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Home > Archives > **Vol 39 (2011)**

Vol 39 (2011)

Geographies of Slavery

Guest Editors: Derek H. Alderman and G. Rebecca Dobbs

Table of Contents

Editorials

Editorial Update [PDF](#)
Karen M. Morin i-ii

Distinguished Historical Geography Lecture

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Historical Geography [PDF](#)
Richard H. Schein 7-28

Geographies of Slavery

Geographies of Slavery: Of Theory, Method, and Intervention [PDF](#)
Derek H. Alderman, G. Rebecca Dobbs 29-40

Slavery Heritage Representations, Cultural Citizenship, and Judicial Politics in America [PDF](#)
Christine N. Buzinde, Iyunolu F. Osagie 41-64

"A Wretched and Slave-like Mode of Labor:" Slavery, Emancipation, and the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's Coaling Stations [PDF](#)
Anyaa Anim-Addo 65-84

The Application of GIS to the Reconstruction of the Slave-Plantation Economy of St. Croix, Danish West Indies [PDF](#)
Daniel Hopkins, Philip Morgan, Justin Roberts 85-104

Applying the Panopticon Model to Historic Plantation Landscapes through Viewshed Analysis [PDF](#)
Lisa B Randle 105-127

Defetishizing the Plantation: African Americans in the Memorialized South [PDF](#)

Journal Help

NOTIFICATIONS

- [View](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

JOURNAL CONTENT

Search

All

Browse

- [By Issue](#)
- [By Author](#)
- [By Title](#)
- [Other Journals](#)

FONT SIZE

INFORMATION

- [For Readers](#)
- [For Authors](#)
- [For Librarians](#)

USER

Username
Password
 Remember me

Perry L. Carter, David Butler, Owen Dwyer	128-146
Representing Slavery at Plantation-House Museums in the U.S. South: A Dynamic Spatial Process	PDF
E. Arnold Modlin, Jr.	147-173
Afterword: Critical Geographies of Slavery	PDF
David Lambert	174-181

Research Articles

Enclosure Landscapes: Historical Reflections on Palestinian Geography	PDF
Gary Fields	182-207
Sardines, Place, and Taste	PDF
Dave McDermott	208-222
Negotiated Geographies of New Orleans's Place d'Armes, 1789-1852	PDF
Rebecca Sheehan	223-247
Landscaping the Garden City: Transportation, Utilities, and Parks in Newton, Massachusetts, 1874-1915	PDF
John H. Spiers	248-274

Review Essays

The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied. Volume II: April-September 1883	PDF
Margaret Pearce	275-280

Reviews

Book Reviews	PDF
	281-350



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Landscaping the Garden City: Transportation, Utilities, and Parks in Newton, Massachusetts, 1874-1915

John H. Spiers

At a December 21, 1878, meeting of the Newton Horticultural Society, local resident Reverend Thomas S. Samson remarked: "To the unpracticed eye there would seem to be little if any room for improvement in the cluster of beautiful villages which form our Garden City."¹ In upper- and middle-class town-and-country suburbs like Newton, Massachusetts, fears about the encroachment of unnatural and unhealthy conditions of large cities in the late nineteenth century inspired the pursuit of a brand of environmental reform known as "improvement." This landscape aesthetic sought to upgrade the quality of the physical environment through private initiative and to recreate the myth of a harmonious social order by maintaining the class exclusivity of a middle-class bedroom community.² As Newton grew more connected to nearby Boston in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, residents and public officials began to realize the shortcomings of "improvement." As a result, they embraced more rational, scientific, and interventionist methods for shaping their community. This article uses Newton as a case study to examine how suburban cultural ideals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a shift from the citizen-led ethic of "improvement" to municipality-directed city planning. Newton's residents and public officials turned to city planning because they believed it could more effectively achieve the scale and scope of environmental reform they sought. In the process, they exchanged their broader social vision of an ideal suburb for a more conservative program of public works in order to market their suburb as a desirable bedroom community.

The story of Newton, Massachusetts, resonates with the experiences of other late nineteenth and early twentieth century town-and-country or outer suburbs. Following the Civil War, Newton consisted of a federation of villages. On the north side were the villages of Newton Corner, West Newton, Newtonville, and Auburndale. They had the most affluent residents, the highest populations, and benefited from being on the main line of the Boston and Albany Railroad, which connected them to Massachusetts's two major cities, Boston and Worcester. To the south was the middle-class village of Newton Centre, the south's most populous; the working-class industrial villages of Upper and Lower Falls; and the

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relatively unsettled villages of Waban and Chestnut Hill, all of which lacked adequate railroad service as of the early 1870s. As Newton experienced a population surge in the late 1860s and 1870s fostered by speculators and the desires of those seeking to live in a major residential suburb of Boston, a political coalition formed to advocate that the town become a city. On January 5, 1874, Massachusetts approved Newton's request to become a city and thereby granted it greater control to regulate its environment for the benefit of the middle-class residents it sought.³

While adopting the "Garden City" as its official municipal identity, Newtonians did not pursue the type of planned community of the same name advocated by Ebenezer Howard. Howard's *Garden Cities of To-morrow* represented the culmination of a current of thought in the nineteenth century that attempted to solve a set of problems, including the physical and social encroachment of cities on rural areas, the decline of rural life produced by the drift of people to large urban centers, the congestion of central cities, and concerns about the unsanitary conditions of modern urban life.⁴ Howard proposed a highly planned community that included convenient access by modern transportation, controlled suburban land speculation by having residents pay rent rather than purchase their homes, and preserved a belt of open country beyond the city. Howard said of his "town-country" hybridization that in such places, "opportunities of social intercourse may be enjoyed than are enjoyed in any crowded city, while yet the beauties of nature may encompass and enfold each dweller therein."⁵ Unlike suburbs that more fully adopted Howard's plan, Newtonians used the "Garden City" moniker as shorthand to describe a more conservative vision of a desirable residential community that was a borderland between rural and urban in modern society.⁶ As a replacement for a strong and comprehensive plan for their city, Newtonians advocated that its local government undertake the provision of "improvements" and modern amenities. Instead of assuming Howard's call to control land speculation by featuring rental housing, Newton's residents endorsed home ownership. Rather than actually being a "Garden City," Newton in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was representative of a group of suburbs for which the limitations of "improvement" inspired a turn toward a relatively more interventionist mode of municipal planning of public works and infrastructure.

