

Selectman Gilbert Hoy
Town Hall, 333 Washington St.
Brookline, MA 02445

Dear Mr. Hoy:

I would like to provide a statement of my understanding of the significance of the Canton Street Footbridge in Olmsted's plan for the linear park that he planned for the Muddy River section of the Emerald Necklace.

Olmsted wished the series of parks that he created running the twelve miles from Charlesbank to Marine Park in South Boston to provide a variety of recreational opportunities. At the same time the system of parks was to be a unifier of the new city, whose recent expansion following the Civil War had brought within its borders a number of villages that had been proudly independent since the seventeenth century. Olmsted also looked on the "Emerald Necklace" as a metropolitan resource. He looked forward to cordial collaboration between the Town of Brookline and the City of Boston to realize along the Muddy River the full recreational and landscape potential of the stream valley, for the benefit of citizens of both municipalities. As he said in his first report, "The scheme offers hardly less advantage to Brookline than to Boston, and a plan of equitable co-operation in carrying it out is probably feasible." [Frederick Law Olmsted, "Suggestions for the Improvement of Muddy River" (December 1880)]

For the promise of this remarkable system to be realized, however, access was necessary. This access was particularly difficult for the citizens of Brookline living near the northern end of the Muddy River section. The Boston & Albany Railroad tracks created a barrier between Brookline residences and the park from Brookline Avenue to Netherlands Road. To allay this difficulty, Olmsted in his first published plan (1881) provided one pedestrian entrance to the park between Brookline Avenue and Longwood Avenue, the longest stretch where the railroad tracks blocked access. This entrance was at Carlton Street. Likewise, in that same half-mile section of the park on the Boston side he provided one pedestrian entrance--at Appleton Place (now Short Street) extended, near the present site of the Winsor School on the Riverway. Both entrance points were approximately in the middle of the long inaccessible section of the park. No bridge across the B&A tracks at Carlton Street is shown on the plan of 1881, the pedestrian crossing apparently being at grade. [see "General Plan for the Sanitary Improvement of Muddy River and for Completing a Continuous Promenade between Boston Common and Jamaica Pond," F.L. Olmsted, Landscape Architect (1881)].

Olmsted drew up final grading and planting plans for this section of the Muddy River in 1890-92 and published a new lithograph of the whole area between the Fens and Jamaica Pond in 1892. The new plan showed three pedestrian entrances on the Brookline side between Brookline Avenue and Longwood Avenue. One was near the intersection of the B&A tracks and newly constructed Audubon Road (now Park Drive),

and another was a footbridge over the B&A tracks from Chapel Street near the end of Hawes Street and close to the Longwood Station of the B&A Railroad. The third access point was a footbridge over the tracks at the end of Canton Street.

In this plan, Olmsted carefully integrated the Carlton Street entrance into the circulation system and landscape of the Muddy River recreation ground that he was designing. A separate path curved away from the main path to meet the footbridge, and a mass of low shrubs in the 150-foot-long crescent between the two paths provided a dense, green foreground over which to view the river at its widest point. The two islands that Olmsted created there framed the vista. A schematic plan (no. 927-95, of March 7, 1892) and two planting plans (no. 927-101 of April 9, 1892, and no. 930-61A of Feb. 7, 1893), indicate the layering and precise species of plants to be used in creating this landscape.

There were only two other pedestrian entrances to the park between the Back Bay Fens and Jamaica Pond that received the same distinctive attention to design that Olmsted gave to the Carlton Street footbridge entrance. One is also in Brookline, at the Allerton Overlook at Leverett Pond; the other is the entrance on the Boston side previously referred to, 250 yards downstream from Longwood Bridge, with its stone overlook shelter that provides views across the same wide, island section of the river as does the Canton Street footbridge. Recent extensive renovation programs have greatly improved the appearance and usefulness of both of these entrances. [See City of Boston, Park Department, "Plan of the Parkway Between Muddy River Gate House and Jamaica Park," F.L. Olmsted and Co. Landscape Architects (1892)]

Clearly, the Canton Street entrance to the Muddy River park in its present condition is a crucial "missing link" in the Emerald Necklace, a feature that Olmsted carefully designed to provide both convenient access and landscape amenity for many potential users of his park.

Charles E. Beveridge
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