

‘ANOTHER GREAT RESERVATION FOR THE PUBLIC’

On March 4, 1894, the *Boston Herald* published a major article detailing the success of years of Fells leaders' educational agitation leading to creation of the Middlesex Fells Reservation and the Greater Boston metropolitan park system.

Though the article included no by-line it was most assuredly written by Malden journalist and city planner Sylvester Baxter whose 1879 *Herald* article, '*Spot Pond and its Vicinity*,' is quoted at length.

The following year, 1880, when Baxter was thirty years old, he helped form the Middlesex Fells Association. Alerted to the Fells cause by the early writings of Elizur Wright and Wilson Flagg, Baxter lent his talents to the unprecedented publicity campaign for converting the Fells into the public domain.

After the passing of the early Fells visionaries it was Baxter who ultimately teamed up with Charles Eliot to bring about the success of the metropolitan park system. The Fells illustrations accompanying this *Herald* article are taken from the '1893 Report to the Metropolitan Park Commission,' which was submitted by Sylvester Baxter, Secretary to the Commission and Charles Eliot, the Commission's Landscape Architect.

The Metropolitan Park Act was signed on June 3, 1893, by Governor Russell. Then, on February 2, 1894, with the five Fells town water boards formally agreeing the reservation boundaries would encompass their public lands, the Fells dream became a reality.

Here follows a complete transcription of this article courtesy of the Friends of the Middlesex Fells.



THE SUNDAY HERALD **Boston, March 4th, 1894**

MIDDLESEX FELS.

Another Great Reservation for the Public.

Local boards concur with the Metropolitan Park Commission in the taking of land, and the people are assured of the benefits of a magnificent recreation ground of large extent and much natural beauty.

The Middlesex Fells is a public domain at last!

The great tract of wild rock hills and woodland was taken by the Metropolitan Park Commission by right of eminent domain on Friday Feb. 2nd, and the action has been made final by the signing of the last name required on the part of the local park boards of the five cities and towns within whose limits the territory lies: the concurrence of the local park commissions being necessary to complete the taking of lands by the metropolitan park commission.

The conversion of the Middlesex Fells into a great public recreation ground was, of course, made a foregone conclusion by the passage of the metropolitan park act last year.

The consummation of this step is an event of exceptional importance in the work of the commission as marking the final accomplishment of a great project which has been the aim of an agitation that was begun over 15 years ago, while more than a quarter of a century has elapsed since the first suggestions

were made to that end. And to the educational force of this agitation may be directly traced the various steps that have led to the establishment of the metropolitan park commission, making possible the grand and beneficent work which that body to a great extent has already carried out.



Of all the tracts whose reservation for recreative purposes has been urged in the course of the past 10 or 15 years, there has been no other whose name has been made so familiar throughout the country as that of the Middlesex Fells, which has become so closely identified with the movement as, in a great measure, to be typical thereof. The first time that the name was ever used in connection with this tract was as the title of a special article in the HERALD of

Dec. 6, 1879. The location and character of the region was thus described in that article:

"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 within the limits of the towns of Malden, Medford, Melrose, Stoneham and Winchester, and its heart is that most beautiful of Boston suburban lakes, Spot pond, which lies high up among the hills. The limits of this region are defined with great clearness, especially on the south and east, a line of steep hills and ledges rising abruptly from the broad plain that borders the Mystic river, almost as level as a floor, and forming it's southern boundary, while on the east the ledges start with still greater steepness out of the long valley of meadow land through which the Boston and Maine railroad passes....Its western margin is formed by the valley through which run the Lowell railroad and its Stoneham branch, and its northern by the houses and fields of Stoneham. ...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.' "



In this article it was strongly represented that the character of this tract made it particularly suitable for reservation as

A Great Public Forest Domain,

and from about this time dates the active agitation to that end. The idea however had been advanced many years before in various articles, written by the late Elizur Wright and the late Wilson Flagg, and it was one of Mr. Wright's articles that first called the attention of the Herald writer to the region.

