

Creation of the Middlesex Fells Reservation

By Mike Ryan

“And upon whom would you bestow the future except those who truly honor the past?”

Verlyn Klinkenborg

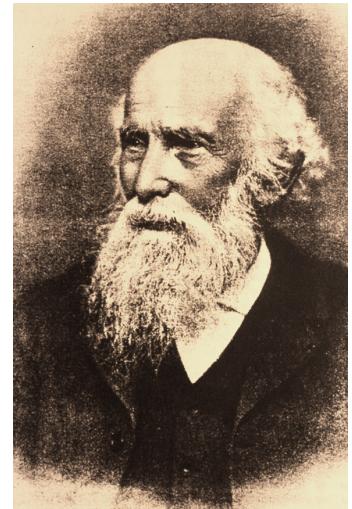
Birth of a Visionary Movement

At the midpoint of the 19th century commerce was on the move in New England, as elsewhere. Expanding cities and towns were swallowing up available land at a rapid rate. The impact on forests and water resources was immense, as rivers and streams were dammed, and land cleared and subdivided at an increasing rate. Towns and cities were densely packed and increasingly polluted.

How the pristine area now known as the Middlesex Fells, the Blue Hills, and the vast network of greater metropolitan green space was saved from the destructive forces of the march of history is testament to the foresight, dedication and generosity of a group of remarkably practical visionaries. Their efforts fostered a great movement that has allowed us to live in an area graced with natural beauty and spaciousness.

Elizur Wright

Some say the vision began with a visit to England in 1844, when Elizur Wright returned from London with a strong impression of that city's great parks. Wright was a teacher and businessman, and was friends with luminaries such as the poets Longfellow and Whittier. He was fervently interested in livable cities and societies, and the provision of a healthy environment. He presented his views in numerous newspaper articles. In 1847 he specified the need for a rural playground for Boston, where he mentioned likely spots near Boston Harbor and the Blue Hills for fine parks. In 1850 an expanded vision was presented in the Boston Transcript *"...urging the need of a great public forest for recreational and educational purposes and for the preservation of a water supply."* (Cited in the Medford Historical Register, Sept-Dec, 1935)



There were others who shared this vision. Here is an account from George Davenport, who showed his slides of the proposed Fells Reservation to many across the Commonwealth:

"In 1856, that charming writer on rural subjects, Wilson Flagg, published an article in Hovey's Magazine, entitled, "A Forest Preserve, a Proposition to State and City Governments," in which he advocated the setting apart of the wild region extending from Stoneham to Salem, for the purpose of one or more "preserves". In 1869, Elizer Wright published a pamphlet in which he urged the setting apart of "The Five Mile Wood," by which name the Fells was then known, as a public park, under the name of "Mt. Andrew Park," with a system of "Schools for the Study of Natural History." Again, in 1872, Wilson Flagg renewed his suggestions, and in those delightful essays on the "Woods and Byways of New England," urged anew the selection of "the Five Mile Wood" for a "Forest Conservatory."

"Then came some unsuccessful efforts to secure favorable legislative action, followed by a long period of discouragement until, in 1879, Sylvester Baxter, of Malden, published in the Boston

Herald an article on "Spot Pond and its Vicinity," which attracted widespread attention, and revived once more the waning interest in the movement to secure that region for the purpose of a public park." (George Davenport, ""A Lecture on the Middlesex Fells," 1893, Press of the Medford City News)

Wright's call for "Schools for the Study of Natural History" shows clearly the interest in fostering a connection to the land, which would be harmonious and beneficial for both land and people.

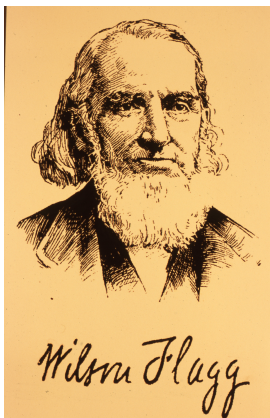
Spot Pond

By this time Wright had moved to his Medford woodland property and had begun to purchase additional land in the area to save it from destruction. The region was becoming well known. Spot Pond was seen as the heart of the landscape. Here is Baxter's 1879 Boston Herald description of the area: *"Something like five miles northerly from Boston lies a great tract of country, all stony hills and table-lands, almost uninhabited, and of wonderful picturesqueness, and wild rugged beauty. It is with in the limits of the town of Malden, Medford, Melrose, Stoneham and Winchester; and its heart is that most beautiful of Boston's suburban lakes, Spot Pond, which lies high up among the hills...The nature of this region cannot be better characterized than by the application of the old Saxon designation fells, a common enough word in England, meaning a tract of wild stone hills, corresponding to the German word felsen."* (Sylvester Baxter, 12/6/1879, Boston Herald)

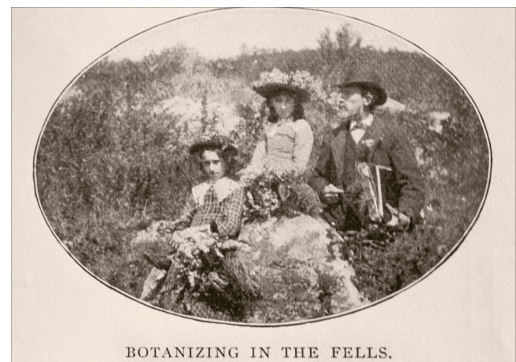
Middlesex Fells Association

As mentioned above, several attempts to enact statutes to protect this land failed in the state legislature.