Improvement societies articulated a strong landscape aesthetic paired with a conservative and highly disciplinary orientation toward social issues and the regulation of space. On the surface, improvement groups sought incremental changes and fastidious upkeep of their surroundings through direct action and stirring up civic pride in order to market their villages as desirable places of residence for people working primarily in Boston and their families.⁷ As scholars have noted, "improvers" saw

environmental reform and the cultivation of a harmonious social order through natural surroundings as the leading agent of disciplining (sub)urban space.⁸ Residents of Newton Centre formed the city's first improvement society in 1878, charging it "to improve and ornament the streets and public grounds of the locality."⁹ Other improvement societies organized in Auburndale (1883), Newton Highlands (1886), Waban (1889), Upper Falls (1901), and Newtonville (1904). Efforts to create a citywide society were unsuccessful, due to the parochial nature of "improvement" ideology for improving one's immediate surroundings.¹⁰

While "improvement" offered one route for reforming one's environment, many residents and public officials found it insufficient for achieving the type of comprehensive reform they sought. As other scholars have demonstrated, this led people to appeal to municipal planning and administration as a more complete and interventionist strategy.¹¹ These scholars argue that the growing prominence of modern industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries imposed new and heightened considerations on cities to accommodate economic growth.¹² Following this analysis, Newtonians saw in the adoption of municipal reforms to improve governmental efficiency and in the implementation of city planning an opportunity to regulate and order space in ways that upheld prevailing upper- and middle-class social values and reinforced modern industrial capitalism's emphasis on profit, circulation and mobility, and order.¹³ In this transition from "improvement" to the beginnings of city planning, an earlier social vision intended to realize a specific "suburban ideal" gave way to a legal and professional exercise of city administration characterized by an ever-evolving selection of municipal projects.¹⁴ From 1874 to 1915, Newtonians engaged in what Robert Wiebe has termed a "search for order" by using, as other scholars have discussed, planning and administration to produce environmental reform that privileged capitalist-oriented values.¹⁵

Using Newton, Massachusetts as a case study to examine the transition from "improvement" to early city planning, this article discusses three areas where Newtonians sought to discipline suburban space. With transportation, they welcomed the extension of railroads and electric street railways and the construction of paved roads to further connect Newton to Boston, to promote residential suburbanization, and in a more limited way, to link together the villages. Yet, Newtonians did not view transportation as only an issue of utility; consistently, residents and public officials expressed concern over the natural aesthetics of the transportation landscape. Second, Newtonians focused on the creation and extension of municipal utilities, particularly water and sewage service. Residents understood municipal utilities not only as a matter of ensuring and promoting public health but also as a material discourse to attract middle-class families with

working professionals. The routing and timing of the extension of public services tended to concentrate on the established Newton villages on the north side before fanning out into the south side. The third issue on Newtonians' agendas was to set aside larger tracts of land and small, isolated grounds as park spaces. In "parking" the city, Newtonians initially created spaces for quiet aesthetic appreciation but by the early twentieth century, had turned toward creating parks as recreational spaces. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the residents and public officials of Newton, Massachusetts employed the ideology of "improvement" and the tools of municipal planning to transform their environment into a cultural landscape that married the picturesque enclave ideal of suburb with the modern amenities of urban life and that materialized the cultural values of order, beauty, and nature.

Transportation

While a number of factors ignited suburban development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, transportation became a crucial agent in this process. In his classic study *Streetcar Suburbs*, Sam Bass Warner, Jr. identified the streetcar as the catalyst for Boston's inner suburbs of the late nineteenth century. As he noted, "the more street railway service, the faster the rate of building."¹⁶ While his study focused on the inner suburbs of Boston, his point also applied to its outer suburbs at the time, such as Newton. In a comparative study of streetcar suburbs in Boston and Leeds, England, David Ward found that in Boston, the improvement of local transportation, combined with heavy immigration, inspired a large suburban residential building boom that reflected citizens' desires for suburban living.¹⁷ As other scholars have noted, the shift from the private, citizens-led initiatives for improvement to an interventionist strategy of city planning brought a heightened discipline and order to the city to maximize its use value.¹⁸ Through the installation of a railroad to serve the southern villages, the development of electric streetcar service, and the construction of paved roads, particularly Commonwealth Avenue, public officials in Newton connected the villages of the city closer to Boston and secondarily to each other in an effort to improve circulation and promote development.

By the early 1870s, the Boston and Albany Railroad connected Newton's northern villages to Boston, Worcester, and other major cities, while the New York and New England Railroad ineffectively linked the southern villages to outside cities. The difference in train service reflected the historic divide in development between the north and south sides. In the early 1880s, however, the Boston and Albany Railroad bought the New York and New England Railroad and, to the delight of residents in the

southern villages, opened the Circuit Railroad in 1884, which connected the southern villages to the north side villages at Riverside station. More importantly, the Circuit Railroad connected all of Newton's villages to Boston. With a railroad circuit taking people to and from Boston, the residential suburbanization of Newton, particularly on its south side, began.¹⁹

While railroad service linked Newton to Boston for more affluent middle-class residents, electric streetcar service subsequently emerged on the north and south sides to move blue-collar workers between Newton's villages and to smaller nearby cities such as Waltham, Watertown, and Cambridge. Four electric railway companies created over half a dozen streetcar lines between 1866 and 1893.²⁰ Leading this push for transportation services was a coalition of real estate developers, city officials, and business groups in Newton, who like their counterparts in other suburbs, advocated transit as crucial to real estate profitability and increasing tax revenues.²¹ In the 1890s, however, real estate speculation slowed in Newton, leading companies to consolidate their service and to propose to reduce transfer privileges. By 1900, the Boston Suburban Electric Company had consolidated seventy miles of track.²² As a result, residents grew frustrated with the decline of streetcar service and, in March 1907, the Company restored free transfers throughout Newton and increased service for Newton Centre during the morning and afternoon rush hours.²³ Ultimately, with the rise of the automobile, railroad and electric streetcar service in Newton began a permanent decline by the 1910s.

