

# The Landscape Architect's Guide to **BOSTON**

## Boston Public Garden

### History

In Colonial times, the area now encompassing the Garden was tidal marshland, sometimes known as Round Marsh, on the western edge of the venerable Common. In 1794 parts of the area were granted to ropemakers. The City repurchased this ropewalk property in 1824 and reserved it for public use.

**1821** The Mill Dam was built, extending Beacon Street from Charles Street to Brookline. Three years later, the exasperated citizens voted to keep the area public and began the process of filling it in.

**1837** The City Council received a petition from a private association of 17 Bostonian horticulturists headed by Horace Gray to establish a botanical garden. The Council promptly leased about 20 acres to the group, incorporated as "Proprietors of the Botanic Garden in Boston," and in 1838 the area was first designated as the Public Garden. Gray envisioned a botanic garden on the site similar to those in European cities and imported an English landscape gardener, John Cadness, to supervise the work of ornamenting the grounds.

Financial reversals forced the proprietors to return the Garden to city care in 1852, but their achievements provided inspiration for succeeding generations. No trace of the John Cadness garden remains.

**1859** It was agreed that the area between Charles and Arlington streets be devoted forever to public use, which was confirmed by an act of the Legislature. The city filled the remaining area and laid out its 24-four acres according to the landscape plan of Boston architect George F. Meacham, winner of a public competition that paid \$100.

Employing formal and picturesque elements, Meacham's plan included geometrical displays of flowerbeds, a central building on axis with an ornate bridge that straddled a pond, a children's playground, fountains, and a network of pedestrian paths. The plan was adapted by city engineer James Slade and included removing the central

building and replacing it with an equestrian statue of George Washington by Thomas Ball. The plan contained many features notable in today's Garden, including the serpentine pond and winding paths.

The 1860s brought many additional enhancements: four granite basins with fountains; the perimeter iron fence and gates; the bridge crossing the lagoon, designed by William G. Preston; the equestrian statue of George Washington by Thomas Ball; and the Ether Monument. In 1877 the Swan Boats, designed by Robert Paget, first appeared on the lagoon. By 1880 the Garden numbered 1,500 trees among its choice collection of plants, and each spring bedding plants provided ribbons of color along the principal paths.

**1897** Despite strenuous opposition, the Garden became the site of an "incline entrance" to America's first subway. Down came many of its oldest trees. When the subway was removed to Boylston Street in 1914, a strip of the Garden 40 feet wide went with it.

**1901** Flowerbeds made a colorful parterre around the Washington statue. Containers of tropical plants were used as accents and were wintered in the city greenhouses. Statuary had continued to arrive: Sumner, Cass, Channing, Hale, Phillips, and the Japanese lantern by 1915, Kosciuszko and the White Memorial in the 1920s. An ample staff kept the Garden in "almost perfect condition," in the words of Charles Francis Adams.

When the Garden began its serious decline is difficult to say. Through the 1950s and '60s, a downward cycle accelerated until the once-proud jewel of the city was almost beyond saving, its bridge unsafe, its fountains inoperable, its fencing gone or falling down, many trees diseased, its staff reduced, and its equipment so broken or obsolete that nearby residents offered rakes and hoses for maintenance. It was those conditions that led to the formation in 1970 of the Friends of the Public Garden with Henry Lee as President.

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The Friends and City working together brought about vital capital improvements in the Garden, most importantly the restoration in 1978 of the perimeter fencing and gates, dating from 1865, which again enclosed the Garden for the first time in 60 years. Improvements to the vegetation, sculpture, fountains, and other infrastructure followed. Over the years, through the partnership between the Friends and the City, the Garden was once again restored to its former glory.

**1987** The Friends installed the Duckling Sculpture by Nancy Schon, a great attraction for children and adults alike.

The Boston Public Garden was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 and became a National Historic Landmark in 1987.

#### Resources:

[City of Boston](#)

[The Friends of the Public Garden](#)

[The Cultural Landscape Foundation](#)