

A History of
UNION PARK
In the South End

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Union Park has long been known as one of the most handsome of the tree-shaded residential squares surviving in Boston. With its towering elms, splashing fountains and air of tranquillity just steps away from bustling Tremont Street, it still casts a quiet spell over visitors and neighbors. Comparisons with Beacon Hill's Louisburg Square are sometimes made, and history shows that the two elliptical parks have much more in common than just their shapes.

The preservation and creation of green spaces within the boundaries of the city of Boston began for very pragmatic reasons, when townsmen used the Boston Common to graze cattle and sheep. As Boston grew rapidly during the eighteenth century, certain civic-minded citizens realized that the crowded town would be enhanced by the inclusion of trees and grass purely for the enjoyment and refreshment of its residents.

The first citizen to act on this need was Charles Bulfinch; architect, city planner, city selectman and businessman. Raised in a wealthy Boston family, Bulfinch traveled to Europe as a young man, and was much influenced by the striking examples of progressive urban planning he saw in London, Paris and most especially, Bath. With its crescent-shaped rows of uniform townhouses forming monumental compositions around green parks and squares, Georgian Bath exerted a profound influence on a young man who had been raised in a colonial city that did not even have a straight street. In 1793, Bulfinch designed, financed and began building his own more modestly scaled version of the grand crescents he had seen in Bath. Located on what is today Franklin Street in downtown Boston, his development was known as the Tontine Crescent, named after the "tontine" form of joint property ownership that he unsuccessfully attempted to import from Italy, each owner's share passing on to the other owners upon their death, until only one person owned the entire property.

Bulfinch created an asymmetrical composition with a 300-foot park as its centerpiece, a crescent of houses on one side facing a straight row of houses on the other. It was named Franklin Square in honor of Benjamin Franklin, although there was no statue of Franklin in evidence. The iron-fenced park in the center was fittingly dominated by a neoclassical urn that Bulfinch had purchased while

in Bath (this urn now marks his grave in Mt. Auburn Cemetery). The 16 houses of the crescent side had a uniform appearance with a handsome pavilion at the center, spanning what is today known as Arch Street. The expensive houses sold slowly, but the Tontine Crescent was a critical success, admired throughout the city for its innovative design and monumental scale. Not even London had a residential square like it at the time, and although the Crescent was demolished in 1858 due to the growth of the downtown business district, the concept profoundly influenced Boston city planning from that day forward.

Charles Bulfinch later became the head of the Board of Selectmen for the City of Boston, giving him the opportunity to experiment with his ideas about urban planning on a much grander scale. Since the founding of the city, the narrow isthmus of land that connected the Shawmut Peninsula with the mainland had been known as the Boston Neck. The "Road to Roxbury", today's Washington Street, ran down the center of the Neck. It was the only street on the Neck, with just marshes and a few scattered buildings occupying the land beyond the town gates, which stood where East Berkeley Street crosses Washington Street today. Bulfinch and the Selectmen saw the Neck as a perfect opportunity for Boston to sell off land to make a profit for the city, while increasing the tax base and tempting residents looking for more space to stay within the city limits.

In 1801, Bulfinch drew up a plan for the Neck, dividing it into regular streets set in a grid pattern with Washington Street running down the center. At a point about halfway between the town gates and the Roxbury line he set a large oval-shaped park named Columbia Square, after the ship his family had invested in that had begun Boston's lucrative China trade. Bisected by Washington Street, Columbia Square had trees planted around its perimeter, but was otherwise left unimproved by the city. Lot sales on the Neck were extremely slow, and it was to be many years before Columbia Square would be improved and renamed as two squares, today's Blackstone and Franklin Squares. One of the problems with the Neck was that it was facing stiff competition from another more successful development that offered land much closer to the center of town, Beacon Hill.

Beacon Hill was known early in its history as the Trimount, because of the three peaks that surmounted it, Mt. Vernon on the west, Pemberton Hill on the east, and Beacon Hill at the highest point in the middle. Initially developed by a group of real estate speculators known as the Mt. Vernon Proprietors, Beacon Hill quickly grew into one of the city's most fashionable new quarters. In 1826, a surveyor named S. P. Fuller laid out an ellipse of grass on the site where Mt. Vernon had stood, and lots around it were sold to a group of owners who jointly owned and maintained the park. Naming the ellipse Louisburg Square, the new Louisburg Square Proprietors became the first home association in the country, and had the task of taxing the owners to maintain the park in the middle. Houses around Louisburg Square were built between 1834 and 1848, mostly in the Greek Revival style. In 1848 the Proprietors enlarged the Square and installed an ornate Egyptian-Revival lotus-pattern fence at a cost of \$6,000, and two years later a

cast-iron fountain was installed. The fountain was removed in 1856, but during those years Louisburg Square's design and ornaments exercised a profound influence on the new parks the city was constructing in the South End. The homes of the wealthy surrounding an urban oasis of trees, grass and splashing water became firmly entrenched in the popular consciousness of the day as the ideal in elegant city living.

During the 1840's the Boston Neck began to grow rapidly in population, and as the city began to fill in the Back Bay and South Bay marshes at its edges to reclaim new land for building, the neighborhood came to be known as the new South End, taking its name from the original South End that Downtown Crossing now occupies. In 1849, Boston's new mayor John P. Bigelow decided the time was right for further improvements in the South End to encourage the city's growing upper and middle classes to stay, rather than moving to growing areas like Dorchester and Roxbury. Bigelow empowered the Joint Standing Committee of the City Council to "lay out such streets and squares on the public lands, and make such alterations in the lots as the best interests of the city may require."

