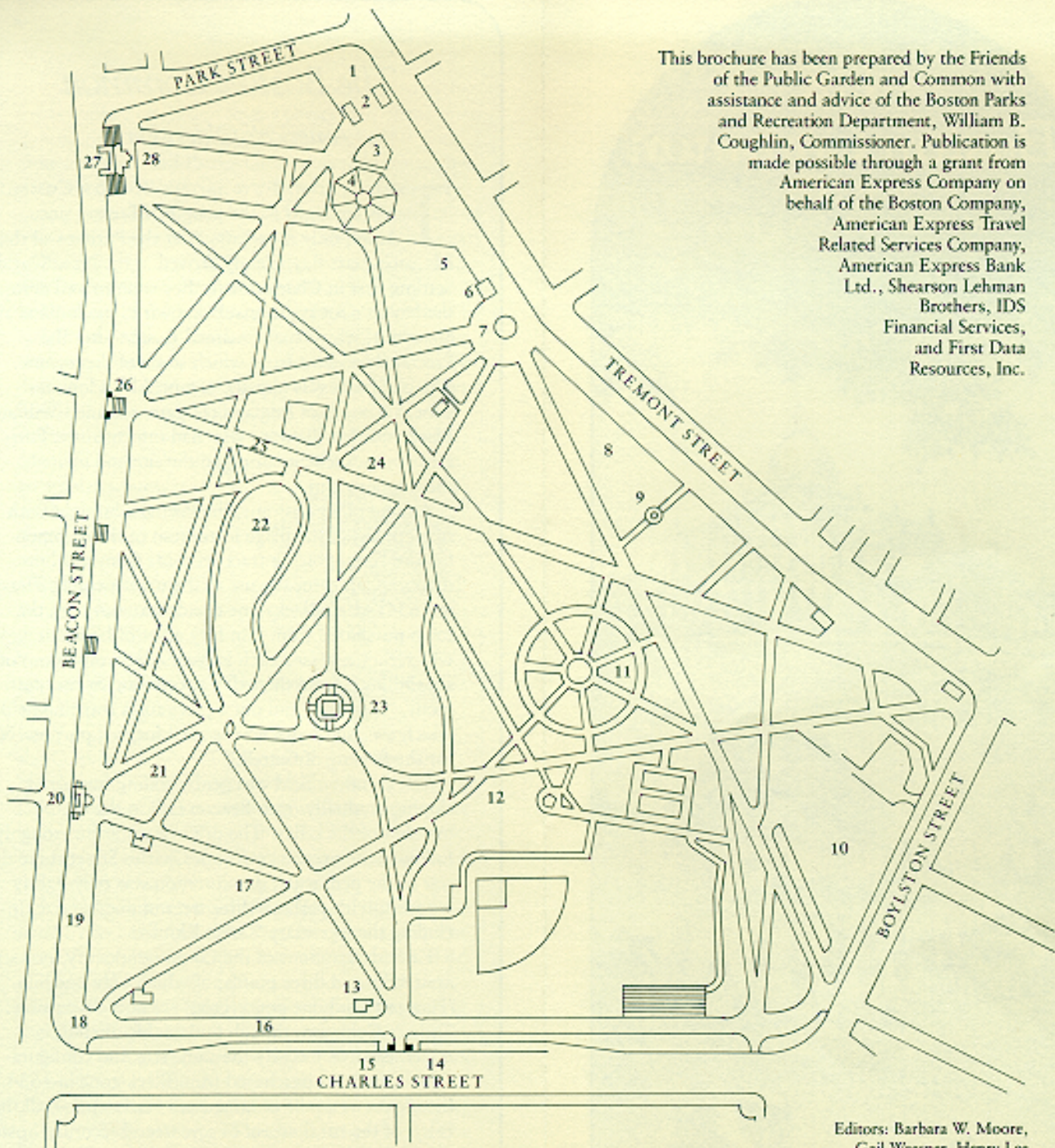
A visitor to the Common may find on a pleasant day an almost endless variety of activities. After more than 350 years, it remains a center stage of civic life, and a green oasis in the midst of a modern city.

## A Tour Around the Common

1. **Blackstone Memorial Tablet 1913**, by R. Clipston Sturgis, recalls the founding of the Common in 1634. The words of the inscription are taken from a 1684 deposition of four elderly men, among the last survivors of the first inhabitants of the town. For generations, this testimony has been cited as evidence that the lawful owners of the Common are the people of Boston.
2. **Park Street Subway 1897**; an entrance to oldest subway line in America.
3. **Lafayette Monument 1924**, by John F. Paramino. On the centenary of Lafayette's 1824 visit to the Common, the Tremont Street Mall was renamed in his honor. The original tree-lined mall was destroyed by subway construction in 1897.
4. **Brewer Fountain 1868**, by Paul Liénard; statues by Mathurin Moreau. One of several copies, this work was purchased by Boston merchant Gardner Brewer at the Paris Exposition of 1867 and given to the city the next year. The reclining figures at the base are of Poseidon and Amphitrite, Acis and Galatea.
5. **Commodore John Barry Monument 1949**, by John F. Paramino, honoring the man known as the "Father of the American Navy."
6. **Freedom Trail Information Center** Visitor service of the Greater Boston Convention and Tourist Bureau; open Monday through Saturday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
7. **Parkman Plaza 1960**; designed by Shurcliffe & Merrill. The statues representing Industry, Religion, and Learning are the work of Arcangelo Cascieri and Adio DiBiccari.
8. **Declaration of Independence Plaque 1925**; bas relief by John F. Paramino after a mural by John Trumbull in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington.
9. **Boston Massacre Memorial 1888**, by Robert Kraus. The bronze figure represents Revolution breaking the chains of tyranny. The bas relief depicting the events before the Old State House on March 5, 1770, features Crispus Attucks, the first to fall.
10. **Central Burying Ground 1756**. This area became part of the Common in 1839. The composer William Billings and the artist Gilbert Stuart are buried here.