While developers and business interests focused on the efficiency and functionality of transit, Newton residents and officials also expressed concerns about the appearance and safety of railroad stations in relation to their importance for attracting suburban development and tax revenue. The biggest public outcry of the period was over the grade crossings on the Boston and Albany Railroad line. At a meeting on January 4, 1894, the short-lived North Side Improvement Society insisted that depressing the railroads tracks would "beautify the city, give safety to public travel, and enhance the value of Real Estate making Newton more desirable as a place of residence for that class of population which will bring wealth to our city treasury."²⁴ This statement suggested that in some ways Newton had become less attractive to prospective residents due to competition from surrounding suburbs that offered more land and housing at a lower price, and that renewed efforts had to be made to market Newton's residential appeal in order to pay for the service demands of being a city.

Over the next couple of years, residents pushed the city to petition the Massachusetts legislature to address the grade crossing issue. After taking their case, the Massachusetts Superior Court ruled on March 3, 1896, in favor of the city "that it is necessary for the security and convenience of the public" to depress the railroad tracks in order to abolish grade

crossings.²⁵ After the ruling, it took \$2.5 million, the removal of seventy-one houses and twenty-five blocks, and the pressure of improvement associations, to complete the work of depressing the tracks and lowering the grade crossings. Completed in 1909, this project improved the aesthetics of train station grounds and the speed of the trains for commuters, thereby supporting Newton's interest in being a bedroom community for Boston.²⁶

Along with the extension of railway and streetcar transit, the development of roads in Newton further supported emerging planning interests in promoting the orderly circulation of people. In the mid-1880s, the Commonwealth Avenue Street Railway Company sought the city's inclusion in its Commonwealth Avenue project, a grand avenue in the tradition of Baron von Haussmann's Parisian boulevard that combined paved roads and streetcar service. In the early 1890s, the city appointed a committee to look into the matter after several residents in the projected path of the Avenue expressed their willingness to donate portions their land with the belief that the boulevard would increase property values, promote development, and improve transportation. The committee approved the plan. During the 1890s, the Newton Street Department extended Commonwealth Avenue from the Boston border through Newton. By the end of 1895, workers had laid out 5.5 miles of the Avenue and, by 1898, had finished its extension to the Weston line along the Charles River.²⁷

The Commonwealth Avenue project was significant for two reasons. First, it illustrates the shift from "improvement" of Newton's local villages toward addressing a broader range of issues at the city-wide level, including structural organization, the timing of development, and infrastructural needs. Second, over the next few decades, Commonwealth Avenue became a leading site for development in Boston and Newton with little in the way of restrictions on building, which further invited capital investment and speculation in the field of housing.²⁸

The assumption of the construction, improvement, and maintenance of local streets by Newton's government was another sign of the growing interventionism of city planning to promote order and efficiency on a city-wide level. At this time, Newton had five major streets: Washington, Boylston, Beacon, Centre, and Walnut.²⁹ During this period, many residents built roads connecting their properties to these main thoroughfares. Under the legal system in place, residents could build their own roads and petition the city to accept them, which meant the city would take over responsibility for maintenance. From 1889 to 1915, the total mileage of roads increased from 140 (110 miles accepted and 30 unaccepted) to 224 (145 accepted and 79 unaccepted).³⁰ While the density of roads was greater on the north side, significant construction had occurred by 1900 on the south side. This era of road building, however, had its drawbacks. As the City Engineer noted in 1898, there was a tendency for residents to build

self-serving roads that created a disconnected transportation network.³¹ If the rise in unaccepted roads was attributable to newer development and a focus on "improvement," the increase in accepted roads suggested the growing role of the city to order its transportation infrastructure. The balance between the two, then, demonstrated that for Newton, like other suburbs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "improvement" and city planning operated alongside one another.

Newton's assumption of road maintenance revealed how city planning emerged within the context of increased government involvement in regulating the physical fabric of the city. Recognizing the expectations of Newton's residents, Mayor J. Wesley Kimball insisted in early 1884: "Our citizens are not satisfied with ordinarily kept streets, but require and are accustomed to a high standard of roads."³² Like transit, Newton's roads reflected on its ability to attract and keep residents. At the same time, road maintenance privileged the northern villages of the city. For example, residents of the southern village of Waban had several concerns about the lack of upkeep of its streets, particularly the need for repairs, problems of drainage, and resurfacing, which the city only started to address in the early twentieth century.³³ As Newton grew and developed, increased transit and automobile traffic exacerbated congestion and the need for street repairs, particularly along main thoroughfares such as Commonwealth Avenue.³⁴

By 1915, Newton had two hundred twenty-four miles of roads. In his evaluation of Newton's municipal operations, an outside consultant named Edwin Cotrell faulted not only Newton's side streets but also many of its main roads, outside of the town squares and major intersections, for not receiving adequate cleanings and maintenance.³⁵ Yet, in comparison to other cities, he was impressed with how Newton maintained its roads: "They carry an enormous amount of traffic, have adequate width and length, and are in better condition than those of any other city in this section [New England] of the country."³⁶

Although concerned about efficiency, many Newtonians also had aesthetic concerns about transportation routes. Improvement associations often petitioned the operators of railroads and electric streetcars to build waiting rooms, install lighting, make repairs to roads near the stations, and to keep their stations clean and naturally landscaped for the benefit of current residents and to make a favorable impression on visitors.³⁷ Charles Mulford Robinson, a nationally recognized writer on city and town improvement, cited the Boston and Albany Railroad and its Circuit Railroad as having well-designed railroad stations. Robinson praised not only the landscape architecture of the station grounds but also the landowners who created appealing landscapes near from the stations.³⁸ This emphasis on park-like landscapes also applied to roadsides. In 1884, Mayor Kimball



Figure 1. Newton Highlands Railroad Depot (1907). Courtesy of Historic Newton.

advocated adorning roadsides with trees in recognition of “the very great value, both as regards comfort and beauty” that they possessed.³⁹ Improvement societies led the way in this field, even with the rise local planning in the early twentieth century.⁴⁰ In March 1909, for example the Newton Centre Improvement Association approved a budget for planting elm trees on a section of the Boston and Albany Railroad tracks from Langley Road to Cyprus Street.⁴¹ The value attributed to improving train stations and roadsides reflected efforts to foster Newton’s attractiveness as a residential community.

