

LEFT: Olmsted began work in the Back Bay Fens by dredging, or deepening, the waterway.
BELOW: Today, it's an attractive park.



animal life was dying. So Olmsted's first jobs were to build intersecting sewers, which managed water flow and kept the water clean, and find plants that could withstand both saltwater spray from the Atlantic Ocean and icy winter winds.

Olmsted's firm labored for years to accomplish his vision. In 1893, 15 years after he started the project, Olmsted wrote to his partners, "Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work. . . . [D]ecline any business that would stand in the way of doing the best for Boston all the time." When workers finally finished in 1895, they had added six new parks. Linked with the city's original three (see the sidebar on page 31) along a meandering route

nearly seven miles long, they form "the Emerald Necklace."

SIX JEWELS

After cleaning up the **Back Bay Fens**, Olmsted planted salt-tolerant grasses in tidal areas and winter-hardy pine and spruce trees on the banks. He built gatehouses to control tides and arched bridges and paths for pedestrians and horses.

Olmsted rerouted Muddy River, widening it in places to form ponds. Along the banks of the ponds, he established more than 100,000 plants that looked so natural that visitors thought the area remained wild. This twisting ribbon of greenery, water, walks, and roads is called the **Riverway**.

**What a concept!
Linking multiple
parks together!**





LEFT: Arnold Arboretum remains both a place to learn about plants and relax in a natural setting. ABOVE: A smaller Franklin Park today still offers urban dwellers a refreshing outdoor retreat.

For **Olmsted Park**, in suburban Brookline, the landscape architect designed a chain of ponds, coves, groves, and meadows. To draw nesting birds, Olmsted built islands in Leverett Pond. He hoped to add a series of fresh water “natural history pools,” complete with fresh water animals. One animal considered for the pools was a hippopotamus. But lack of money and complicated negotiations with city officials often hampered Olmsted’s work, and the pools were filled in.

Olmsted described **Jamaica Pond**, formed by retreating glaciers, as “a natural sheet of water with quiet graceful shores.” Fed by natural springs, this 50-foot-deep *kettlehole* is the largest and purest body of water in Boston and was the city’s major source of drinking water and ice. Visitors also fished, boated, and skated there. Since it was naturally perfect, Olmsted added little

other than a 1.5-mile path around the pond’s perimeter.

Upon his death in 1842, Benjamin Bussey, a prominent Boston merchant, donated more than 200 acres of land west of Jamaica Pond to Harvard College to encourage the study of agriculture and horticulture. In 1872, money from the will of James Arnold, a New Bedford businessman, was combined with Bussey’s gift to form **Arnold Arboretum**. It would be a place where students could study “indigenous or exotic” trees, including a giant sequoia, one of the biggest living organisms on Earth. Harvard turned the property over to the city in exchange for the right to use it. Olmsted and the first director of Arnold Arboretum, Charles Sprague Sargent, collaborated on its design. Sargent chose and sited rhododendrons, maples, and crabapples—all arranged in scientific order by family, genus, and

A **kettlehole** is a depression left by glacial drift that is formed by the melting of a large, isolated block of glacial ice.

species. Olmsted planned roads and made sure the plantings were pleasing to both scientists and people who simply wished to admire the collection.

With more than 500 acres, the largest site in the Emerald Necklace is **Franklin Park**, named for Benjamin Franklin, who was born in the city. In 1884, Olmsted planned this space to be a “restful, soothing, and refreshing” retreat for city dwellers. He cultivated native plants, including a 200-acre oak tree wilderness. Instead of lawnmowers, sheep trimmed the grass in the meadows and in the Playstead, a recreational area. Olmsted wanted only farm animals in the zoo.

THE VIEW TODAY

Of the six parks, Arnold Arboretum is the least changed. People hike to Peters Hill, the highest point in the necklace. Every May, thousands of visitors admire 180 varieties of fragrant lilacs on Lilac Sunday, the one day that picnicking is allowed.

Likewise, the sight of children in Halloween costumes carrying lanterns

and parading around Jamaica Pond in October would delight Olmsted. A boathouse and bandstand were added 100 years ago, and residents and dogs sometimes sneak a swim.

