



Muddy River Restoration Project

The Maintenance and Management Oversight Committee (MMOC) is the independent citizen-led oversight body of the Muddy River Restoration Project.

MUDDY RIVER SYMPOSIUM KEYNOTE PANEL PRESENTATION

APRIL 25, 2007
WHEELLOCK COLLEGE

My role today is to share with you the extraordinary history of what many of you know as the Emerald Necklace Environmental Improvements Master Plan and Phase 1 Muddy River Flood Control, Water Quality, Habitat Enhancement and Historic Preservation Project—the oft-mentioned nearly ninety-two-million dollar reclamation and restoration of your front yards, your neighborhood parks.

Our goal today is to add each of you to our number as advocates for the Muddy River Parks!

Under my official Executive Office of Energy and Environmental hat, the one that describes me as the Executive Director of the Office of Public Private Partnerships, is the lining of that hat which says “park advocate, park activist, open space advocate”...because once a park advocate, always a park advocate!

In the 19th century, and now, public parks represent Democracy in Dirt. They are, perhaps, the last resource in our country which belongs to everyone. They are held in trust by public agencies but they belong, in truth, to the public. No exceptions. Everybody.

Between 1878 and 1895, Frederick Law Olmsted, John Charles Olmsted and Charles Eliot and their firm, working out of their new offices (called “Fairsted”) in Brookline, created one of the world's most famous public works projects which FLO considered “an essential park of his legacy to the nation” (EN MP. p.27). During their design, in 1892, FLO wrote to his partners, “Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work... I would have you decline any business that would stand in the way of doing the best for Boston all the time...”

Given that extraordinary beginning: the civic pride and generosity of citizens who purchased and donated the land and the visionary talent which solved the Muddy River drainage problem and shaped the landscape which came to be known as "the Emerald Necklace," you might find the words of FLO's biographer, Laura Wood Roper, published in 1973, puzzling, and indeed, appalling:

"America's great pioneer landscape architect, Olmsted during his own long day was recognized as a prophet by a few and held in simple gratitude by multitudes. At his death, he was praised from one end of the nation to the other. Within a quarter of a century he was half forgotten, his name became a feature of footnotes, and his great landscape works were let lapse toward ruin or, worse, cobbled and botched."

It was the passage of the Historic Preservation Act, the Wetlands Protection Act and the first Earth Day, a full century after the creation of our park system that provided the catalyst for action toward rehabilitation and restoration. And, it came from some interesting directions: from those who taught and learned about American history and literature, who read about Frederick Law Olmsted as a farmer, as a journalist and writer on slavery in the South, as the Winner of the Competition to design Central Park in NYC, his work with the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War; it came from those who were curious about the science of water quality, from grassroots preservationists and landscape architects and environmentalists and park users....including dog walkers....

I was a Simmons College Continuing Education Student between 1975 and 1978, completing an BA in English literature, interrupted by marriage and family and I had a neighbor who lived across the road from a park called Leverett Pond. We both sat on the Board of Directors of our neighborhood association, The High Street Hill Association and we both had small children and dogs and we thought the park in our neighborhood was a mess!

At about that same time another neighbor who was a student at the Radcliffe Seminars Landscape Design Program was taking a course in historic landscapes and told us that our park was a "jewel" in the Emerald Necklace. It was designed by the same man who designed Central Park in NYC. We called the private landscape architect who, at the time, was the last owner of the Olmsted Offices in Brookline and took ourselves over there to look at the original plans for our park and discovered that our tawdry, rundown, poorly maintained park was indeed a link in the Emerald Necklace and we began to make phone calls to Brookline and Boston parks departments. We further discovered that there was already a Franklin Park Coalition and a Friends of the Muddy River, dealing with the same issues we were confronting: public funds being spent exclusively on areas of active recreation, on tennis courts and swimming pools and hockey rinks and football, baseball and soccer fields but absolutely no funds directed to passive recreational spaces. No money for walking paths, no money for tree pruning, no money for historic landscape and historic structure and bridge rehabilitation. In 1978 we established The Friends of Leverett Pond, created a town-wide celebration on the banks of

the pond with music, clothesline art show, wandering artists and musicians, funny boat races (who knew how polluted our pond really was!), walking tours by the town Conservation and Parks commissions, horticulturalists and preservationists. We showed the restoration plans created as a class project by the RSLDP to appointed and elected officials at Town Hall. We encouraged, cajoled, educated, and developed partnership relationships with our Conservation, Historical, and Parks commissions, as well as our wonderful local newspaper editor.