The name of "Middlesex Fells" struck the popular fancy. The application of

an old Saxon word to a region that it so well described gave the name an original and striking character that caused its speedy adoption. The Malden Scientific Field Club, which afterwards became the Middlesex Institute, recommended the name to the Appalachian Mountain Club, and it was adopted by that body.

The interest aroused in the subject gave to Mr. Wright and Mr. Flagg renewed hope that their cherished idea might be realized, and they entered upon the agitation with greater zeal. Mr. Wright's intense activity in behalf of the movement entitles him to recognition as the real father of the work which has just been consummated. It was in 1867 that Mr. Wright published his first article on the subject, recommending that Boston take the region as a wild forest domain. His article was called "Mount Andrew Park," the name of "Mount Andrew" being recommended for him by him for Bear hill in honor of the great war Governor. This and many other articles from his earnest pen are included in a pamphlet published last year by the Medford Public Domain Club entitled "Elizur Wright's Appeals for the Middlesex Fells and the Forests," compiled with filial devotion by his daughter Miss Ellen Wright. Mr. Flagg, the author of "Woods and Byways of New England," and several other charming books on studies of nature, had also advocated the establishment of a "forest conservatory," at the "Five-Mile Wood," as this region was locally known. The movement for the preservation of the Middlesex Fells brought Mr. Flagg and Mr. Wright into close association, together with another striking figure, the late John Owen of Cambridge. Mr. George E.

Davenport of Medford, the botanist, and one of the foremost authorities on ferns, last year gave an illustrated lecture on the Middlesex Fells, with lantern slides from beautiful photographs made from himself. Among his pictures was one of these three venerable men forming a group.

Col. Higginson, in his address as President before the Appalachian Mountain Club, on Jan. 13, 1885, included a fine and characteristic tribute to the memory of Mr. Wright, who was a life member of the club, and who died on the 31st of the previous November. Speaking of him in the aspect of the eager, hopeful, patient, and unconquerable advocate of the scheme for setting apart Middlesex Fells, Col. Higginson said: "I served with him for a time on a committee for that seemingly hopeless object, and shall never forget the inexhaustible faith with which he urged at. In his presence it was almost impossible not to believe in its speedy success: all obstacles seemed little before his sanguine confidence, and each scattering donation of a dollar or two filled him with renewed faith, although it was plain that tens of thousands of dollars must be forthcoming to accomplish the end. Scarcely any one was ever present at these committee meetings, except the three old men in whom the whole enterprise seem to center - Wilson Flagg, John Owen and Elizur Wright. They were all of patriarchal aspect: and as they sat leaning toward each other, with long gray locks and gray beards flowing, I always felt as if I were admitted to some weird

Old Greek Wood Gods,

displaced and belated, not yet quite convinced that Pan was dead, and planning together to save the last remnants of the forests they loved."

Mr. Davenport's lecture has lately been published in pamphlets shape, and forms a valuable contribution to the literature of the Middlesex Fells, together with a pamphlet by Mr. Rosewell B. Lawrence of Medford, the secretary of the Appalachian Club. Mr. Lawrence's pamphlet, which is reprinted from contributions to Appalachia, the magazine of the Appalachian Mountain Club, makes an excellent guide to the points of interest in the Fells, and its value is enhanced by a sketch map of the territory which gives the location of all the woods, roads and footpaths. This map was reproduced in the report of the preliminary metropolitan park commission.

Mr. Wright was active in organizing the Middlesex Fells Association, which was formed to promote the work, and the Medford Public Domain Club was organized with a similar purpose. Public meetings were held in Medford, Malden and various other places in the neighborhood, and as a result of the agitation the public forest act was passed by the General Court of 1882, the same year that saw the general park act placed on the statute of books. No action was ever taken under it, owing to the practically insuperable difficulties in the way of inducing separate communities to unite and carrying out a project of this character in which all have a common interest. Eleven years elapsed before the time became ripe for the legislation that presented the most feasible means of accomplishment, and it is notable that Mr. Wright's first suggestion, that it was for the interest of Boston to do this, was followed to a considerable extent in the provision that Boston's proportion of the expenses to be incurred by the metropolitan park work should be 50 percent, since the city possessing the greatest proportion of the wealth of the metropolitan district would be directly benefited to at least that extent by the increased attractiveness given it as a place of residence through the assurance of permanently beautiful surroundings.

