

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

SEP 15 1989

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Back Cove
other names/site number Baxter Boulevard

2. Location

street & number Roughly bounded by Bedford & Veranda Sts., Back Cove
city, town Portland
state Maine code ME county Cumberland code 005 zip code 04101

3. Classification

Table with 3 columns: Ownership of Property, Category of Property, and Number of Resources within Property. Includes checkboxes for private/public ownership and building/site/structure/object categories.

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.
Signature of certifying official: [Signature]
Date: 9/18/89
State or Federal agency and bureau: Maine Historic Preservation Commission

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.
Signature of commenting or other official
Date
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:
Entered in the National Register.
determined eligible for the National Register.
determined not eligible for the National Register.
removed from the National Register.
other, (explain:)

Entered in the National Register 10/16/89
Signature of the Keeper
Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Landscape/Park
Transportation/Road-Related

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Landscape/Park
Transportation/Road-Related

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

No Style

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation N/A
walls N/A

roof N/A
other Granite Exedra & Bridge

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Portland peninsula is ringed by water. Long and narrow, the peninsula is three miles wide and approximately 3/4 of a mile wide, to the east is Munjoy Hill, 160' high, to the west Bramhall 180' high, to the south lies Portland Harbor, to the north Back Cove. The Cove is three miles around, one mile long, 2/3 of a mile wide and contains nearly 340 acres of mudflats. The district has one contributing site, 3 structures, and one non-contributing building.

In 1895 at the direction of Mayor James P. Baxter, the City of Portland commissioned the landscape firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot to prepare a report entitled, On The Improvement of Back Cove. The report addressed the sanitary conditions of the Cove and provided recreation in the form of drives, walks and water activities on the Cove. A sewage disposal system was developed that carried the wastes out with the tide; however, the problem remained in Back Cove of the previously contaminated mudflats, "exposed at every tide, and giving forth a stench which at times is so bad as to very strongly call attention to the unsanitary conditions of Back Cove." The condition of the flats was seen not only as unhealthy but a detriment to profitable residential development. To remedy this situation the Landscape Architects Report suggested constructing a dam at the mouth of the Cove.

We offer the suggestion that the foul flats of Back Cove be kept covered by salt water to be held back by a long dam or dyke wholly north of the ship channel and therefore, not requiring any lock, but only an inlet and outlet of small size and comparatively trifling cost... this, in brief, is the simple engineering solution of the problem of hiding the foul mudflats of Back Cove. (Landscape Architects Report Pg. 7)

Drawing on the Firm's experience at Marine Park in Boston the Report recommended constructing the dam of ordinary gravel with a slope of one in ten. The Report goes on to recommend ". . . how to best lay out the lands surrounding Back Cove to realize their highest value for residence purposes." The accompanying plan proposed the construction of a shore drive and promenade "for the benefit of all people of Portland and Deering." The main approaches to the drive were at Forest Avenue at Bedford Street at the west and at Tukey's Bridge on the east. Along the drive, the report recommended that the city purchase additional land for public use. One site extended from Bedford Street to Noyes Street.

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Such a park would be of great value to the citizens of both Portland and Deering, and, looking to the not distant future, would be worth far more for a park than its present value as real estate... It commands beautiful views across Back Cove, and it would be a cool, breezy place in summer.

Undoubtedly familiar with the speculative nature of the venture and the limits of political and financial support for the project, the report closed with a final plan for the city to acquire the land.

The completion of the circuit shore drive and promenade all around Back Cove, involving as it does a large amount of filling and road construction, and being for the most part a luxury, may well be deferred for a generation or two, but the acquisition of the needed land and title to the flats ought to take place immediately.

By 1905, Baxter had convinced the owners to donate a strip of land one-hundred feet wide along the shore, from Bedford Street to Tukey's Bridge. By the end of the year both ends of the boulevard were graded. True to the Olmsted firm's prediction, the drive and promenade were not laid out until 1917, and on November 13th, the boulevard was opened to the public. The bridges at the eastern end of the boulevard were completed in 1916. Constructed of concrete with decorative brick details, the U-shaped pedestrian overlooks sit on battered, random ashlar granite bases and feature eight concrete posts with brick quoins capped with three concentric concrete squares defining the corners of each U. The posts at the walkway edge are larger, topped by a knob-style finial. Bench seats are installed along the walls. Located between the two paths were elliptically shaped walls with four posts opened to the river below. A third elliptical element was located in the median strip between the vehicular traffic lanes. The posts and walls of these elliptical structures defined the vehicular roadbed.