Water and sewage

In *Streetcar Suburbs*, Sam Bass Warner Jr. remarked, “During the last third of the nineteenth century, sanitation and power services became established as prerequisites for the standard home.”⁴² While Warner highlighted the importance of utility services in fostering suburban development, scholarly focus on the transportation developments that shaped nineteenth and early twentieth century suburbs has tended to marginalize discussions about the environmental history of cities.⁴³ Earlier scholarship, including Stanley K. Schultz and Clay McShane’s 1978 article “To Engineer the Metropolis” and the work of Joel Tarr, focused on how technology and the shift toward city planning changed urban environments.⁴⁴ Scholarship since the mid-1990s, including Nancy Tomes’ *The Gospel of Germs* (1998) and Adam Rome’s 1996 article on the language of pollution and environmental reform from 1865-1915, has emphasized the importance of civic activism in articulating environmental reform as an issue of middle-class disciplinary interest in controlling pollution or beautifying the city.⁴⁵

Through a close reading of the attitudes of environmental reform among Newtonians and the city building process in their municipality, this article brings together these previously separated scholarly inquiries.

Looking at the attitudes of environmental reform among Newtonians and seeing how those attitudes manifested themselves on the landscape allows us to further consider the transition from "improvement" to planning that characterized late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suburbs and cities. Generally speaking, the installation of water and sewer lines, like transportation infrastructure, began under the aegis of improvement. However, as popular concerns about sanitation grew, residents petitioned public officials to intervene more concertedly to extent utility lines, pushing the development of utilities ahead of transportation. Unlike the ethos of improvement, which was more responsive to the public, planning utilities particular tended to emphasize technical decision-making detached from popular control.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most critical concern for urban residents of the nineteenth century was environmental pollution. Prior to the 1870s, Newtonians, like many Americans, obtained their water either from local surface sources, including ponds and streams, or from private sources, such as local water companies or wells, while depending on cesspools and privy vaults to remove waste from their houses. As (sub)urban areas increased in population, concerns arose over the availability of water supplies and the lack of regular upkeep of waste removal systems. In a landmark 1877 report, Newton's Board of Water Commissioners insisted that because the demand for a large supply of water had grown ever more pressing, the city should create a municipal water system. Other reasons that cities like Newton cited a municipal solution for water included the taste, smell, and potential contamination of local and private supplies; concerns about fighting fires; water for flushing streets during times of epidemics; and industrial demands for a clean and regular water supply. Newton's public officials, like those in many suburbs and cities, had to decide whether to focus on treating and making water available for consumption or providing potable water and treating sewage.⁴⁷

Like many places, Newton's officials chose water first and sewage second because of fiscal constraints and prevailing ideas of sanitation. With the aid of state legislation passed in 1872 and 1874, Newton received permission to draw water for a municipal system from a tributary of the Charles River and from several ponds, including Hammond's, Wiswall, and Bullough, along with Cold Spring Brook; additionally, it received authorization to take land to build reservoirs or dams.⁴⁸ In his address in 1874 as Newton's first mayor, J. C. Hyde advocated a water-first position.⁴⁹ In 1877, the city's Board of Water Commissioners insisted that Newton's subsoil base was highly conducive to filtering sewage, suggesting that the

city did not immediately need a municipal sewage system.⁵⁰ Newton's decision to pursue water first fit with prevailing ideas of sanitation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which revolved around an accepted theory that running water purified itself over a given distance and, thus, sewage could be transported through water-carriage systems.⁵¹ While cities focused on water, environmental pollution still increased due to population growth and because municipal water and technological developments such as water closets actually created more sewage and greater demands on drainage systems as utilities became a requisite middle-class amenity.

By identifying the provision of municipal water as one of a collection of factors for making Newton a more healthful place of residence than large cities such as Boston, residents, public officials, and developers supported the interventionism of local planning to regulate the city's sanitation.⁵² In contrast to well water, city public health officials cited municipal water as healthier.⁵³ In 1887, Mayor J. Wesley Kimball extolled: "The benefit of a public system of water-works to supply the community with pure water, its good effects upon the health of the people, and its influence upon the growth of the place, are obvious to all."⁵⁴ As more villages connected to the municipal water supply, the city government continued to pride itself on the healthful quality of city water and on its ability to recruit residents.⁵⁵ Newton's decision to join Boston's metropolitan water system in the early twentieth century, however, suggested that providing water became too heavy of a financial obligation for Newton to shoulder on its own.

For the middle-class residents of the more developed villages in Newton, whose viewpoints on environmental pollution shifted from "sanitary science" toward a "gospel of germs" during this period, their references to germs also held social implications. The "gospel of germs" became a discourse for discouraging the social interaction of middle and upper class residents with working-class and poor citizens not just in large cities such as Boston but even the working-class communities in Newton at Upper and Lower Falls.⁵⁶ The discourse of germs was as much about controlling the spread of disease as managing socioeconomic integration. Although the class divides between the north and south side villages in Newton strongly shaped the development of transportation infrastructure in the city, progress on water and service outpaced transportation by the early twentieth century because of growing concerns of germs.

A final reason for Newton's decision to build a municipal water-works was to contain the threat of fires. Fires in several large cities in the early 1870s, including Boston, had cautioned outlying communities to ensure that they had enough water to protect residents against the threat of fires. In 1879, the chief engineer of the Newton Fire Department noted

that the large area of the city, the lack of water facilities in the distant parts of villages, and the distant location of fire and alarm stations made the Department's job incredibly difficult.⁵⁷ The old construction in the villages, combined with the ongoing real estate speculation, which built mostly wooden structures, generated concerns arose over the threat of fires spreading rapidly.⁵⁸ In the 1880s and 1890s, demands for fire equipment and water rose, leading Newton to extend its water mains and install more fire hydrants and alarm boxes.