Three new squares, Chester Square, Worcester Square and Union Park, were designed and built in the early 1850's, but some of the houses surrounding them were not completed until the 1860's. Of the three, only Union Park has survived largely intact. It was in June of 1851 that Union Park's lots were auctioned off around the park that Ellis S. Chesbrough himself had designed. Because its location closer to the center of town made Union Park a more desirable address, the city did not feel the same need to create such a large park, or sell such large lots as they had at the less accessible Chester Square location. At 16,000 square feet, Union Park fell between Louisburg Square and Chester Square in size. It was given the same ornate lotus fence with attached gaslights that surrounded Louisburg Square and the other two new South End squares.

Two matching lotus flower pattern cast iron fountains set in sculpted granite basins graced the center of the park. Gates at the opposite curved ends gave access to a crushed stone path that ran down the center around the two fountains, with a cross path at the center leading to two middle gates. A row of elm trees ran down each side of the park, and flowered borders flanked the paths. One of the earliest images shows two arched trellises covering the cross paths at the center. In later years a pair of flower-filled urns replaced the other plantings of flowers, and a flagpole was installed at the center.

Union Park was an immediate success, and the lots surrounding it were quickly sold at auction. Nearby neighbor Otis Everett wrote his son in September of 1851 that "The South-end markes (sic) progresses rapidly; (Washington) street has been paved from Dover to Brookline Streets and Union Park (back of Mr. Clap's store) is having an iron fence erected round it, and preparations for a fountain, so we should look in nice order when you return." Future Boston mayor, governor of Massachusetts and U.S. congressman Alexander Rice soon

bought his house on Union Park, as did grocery magnate S. S. Pierce. Another mayor of Boston, Joseph M. Wrightman, also moved to Union Park. The houses on the street had been completed by 1859, and the following year Wrightman wrote that "The experience of the city government in the laying out of the public lands in Ward Eleven is a favorable instance of the advantages of a generous policy in this respect. The wide streets, and open spaces and parks in that section, have induced many wealthy persons to erect many expensive and beautiful residences in the city, who would otherwise have removed to some of the suburban towns."

By the mid-1870's the emergence of the Back Bay as the city's newest neighborhood of fashion began an exodus of the South End's wealthier citizens that continued into the beginning of the twentieth century. As the South End lost its wealth, it also lost a great deal of its ability to command its share of city services. The squares began to decline physically as upkeep fell off, and by World War I, all three of the parks had lost their wonderfully elaborate lotus pattern cast iron fences. In 1913 a smaller, much less elegant wrought-iron fence was installed around Union Park, although the beautiful lotus flower fountains remain to this day. During the twentieth century, Worcester Square was narrowed by 15 feet and lost its original fountain. Its cast iron fence was replaced by a crude steel fence, and the center of the square became overgrown with inappropriate plants and trees. Chester Square suffered the most grievous damage of all when Massachusetts Avenue was rammed through its center in the 1950's, obliterating its fishpond and fountain in the name of improved traffic flow.

In spite of the indignities heaped on them in the twentieth century, the parks have remained the focus of their respective neighborhoods over the years. After World War I Union Park became the home of a large Syrian and Lebanese community that maintained the park when the city began to neglect it. Residents weeded, cleaned and raked the park, painting the fountains and seeing to it that the fence was kept in some semblance of good repair. The informal neighborhood group eventually became the officially recognized Union Park Neighborhood Association, and over the years has worked with the city to care for the grass, plant flowers, tend the old elm trees that remain from the 1851 plantings, and plant appropriate new trees when they die. The Association has organized clean-ups twice a year, and sponsors an annual Christmas celebration. The highlight each summer is the annual block party held on the park itself.

In the early 1980's, a renewed awareness of the park's history, both social and physical, led to the creation of the Union Park Restoration Committee, a group created within the Union Park Neighborhood Association. The South End had become a historic Landmark District in the meantime, and Union Park remains one of the highlights of the District. To bring the park back to its original Victorian appearance, the Restoration Committee researched the park's history and plantings, and began working towards a complete restoration. Funds were raised from the Browne Fund and the Henderson Foundation, both established to

help beautify parks and squares in the city of Boston. Using some of this money, the fountains, which were in a badly deteriorated state, were removed and recast to their original appearance. Recirculating pumps and lighting were installed, and their original granite bases were cleaned and repaired. The park itself was very uneven and filled with the stumps of long-vanished trees that need to be removed, so it was regraded and resodded, with an irrigation system installed to keep it green all summer.

The last stage of the restoration, for which fund-raising is currently in process, will be the restoration of the fence. The existing fence, which is 85 years old, is in drastic need of replacement. The recently formed Union Park Fence Committee has been exploring the options for restoration, and has presented several of them to the South End Landmark District Commission. The Commission decided that if the fence is to be replaced, it should be replaced with a reproduction of the original fence, or if not, the existing fence should be maintained.

Fortunately, most of the substantial granite bollards that supported the main posts of the lotus fence still remain. These bollards can be raised up to their original height, to accommodate the installation of a reproduction fence. Extensive photographic research has established that the original lotus fence was exactly the same as the one that still surrounds Louisburg Square. Because of its privately-funded care, this fence has survived for about 140 years with just minor repairs. The Proprietors of Louisburg Square have graciously agreed to share the molds of their fence for any necessary pattern-making.

With its fence restored and its fountains once again splashing under the elm trees, Union Park may once again take its place as one of America's outstanding urban squares, an oasis for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

Update: 2011

The original plan to install an ornate reproduction of the first fence (circa 1851) was later abandoned because of cost. Instead, the second fence (circa 1913) was restored in 2009-2010.