

**Using Open Space and Historic Identity
To Strengthen Natick's Sense Of Itself
By Peter Golden for Natick 360**

Summary

Cities and towns that preserve both the natural environment and their historic identity benefit in numerous ways. By creating systems which link recreational space and wildlife corridors Natick adds value to its quality of life.

Further, by naming and documenting its historic villages – neighborhoods like the town center, Felchville, and the Navy Yard, – Natick adds further value to its sense of itself and in turn its desirability as a place to live.

In creating links between open space and historic areas Natick will gain in reputation and quality of life, especially when its development of commercial areas (the new mall) and renewed infrastructure (new schools) are viewed with them as a whole.

The long-term result of such combined initiatives is a strengthening of residency desirability and of property values within the town – a constructive result, whether real estate prices are in decline or in a growth mode.

Discussion

The keys to long-term preservation of value in Natick are trails and historic districts.

Charles Eliot foresaw the breakneck pace of development in Greater Boston at the close of the 19th century and decided to create a means to guide that development through the introduction of a "green armature" on which to build a new city. He saw correctly that the resulting greenspace (the MDC systems which served as an urban parklands model for the world) would preserve and represent the "best in the New England landscape" while adding to the prestige and value of adjacent housing.

Frederick Law Olmsted elaborated on Eliot's notions with the proviso that wherever possible his landscapes would represent a sense of endless perspective that would call attention to notions of the majesty and mystery of the eternal rather than pretty, self-conscious things like flower beds and decoration.

Thanks to the long-term efforts of Bob Eisenmenger and his colleagues on the Planning Board and more recently, Natick Walks and its leader Tim Collins, Natick already has a wonderful pathway system, some of which is devoted to linking neighborhoods and providing safe, direct ways to school. Some have called this "a walking school bus."

Unique community

Other parts of the pathway system lead to natural vistas and through woodlands where wildlife corridors are present. The latter accommodates the presence of deer and other species within

sight of the Town Center, which at this stage of its development is unique for a community so close to Boston.

Might Natick benefit from a great central park, such as that those in Boston and New York? Perhaps with modification the Gravel Pit might play that role, or some other site in town. But with a trail system already present in the town and large, accessible areas like the Wellesley College Campus and Elm Bank (an Olmsted design) nearby, it would seem the trail system is Natick's best chance for expansion and use in the immediate future.

It should also be noted that a substantial trail system already exists in nearby Wellesley while another, the "Rail Trail" is on the verge of commencing. By strengthening and expanding Natick's present trail resources and integrating them with those of abutting towns the beginning of an inter-regional parklands system will begin to appear.

Olmsted and Eliot knew well that Boston, indeed numerous cities around the world, were poised for dramatic growth at the end of the 19th century. While the depression of 1893 led to widespread bankruptcy and a stop to projects like the Cambridge Esplanade (Much of the project was purchased at fire sale prices for the MIT campus in 1910.), it created an opportunity for Eliot to purchase much of what now constitutes the Charles River Parklands and extended Reservation (over 400 acres) for pennies on the dollar.

Integrated urban parklands

Going a step further, Eliot and his cofounder and successor at the MDC, Baxter, bought everything from Revere Beach to the Quincy Shore Drive and vast tracts in between (the Lynnway, the Fells, Alewife, Fresh Pond, etc), then combined them with the Fenway, Arborway, Jamaica Way, the Blue Hills and Quincy Shore Drive to create the world's first integrated urban parklands system in the 1890s.

What Eliot and his sponsor, Higginson, (an investment banker and founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra) proposed to do was not purely altruistic. Both recognized that while urban growth was an unstoppable phenomenon (population gains in urban areas in multiples of 100 were not uncommon in the 19th century), the creation of a green cityscape (what Olmsted called 'the country in the city') would yield multiple benefits, not the least of which was stabilized and well-supported property values, as we noted earlier.

Then, just as today, proximity to parks and tree-lined boulevards (Commonwealth Ave, both in-town and out) led to marginally higher property values than in other parts of the city. At the local, municipal level towns like Belmont, Brookline, Newton and Wellesley got the message and have profited in the hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of dollars in enhanced property values as a result.

While there appears to be limited land and appetite to create a unified parkland system in Natick, or town still has a chance to follow suit, if only through a unified trail system. Once such a system was in place (and it already largely is), it might be possible to identify areas already in the public domain that might, through enhancement be made more accommodating to the notion of "parklands."

Expansion of walking paths

In the later case this might include the expansion of walking paths at the Gravel Pit or elsewhere, the inclusion of picnic groves and even built promenades along the shores of Morse or Dug Pond, or even Pegan Cove.