Similar to the development of transportation, the provision of municipal water in Newton began on the north side and proceeded south. The work began with the creation of the Waban Hill Reservoir in the mid-1870s, a site chosen for its high elevation and ability to carry sufficient amounts of filtered water through the city streets for supplying fire hydrants and water lines.⁵⁹ With this reservoir and access to the Charles River and Boston's Chestnut Hill Reservoir, Newton made significant progress in installing water lines. From 1887 to 1899, the city's water usage more than doubled, from a high of eight million gallons to a high of twenty million gallons per week; for the first decade of the twentieth century, it leveled out at nearly twenty-three million gallons of water per week.⁶⁰ By 1915, Newton featured 158.5 miles of local water lines and 13.97 miles of lines that relied on sources from the Boston metropolitan area.⁶¹

While public officials focused first on providing water, they soon faced the need to address sewage. In 1878, Mayor William B. Fowle noted: "our city has arrived at a point when it is so thickly settled, that within its limits, sewerage, drainage and offal of all kinds can no longer be disposed of, or purified by the processes of nature."⁶² The city's department of health supported a growing recognition of the interconnected issues of water and sewage. In early 1881, diphtheria cases sharply increased in a tenement section of the distant industrial village of Upper Falls. After investigating the incident, the Department of Health attributed this to the use of shallow wells from which water had risen near the surface and the use of seeping privy vaults in disrepair. Following the city's decision to run municipal water and sewage service to the tenement complex, the Department of Health reported no subsequent diphtheria cases.⁶³ Such examples, on the surface, should have prodded the city into working on water and sewers at the same time and rate, but it did not. Even while population density made the issue of sewage a recognized public health concern, developing a solution presented a sizeable problem.⁶⁴

In 1880, the Commissioners for Drainage and Sewerage recommended a system of main drains and lateral sewers to deal with Newton's sewage. The Commissioners were unable to find any sites for a processing plant that were large enough and where the land was separated enough from residents to not be a "public nuisance."⁶⁵ As Newton developed in

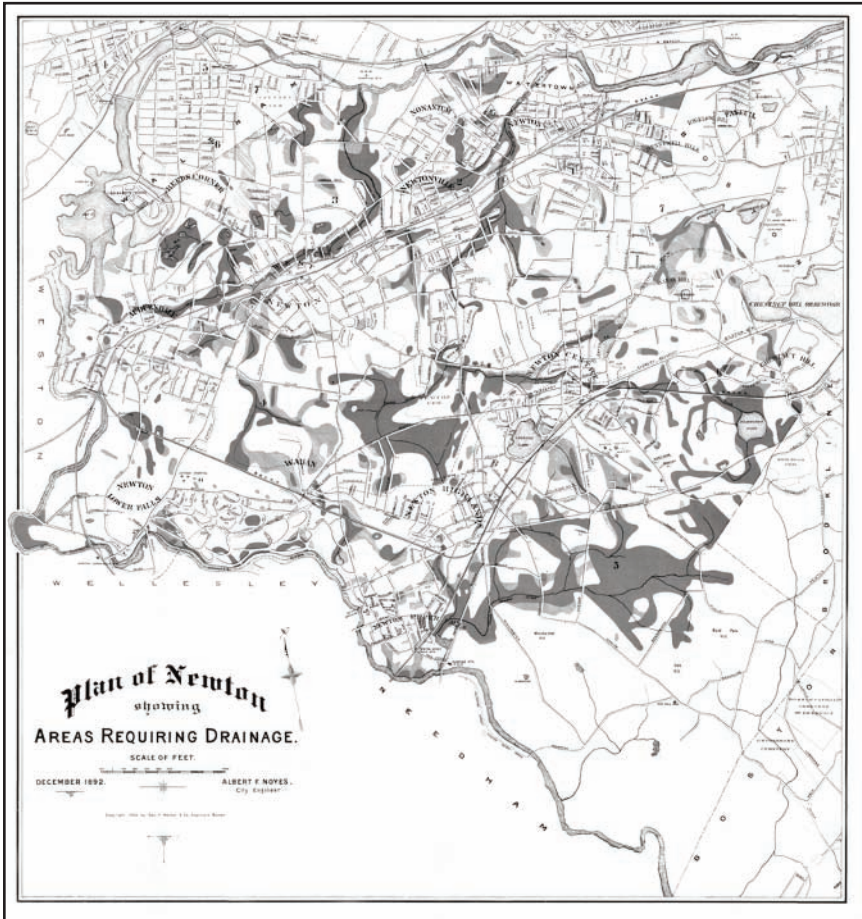


Figure 2. Areas Requiring Drainage (1892). Courtesy of Historic Newton.

the 1880s, the increased pollution from cesspools and privy vaults, along with water runoff, exacerbated the sewage issue.

Newton's city departments recognized the need to install municipal sewers but, for fiscal constraints, did not take action until the late 1880s and early 1890s. In 1889, the Health Department reported that much of Newton's soil was of no use in purifying sewage, although it recognized the need of continuing to rely on cesspools until financing allowed for extending the sewage system.⁶⁶ By the early 1890s, the sewage issue had become serious enough that the mayor recommended the city devote all of its extra expenditures to sewerage and drainage.⁶⁷

Municipal sewers attracted suburban development by offering a large, planned, public system that was maintained by the city rather than

individuals. The belief in the beneficial nature of technology, the rise in the sanitation and public health movements, scientific developments in medicine and engineering, and residents' desires to increase property values by projecting a "clean" city image provided the ideology and technology for sewer systems.⁶⁸ While some scholars argue that a regime of sanitation activists, landscape architects, and engineers had to convince or coerce citizens to sign onto municipal planning or otherwise hijacked the type of popular control of "improvement" ideology, the example of Newton suggests that new and existing residents favored this substantial government intervention.⁶⁹

In April 1892, Newton received permission to connect to the Boston metropolitan sewer system, which ran from Waltham through Newton, nearly parallel to the Charles River, to the main sewer in Boston.⁷⁰ The creation of the system in 1889 provided a regional solution to the intensive capital costs of municipal sewer systems and combated the tendency of individual communities to dump their sewage downstream on nearby neighborhoods.⁷¹ After April 1892, residents actively petitioned for connections to the municipal sewer system. By 1900, in apparent acknowledgement of the interests of the community and public officials, the city required all houses on the line of a public sewer to connect to them.⁷² At that point, installations had moved from the more affluent northern villages down to the southern villages including the middle-class Newton Highlands area and the two working-class communities at Lower and Upper Falls, respectively. Other areas, such as parts of Chestnut Hill, which received sewage service from the neighboring town of Brookline, along with Waban and Nonantum, had to wait to connect to the metropolitan sewer system.⁷³

The metropolitan sewer system did not initially provide drainage for storm water. In 1906, Newton's mayor reported that the city had made substantial progress in meeting recent statutory requirements to separate storm water drainage from household sewerage, particularly in Newtonville, where the general lack of slope in the land had made operating lateral drains and catch basins difficult.⁷⁴ On the other hand, in Waban, which had serious drainage issues, the lack of a comprehensive storm water runoff by the mid-1910s frustrated residents as suburban development had begun to rapidly develop the village.⁷⁵

The formation of ideas of modern sanitation and the development of municipal water and sewage systems in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries in Newton offers a revealing glimpse into late nineteenth and early twentieth century suburban development. Newton residents and public officials recognized the public health, social, and economic benefits of cleaning up and irrigating their community. Though the introduction of municipal water proceeded earlier and more quickly

than sewage service, both were essential to the sanitary landscape. In the middle-class's "search for order" that was characteristic of the period, many residents took comfort against the anxieties of modernizing life by embracing the public services enabled by the intervention of local government through planning.