Beginning at Forest Avenue, sidewalks, driveways, and esplanades were built extending nearly a quarter of a mile; inside walks eight feet wide; outside walks ten feet wide; and two driveways twenty feet wide; with three esplanades fourteen feet wide, ready for seeding. (Auditor's Report, 1917)

Work continued on improving the boulevard into the 1920s. In 1921 one-hundred European linden trees were planted along the esplanade. Brick gutters and granite curbing were installed in 1924. In order to maintain the view, power lines along the boulevard were buried. By the mid-1920s the Olmsted plan had been implemented between Bedford Street and Washington Avenue, or approximately one-half of the Cove's circumference. No additional effort was made to complete the design.

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In 1925 the boulevard was named Baxter Boulevard in honor of James Phinney Baxter. A three-part granite exedra, called the Baxter Memorial was installed on the west side of the intersection of Vannah Avenue and Baxter Boulevard. At the dedication ceremony, Mr. Virgil C. Wilson, representing the Portland Library, stated:

Let us hope that the beautiful highway with its present and future adornments, may have the permanence of that historic highway, the "Via Appia", styled by the poet Horace as the "Queen of Roads", which for centuries sustained the material tread of the legions of the conquering Ceasars, and the hurrying rush of invading barbarians; yet after five-hundred years of service was recorded as being in perfect repair, and now after a lapse of more than two-thousand years has some well preserved sections. (Baxter Memorial Dedication, October 13, 1925, p. 13)

The original intent of the boulevard has been compromised somewhat in order to accommodate increases in traffic volume by creating a second traffic lane from the original broad median strips. The bridge is in a severely deteriorated condition, and only remnants of the overlooks survive. In addition, the eastern end of the boulevard was adversely effected by the Tukey's Bridge replacement on I-295. However, the esplanades continue to be intensively used for a variety of recreational purposes and at high tide the cove is popular with wind surfers. Despite the increased vehicular speed the boulevard offers a scenic alternative to the interstate highway, and a dignified setting for the residential neighborhoods that have developed along its boundary.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Landscape Architecture

Period of Significance

1895 - 1925

Significant Dates

1895
1905
1916 1925

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot
Olmsted Brothers

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The impetus to improve Back Cove, as was the case with so many public grounds, was a concern with health and sanitation. The attendant benefit was the opportunity to develop a scenic drive and provide a variety of structured and unstructured recreational activities. A plan for the improvements to Back Cove and Baxter Boulevard was prepared by the landscape architectural firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot in 1895. The improvements to Back Cove and Baxter Boulevard are significant in a number of ways: first, as an early effort to reclaim a natural area; second, the development of metropolitan open space for scenic and recreational use; and third, as a vital link in the Portland Parks System proposed by Mayor James Phinney Baxter and designed by the Olmsted Brothers firm in 1905. Back Cove and Baxter Boulevard are eligible for listing under criteria C, for landscape design.

As early as 1884 there was concern about the unhealthy and malodorous conditions of Back Cove. William Goodwin, city civil engineer (see Deering Oaks, N.R.N.) proposed constructing an elaborate sewer system, a solution that would prevent further degradation of Back Cove but would not address the problem of the existing polluted mud flats. Later, Mayor James Phinney Baxter, a committed supporter of public parks, envisioned a park around a newly sanitized cove. The city began acquiring the property during his first mayorial term beginning in 1893. In an effort to address the problem of the polluted mud flats and the development of a park, Baxter hired in 1895 the landscape firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot to prepare a study entitled, A Report on the Improvement of Back Cove.

The firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot included Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., John C. Olmsted and Charles Eliot. These three were partners from 1893 until Charles Eliot's death in 1897. However, because of Olmsted, Sr.'s failing health, Eliot assumed the leadership role in the partnership. Eliot had a strong interest in environmental management and natural systems approach to design. Eliot had apprenticed with the Olmsted Firm and worked on designs for Franklin Park (1884), the Arnold Arboretum (1885), and the

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

City of Portland Auditor's Report. Portland: Ford and Rich, Printers.

City of Portland Landscape Architects' Report on the Improvement of Back Cove 1895-96. Portland: The Thurston Print, 1896.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property Approx. 50

UTM References

A

1	9	3	9	7	3	2	5	4	8	3	6	9	3	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

C

1	9	3	9	7	4	6	5	4	8	3	5	1	1	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

B

1	9	3	9	8	6	0	0	4	8	3	6	9	1	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

D

1	9	3	9	6	6	4	0	4	8	3	5	9	8	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

See map

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary embraces the remaining intact contiguous portions of the parkway as developed by the mid 1920s and in accordance with the Olmsted plan.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Elizabeth Igleheart, Architectural Historian

organization Maine Historic Preservation Commission date July, 1989

street & number 55 Capitol Street telephone (207) 289-2132

city or town Augusta, state Maine zip code 04333

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Boston Fens (1883). John C. Olmsted, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.'s stepson, began as a partner in the firm in 1884, becoming a senior partner in 1898 after Charles Eliot's death. He was noted for his engineering and design abilities (see Eastern Promenade N.R.N.).

At the time that the property was acquired the land along the cove was roadless, all privately owned, and the cove itself was literally a cesspool, since much of the city sewage, as well as a nearby tannery's wastes flowed into the cove. Baxter lamented that "the cove was not only offensive to nostril and eye, but a menace to the health of the City." (Downeast Magazine, May, 1989)

It appears that in addition to design and sanitation concerns, the Landscape Architects' Report was assembled to convince the landowners to give their property to the city, assuming that the publicly-funded improvements would enhance the value of their remaining property. The report concludes by suggesting that:

The acquirement of the shore of Back Cove and of suitable approaches, together with the construction of the suggested dyke, will, in effect, create a great public water park extremely agreeable to look at as well as immediately available for small pleasure boats. Such a water park with its fringe of trees as proposed, would present most attractive views, and it would unquestionably have a most favorable influence in raising the value of all adjacent land.

Opposition to the Back Cove plan may have cost Baxter the Mayoral election, for in 1897 he was voted out of office. But in the meantime he had managed to acquire most of the needed land (Plan Book 2, p. 67, Cumberland County Registry of Deeds). Nevertheless, the Boulevard Plan was shelved and municipal funds for parks declined.

In 1904, Baxter again ran for mayor and, in his inaugural address, he said, "I almost hesitate to speak of parks, because I have been held up by some as a monomaniac on the subject." (Downeast Magazine, May, 1897) Baxter was undaunted by his critics, however, and he remained an outspoken supporter of a park system. Writing in 1905 he said that:

Having seen the principal parks in this country and Europe, and realizing their great public importance, as well as the paucity of our own achievements in this regard, I resolved to do all in my power towards the creation of a park system for Portland.

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Back Cove was a vital link in the Portland Parks System envisioned by Baxter, connecting with the Eastern promenade at Tukey's Bridge and Deering Oaks, along Bedford Street and Deering Avenue. When Baxter returned to office in 1904 he hired the Olmsted Firm to design a boulevard system linking the Eastern and Western Promenades, Deering Oaks and Back Cove.

The majority of the work on the boulevard was undertaken in 1916 and it opened to the public the following year. Approximately one-half of the plan was implemented with the construction of the boulevard between Bedford Street and Washington Avenue. At the time of his death in 1921, Baxter's legacy of public parks was well established.

A testimonial to Baxter's foresight was written on the occasion of the dedication of the boulevard in 1925 by Mrs. Caroline B. Rolf, President of the James Phinney Baxter Boulevard Association.

He first realized for us many years ago the beauty of the picture that could be developed around the waters of the Back Bay, and through his efforts it now is possible for us to enjoy the blessings of the beautiful and useful Boulevard.

