

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*

Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Boston Common

and or common

2. Location

street & number Beacon, Park, Tremont, Boylston, and Charles Streets not for publication

city, town Boston vicinity of

state Massachusetts code 025 county Suffolk code 025

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name City of Boston

street & number City Hall

city, town Boston vicinity of state Massachusetts

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Suffolk County Registry of Deeds

street & number Pemberton Square

city, town Boston state Massachusetts

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Boston Landmarks Commission Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1969 federal state county local

depository for survey records Boston Landmarks Commission, City Hall

city, town Boston state Massachusetts

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

SUMMARY¹

Boston Common comprises 50 acres of open space in the heart of the city. When the Common was established in 1634, it stood at the west edge of town. Beyond present Charles Street were tidal marshlands. Over three and a half centuries, the principal changes to the topography of the Common have been in the levelling of some of its hills and the filling of some of its natural ponds. Original features that still survive include the central Flagstaff Hill (surmounted since 1877 by Soldiers and Sailors Monument) and nearby Frog Pond.

The principal features of the Common, besides its topography, are the paths that traverse it, in much the same pattern as historically, and the monuments that embellish it. A number of the walkways on the Common take the form of wide, tree-lined malls, the first of which was established along Tremont Street in 1722 and replanted in 1784.² Its present-day successor, lined with brick planters, is known as Lafayette Mall. The monuments on the Common range from commemorative tablets to fountains (notably the Victorian-era Brewer Fountain) to large-scale works such as the Soldiers and Sailors Monument and the Parkman Bandstand. The most important work of art is probably St. Gaudens' Shaw Memorial, which faces the Massachusetts State House near the northeast corner of the Common. An inventory of monuments on the Common follows this general discussion.

Also included within the bounds of the Common is the Central Burying Ground on Boylston Street between Tremont and Charles. The gravestones and vaults of this cemetery, established in 1756, provide an important element in the historic appearance of the Common. A newer feature, recognized as a National Historic Landmark in its own right, is the Tremont Street Subway (1895-98), the first such facility in the country. Although the subway itself is underground, its stone entrance and exit structures are prominent at the Park and Boylston Street corners of the Common. The entrance and exit kiosks to the underground parking garage along the Charles Street side are recent and relatively small, though clearly not historic, elements.

LIST OF PRINCIPAL FEATURES ON BOSTON COMMON*

Robert Gould Shaw Memorial (1) (1897)

The artist was Augustus St. Gaudens, and the architects were McKim, Mead and White. The memorial features a great bronze bas-relief panel, dedicated to Civil War Col. Robert Gould Shaw and his men of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the first Massachusetts regiment of free black men. Shaw and many of his men perished in the attack on Battery Wagner.

*Keyed to Boston Redevelopment Authority map accompanying this study.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	religion
1400-1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science
1500-1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture
X 1600-1699	architecture	education	military	social/
X 1700-1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian
X 1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater
X 1900-	communications	industry	politics government	transportation
		invention		X other (specify) Recreation
Specific dates	1634-date	Builder Architect	Multiple	(public park)

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary¹

Boston Common, generally considered the oldest public park in the United States, merits examination for its significance in the history of conservation, landscape architecture, military and political history, and sculpture, as well as recreation.

It and the adjoining Public Garden are still one of the greatest amenities of Boston. Much of their importance springs from their location in the heart of one of America's oldest and historically most important cities. The Common was, for example, a political rallying point and military training field before and during the American Revolution and the Civil War. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became a showplace for public sculpture. It was also the playing field of the first organized football club in the country, the Oneida Club, which began competing in 1862.²

History

The Common was purchased and set aside by the town in 1634, a scant 4 years after the founding of Boston, as common land for the citizens, as pasturage for cattle, and as a training field for militia. At that point it also included some lands across Tremont Street. As early as the 1660s, John Josselyn, a resident Englishman, wrote about the men and women of Boston taking their evening strolls on the Common:

On the South there is a small, but pleasant Common where the Gallants a little before Sun-set walk with their Marmalet-Madams, as we do in Morefields, etc. till the nine a clock Bell rings them home to their respective habitations, when presently the Constables walk their rounds to see good orders kept, and to take up loose people.³

Children then, as now, enjoyed wading in Frog Pond in the summer and skating in winter.