But in the fall of 1880 Wright organized a gathering of supporters on Bear Hill in the Fells and formed the Middlesex Fells Association. With Wright and Flagg as its principal officers, the Association put steam into the movement. In January of the following year the Fells Association called a mass meeting in Medford's town hall where an overflow crowd of 200 turned out in support of the reservation. The association pushed for legislation that would enable towns to secure land outside of their boundaries. On the grass roots level, clubs were set up in towns abutting Spot Pond and also in Boston. "Forest Festivals" were held yearly in different parts of the Fells, in part to acquaint prospective supporters with the attractions of the wooded landscapes.



Pledges for donations for the purchase of land were solicited in anticipation of a favorable legislative outcome. This victory did come in 1882 with the passage of the Commonwealth's Public Domain Act (otherwise known as the Public Park Act) in which towns and cities were granted the power to take land in order to "provide for the preservation and reproduction of forests and for the preservation of the water supplies." The law established provisions for the management of future public holdings and for the issuance of bonds to cover expenses."



This victory spurred even more grass roots groups to form. The clubs became known as Public Domain Clubs, and gatherings were held in to popularize the vision of the Fells as well as other parklands. The Association drew up the preliminary boundaries of the proposed Fells reservation.

It was at this time, in 1885, that Wright died -- with the Fells Reservation not yet a reality.

However, the towns around Spot Pond had begun to take possession of the surrounding land to protect their principal water supply. The Pond had been the site of much recreational and industrial activity dating back to the early 1700s. Spot Pond Brook was the site of many water-powered mills and indeed a small village called Haywardville had grown in the vicinity. There had been a real estate boom and the Pond shoreline was dotted with homes and settlers' cottages. The Langwood Hotel had been built on a hill overlooking the Pond. But times had changed, and according to historical accounts, the boom had passed. The quarries and mills had closed and the cottages had fallen into disrepair. There was fear that the region would fall into further disuse or even misuse; "...west of the Pond a great piggery befouled the air, and on the southeast by Pepe's Cove an amusement stand, with merry-go-round, dance hall and cheap music, was an offense to eye and ear", lamented one account. (William de los Casas, "the Middlesex Fells," New England Magazine, August, 1898)

Charles Eliot

In the very month that Elizur Wright died a person who was to play a pivotal role in the creation of the Middlesex Fells was embarking on a year long study of European parks, gardens and all manner of scenic landscape in order to complete his self-training in landscape architecture.



This was Charles Eliot, son of Harvard University president and a former apprentice to Brookline landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. In November of 1885 Eliot was visiting the first city on his itinerary, London, no doubt visiting the very city gardens that had so impressed Elizur 41 years prior. Charles Eliot also was convinced that the most pressing need of the growing American cities was to preserve open space while there was still time in which to do so. He wrote: *"The life history of humanity has proved nothing more clearly than that crowded populations if they would live in health and happiness must have space for air, for light, for exercise, for rest and for the enjoyment of that peaceful beauty of nature which, because it is the opposite of the noisy ugliness of towns, is so wonderfully refreshing to the tired souls of townspeople."*

Trustees of Public Reservations

Upon his return to the States and his many public and private landscape projects, Eliot developed a plan to carry out preservation work on a large scale. Through the offices of the Appalachian Mountain Club, of which he was a life member, he began to solicit the support of key individuals in the Commonwealth for the creation by the State of a Board of Trustees endowed with the power to hold real estate in every part of the Commonwealth for the purpose of preserving natural scenery for the use and enjoyment by citizens.

In May of 1890 Eliot organized a conference of more than 100 persons held at MIT, laying the groundwork for the birth of the Trustees of Public Reservations, which was soon after created by passage of a bill in the legislature. It is fitting to note that Wright's old friend and ardent supporter of the Fells, Sylvester Baxter, played a key role on the committee that diligently labored for the bill's passage. The very first property which was given to the Trustees came from land adjacent to Spot Pond; the 20

acres of the Virginia Wood, a gift of the Tudor family in memory of their daughter; the first land trust gift in the world.

Metropolitan Park Commission

The Trustees found that their work in the Commonwealth was hampered by the patchwork of city and town ordinances and practices which stood in the way of cooperative preservation work. Thus several thousand petitions were sent out to town and city officers and others in the metropolitan district seeking additional signatures. These petitions led to a public hearing organized by Eliot, and to the passing of the Metropolitan Park Commission bill, which was signed by the Governor in June of 1892.

