

## An Environmental History of the City and Its Surroundings

Anthony N. Penna and Conrad Edick Wright, Editor  
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Reviewed by Neenah Estrella-Luna  
 School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, Northeastern University,  
 Boston, MA

Incorporating a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the social and physical world is a welcome development in academic research. The renewed interest in working across disciplinary boundaries is providing deeper and more satisfying explanations for why things are they way they are, where they are, and how they came to be that way. *Remaking Boston: An Environmental History of the City and its Surroundings* successfully uses an inter-disciplinary approach to environmental history in a place unique in both history and landscape.

*Remaking Boston* is a compilation of papers originally presented at the Massachusetts Historical Society's seminars on Boston's environmental history. Editors Penna and Wright bring together twelve scholars from across the social and physical sciences to provide a refreshing look at the urban environmental history of Boston and the surrounding region. They avoid the more familiar Boston development stories of landfilling, environmental pollution, and the judicial history of environmental cleanup. Instead, they integrate places outside of the city of Boston into these histories in interesting ways. They also incorporate more 20th century history than is usually found in books of this kind. These stories, both old and new, provide a wide-ranging overview of the environmental history of one of the oldest regions in the United States.

The editors bookend this compilation with the physical science perspective. The book starts with *The Drowning of Boston Harbor and the Development of the Shoreline* by Peter Rosen and Duncan Fitzgerald, which discusses the geologic history that created the original shape and topography of the Shawmut Peninsula and Boston Harbor. The final chapter by Abraham Miller-Rushing and Richard Primack, *Biological Responses to Climate Change in Boston*, demonstrates the utility of common historical research methods (artifacts in the form of herbarium specimens, journals, dated photographs) to study past climate change impacts on flora and fauna. However, most of the book is dominated by the social science perspective which focuses primarily on how the physical environment influenced social and economic relations (and how it continues to do so) and how social, political, and economic forces shaped, and reshaped, the physical environment.

For me, the most enjoyable chapters were those that complicated my own understandings of Boston's social history. For example, in *A City (Only Partly) on a Hill*, William Meyer presents the theory of vertical fringe, the idea that the pre-twentieth century urban geographic patterns of social group settlement and economic activity were heavily influenced by topography.

Contrary to today, high ground was occupied by marginalized groups and activities. Copp's Hill, Fort Hill, and Trimountain, hills that have since been mostly or entirely leveled in what is now central Boston, were occupied by the poor, and were the sites of the almshouses, jails, and noxious industry. The handful of large estates on the summits of these hills were either seasonal residences or were inhabited by wealthy people who did not have to travel into town on a daily basis. Meyer convincingly argues that, until technological advances made going uphill easier, hills were viewed as places of nuisance. The role of topography in shaping social relations forces us to review previous work on pre-20th century segregation. In *American Apartheid* (1993), Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton reported that there was less racial isolation and segregation in nineteenth century Beacon Hill. But we learn from Meyer that the north slope of the hill, which was inhabited primarily by African Americans in this time period, was the steepest portion of Beacon Hill, and therefore an undesirable place to live. Wealthier white Bostonians lived on the south side of the hill that was made more level with the Boston Common. The theory of vertical fringe reminds us to be wary of only measuring proximity horizontally; true distance may be considerably larger because of the topography.

Most of the chapters are nicely woven together, building upon each other almost seamlessly. Chapter 3 and chapter 4 discuss two theories that were later discredited but were key in the decision-making related to the shape and quality of the Boston Harbor, for both good and ill. In *What Lies Beneath* (Chapter 3), Michael Rawson describes the theory of scour, the idea that the force of water moving in and out of the harbor, river systems, and tidal reservoirs created and maintained the channels that make up the Boston Harbor. This theory was used for almost half a century to effectively restrict land-making activities on or near the harbor. This chapter also nicely illustrates the concept of the paradigm shift. Federal surveys undertaken to monitor the Boston Harbor and to provide additional empirical support for the theory of tidal scour found little evidence for it. However, the theory of tidal scour was not abandoned until the development of the theory of glacial retreat in the early twentieth century. Steven Rudnick describes how the miasma theory of disease, the notion that disease is caused by the "foul vapors of decaying matter" informed sanitation efforts from the eighteenth through the early twentieth century in *Remaking Boston Harbor* (Chapter 4). Sanitation policies based on the miasma theory were partly responsible for the pollution of the Boston Harbor, since the policy called for sewage to be collected and disposed in the harbor. A paradigm shift occurred here as well with the adoption of germ theory, the idea that disease is caused by microorganisms. The cleanup of Boston Harbor was supported in part by arguments that public beaches polluted by sewage was a public health problem.