Park spaces

As Americans reflected on the closing of the initial phase of settlement across the western frontier in the latter half of the nineteenth century, some sought new outlets for domesticating nature in a more planned and orderly way. The modern park movement in the United States originated within this context and in regards to concerns about making planned natural spaces available in urban areas where accessibility to open country no longer existed.⁷⁶ Parks were intended to provide a retreat from the problems of modern urban life, including "overcrowding, poverty, squalor, ill-health, lack of morals and morale."⁷⁷ In contrast to the private gardens of eighteenth and nineteenth century elites, urban parks were open to the public.⁷⁸ The prevailing landscape aesthetic of these parks was, in one scholar's words, *rus in urbe*—the country in the city—an aesthetic sought to rationalize the beauty and spirituality of natural spaces not only for their own merits but also as a projection and model of a virtuous society.⁷⁹ In contrast to the wilderness, which historically was portrayed as a place of potential danger and individual engagement, or private gardens, built for the elite classes, urban public parks were intended to provide a disciplined space for the socialization of diverse groups of people in a natural setting that emphasized harmony and order.

As America's foremost landscape architect of the latter part of the nineteenth century, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., was indicative of a belief in nature as a primary resource for improving urban life, and used this philosophy to design numerous parks, including Central Park in New York City and the Emerald Necklace of parks in Boston. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, this broad social vision for parks yielded to narrower interests in park design as a logistical task for municipal parks departments. Stepping outside of his father's shadow, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., was suggestive of the transition from improvement to planning in which parks were only one of several ongoing municipal projects. As a result of this shift, the design and use program of parks changed from one emphasizing pastoral landscapes and passive appreciation of nature to one of more active engagement and recreation. In this transition, the exercise of planning controls further disciplined the use of these spaces.⁸⁰

Park spaces played two key roles in Newton's growth and development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First,

residents and public officials identified park spaces as helping to establish a certain character for the city. In suburbs like Newton, parks were an attempt to bridge the rural and pre-modern natural landscape with a progress-oriented urban modernity that could create new models for social relationships on a suburban landscape.⁸¹ The nature of these social relationships, however, could prove suspect as the emphasis on parks and other public projects potentially elided over the lack of commitments to challenging the inequities underlying the capitalist market system.⁸² Second, the development of park spaces helped to market Newton as a desirable bedroom community accessible to the central city but far enough away from its pollution and unhealthy environment to provide a retreat in nature.⁸³

From 1874 to 1915, Newton's improvement societies initiated small-scale projects, but the local government increasingly took responsibility for making Newton into a city of park spaces. In 1875, a year after it became a city, Newton formed a Board of Park Commissioners at the behest of the Newton Horticultural Society to lay out one or more parks for the city. Although the Board lacked authority, the action suggested the growing importance of parks for Newtonians. Together, residents and public officials aimed to create park spaces not only in large, commonly accessible areas, but also in smaller sites such as in-between houses and along roads and public transit lines. Later, as ideas about the use of parks changed, Newtonians added playgrounds and other spaces for recreation to complement a large collection of private athletics clubs. The evolution of ideas about parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers valuable insight into the results in the shift from local improvement to city planning.

"In the mental picture of a beautiful city or village, the tree has an inseparable part."⁸⁴ Charles Mulford Robinson's statement spoke to Newtonians about the tree as a foundation for park spaces. As early as 1853, Newton residents had established a Tree Club. The later formation of the Newton Horticultural Society added to the interest in trees. In a meeting of the Newton Horticultural Society on December 21, 1878, which invited speakers to discuss "Village Improvement," the importance of trees to the landscape was clear. One of the speakers, who advocated planting trees along streets and avenues, spoke of a "fine tree" as "so graceful an adornment when it is finished, so difficult to replace, so enlivening a part of landscape."⁸⁵ In the 1890s, Newton's improvement societies still planted trees, although by this time, their agendas and those of public officials had broadened to focus on trees as one element of park spaces.⁸⁶

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries interest in trees shifted from their individual scientific or artistic focus to their value for making residential suburbs feel like parks. Charles Robinson's vision of "[t]ree-lined avenues, tree-arched streets, the background of foliage to

well-placed sculpture [...] the play of light and shadow on the pavement [...] the lovely chronicle of the season's progress" resonated with the landscape aesthetic of many Newtonians.⁸⁷ By 1908, the city created a Forestry Department to provide "maintenance, care and management of public parks, squares, play grounds and burial grounds" and the elimination of insects and pests.⁸⁸ Even with the city's assumption of park planning duties, attitudes about the natural value of trees continued to be important. In 1916, the Forest Commissioner in commemoration of Arbor Day, issued a pamphlet entitled "I Am a Tree, I Need Your Help." The pamphlet encouraged residents to protect trees because of their beauty, temperature control, air purification, and enhancement of property values.⁸⁹

Although many groups venerated trees for their aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific value, suburbanization frequently deforested landscapes. In the Newton Horticultural Society's 1878 meeting, Reverend J. Coleman Adams, a Universalist minister and Newtonville resident, warned of the impending destruction of trees with suburbanization. He urged: "Let us never identify improvements with the needless slaughter of trees."⁹⁰ While Newtonians positioned trees as central features of their (park) landscape, complications arose as the city's pro-development position increased real estate activity, which placed a premium on space and encroached on trees.