The desirability of reserving the region for the sake of assuring the purity of the Spot pond water supply was urged at the time of the first agitation, but the authorities of the communities concerned had not been educated to that point then, and no danger of serious pollution was foreseen. The suggestion, therefore, fell upon deaf ears. The city of Lynn, however set a powerful example five years ago in reserving the



surroundings of its important water basins in the Lynn woods to assure the purity of its supply, and thus providing one of the chief elements in the establishment of the grand recreation ground that has been reserved there.

The threatened injury to Spot pond contained in the danger of the laying out of house lots on the watershed at last arose the waterboards of Malden, Medford and Melrose to the necessity of protecting the pond, and as a result a considerable amount of land was taken, including all the shores of the pond and other portions of its watershed. The town of Winchester had also established two large

reservoirs in the region to the westward of the Spot pond watershed, and had taken considerable land in addition about the basins, and for the provision of an additional supply Medford had taken a large tract of over 200 acres to the southward of Spot pond. For the protection of its own interests which had held to be attacked by the action of the Malden, Medford and Melrose water boards in relation to Spot pond, the town of Stoneham accepted the general park act, and took considerable territory near the pond for park purposes, including Bear Hill the greatest eminence in the region. The beautiful tract known as Virginia Wood, on the Ravine road, had also become a public domain and placed in charge of the trustees of public reservations. In these several ways a total of something like 1600 acres of land and water had become public domain in the Fells when the metropolitan park commission was established.

It became the task of the metropolitan commission to round out the work which, by piecemeal, had thus been well advanced, by taking intervening lands which would unify the whole region, together with the remaining outline features of importance desirable to the completion of the scheme. This is the work that has now been accomplished.

The Grand Reservation,

thus established, in connection with the lands already reserved, and a tract which the Medford water board proposes to take, will be of considerable less area than that indicated in the space covered in Mr. Eliot's map in the metropolitan park report, and which, as explained at the time, was merely a tentative suggestion. The scheme advocated by Mr. Wright comprised a tract of something like 4000 acres. The area taken by the metropolitan park commission is about 1600 acres. This, together with a tract yet to be

taken by the Medford water board, will increase the total expanse of public domain to over 3200 acres. Real estate values have so advanced in certain parts of the region, and encroachments in the way of building had been made to such an extent that certain sections that once would naturally have been included have been made impracticable except at a cost altogether too great for the resources available. But the loss in this respect is, after all, not so serious as may have been supposed. Most to be deplored, perhaps, is the necessity of leaving an island of private property in the heart of the domain in the neighborhood of Spot pond. But the building of a large hotel here has made the cost of taking too great to be considered, and so this property, together with the several estates near the pond, including the familiar group of stone houses, had been left. Owing to its isolated position there is no danger that a village will ever grow up on this land. The large hotel, moreover, will be a distinct advantage and convenience to frequenters of the Fells. But it is conceivable that a use of this private property might come about which would be detrimental to public interests, and at some future time compel its taking. It has been suggested that the interests of the public and of the present owners might be secured by an agreement under which the property could be taken and then released for a long term – say 999 years, or practically in perpetuity -- under conditions that would forbid its use for undesirable purposes.

On the north, in Stoneham, and on the west, in Winchester and Medford, the taking is of an extent that meets all the original expectations: the boundary line in Winchester, for instance, being drawn well down on the westerly slope of the highlands bordering the water basins of that town's important supply, and thus preventing any undesirable constructions from ever obtruding themselves upon the vision of those roaming in the wilderness. The conditions have been such as to make it a difficult task to define the proper boundaries for the reservation, and this work has been done with great care by the landscape architects, Messrs. Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, according to the general principles laid down in their report to the commission and included in their first annual report of that body. These principles are thus stated:

"First - The boundaries of the proposed reservations should, if possible, be established so as to include all lands belonging to the same topographical unit and exhibiting the type of scenery characteristic of each reservation. Obviously, a public domain is not well bounded if it includes only half a hill, half a pond or half a glen. Neither is it well bounded unless it includes such contiguous lands as form the essential framework of the hill scenery, the pond scenery, the glen scenery, or whatever other type of scenery it is desired to preserve. For example it is desirable to include in the Blue Hills reservation all the hills of the high range down to the base of their steep slopes. Similarly, it is desirable to include in the Stony brook reservation all the uplands which inclose the glen or valley of that stream. To city men

“It is Most Refreshing

to find themselves in what appears to be a wilderness of indefinite extent. This impression cannot be enjoyed unless the boundary of a valley reservation is established beyond the summits of the inclosing hills.

"Second -- the boundaries of the proposed reservations should be, if possible, established upon public streets or roads, or upon lines drawn where roads may ultimately be built upon good grades.

"The reasons for this principle are many. It is obvious that the back fences of private lands cannot make a handsome boundary for a public domain of any description. It is obvious that private lands abutting directly upon public lands will be much more liable to trespass than they would be if a public roadway separated the two. Private land in the position described is a nuisance to the public, while the public is likely to be a nuisance to its owner. Speaking generally, the policing and the general administration of a

public reservation is greatly facilitated when the boundary is a road. Still more important is the consideration that if the private lands which adjoin the reservation are provided with a road frontage which looks upon the public domain they will eventually be greatly increased in attractiveness and value."

In applying these principles to the boundary of the Fells it has been necessary, for the sake of economy, to exclude improved lands from the reservation by arbitrary lines, as for instance, at the head of Summer street in Malden and at two places on Washington street in Melrose.

On the south the boundaries have been set back in Melrose and Malden to a considerable distance northward of the lines originally desired. The noble eminence of Pine Hill is included, but the law required that nothing southward of an arbitrary line drawn from the southerly foot of Pine Hill to the dam of the Winchester reservoir at Turkey swamp should be taken, and to a great extent this line has been made the boundary in that section. The greatest loss to the reservation from this cause consists in a fine hill not far from the Almshouse in West Medford, and commanding a beautiful and extensive view over



the Mystic ponds and their valley. It is of course not impossible that this may at some time be included.

Another arbitrary line was drawn to the eastward of Pine hill, to the Medford Malden line, southward of which nothing could be taken. But the precaution of this line, in the interest of

Medford's potential

growth, proved unnecessary, for in the large triangular expansive wilderness between Forest street and Highland avenue nothing at all has been taken.

The Element of Expense

was sufficient to prevent this. Moreover, the region, although its steep southerly line of cliffs rising abruptly from the plains shows the demarcation of the Fells with striking prominence, contains few internal features of remarkable interest.

Highland avenue, in Malden and Medford, was, until lately, proposed for the boundary of the Fells in that quarter. But it has lately been much built upon, and has also the disadvantage of being a long, straight and monotonous thoroughfare. Therefore the taking does not touch it, except for a short stretch at its upper end, and for the rest of the way in Medford and Malden, a line has been drawn which provides for the construction of a boundary road at easy grades, as along other portions of the Fells, wherever practicable. In the natural order of things, it would probably be a long time before this boundary road would be

constructed by the commission. But it would be a distinct advantage to both Medford and Malden to have it built in the near future, and it would also prove of immense value to owners of abutting real estate, thus giving a beautiful frontage upon a magnificent public domain. And as the metropolitan park law has no provision for the assessment of betterments, it ought to be worth the while of the owners of real estate to advance the funds necessary for the construction of this road.

The boundary in Malden includes the "Bears Den," within the reservation, and then runs across the swamp at the foot of the great cliffs, where stand the summer houses of the Dutton estate at the head of Summer street. The higher of these summer houses is brought within the reservation, and a narrow step along the south side of the Dutton place is taken to give a convenient entrance from that section of Malden. The main feature of interest that has not been included in the Malden portion of the reservation is the prominent pine-crowned cliff near the point where Highland avenue turns in a northwesterly direction, known as "Highland rock." The omission of this occasions much regret in Malden, but the advance in real estate values in that neighborhood made it impracticable to bring the boundaries so far southward. The face of the cliff has lately been much disfigured by the blasting of the rock in quarrying it for building purposes.

