

**THE BACK-BAY
DISTRICT AND
THE VENDOME**

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The Back-Bay district and the Vendome by Moses King

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MOSES KING

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THE VENDOME.

BY MOSES KING.

1880.

THE CITY OF BOSTON.

TWO hundred and fifty years ago John Winthrop, at the head of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, bought of William Blaxton, for £30, a peninsula of perhaps 700 acres, which, it is said, was named Boston in honor of the English town whence had come some of the colonists, including Isaac Johnson, the second most important man among them. The colonists had settled a short time previously in Charlestown, — now a part of Boston, — but, not finding there agreeable water, made the purchase just mentioned, and founded a town that has ever since enjoyed an almost uninterrupted career of prosperity. The original territory has been enlarged, both by annexation and by reclaiming land from the bay, until the area of Boston is 23,661 acres (36 $\frac{1}{8}$ square miles). The population has steadily increased, until in 1880 it numbers within the city limits 363,938, and including its immediate vicinity, about 600,000. The number of births each year now almost equals the whole population of even a century ago.

A charter was not obtained until 1822; and since then several of the adjoining towns have been annexed, — including Roxbury in 1867, Dorchester in 1869, Charlestown, Brighton, and West Roxbury in 1873. It is a matter of only a few years until other adjoining places — such as Somerville, Chelsea, Brookline, and Cambridge — will be annexed.

Boston lies at the bottom of Massachusetts Bay, in latitude 42° 21' 27.6" N., and in longitude 5° 59' 18" E. from Washington, and 71° 3' 30" W. from Greenwich. Its harbor — 14 miles long, 8 miles wide, with an anchorage of 60 square miles — is one of the best on the Atlantic coast. The city is the seat of the county of Suffolk, the capital of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the metropolis of New England. Compared with other cities in the United States, it is fifth in population, but second in commerce, wealth, banking capital, and valuation. As a seat of learning, it stands perhaps at the head of the list; for its educational, scientific, literary, art, and kindred institutions have been so devotedly cared for by the citizens that the city has well earned the significant epithet — "the Athens of America." As a manufacturing centre, it ranks among the foremost; containing, as it does, upwards of 6,000 establishments, giving employment to 50,000 or more persons, and producing yearly \$175,000,000 worth of goods of every description. As regards its healthfulness, there is no doubt in the minds of the well-informed people that Boston is one of the healthiest cities in the world. The death-rate, it is true, in 1879 was 19.72; but this rate is compiled from such trustworthy and carefully prepared data, that it ought not to be compared with the death-rate of many cities, which is generally a result of prejudiced estimates. In reference to hotels, Boston long ago cast aside her famous inns which provided "good cheer" with meagre fare, and now provides every grade of accommodation, — from the plainest lodging to the palatial quarters in the recently-built Vendome.

This city enjoys the honor of having established the first newspaper on the continent, — "The Boston News-Letter," April 24, 1704; and to-day there are five great morning and five successful evening daily newspapers, besides two special dailies, and upwards of 250 periodicals, — all published with more or less success. It is also a noteworthy fact, that the town where printing got its early start is now the acknowledged literary centre of this country. It would not be difficult to dwell upon the supreme virtues of the New-England metropolis; but want of space forbids more than the foregoing sketch, to which might justly be added the high financial credit that the city maintains.

The Indian name of Boston was Shawmut, signifying "living fountains," and the first substitute for it was Trimountaine (since contracted into Tremont); but Sept. 17, 1630 (N.S.), the name as it now stands was selected. This day is considered as the anniversary of the founding of the city; and in this year, 1880, the 250th anniversary is to be celebrated in a most magnificent manner. And perhaps of the many reasons for rejoicing, not one is of more importance than the successful completion of the great work that will be outlined under the title of "The Back-bay District and the Vendome."