In 1877, Newton's Board of Park Commissioners laid out a vision of the city as a park. The Commissioners promoted a series of small parks connected by boulevards and avenues and at least one large park for the entire Newton community. The Park Commissioners imagined: "Fine houses, located at varying distances back from the avenues, surrounded by judiciously grouped trees, shrubbery and flower beds, with winding avenues and well kept lawns, and an entire absence of unsightly walls and fences, [that] would form a new feature in park scenery, and one very desirable and comparatively inexpensive." In comparison to the parks in large urban centers like Boston, the greater availability of land in Newton enabled the devotion of more space to parks and became a tool for further selling the city as a desirable residential suburb. In 1882, Newton's mayor, William P. Ellison, insisted that the city's future "is closely connected with the attractions that she can hold out to those who wish to have, in the place they choose for their homes, the comforts and conveniences of a well-ordered city, combined, however, with those beauties which are essentially rural in their character," the most appealing being a system of public parks.⁹¹ In 1882, the city received the power from the state legislature to take land for public parks.⁹² From 1889 to 1915, the city's acreage of parks increased from 40 to 231. In addition to creating its own network of parks, nearly half of the city's total acreage by 1915 (119) was part of Boston's metropolitan park system.⁹³

The development of parks throughout Newton reflected emerging tensions between ideals of parks as natural spaces for passive appreciation and as potential sites for recreational enjoyment. Early in this period, Newtonians created park spaces along roadsides, small town squares, and at road junction points. Much of this work involved improvement societies soliciting private donations and public assistance to purchase small pieces of land and then plant trees, along with encouraging residents to beautify the yard in front of their houses.⁹⁴ These types of projects continued into the early twentieth century. At its first meeting on May 17, 1904, the newly formed Newtonville Improvement Association appointed a committee to investigate whether the owners of tenement building property on the triangular lot bounded by Lowell Avenue, Walnut Street, and Watertown Street might sell it. Four years later, after raising money and obtaining supplementary funds from the city, the Association reported that the owners had deeded the lot to the city for a park.⁹⁵ Triangular neighborhood parks were a common feature and reflected the importance Newtonians attached to “parking” their city.

As ideas about the uses of parks changed, the earlier emphasis on passive enjoyment gave way parks for recreation. The move to organize outdoor recreational spaces for social interaction began with playgrounds for school age children. In his 1877 mayoral address, Alden Speare argued that the primary use for public parks in Newton should be to serve as playgrounds for children.⁹⁶ In 1901, Newton’s superintendent of schools argued that plentiful outdoor recreational spaces “are indispensable to the health and happiness of growing children, and form the best outlet for their irrepresible activities.”⁹⁷ Newton’s Forest Commissioner envisioned parks as “a place at the door of the people where the children may go for air and play,—a park accessible to men and women who cannot go to the country for rest and recreation.”⁹⁸

Newton residents actively solicited their local government to create outdoor playgrounds and recreational spaces. One of the earliest requests came from the Newton Centre Improvement Association in May 1886. In the early 1890s, the city gave the project proposal \$10,000 after three prominent citizens contributed the bulk of the twenty-five acres of land and residents had raised \$15,000.⁹⁹ The improvement society later had an open-air gymnasium and tennis courts added to the playground. Other villages in Newton shared in this pursuit of outdoor recreation and added sporting equipment to playgrounds and parks and flooded portions of playgrounds in the winter to create skating rinks.¹⁰⁰ Residents organized the Playground and Social Service League of Newton in 1902 to work with the city to provide new parks and recreational spaces and to maintain existing facilities.¹⁰¹ By 1907, Newton Centre and Newtonville had significant appropriations in land and maintenance for playgrounds while other

Name	Location	Village	Year Created	Acreage	Baseball Diamond
Centre Green	Ward 6	Newton Centre	1726	1.94	
Grafton Park	Ward 6		1859	0.25	
Lincoln Park	Ward 3		1868	0.84	
Islington Park Playground	Ward 4		1872	1.43	Yes (1)
Farlow Park	Ward 7	Newton Corner	1883	3.76	
Loring Park	Ward 7		1884	0.69	
Linwood Park	Ward 2	Newtonville	1888	1	
Allison Park Playground	Ward 1	Nonantum	1889	5	Yes (1)
Newton Centre Playground	Ward 6	Newton Centre	1889, 1897	16.41	
Boyd Park Playground	Ward 1	Nonantum	1893	6.06	
Cabot Park Playground	Ward 1	Newtonville	1894	14	
Auburndale Park (Metro. Park)	Ward 4	Auburndale	1894	28.81	
Lower Falls Park	Ward 4	Lower Falls	1894	46	
Brooks Park	Ward 7		1897	0.13	
Elmwood Park Playground	Ward 2		1898	0.63	
Wolcott Burr Park	Ward 4		1905	0.6	
Stearns School Playground	Ward 1		1906	1.15	
Bray Park	Ward 6		1906	0.08	
Clafin Field Playground	Ward 2		1906, 1907	6.43	
Paul Park	Ward 6		1907	0.35	
Nye Park	Ward 4	Auburndale	1908	1.09	
West Newton Playground	Ward 3	West Newton	1909	3.63	
Upper Falls Playground	Ward 5	Upper Falls	1909	6.93	
Beacon Triangle	Ward 6		1909	0.25	
Kenrick Park	Ward 7		????	0.72	
Total Park Acreage, 1910				148.18	

Table 1. Parks and Playgrounds in Newton as of 1910. Source: Forest Commissioner, Report, Public Documents for 1910, 17.

villages, such as West Newton, Auburndale, and Upper Falls did not have any playgrounds.¹⁰² The interest of Newtonians in outdoor recreational spaces also reflected broader trends in the US at the time that saw the creation of the American Civic League's department of recreation in 1904 and the formation of the Playground Association of America in 1906.¹⁰³

For the city of Newton, the most noteworthy achievement in the area of parks occurred with the opening on June 17, 1897, of Norumbega Park, also known as Auburndale Park, a park of nearly twenty-nine acres that stretched along the banks of the Charles River as part of Boston's Metropolitan Park system. Local historian Henry Rowe's description of the park indicates its rich and varied landscape:

To the natural grove had been added two hundred trees, five hundred shrubs, and one hundred vines. Its proximity to the river added to its popularity, and its one hundred and fifty canoes and launches were quickly in demand. Its deer park of an acre or more, its rustic paths, its theatre with seats for twelve hundred people, the merry-go-round, the daily band concert, and the beautiful effects of the electrical fountain in the centre of an acre pond, proved a great attraction.¹⁰⁴

While Newtonians recognized the attraction of public parks, many residents and public officials also believed that behavior in these parks should reflect middle-class values of sobriety, orderly virtue, and disciplined use of leisure time.¹⁰⁵ To regulate the use of Norumbega Park, in 1899, Newton and the neighboring city of Weston added additional police to those provided by the Boston Metropolitan Park Commission in an effort at "stopping all profanity and songs of ribaldry" from park guests.¹⁰⁶ Norumbega Park continued in Newton for the next several decades, providing residents and visitors alike a recreational park that pushed past earlier pastoral park design models to embrace a more active engagement with nature.