On the easterly side of the Fells even more has been taken than was expected of late. The boundary follows the base of the cliffs near the line of Washington street in Malden and Melrose, and comes out to that thoroughfare near the front of the grand cliff of Black rock, taking in the group of houses in the neighborhood of the celebrated cascade, and leaving the course of the street again at the point where the line of cliffs recedes so as to avoid the necessity of taking the colony of houses in that neighborhood. A short distance beyond where the land again assumes an unimproved character, the boundary again comes out to Washington street which crosses and takes in the

Old Farmhouse with a Belfry,

which has long been a landmark there. The object of this is to take in the magnificent woodland of white pine between Washington street in Wyoming avenue, and to preserve in its present state the remarkably beautiful section of the Ravine road between those two thoroughfares. All the territory between these two highways, as far as the Virginia wood, has thus been taken, including the well known "Red Mill" property. Should the additional water supplies within the three municipalities that jointly own Spot pond must soon possess to meet their necessities ever permit the pond again to flow over its dam as it once did every spring, the brook in this ravine, with its fine cascades, would at such seasons be a very attractive feature of the place.

A good border to the Ravine road is assured permanently by taking a strip of sufficient width from the Langwood Hotel property, including the superb growth of hemlocks near their Virginia wood. On the northerly side of Wyoming avenue, opposite of Virginia wood, the wild and for the most part, well wooded section, has been taken as far as the boundary of the reserve of the Spot Pond water boards about Doleful pond. This territory, though less known to the general public that comes to the Fells from the direction of Boston, has much of interest and beauty in its broken and sylvan character, and will prove a particular recreative value to the adjacent populations of Stoneham and Melrose. The taking of this area embraces the picnic ground on Wyoming avenue near the pond. Had it not been taken, it might have been occupied in a way that would make it a serious nuisance for the reservation, and it might also have made the neighborhood of the pond disfigured by constructions of ugly aspect. Opportunities for the sale of refreshments to the multitude will probably be provided for in the plans of the commission at centers of

resort like the banks of Spot pond, but it is of great importance that they should be under control of public authority. The taking of the land on both sides of Wyoming avenue, as well as of the Ravine road, assures the permanent beauty of both approaches to Spot pond from the eastward. These form two of the most charming passages of scenery in the Fells, with the well grown pines and hemlocks bordering the gradually ascending rocks and forming solemn and stately vistas. With the removal of unsightly objects and the restoration of the wood growth on the bare spots, these roads will steadily gain in attractiveness year by year - and the same will, of course, apply to all parts of the Fells. Indeed, persons who have been familiar with the region for the past 15 years are struck by the rapid way in which a wooded growth has spontaneously sprung up, and already attained respectable proportions, in places where the fires that annually have caused serious ravages have chanced not to come. A system of control will now, naturally, be adopted that will these fires to a minimum, and the many waste spots of the wilderness will, therefore, be likely to become tree-mantled before many years pass.

In the accompanying diagram of the reservation the dotted lines intersecting the area at different points represent wood paths along which it is proposed to keep the ground cleared of leaves and brush. This will create "fire swathes," dividing the reservation into a convenient number of sections, and in dry weather, with the proper watchfulness, fires breaking out at any given sections can easily be checked before great damage is done.

The individual

Features of Special Interest

in the region are many. They have been more closely enumerated and described, and are better known than those of any similar region of natural scenery in the neighborhood of Boston, with the single exception of the Lynn woods. Like the Lynn woods and the Blue hills, The Middlesex Fells reservation has notable historic associations. Chief of these is a visit made by Gov. Winthrop to the neighborhood of Spot pond, described in the oft-quoted passage in his diary under date of Feb. 7, 1631 (O.S.), where it is related that with Mr. Nowell, Mr. Eliot, and others, they went over Mystic river at Medford, and going "north and by east" among the rocks about two or three miles, they came to a very great pond, having in the midst an island of about one acre, and very thick with trees of pine and beech: and the pond had divers small rocks standing up here and there in it, which they thereupon called Spot pond. They went all about it upon the ice."