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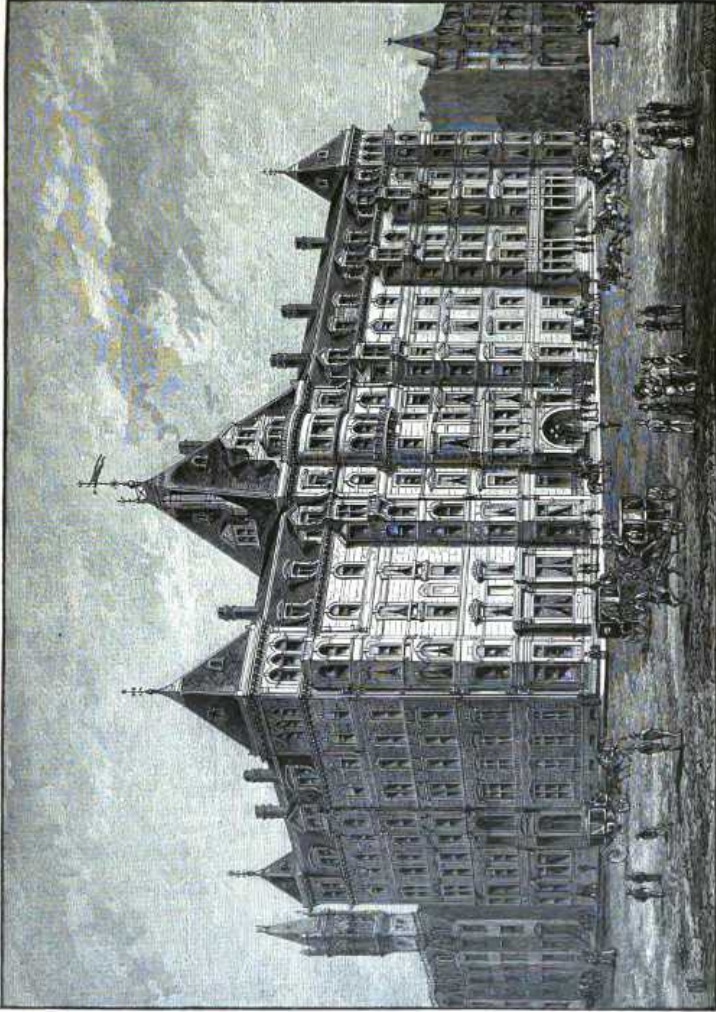


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WHAT men can do to make Nature subservient to them is well shown in the district which is to be described briefly in the following pages. Only thirty years ago this territory was in reality a back bay; in one part the boys were wont to skate and swim, in another the refuse of the city was dumped, and in still another boats and various crafts used to sail. To-day that same district is one of the grandest architectural sections in the world. It is intersected by the most fashionable thoroughfares of the aristocratic Bostonians; the broad avenues, running parallel to one another, having already done much to take away

Boston's past fame of being a city of crooked lanes and narrow, winding streets. It is in this district that many specimens of the best modern architecture have been erected; the latest and costliest, and in many respects the most imposing, as well as the most central of which, is the Vendome, one of the finest hotel structures in the world, and by far the grandest in New England. It is since 1830 that the tide-water has been driven back, the basin filled with clean gravel to an average depth of eighteen feet, and the greater part of the section covered with handsome private residences and imposing public edifices; all of which stand upon made-land, with their foundations resting upon thousands of piles driven deep into the ground. It was this latter fact which caused Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was consulted on the subject, to suggest to Col. Wolcott the advisability of changing the name "Vendome" to "Venetia;" for, as he writes, "I like the sound of the word; and as all this quarter is built on piles, as Venice is, it seems appropriate."

According to some authorities, the original area of "Shawmut"—the Indian name of primitive Boston—was about 700 acres. If this be true, the Back-bay improvement has enlarged the city by a number of acres equal to its original area. And therefore it may be well to pause for a glance at the history of this improvement.



THE VENDOME, on Commonwealth Avenue, the newest and most superb Hotel in Boston.

