

The Trustees'
Work in Boston—Then and Now

Capital Improvement

BY VICTORIA ABBOTT RICCARDI

Ever since Charles Eliot founded The Trustees in Boston in 1891, the city has remained a vital area of interest for the organization. Rapid urban development back in Eliot's day, sparked the young conservationist's desire to create an organization that could preserve swaths of nature "as a valuable antidote to the poisonous struggling and excitement of city life." His landscape design work, both alone and eventually through the Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot office, resulted in many of the beautiful parks, concourses, and open spaces we see in Boston today.

And now, as Boston's building boom continues, particularly along the waterfront, The Trustees feels the same imperative to foster healthy refreshment, recreation, and a connection with the land through preservation within the capital. "The work Charles Eliot began so many years ago is still vitally important today," says Barbara Erickson,



President & CEO of The Trustees. "He formed the organization to preserve access to open space for those that live and work in Boston, and we have always believed that imperative would one day extend to places within the city limits."

THE EARLY YEARS: BOSTON & BEYOND

Some of Eliot's earliest endeavors, both as a landscape architect and founder of The Trustees, involved working with Boston's park commissions and committees to help them better understand how few open spaces Boston offered its residents, particularly in comparison to other major world cities, like London and Paris, as well as how little public access there was to nearby rivers, ponds, lakes, shores, and beaches. The result of Eliot's efforts was the creation of the Metropolitan Park Commission, the first regional park system in the United States, which within a mere twelve years of its establishment had protected nearly 10,000 acres of public open space and 26.3 miles of public parkway around Boston.

For the next several decades, The Trustees acquired a broad range of properties largely outside of Boston, mainly because that is where opportunities arose. These acquisitions ranged from islands and woodlands to

Trustees founder Charles Eliot's (left) earliest writings concerned areas in and around Boston where he saw the open landscape being rapidly eliminated, and those words still ring true today. Said Eliot, "The life history of humanity has proved nothing more clearly than that crowded populations, if they would live in health and happiness, must have space for air, for light, for exercise, for rest, and for the enjoyment of that peaceful beauty of nature which...is so wonderfully refreshing to the tired souls of townspeople."

hilltops and historic homes. The Trustees also grew as an organization. By 1967, when Gordon Abbott Jr. became its Director, the Annual Report listed The Trustees as having 44 reservations, an expanding staff, scores of volunteers, and a mission to establish a new management system and future direction for the organization, which had all but doubled its endowment due to a recent gift.

1960S-90S: COLLABORATION & CONSERVATION
The Trustees became involved with Boston again in 1968 when it hosted a Parkland

Conference to share the results of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's open space and recreation study of Boston Harbor and the Boston Basin's three major rivers: the Charles, Mystic, and Neponset. One of the most important results of the conference was the establishment of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Open Space and Outdoor Recreation, whose members included many affiliated with The Trustees, including Abbott. The mission of the Commission, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, was

to review the Commonwealth's open space and recreation needs and make recommendations to then Governor Francis W. Sargent.

The review took one year, but yielded many valuable and landmark recommendations, including public ownership and control of the thirty-four islands of Boston Harbor. In the 1970s, the islands became Boston Harbor Island State Park and in 1996, they were designated as a National Park unit, managed by a partnership of member organizations, including The Trustees. Another recommenda-



IMAGE MADE AVAILABLE BY GEOGRAPHICUS RARE ANTIQUE MAPS, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

A chromolithograph map (ca. 1899) provide's a "Bird's Eye View of Boston Harbor," and shows its many islands, which would eventually all be brought into public ownership at the recommendation of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Open Space and Outdoor Recreation in 1969. Trustees staff and volunteer leaders were well represented and active participants in the work of the Commission.

tion to protect agricultural land would lead to the creation of the Agriculture Preservation Restriction (APR) that has provided tax relief to struggling farmers wishing to continue to maintain their family farms to this day. Many of the Commission's remaining recommendations focused on protecting landscapes in urban areas throughout the state—over time most of those recommendations also came to fruition.

THE 2000S: NEW CONNECTIONS

It wasn't until the 2000s that The Trustees became active in Boston again, this time through an affiliation with the Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN), which was founded in 1977 to help communities preserve and improve urban spaces through

the development of Wilds, Greenways, and community gardens. It was just the kind of work that aligned with The Trustees' ongoing preservation efforts in urban areas outside Boston. "We'd been doing conservation work in gateway cities, like Leominster, Fitchburg, and Fall River," says Jocelyn Forbush, Chief of Operations and Programs for The Trustees, "but looking for a way to work in Boston. When we met the folks at BNAN, we knew we wanted to partner with them." Thus, in 2006 The Trustees became affiliated with BNAN and then the two merged in 2014. To date, The Trustees and BNAN have 56 community gardens across eight Boston neighborhoods and The Trustees helps coordinate activities related to all of the city's more than 200

community gardens.