Spot Pond was then nearer the size which it now has when the water is low by the extraordinary drafts upon it, for there was then, of course, no dam to raise its level, but its shores were then natural and beautiful, with none of the bareness now presented at low water. When full the pond, which is the central attraction of the region, is an exceptionally beautiful sheet, with its expansive 296 acres. Its height above sea level is about 150 feet, and until a few years ago, when the draft upon it necessitated pumping, it supplied the needs of the three communities dependent upon it solely by gravity.

The two large basins of the Winchester supply, with areas of 63 and 160 acres respectively, are in the midst of the great expanse of wilderness lying to the westward of Spot pond, and from most points of view have the charm of natural lakes, long and with very irregular shores, as they form central features of the landscape. Two minor pieces of water are Shiner and Hemlock ponds, in the easterly section, near Highland avenue and not far from Spot pond. Doleful pond which hardly merits its gloomy name, lies to the north eastward of Spot Pond and is tributary to it.

The largest stream in the Fells is Meeting House Brook in Medford, which flows from the foot of the dam of the Winchester south reservoir, and formerly drain Turkey swamp, whose site the great water basin occupies. The Wannalanset, or Spot Pond Brook now takes little water through the ravine that descends from Spot Pond through the Virginia wood. The brook that forms the Melrose cascade originates in a line of swamp among the crags above, and is usually dry in the summer.

Bear Hill

is the greatest elevation in the region. It was the steep northerly face of this hill according to general belief that Gov. Winthrop named Cheese rock when he came here with his party from Spot pond one day, and stopping for their lunch of bread and cheese, found that the Governor's man had forgotten to put up any bread for them. The summit of the hill is 370 feet above sea level and a very substantial observatory, built there about a year ago by the Appalachian Club, gives a total altitude of 400 feet. This is the northerly outlook point of the Fells, and commands an extensive prospect, from the dome of Wachusett in the west to Monadnock and the other New Hampshire mountains to the northward: the great Danvers Asylum for the Insane crowning its hill to the northeastward, the Atlantic's expanse, abroad and blue in the east, the wild undulations of the Fells stretching away on all sides, with its blue lakes, and merging in the seeming wilderness that beyond on nearly every side is but dotted, here and there, with islets of human habitation in the various cities and towns of this most popular section of New England, a seeming wilderness: except to the southward where the vast metropolitan population spreads its sea of houses in the hazy distance, with a glittering dome of the State House just seven and three quarter miles away, the long range of the Blue hills rising rapidly grandly beyond, now also a great public reservation something like 18 miles distant, and marking the southerly rim of the Boston basin as the Middlesex Fells do the northern, with the Lynn woods and the intervening range of rock hills.

Taylor Mountain

forms a southerly extension of Bear hill. Pine hill, thrusting its promontory out into the more level country of the Mystic valley, forms a fine southerly outlook point, and the summer house on the cliffs in Malden does like service to the southeastward. Black rock, near the cascade, offers a most extensive easterly prospect. All of these marginal outlook points, with the exception of Bear hill, command views where the busy life of the outside world enters as an element, from its nearness. But from the hill marked by a dilapidated cairn called "Stone monument" - about 300 feet above the sea, and the highest point in the easterly fells - the effect of the view is that from the midst of a great wilderness. And wandering through the rambling ways - old wood roads and footpaths - one may go for hours with a sense of utter seclusion from the outside world. It is this that constitutes the main service of a great reservation like this: the opportunity to lose oneself in the wilderness and escape, for the time being, from jarring contact with the nervous distractions of modern city life.

And lying only five miles from Boston on its nearest side, accessible by steam cars at several stations on all sides, and by three lines of street cars that approach within half a mile of its limits, The Middlesex Fells cannot fail to become one of the most popular of all the beautiful recreation grounds that make Boston one of the most favored of cities.