In his appraisal of Newton's municipal operations, Edwin Cotrell captured the importance of playgrounds for the residents of Newton in remarking: "The citizens realize the absolute necessity of an abundant opportunity for healthful supervised play and the training of a spirit of loyalty to the city which it engenders."¹⁰⁷ His notion that parks and playgrounds fostered civic loyalty clearly reflected the ways in which Newtonians worked within their own associations and in concert with the city government to generate an ethos of improvement that brought together the community. Yet, for all of the increasing focus on parks as spots of recreation, however, in most cases, their natural elements remained in the foreground.



Figure 4. Norumbega Park, c. 1910. Courtesy of Historic Newton.

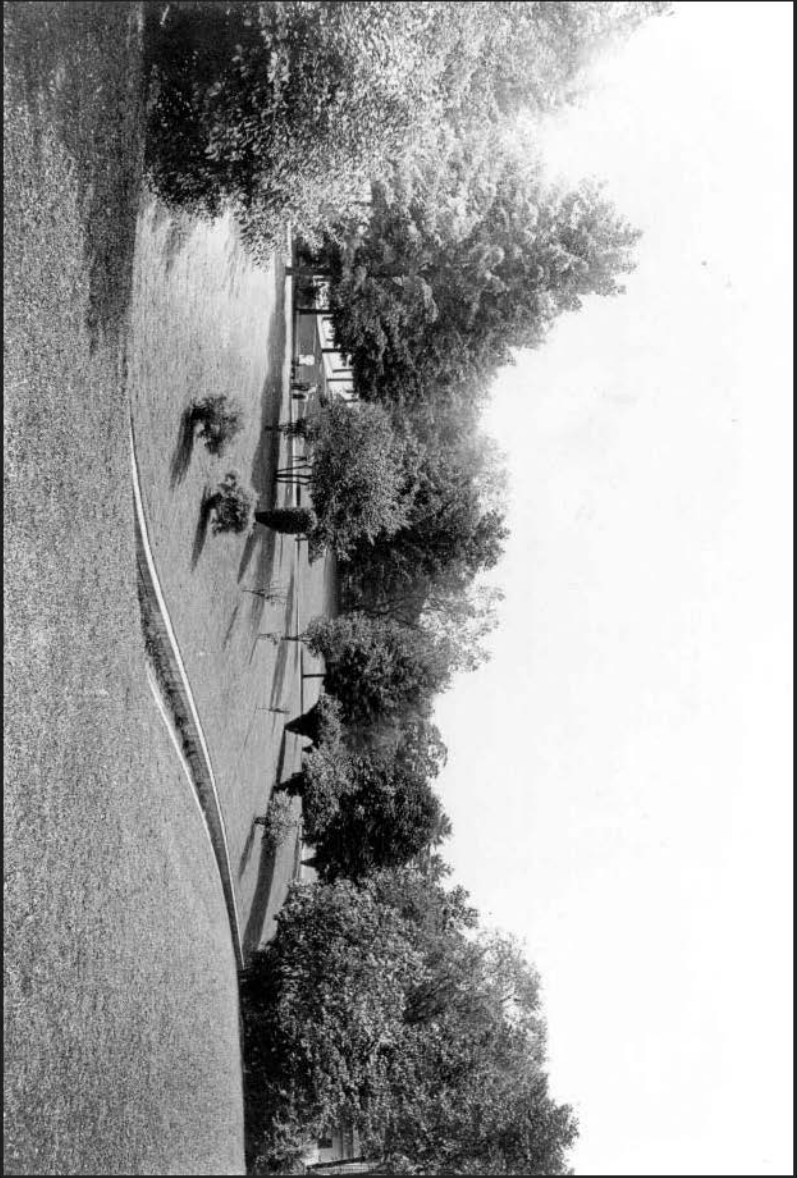


Figure 5. Newton Center Playground, early twentieth century. Courtesy of Historic Newton.

Conclusion

The residents and public officials of Newton, Massachusetts worked together in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on an agenda of environmental reform in the fields of transportation, municipal utilities, and parks. As industrialization, immigration, and urbanization in the nineteenth century changed cultural understandings of the city from “a living body” to a machine devoted to capitalist accumulation, suburbs such as Newton sought to position themselves in opposition to the ecological damage and environmental pollution wrought by such a model.¹⁰⁸ Newton’s suburbanization in this period speaks to an important historical moment when many cities and suburbs moved from the citizen-led efforts of “improvement” to the more statist and interventionist model of city planning in order to pursue the type of environmental reform that middle-class residents and public officials wanted. Newtonians’ interests in making their landscape sanitary and beautiful, however, conflicted with political and economic forces that encouraged real estate speculation by marketing the desirability of the city to current and prospective residents in order to build a tax base that could support continued municipal planning obligations. In the process, city planning became increasingly beholden to the values of capitalism, including order, accessibility, and growth. The story of Newton, Massachusetts was not a unique case, but instead a site for considering the formation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural ideals of suburbia and how, within the context of the emergence of city planning, they manifested themselves on the landscape.

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Notes

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98. Forest Commissioner, Report, *Public Documents for 1910*.
99. Newton Centre Improvement Association, Minutes, May 22, 1886; newspaper article [unknown], 1890, 109, in Papers, Box 1, Historic Newton.
100. Newton Centre Improvement Association, April 11, 1899, 19-20; May 20, 1899, 22; June 13, 1899, 24, January 11, 1900, 30; May 23, 1901, 63-64, October 10, 1901, 77; all in Papers, Box 1; Waban Improvement Society, May 16, 1907; December 6, 1911; March 13, 1913, vol. 2, 1911-1933.
101. Rowe, *Tercentenary History*, 369. I am unable to locate any records for this organization.
102. Superintendent of Schools, Report, *Public Documents for 1907*, 48.
103. Forest Commissioner, Report, *Public Documents for 1910*, 18.
104. Rowe, *Tercentenary History*, 288.
105. Forest Commissioner, Report, *Public Documents for 1909*, 22; Young, "Modern Urban Parks," 537.
106. Police Department, Report, *Public Documents for 1899*, 29.
107. Cotrell, *Efficiency Survey*, 117.
108. Merchant, *American Environmental History*, 115-119, 126.