Early in the 18th century, the Common began to assume the "park-like" qualities for which it has ever after been noted; the tree-lined Tremont Mall was in place by 1722. Another long-time feature of the Common, the Central Burying Ground, was established on the Boylston Street side in 1756. Soldiers who died at the Battle of Bunker Hill and during the British occupation were buried there, as well as peacetime citizens of Boston. The Common proper served as the training field for

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Representation in Existing Surveys

Title: National Register of Historic Places

Date: 1972

Depository for survey records: National Park Service, 1100 L Street, NW

City, Town: Washington

State: DC

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Curtis Guild Memorial Entrance (2) (1917)

Designed by Ralph Adams Cram and Frank W. Ferguson, noted architects.

Blackstone Memorial Tablet (3) (1914)

Designed by R. Clipston Sturgis.

Plaque to the Royal Navy (4)

Plaque indicating the site of Fox Hill (5) (1925)

Fox Hill, a natural feature at the west end of the Common, was leveled for landfill in the 19th century.

Soldiers and Sailors Monument (Civil War Army and Navy Monument) (6) (1877)

Designed by Martin Milmore, a protege of Thomas Ball, it is the most significant work of his short career.³ It is dedicated to the men of Boston who died in the Civil War.

Football Tablet (7) (1925)

Dedicated to the Oneida Football Club of Boston, the first organized football club in the United States. The club played on the field in the vicinity of the tablet "against all comers" in 1862-65. Seven surviving members of the club were present at its dedication.⁴

Founding of Boston Memorial Tablet (8) (1930)

The artist was John F. Paramino, and the architectural setting was designed by Charles A. Coolidge. The tablet commemorates the arrival of John Winthrop in Boston, and was placed on the 300th anniversary of that event.

Brewer Fountain (9)

Presented to the City by Gardner Brewer, it is a copy of one designed by Lienard and given to the city of Paris in 1868.

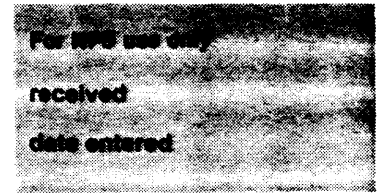
Statue of Commodore John Barry (10)

Religion, Training, and Industry Tablets (11, 12, and 13) (1961)

Designed by Cascieri and di Biccari.

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Declaration of Independence Tablet (14) (1925)

The artist was John F. Paramino.

Boston Massacre Monument (15) (1888)

The artist was Robert Kraus. This memorial honors free black Crispus Attucks and others slain by British troops in Boston in 1770. The top of the monument has thirteen stars representing the thirteen original States. "Free America" holds a flag in her left hand.

George F. Parkman Memorial Bandstand (16) (1912)

Designed by Robinson and Shepard. This bandstand replaced a 19th-century bandstand on the same site.

Subway Entrances

Although these small stone Classic Revival structures that shelter the entrances to the subway were denounced, when constructed in the 1890s, as intrusions that resembled mausoleums, they have become a familiar element on the Common.

Fence

The Common's 19th-century iron fence with elaborate entrance gates was partially removed in World War II scrap iron drives.

CONDITION:

The monuments and the vegetation of the Common suffer from typical pollutant and disease problems, identical to those noted in the Description of the Boston Public Garden. The expense of optimum treatment, as well as the necessity for regular scheduled maintenance, will, no doubt, be considerable.

Footnotes

¹This description, except as noted, has been adapted and edited from the National Register of Historic Places joint nomination of the Boston Common and Public Garden prepared by Robert Rettig in 1974.

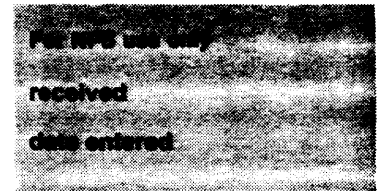
²Walter Muir Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 150, 159.

³"Martin Milmore," Concise Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 682.

⁴John D. McCallum and Charles H. Pearson, College Football, U.S.A. 1869-1973 (New York: Hall of Fame Publishing Co., 1973), p. 80.

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Boston's military companies, eight of which existed by 1674, as well as for those from surrounding towns. Oddly enough, the militia musters proved to be an occasion for recreation:

Throughout New England, training days offered the greatest opportunity for participation in outdoor sports. As the years passed a gala spirit came to pervade these periodic musterings of the able-bodied men of the town. Though the same psalms were sung before the exercises, the sober decorum of the days of John Cotton was not so evident in the time of Cotton Mather. At the Boston training the drill was generally followed by a great feast on the Common. Those who did not tarry too long at the taverns competed in target practice for prizes ranging from a silk handkerchief to a silver cup. Proficiency in marksmanship was scarcely more coveted than superiority in wrestling and rough-and-tumble fighting. Running and jumping contests became more hilarious as the day waned, but the magistrates were apt to overlook much on training days which they would not countenance on less favored occasions.⁴

In 1758, during the French and Indian (Seven Years') War, General Jeffery Amherst and his army of 4500 pitched their tents on the Common en route to Albany and New France (Canada).