11. **Parkman Bandstand 1912**, by Derby, Robinson, & Shepard, commemorating George F. Parkman (1823-1908) who bequeathed \$5 million for the care of the Common and other city parks. This is the site of Cow Pond (sometimes known as Horse Pond), which was filled in 1838, after the cows had left the Common.
12. **The Flagstaff 1837**. This unprepossessing pole, 37 feet high and fashioned from a single tree, has stood in the Common for 150 years, giving its name to Flagstaff Hill and moved to this location in 1866. This area is the site of "Smokers Circle," where gentlemen gathered when tobacco was prohibited elsewhere on the Common.
13. **Papal Mass Plaque, 1981**, by F. P. Davis Monumental Works, commemorates the 1979 visit of Pope John Paul II, when, despite a downpour, 400,000 crowded the Parade Ground and Flagstaff Hill to hear the papal mass.
14. **Fox Hill Plaque 1925**; attached to the southern pillar of the gate to Charles Street. This plaque marks the site of one of the most prominent features of the early Common. A gravelly bluff projecting westward into the bay, Fox Hill was almost an island at high tide. During the occupation of Boston, 1775-1776, the hill was fortified.
15. **Royal Navy Plaque 1945**; on the opposite pillar.
16. **MacArthur Mall 1824**; parallels the colonial shoreline. Originally the Charles Street Mall, it was renamed for General Douglas MacArthur.
17. **Carty Parade Ground 1852**; the remains of the original training field of the Colonial militia. For three centuries it has been the site of military displays and public celebrations. It was named in 1963 for Thomas J. Carty, Captain, Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company.
18. **Charles Street Gate 1836**; the sole survivor of the five gates that once marked the main entrances to the Common. They were connected by a decorative iron fence, most of which was removed during World War II for scrap iron. A portion of the old fence remains along the Beacon Street boundary.
19. **Beacon Street Mall 1815**; the best preserved of the five original malls. With its original fence and flanking rows of trees, this mall offers some of the flavor of the nineteenth-century Common.
20. **Founders Memorial 1930**; bas relief by John E. Paramino, frame by Charles A. Coolidge, commemorating the 300th anniversary of the founding of Boston. The memorial shows William Blackstone welcoming John Winthrop's party to Shawmut peninsula, as allegorical figures look on.
21. **Oneida Football Plaque**, erected in 1925 by members of the Oneida Football Club, 1862-1865. Designed by I. Howland Jones; bas relief by Joseph Coletti.
22. **Frog Pond**, curbed 1826. Sole survivor of three ponds on the Common, the Frog Pond was the scene in 1848 of an extravagant "Water Celebration" inaugurating the city's public water system.
23. **Soldiers and Sailors Monument 1877**; a Civil War memorial by Martin Milmore. The bas reliefs at the base of the monument present portraits of many Bostonians prominent in the Civil War period. The monument crowns Flagstaff (formerly Powder House) Hill, site of a British redoubt during the Revolution. From colonial to modern times this has been a favorite sledding hill for children.
24. **Great Elm Site** According to tradition, this giant elm was already of good size in the seventeenth century and used for hangings. Its destruction in a storm in 1876 occasioned widespread mourning.
25. **Oliver Wendell Holmes Path** The Holmes Path, once Long Path, was named for the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," whose tale of wooing and winning the schoolmistress made the Long Path famous.
26. **Guild Steps 1917**; in honor of Curtis Guild (1860-1915), three times governor of Massachusetts, and ambassador to Russia. The decorative iron railing was restored in 1978.
27. **Shaw Memorial 1897**; bronze relief by Augustus St. Gaudens, granite frame and terrace by Charles F. McKim. Between two majestic elms, "the finest work of art to come out of the Civil War" faces Beacon Street and Charles Bulfinch's 1798 State House. The sculpture immortalizes Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the volunteers of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry, the first free black regiment in the Union Army. Shaw and 32 of his men were killed leading the assault on Fort Wagner, S.C., on July 19, 1863. Restored by the Friends of the Public Garden and Common, 1984.
28. **Liberty Mall, 1826**. Originally the Park Street Mall, this walk was renamed Liberty Mall on October 27, 1917, in honor of "Our Soldiers and Sailors in the Great War."

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