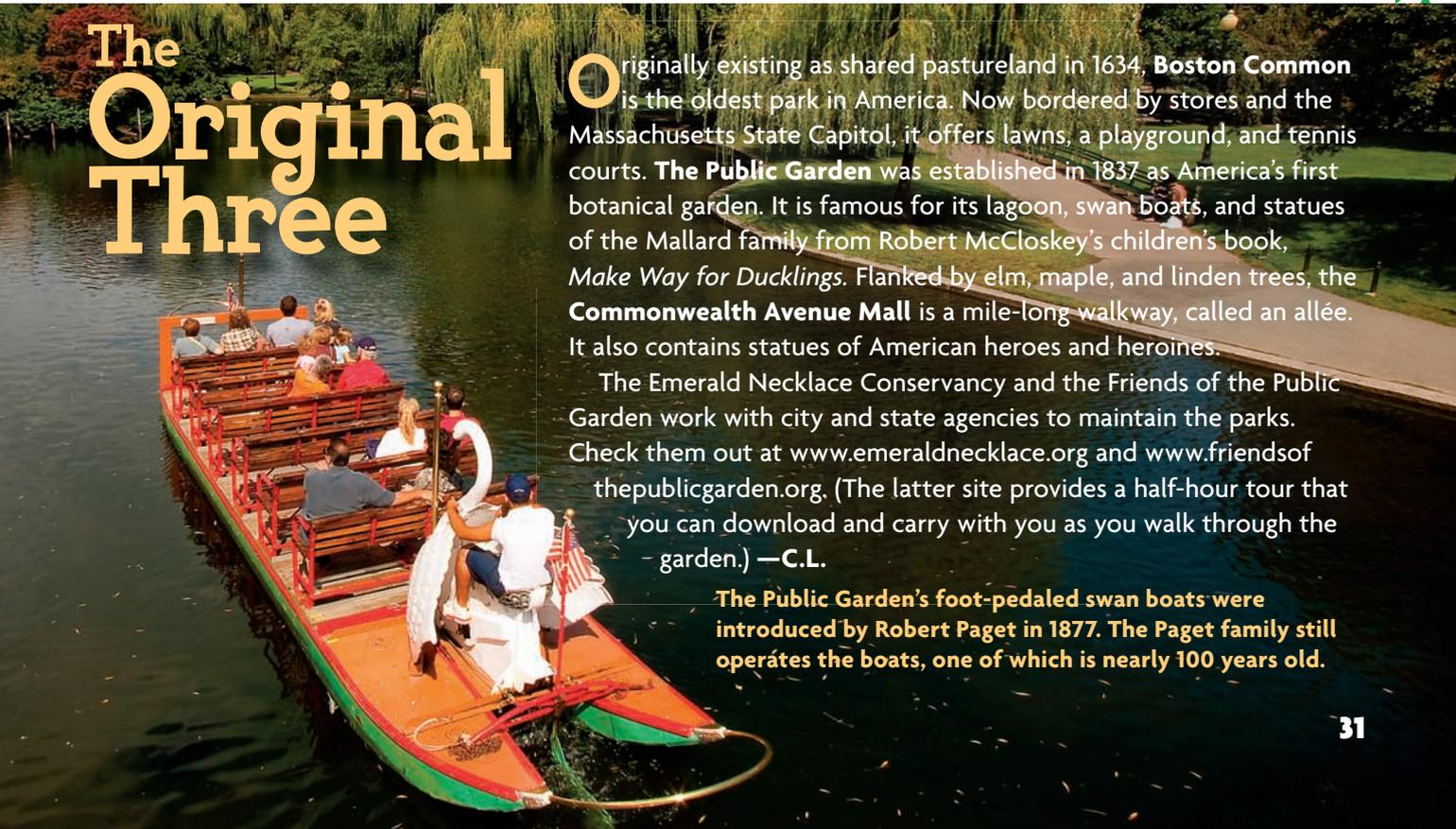
Olmsted would barely recognize Franklin Park. Surrounded by the city, it has shrunk, and its zoo houses lemurs and gorillas. But the layout retains the mix of open space and forest that Olmsted designed, inviting soccer players, hikers, and picnickers.

A busy thoroughfare now borders the Riverway. Most changed is the Back Bay Fens, which is no longer a salt marsh. A dam built on the Charles River in 1910 turned the water all fresh. The Fens now sits among museums and bustling colleges and is home to community vegetable gardens. It still leads to the three original parks, drawing strollers, skaters, and children who love ducklings. Few know how much planning went into these “natural” spaces! 

Cynthia Levinson lives across the street from Muddy River and likes to walk around Jamaica Pond.



FAST FACT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
MANAGES THE ARNOLD
ARBORETUM UNDER A
1,000-YEAR CONTRACT,
WHICH WILL END . . .
IN 870 YEARS!



The Original Three

Originally existing as shared pastureland in 1634, **Boston Common** is the oldest park in America. Now bordered by stores and the Massachusetts State Capitol, it offers lawns, a playground, and tennis courts. **The Public Garden** was established in 1837 as America’s first botanical garden. It is famous for its lagoon, swan boats, and statues of the Mallard family from Robert McCloskey’s children’s book, *Make Way for Ducklings*. Flanked by elm, maple, and linden trees, the **Commonwealth Avenue Mall** is a mile-long walkway, called an allée. It also contains statues of American heroes and heroines.

The Emerald Necklace Conservancy and the Friends of the Public Garden work with city and state agencies to maintain the parks. Check them out at www.emeraldnecklace.org and www.friendsofthepublicgarden.org. (The latter site provides a half-hour tour that you can download and carry with you as you walk through the garden.) —C.L.

The Public Garden’s foot-pedaled swan boats were introduced by Robert Paget in 1877. The Paget family still operates the boats, one of which is nearly 100 years old.