With a strong toehold now in the city, The Trustees began to investigate other ways they could serve the city and foster community engagement. When the concept of Boston Public Market—a 100-percent locally-sourced food market (and the only one in the country)—became a reality in 2011, The Trustees jumped at the opportunity to become a founding partner and the lead programming partner, since connecting people to locally-grown food is central to the organization's mission.

When the market opened in 2015, The Trustees had the two presences that it still maintains. "First, we have a vendor booth for Appleton Farms, where we also represent the

Massachusetts Cheese Guild," says Forbush. "Then, we run The KITCHEN, presenting nutrition-based educational and social programs to showcase local products and purveyors that highlight the food's link to the land."

TODAY: THE WATERFRONT CHALLENGE

Concurrent with that effort, The Trustees recognized the immense development throughout Boston's waterfront area was happening without consideration of the need for open space, and began to look for land preservation opportunities along the fragile harborfront. The Trustees has long been involved in protecting vulnerable coastal areas, and became concerned with the impact of sea level rise and storm impacts on Boston's waterfront. "The way we see it," says Nick Black, Managing Director of The Trustees' Boston Waterfront Initiative, "Boston's waterfront is a critically important place to be focusing our energy as a conservation organization. Its health impacts the largest population in New England and the time for action is now, before the opportunity to preserve open space is lost forever."

So, in the last two years, The Trustees has been working to determine what part of the Boston waterfront it wanted to help preserve, using four guiding principles. "First, we want the site to eventually include a world-class design element, as a draw for residents and visitors around the world," says Black. "Next, we are focused on elements of inclusion and equality, meaning the site will eventually be 'a place for all.' It's also important to improve sustainability and resiliency along the waterfront, helping protect the low-lying, once tide-filled city. Finally, there is the financial feasibility of developing such a place as this. Much of The Trustees' work to date has been based on gifts of existing greenspace with the financial support to maintain them. If the space in Boston doesn't already exist, we have to create it and be able to maintain it in perpetuity."

To date, the organization has found several regions of interest around Boston's harborfront, including sites in East Boston and the South Boston waterfront. And, it is not working alone. Several nonprofits are supporting its efforts, including the Barr Foundation, which along with many generous donors has



supported The Trustees' exploration with a series of planning grants. The City of Boston also supports The Trustees' efforts; in fact, in 2016, Mayor Marty Walsh released *Climate Ready Boston*, a report outlining the city's ongoing initiative to address climate change, particularly as it effects sea level rise and coastal flooding in vulnerable neighborhoods around East Boston and Charlestown.

"Right now, we're focused on securing a site that will become a designed and activated space," says Black, who notes the scope and splash of the project is intended to be along the lines of Chicago's Millennium Park, New York's Brooklyn Bridge Park, and Waterfront Toronto. "Once the site is secured, we're going to engage with communities to determine the best use of the space, with an eye towards recreational, educational, and historical programs and activities." The idea, Black further explains, is to connect the greenspace to the harbor through natural park edges with coastal landscapes, like rocky shorelines and salt marsh. These natural formations will encourage kids to engage with the space through play, whether climbing amongst tide pools or playing hide-and-seek among the greenery. Programs and activities will engage both young and old, such as sharing information about the ecology of the coastline and the area's maritime history, particularly around the harbor piers, which used to be the backbone of the Northeast's shipping industry. Even though none of its 116 reservations are within the city itself, The Trustees has



Early renderings for the types of open space designs envisioned for the city's harborfront areas, as part of the Trustees' recently launched Boston Waterfront Initiative.

been closely linked to Boston, and concerned for the wellbeing of its people, throughout the organization's nearly 127-year history. As the current development boom overwhelms the waterfront, it seems only fitting that The Trustees—the state's largest conservation and preservation organization—is at the forefront of the effort to protect critically needed future open space in the state's largest and most populous city. "Our work on this Initiative is a critical and actionable solution that extends the mission for which we were founded," says Erickson, "and given the impacts of sea level rise and more frequent flooding from destructive storms, it is one we can no longer afford to ignore."

Victoria Abbott Riccardi is a freelance travel, culture, and food writer, and author of *Untangling My Chopsticks: A Culinary Sojourn in Japan (Broadway) from Newton.*

RENDERINGS COURTESY OF MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH ASSOCIATES.