Chapters 6 and 8 discuss the relationship between the city of Boston and its hinterlands in a way that calls into question the hinterland thesis and, with chapter 7, reminds us that theories developed using Chicago as the exemplar do not necessarily translate to places with different environments and histories. Brian Donahue tells us in *Remaking Boston, Remaking Massachusetts* (Chapter 6) that the towns and rural areas outside of Boston did not produce enough to support urban growth in Boston to any meaningful degree. The countryside was economically and socially interdependent within itself but not very dependent on Boston until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Before the railroads and modern roads, it was simply too difficult

to get to Boston from rural areas. However, it was suburbanization, with its transformation of farmland to bedroom communities, that created the strong interconnection between Boston and what had previously been countryside. David Soll provides a case study of this process in his chapter, *Reforestation in Norfolk County*. By the mid-19th century, Norfolk County farmers, located just south of Boston, realized they could not compete with Midwestern farms. So they shifted their focus to dairy and relied on Midwestern grain to increase milk yields. This led to higher quality manure, which was used to produce the higher crop yields in market gardens and in sustenance farming. The return to traditional intensive farming practices and grain feeding dairy cows did not require large amounts of farmland. As a result, unused pasture and farm land began to reforest.

Chapters 9 and 10 also work well together in telling the story of the rise, fall, and partial renewal of the region's park system. In *How Metropolitan Parks Shaped Greater Boston*, James O'Connell presents the effort to preserve open spaces and develop recreational facilities as an elite progressive reform activity focused on nature conservation and moral uplift. However, the agency that came to be charged with this, the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), evolved away from conservation, beautification or civic concerns and adopted an engineering orientation with an emphasis on infrastructure projects, especially roadway development. Efforts to expand the MDC were resisted by suburban communities who feared both higher taxes and a loss of local autonomy. The decline in support led to shrinking budgets and declining maintenance, which further reduced the appeal of regional parks. The revival of interests and attention to parks, especially in Boston's inner suburbs, is told by Daniel Driscoll and Karl Haglund in *Reclaiming the Middle Charles River Reservation*. After decades of both turning public land over to private development and general neglect, the MDC returned to a focus on providing access to natural areas in the 1990s. It started with the effort to better manage the suburban part of the Charles River by building a riverwalk. In order to do this, the MDC had to remove illegal incursions onto state property and acquire riverfront property it had previously sold. Not surprisingly, there was opposition to building a public space behind private homes and businesses. Much of the early opposition was either based on concerns about security and privacy or came from illegal encroachers. Driscoll and Haglund describe how the MDC was able to successfully balance conflicting interests, and how many opponents eventually came to support the riverwalk, including those who were illegal encroachers. This chapter describes not only the revival of support for public stewardship of parks, but also the small move away from the privatism that characterizes suburban culture.

Finally, chapters 11 and 12 very lucidly discuss the social construction of weather and how it relates to both culture and cultural authority. William Meyer describes the history of the sociology of weather in *Boston's Weather and Climate Histories*. This is a good overview of how the experience of weather relates to both culture and technology, and how it changed over time. For example, early settlers from England were not prepared for the rapid changes in weather that characterized the New England climate. But they also refused to change how they built their shelter despite models from local Indians. In particular, they relied on open fireplaces and chimneys, which were very inefficient. For two centuries, Anglo-Bostonians refused to adopt closed stoves used by French, German, and Swedish settlers, which wasted less heat and actually kept

interiors warmer. The experience of weather also changed with changing technology. Through the end of the nineteenth century, commerce with the countryside was easiest in winter because it was easier to move things over snow in sleighs than over poorly maintained roads. The use of railroads to transport people and goods began to turn snow from an asset into a nuisance. Lauri Bauer Coleman takes a completely different approach to the sociology of weather in *“Rain Down Righteousness”: Interpretations of Natural Events in Mid-eighteenth-century Boston*. She focuses on describing the variation in supernatural rationalism, the interpretation of the physical world that incorporates the role of God in natural events. Both religious leaders and natural scientists viewed weather events as messages from God that were expressed through the natural world. However, not all believers interpreted God’s will in the same way. Conflict occurred in the interpretation of natural events and was rooted in various attempts to secure or reinforce cultural authority in the interpretation of causes and consequences of natural events.

There are a couple of chapters that are not as well integrated into the book and regrettably they are the chapters that use a physical science approach. In particular, *In Search of the Shawmut Peninsula* by Stephen Mague could have been made more intelligible to a general audience. In addition, many histories of Boston ignore certain neighborhoods, specifically East Boston and Charlestown, and this book unfortunately continues that tradition. This omission is remarkable given that, as places that were previously islands before land-filling connected them to the mainland, they may very well have been the most remade of all of Boston’s neighborhoods. Their role in the social and physical history of Boston remains to be told. However, my biggest disappointment is the lack of maps. For a book that is about the changing physical space of Boston and the surrounding region, with only a couple of exceptions, it is curiously lacking in maps.

Despite these shortcomings, *Remaking Boston* is an enjoyable read for both pleasure and use in the classroom. Faculty teaching in the areas of urban studies, urban history, social and physical geography, or any course focused on Boston would find this book useful to assign to students or to prepare for classroom discussions. It provides a broad environmental history of Boston and the surrounding region. The authors tell stories that are not usually told and also incorporate history as recent as the end of the twentieth century. For those looking to enrich their understanding of the history of Boston, this book is definitely worth having.

## References

Massey, Douglas and Nancy Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.