With a strengthened trail system in place, Natick might follow suite on Brookline, where numerous trails link neighborhoods and also feed a series of small park/playgrounds/woods (Amory, Griggs, Greenough, Lawrence, Baker) where walking, athletic and socializing opportunities abound.

Notably, the Rail Trail will link Natick Center with the Natick Mall, which in turn will link with Framingham and communities northwest of our town.

Consistent with such thinking is the notion of a strengthened historic appreciation of the town, especially in light of its various epochs and enterprises over the centuries. One easy way to move such a process forward would be through the agency of interpretive signage and markers, such as those recently installed at the Indian Cemetery on Pond Street.

Natick's role in the Early Settlement period as a Praying Indian town, as the marshalling point for the ethnic cleansing of the Native American population after King Phillip's War (See documentary mural in Natick Center post office), as a participant in the American Revolution, and as the home of Henry Wilson all bear notice through interpretive signage.

Similarly, the role of the town in tanning and shoe manufacturing, as a summer resort, in brewing and high technology all bear notice, as well.

One way to do this might be by means of a visitors' center in Natick Center, another through interpretive signage linked to events, places or centers of enterprise. Another might be a center for Indian life somewhere within the town.

Summary

Walking/biking trails create links between neighborhoods and communities and offer manifold benefits, including increased health, reduced fuel consumption, easier access to shopping and public facilities and improved socialization.

When the historical subtext of our town is made more apparent through interpretive signage the identity and perceived value of places and neighborhoods is strengthened. By combining both natural and historic "place making" Natick will benefit in all sorts of ways, but most importantly through an enhanced sense of its own identity, public perception and associated preservation of real estate values.

After word

Some of the thinking shared above comes from readings undertaken by Peter Golden. But the contributions of others to this paper must also be noted.

Discussions with Natick citizens Martin Kessel, David Parrish, Robert Eisenmenger, Tim Collins, Jason Makofsky, Laura Senior, Josh Ostroff, Fred Witte, Harlee Strauss, Connie O'Hare, Ann Blanchard, Steve Evers and Dick Miller helped refine and direct some of the ideas shared here.

Karl Haglund, a senior designer for the Mass. Department of Conservation and Recreation, and Renata von Tscharnier, president of the Charles River Conservancy were also helpful, as was a conversation with Ron Macadow of the Sudbury Valley Trustees.

Readings

While the perspective outlined above shows no more than a brief sketch of how Natick's green and historic resources might be enhanced through systematic use, the literature supporting such notions is rich and wide ranging. The eight volumes shown below, touch on various aspects of the natural and human landscape of Natick and New England.

"Landscape and Memory," while dense and somewhat obscure in parts, reprises the classical and romantic periods and the evolution of the idea that landscape is a mediational device with which mankind defines its relationship with nature.

Also of particular interest is the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, whose influence on American landscape architecture (He called it a science and essentially invented the term.) cannot be overstated. The recipient of over 6000 landscaping commissions, more than half of which he or his firm completed, he designed such diverse residences, parklands and facilities as Central Park, the Emerald Necklace, the US capital, the Columbia Exposition, Stamford University, Niagara Falls Park and Yosemite National Park.

It is notable that Elm Bank, where part of Natick's water supply is located, bears his stamp.

Four historical figures also bear mention here, although their presence in Natick remains largely unexplored at the local level. First, John Eliot and Henry Wilson bear special mention, especially so in the case of the later, who was a central figure in the prosecution of the Civil War (assuming the chairmanship of Senate Armed Services upon the retirement of Jefferson Davis), and was widely regarded as the next in line for the presidency of the US after Grant.

Eliot's attempt to bring local Native Americans into a Christian, civil society (he was widely believed to be converting Jews, the local tribes being considered part of the Lost Tribes of Israel) demands continuing examination on a variety of levels ranging from socialization and politics to ethno-botany.

Harriet Beecher-Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was a bolt of lightning across the American political landscape and is considered to be the precipitating influence on American political thought leading to the Civil War.

Horatio Alger's influence is more problematic in light of his personal life; yet his influence was pervasive, helping to promulgate a populist, bootstrap form of capitalism still pervasive in the

American character. While a discussion of all four of these individuals goes beyond the scope of this discussion, their presence and influence in Natick represents an asset of substantial worth that has yet to be explored.

Worthy of review (in alpha order)

- 1491 by Charles Mann
- Changes In the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England by William Cronen
- Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape by Charles Beveredge
- Inventing the Charles River by Karl Haglund
- Landscape and Memory by Simon Schama
- Mayflower by Nathaniel Philbrick
- The Name of War by Jill Lepore
- The Red King's Rebellion: Racial Politics in New England 1675-1678 by Russell Bourne