

THE CHARLES RIVER ESPLANADE A FASCINATING HISTORY

The Charles River Esplanade, stretching three miles along the river's Boston shore, rose from mud flats to become a world-famous park attracting millions of visitors. No one waved a wand to achieve that transformation. The parkland evolved in stages, over decades, at great cost and effort. From the beginning, unsung heroes played a starring role in its creation.

The Esplanade's history goes back to 1892, when Frederick Law Olmsted designed Charlesbank, a park that was created on newly made land between what is now the Museum of Science and the Longfellow Bridge. Charlesbank is historically significant as the first public park in the United States to provide free open-air athletic facilities. It served thousands of men, women, and children. Altered many times, nothing remains of the original park designed by Olmsted except the belief in the importance of fresh air and healthy exercise for city dwellers.

A crucial step forward in the Esplanade's history came in 1893, when the visionary landscape architect Charles Eliot (1859-1897), along with Sylvester Baxter, founded the Metropolitan Park Commission, a state agency that acquired and protected the finest natural resources in the Boston area. In 1919 the park commission became the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), a multi-faceted agency that grew to embrace almost 20,000 acres, with ocean, river, and forest reservations, recreational facilities, and connecting parkways. The history of the MDC and the Esplanade are inextricable. As the agency grew to become an international model for regional park and recreational planning, the Esplanade became a crown jewel within the extensive system of green spaces and facilities. (In 2003 the MDC was merged into a new agency, the Department of Conservation and Recreation.)

Charles Eliot's vision of a riverside park along the Boston shore of the Charles was not fulfilled in his lifetime. It was Boston Brahmin James J. Storrow who was most responsible for the building of the dam that was essential to creating the parkland. Storrow's dream was "to create a broad basin for the joy and refreshment of the city's millions," and he used his influence and money to spearhead a movement to get the dam constructed.

In 1910 the dam was completed, and with it came the "Boston Embankment," a new strip of land extending from the Longfellow Bridge to Charlesgate. About one-hundred-feet wide in most places, the new land was made from mud and gravel dredged up from the river's bottom. The finished promenade of grass and walkways was popularly called "the Esplanade," a French word for a flat promenade along a shore. And Esplanade it's been ever since, no matter what the official name.

In the 1930s the Boston Embankment was widened and beautified, thanks to a \$1 million gift from Helen Storrow in memory of her husband, James. The state added \$2.3 million to Helen's gift, and the City of Boston donated \$400,000 to the project.

Boston landscape architect Arthur A. Shurcliff (1870-1957), a protégé of Charles Eliot, designed the new parkland, adding a formal lagoon between Exeter and Fairfield Streets (the Storrow Lagoon), three granite overlooks, a boat haven with breakwaters, and an enlarged Music Oval, the site of the Hatch Shell. More than 40 acres of new land was created, and in 1934, Shurcliff directed the planting of 1,200 trees and more than 12,000 shrubs. In 1936 the parkland between the Longfellow Bridge and the BU Bridge was formally dedicated as the Storrow Memorial Embankment.

A mere fifteen years after the Esplanade's completion – and five years after Helen Storrow's death – the plan for a highway between the Longfellow and BU Bridges, defeated in 1929 at Helen's insistence, was revived. Despite fierce opposition on many fronts, a powerful group of highway contractors and their Beacon Hill allies prevailed. The Legislature approved the highway – by one vote. In an ironic twist, the name that never caught on for the parkland became attached to a roadway that James and Helen Storrow would have hated.

The roadway's opponents did win a crucial victory: the Legislature voted money to replace the land lost to the road. Shurcliff, nearly 80 years old but still active, was again tapped as landscape architect. He and his son Sidney devised a brilliant and simple solution to replace the lost parkland. They lengthened the outer barrier of the existing lagoon, creating a new, undulating island connected to the original shoreline by footbridges, making a series of lagoons that extend to the Hatch Shell. The long stretch of lagoons and the natural-looking shoreline give it a been-here-forever look. On the western part of the Esplanade, between the Mass Avenue and BU Bridges, a softly curving shoreline replaced the straight one. More trees, shrubs, and grass were planted everywhere.

The Esplanade today has changed little from the 1950s redesign, but the saplings have grown into mature and magnificent trees, and new plantings have been added. The annual Fourth of July concert at the Hatch Shell (built in 1940, the third music shell on the site) got a new lease on life in 1974, when conductor Arthur Fiedler and Boston businessman David Mugar reinvented it as a spectacular event that is now the most widely known image of the Esplanade. Today millions of people enjoy the Esplanade every year.

The current boundaries of the Esplanade are understood today to be the Boston University Bridge at one end of the river and the Museum of Science bridge at the other. This was the portion along the Charles River that was part of Shurcliff's original 1930s design as the promenade was expanded, and was the portion that was subsequently redesigned when Storrow Drive was constructed and new parkland was made.

The width of the Esplanade is bounded on one side by the bank of the river and on the other side by Back Street. Back Street was constructed in the 1870s next to the massive granite seawall that marked the southern edge of the River when Back Bay was originally filled in. Most of the seawall still exists and marks the southern edge

of Storrow Drive, which was constructed as a parkway under the Massachusetts General Court Acts of 1949, Section 262. The portion of Storrow Drive that is between the Boston University and Museum of Science Bridges is therefore included within the boundaries of the Esplanade. The entirety of the Esplanade is owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts under the care, custody, and control of the Department of Conservation and Recreation

Designation of the Charles River Esplanade as a Boston Landmark will help preserve and enhance the park for future generations to enjoy. Designation will also recognize the great legacy of Charles Eliot and the metropolitan park system he created, James and Helen Storrow, and Arthur Shurcliff. As a Boston Landmark, this treasured parkland will endure and flourish for another hundred years.