The Fells

Now the stage was set for the creation of the Middlesex Fells Reservation. The newly created Metropolitan Park Commission suggested four property purchases, one of which was the Middlesex Fells. Eliot, as a partner with the Olmsted firm, was commissioned to determine reservation boundaries, and for land management proposals as well. The Fells boundaries encompassed lands previously acquired from water boards and local park commissions, and from gifts as well, encompassing 4,000 acres in all. According to the Medford Historical Register in 1935, in the Fells *"The state paid out \$85,000 to private owners and accepted as a gift the splendid acres around Pine Hill presented by Walter and Ellen Wright in memory of their father."*

The property adjacent to Spot Pond owned by the Langwood Hotel was excluded from the Fells boundaries because the Commission could not afford the price. Eliot was not particularly happy about this omission and cautioned that building heights in the future on that property should not exceed that which could be viewed by the public elsewhere in the park.

Eliot spelled out the critical necessity for topographical, botanical and forestry plans being developed and adhered to, to ensure that *"...a comprehensive scheme of treatment of the woodlands of the reservations such as will ensure their slow, but ultimate restoration to something like their primitive character and beauty."* (Charles Eliot; Landscape Architect, Charles W. Eliot, 1902)

At first the process of formalizing and developing the Fells moved slowly, but very soon the public began to frequent the Reservation, and more extensive work was necessary to provide access as well as for preserving the woods. A glimpse of the scope of ensuing activity in the years which followed is gathered from a September-December 1935 issue of the *Medford Historical Register*:

"The fear of water contamination forced the clearing of trees about the Winchester Reservoirs. Vigorous work has been done, however, in reforestation. In the last forty years millions of trees have been planted in all parts of the reservation. During the last year twenty-five thousand pines have been planted, and in the Whip Hill section there will be planted two thousand hemlocks, a continuation of the planting began there nine years ago. Every winter the wild birds are fed. Reservation headquarters (include) nurseries of trees and shrubs to use in replanting, and a garden of corn, carrots and various feed for animals and birds. A force of one captain, four sergeants and forty carefully trained patrolmen keep watch over the whole."

Extensive work at Spot Pond was carried out by the Metropolitan Water Board to turn the pond into a water reservoir. Several dams raised the water level seven feet to increase the quantity of potable water available for the north metropolitan region. Additional water reservoirs adjacent to the Langwood

Hotel property (later to become the site of a sanitarium and then a regional hospital) were also developed by the agency.

Parkways

In 1894 the Metropolitan Park Commission was authorized by the legislature to expend \$500,000 to begin construction of parkways to connect the reservations with Boston and each other. Charles Eliot and Sylvester Baxter outlined careful and specific plans for these “broad and handsome ways” or “boulevards” in order that city people would have easy access to the Fells and Blue Hills. These were key to the workings and integrity of the entire reservation system. The Commission understood that these and other park roads would serve as clear protective boundaries to the reservations (much more definitive than fences) and such roads would facilitate effective reservation policing and administration.

Lessons for Our Generation

Upon his death Elizur Wright’s daughter wrote “...without his insight and courage to persist in furthering his ideas the Blue Hills Reservation and the Fells would have been lost to posterity.” (reported in *Medford Daily Mercury*, July 30, 1952).

And so we do certainly owe an immense debt to Elizur Wright and all the countless others who saw to it that we are able today to live amongst such beauty. They knew full well that one day future generations such as ours would look back in gratitude, as this account from the time points out so lyrically:

"The Middlesex Fells is dear to those whose love of it has inspired the work of preservation. It is more easily reached than any other reservation of wild lands near Boston, and is of deeper historic interest. It is preeminently a reservation of grateful scenery; yet so adaptable to the highest of refreshment to human beings that if cared for with intelligence it will be to future generations an inestimable delight. The money and the endeavor which it has cost will then seem paltry, and all but the most sordid will wonder how there could ever have been need of straining effort to accomplish so evident a blessing." (William de los Casas, “The Middlesex Fells,” *New England Magazine*, August, 1898)

Caring for this priceless treasure requires a firm commitment to fully uphold our responsibilities to do what is needed to preserve this priceless legacy, now and for those who will follow.



Spot Pond shoreline

In Massachusetts developers have taken aim at protected seashores and river shorelines, and are putting commercial pressure on the Parkway system. At Spot Pond we see how developers would utterly destroy the “broad and handsome” Woodland Road park road by converting it into a high-density traffic corridor.

Common Effort

As we today continue steps to protect this Pond, this *heart* of the Fells, we are mindful that we are acting in the interests of all who dearly wish to save the great legacy of scenic preservation in the Commonwealth.

For what can be destroyed here could spread as easily as gypsy moth infestation to all the green spaces in the Metropolitan district. We can not let that happen, and are immeasurably strengthened by the lessons drawn from those who took the daunting bold first steps of to build this Reservation.

They left us beautiful places, and their example also inspires us to find ways to protect them!