Among the political events that occurred on the Common in the years preceding the Revolution was a celebration of the repeal of the Stamp Act on May 19, 1766. It was a short-lived celebration, for strict revenue acts were passed by Parliament in 1768. These acts were so strongly objected to in Massachusetts that British troops had to be stationed in Boston; they encamped on the Common. The troops were removed after the Boston Massacre (1770) but returned after the Boston Tea Party (1773). On April 18, 1775, British troops formed up at the foot of the Common before marching to Lexington.

During the winter of 1775-76, Boston was held by the British and besieged by the Patriots. As part of the British defenses, a small earthwork designed for infantry was constructed at the northwest corner of the Common and a small stronghold was established on Fox Hill (near present Charles Street and subsequently cut down for fill). The artillery had their entrenchments on Flagstaff Hill, and behind were three battalions of infantry. A regular garrison of 1700 men remained encamped on the Common to prevent a landing by General George Washington and his troops. Eventually, however, the British evacuated Boston, and the Common thereafter was secure.

These depredations by the British scarred the Common and removed many of its trees, but did not fundamentally change its character. After the Revolution, the Common's original uses continued, with recreation gradually taking precedence over cattle grazing and military exercises. The building of the Massachusetts State House in 1795-98, opposite its northeast corner, contributed to a general sprucing up, although cows continued to be pastured there until 1830.⁵

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By 1836, when the pasture fences were finally removed, malls had been cut out along all the edges and across the Common. The Long Path, from Joy Street to the Tremont-Boylston corner, is the most renowned, made famous by Oliver Wendell Holmes.⁶ Formal landscaping also began in this era. Informal sport activities continued their sway, however, as Henry Adams relates: "One of the commonest boy-games of winter, inherited directly from the eighteenth-century, was a game of war on Boston Common."⁷

The Frog Pond, earlier a watering place for cattle as well as a resort for children, was bordered with stone in 1824. In 1848, when municipal water piped from Lake Cochituate was first introduced to the city, the Pond was the site of a great festival commemorating the accomplishment.⁸

During the Civil War, the Common was again a gathering and mustering out point for the militia. It has retained its role as a public gathering spot during the 20th century.

Since the 1860s, the Common has been enhanced by a number of works of public sculpture, including some of exceptional quality. Augustus St. Gaudens' Shaw Memorial is probably the most outstanding. (These works are inventoried in the Description section of this study.)

For a sizable tract of real estate in a thriving city, the Common has remained surprisingly undisturbed in its 350 years. Ten generations have used and enjoyed the Common and have been largely successful in protecting it. Public outcry in the 1890s, for example, at a proposal to route trolley lines across the Common to relieve the city's even-then horrendous traffic, was met by storms of protest. The result, in 1895, was the construction of America's first subway (a National Historic Landmark in its own right), which, though it took small portions of both the Common and Public Garden, left them essentially intact. With this exception, and slivers of the Common removed for street widening by 1920, the Common was largely unscathed until the 1950s. The under-Common parking garage constructed in that decade dotted the Common's old "parade" with decidedly unhistoric kiosks and destroyed many trees along Charles Street.⁹

In recent years, the Friends of the Public Garden (and Common) have assumed the role of private-sector guardians of these great parks. Working with Boston's Parks and Recreation Department, the Friends have made major progress in rehabilitating the sculpture and grounds.

Footnotes

¹Much of this text, except where noted, is derived from the National Register of Historic Places joint nomination of the Boston Common and Public Garden prepared by Robert Rettig in 1974.

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²John D. McCallum and Charles H. Pearson, College Football U.S.A., 1869-1973 (New York: Hall of Fame Publishing Co., 1973), p. 80.

³Cited in Walter Muir Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 15.

⁴John Allen Krout, "Annals of American Sport," The Pageant of America (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1929), 15:11.

⁵Whitehill, op. cit., p. 59.

⁶Marjorie Drake Ross, The Book of Boston, The Victorian Period (New York: Hastings House, 1964), pp. 80-81.

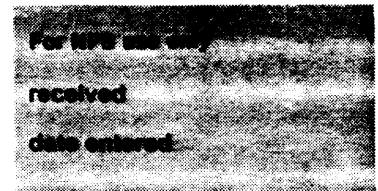
⁷Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), p. 41.

⁸Ross, op. cit., pp. 81-82.

⁹Henry Lee, "Citizens at Arms," pp. 17, 20, 22, 25, in The Promenade (Boston: Friends of the Public Garden, 1977).

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