THEN , in the Fall of 1979 came a call from Buffalo, NY where an Erie County legislator who was fighting the building of a new school in her Olmsted park had put two interns on her Watts lines using "the Beveridge list" put together by an American History professor working on a project out of Johns Hopkins and the Library of Congress on the Olmsted Papers Project, calling all the places where the Olmsted firm had designed parks, finding out if there were park officials or advocates who might be interested in meeting one another and sharing concerns and challenges they faced in protecting their parks from development and attempting to secure funds for historic landscape restoration.

Hosted to home stays by the Buffalo Junior League and League of Women Voters arranged by the local legislators, nearly 20 hardy souls from NYC, Seattle, Detroit, Essex County New Jersey, Brookline, Chicago, and Atlanta met in the deep mid-winter and over a three-day weekend we created The National Association for Olmsted Parks to be headquartered in NYC.

Having not a clue as to what I was getting into, I volunteered to be the Conference Coordinator for what the small group in Buffalo wanted to be a larger gathering in April of 1981. I thought it would be a good way to focus attention on our local Olmsted Parks....and in April of 1981 after nearly a year of grass roots organizing, connecting to the Mayor of Boston Kevin White, the Board of Selectmen in Brookline, the HGSD, our local Steering Committee made up of leaders of environmental, conservation, and preservation organizations hosted a gathering of 450 people from all over the country. We spent three days working together, established the Massachusetts Association for Olmsted Parks as the first statewide affiliate of The National Association for Olmsted Parks and participated in the dedication of Frederick Law Olmsted's home and offices in Brookline as the FLONHS to be run by the National Park Service.

I have brought copies of the 20th Anniversary event called *CELEBRATE THE LEGACY: 20 Years of Landscape Preservation in Massachusetts*, with its timeline of action at the local, state, and national levels during those twenty years beginning in 1981 so I will not go over it in detail, but I will tell you as a spur to the action I hope that you will take on behalf of the Muddy River, that it was the

educated and informed advocacy of CITIZENS and their commitment to bring public agencies to an understanding of their responsibility for this unique resource which led to the project now underway.

It was the work of the NAOP and MAOP in 1982 which initiated the public private partnership funding for *Olmsted in Massachusetts: The Public Legacy, A Report of the Inventory Committee of the Massachusetts Association for Olmsted Parks*. This publication was assisted by grants and contributions from the Beacon Hill Garden Club to Radcliffe Seminars, the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service through the Massachusetts Historical Commission, Hubbard Educational Trust, Chestnut Hill Garden Club, Worcester Garden Club and Lynne T. Brickley. The publication is a comprehensive gathering of information on the history, design, and current status of parks planned by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., his sons, and successors in thirty-seven states. Its purpose is to provide a database for evaluating the Olmsted Park legacy in Massachusetts and to initiate community interest and support for historic urban space preservation, revitalization, and restoration.

The Mass Inventory was a collaborative effort involving the Radcliffe Seminars Landscape Design Program, the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Boston University Preservation Studies Program, the University of Mass. at Amherst, and the Rhode Island School of Design. This project provided local activists with the materials to share with their legislators and, all politics being local, that led to the creation of the 32-million-dollar Olmsted Historic Landscape Preservation Program in the Mass. Department of Environmental Management, funded by the 1984 and 1987 Open Space Bond Bills supported by Governor Michael Dukakis in his second term and by the Massachusetts Great and General Court. The program funded 12 parks in eight cities and resulted in preservation Master Plans which continue to guide the work of rehabilitation and restoration in the Emerald Necklace and provide the foundation for the current projects permitting. And, of course, it was the investment in the original DEM program which brought the Commonwealth into a relationship with the Emerald Necklace, owned not by the Commonwealth but by two municipalities, Boston and Brookline. It was the process of the Master Planning with the DEM, the municipalities and the Advisory Committees that were REQUIRED to be established as a critical component of the program, illuminating the Olmsted legacy in Massachusetts and convincing sequential succeeding Governors and Secretaries of Environmental Affairs and members of the Mass. legislature that such a legacy was the responsibility not only of the municipal land management stewards but of the federal and state governments, given Frederick Law Olmsted's role in the designing of the built environment in America.