The "Back Bay" is the name given to the territory, comprising between seven hundred and eight hundred acres, included between Charles, Beacon, and Tremont Streets, and the line which formerly divided Roxbury from Boston. In 1850 it was a waste of flats, over which the tide, admitted through the gates in the Mill Dam, ebbed and flowed up to Charles Street. The Mill Dam (now a continuation of Beacon Street) provided suitable water-power for a number of mills, founderies, and manufactories. It was built by the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation; which was incorporated June 14, 1814, for the purpose of making available the water-power to be obtained by the passage of the tide-water (of Charles River) and of the full basin through the gates referred to above, into the receiving-basin, which was the western portion of the present Back-bay territory. The Mill Dam was to be not less than forty-two feet wide on the top, "from Charles Street, at the westerly end of Beacon Street, to the upland at Sewall's Point, so called, in Brookline, . . . to be made so as effectually to exclude the tide-water, and to form a reservoir, or empty basin, of the space between the dam and Boston Neck." In a few years the dam—generally known as Western Avenue—was completed, and was formally opened for public travel on July 2, 1821. Much of this territory lay below the ordinary line of riparian ownership, and therefore belonged to the Commonwealth in fee. This ownership is based on the ordinance of 1641, and judicial decisions founded thereon. The Commonwealth also claimed so much of a strip, 200 feet wide, north of the Mill Dam, as lay below this line, at the ends; subject to whatever easements had been acquired by the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation and the Boston Water-Power Company. The Water-Power Company was incorporated in 1824; and bought, in 1832, of the Mill Corporation its mill franchise, water-power, and privileges, and all the real estate lying south of the main dam. The city of Roxbury, now a part of Boston, claimed all lands in the Back Bay lying within its territorial limits, not otherwise granted. Individuals also claimed certain other portions of the territory; some as riparian proprietors, some under the ordinance of 1641, and some for various reasons.

About the year 1850, while these claims were being urged, it became apparent that this district could be used for better purposes than the driving of a few mills, which were of little profit to anybody, and more or less of a nuisance to everybody. It was at this time, too, that the city of Boston was advancing in a southerly direction. Legislative interference having been invoked, a commission consisting of Simon Greenleaf, Joel Giles, and Ezra Lincoln, was appointed by the governor, under the resolve of May 3, 1850, to consider the questions relating to the use of the Back-bay territory. This commission expressed in its report the opinion that the maintenance of the water-power as then arranged was in conflict with more important public and private interests; that its continuance was no longer valuable to the owners; and that it was desirable to fill the receiving-basin, so far as was consistent with the proper flow of the water for harbor purposes, and to convert it into solid land.

The commissioners recommended legislation authorizing the parties interested to change the use of the receiving-basin from mill-purposes to land-purposes, and to fill the same with clean gravel; to secure perfect drainage; to provide for ample wide streets, squares, and ponds; to free the Mill Dam from the tolls which were levied for passing over it; to increase the scouring-force of the water for the preservation of the harbor; and, finally, that these improvements should be carried on under the direction of the State, through a permanent board of commissioners to be appointed for the purpose.

These recommendations were adopted, and commissioners appointed, who, after protracted negotiations, succeeded in 1857 in executing a tripartite agreement between the State,

the City, and the Water-Power Company, completing agreements entered into between these parties, settling their various and conflicting claims, and providing for the carrying-out of the plan for filling the basin, as recommended.

The Commonwealth was then able to proceed with the work of filling in, and that, too, without cost to itself. After one or two experiments, a contract was effected with Goss & Monson, who agreed to do the work, and take their pay in land; the contractors, under

this agreement, receiving 260,000 square feet, and the State 793,000 feet ready for sale.

The contractors entered immediately upon the work, laying railroad-tracks over the territory, and bringing gravel from a hill in Needham, where it was dug by steam-excavators. The work proceeded very rapidly. As fast as streets and lots were ready, they were sold at public auction by the State and the Water-Power Company at remunerative prices, so that the funds for future operations were then constantly in hand.

The net proceeds of the State lands were devoted, after the payment of a portion of the State debt, to which they were pledged, to several literary and scientific institutions: the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy, founded by Professor Louis Agassiz and now a part of Harvard University, received \$100,000; Tufts College, \$50,000; Williams College, \$25,000; other institutions smaller grants; and the balance went to the School Fund.

The Report of the State Auditor for 1866 shows, that, up to that date, over 4,000,000 square feet of land had been filled at an average cost of 40½ cents per square foot, and that 1,295,211 square feet had been sold at an average price of \$1.77 per square foot, giving a net profit to the Commonwealth of \$1,212,653. The market value of these lots advanced from \$1.17 in 1858 to \$2.80 in 1865. By the report for 1880, of the Harbor and Land Commissioners, who succeeded the old board of Back-bay Commissioners, it appears that the total number of square feet sold since 1857 is 2,084,931, for \$4,307,722; the average price per foot being \$2.066. Dec. 1, 1879, there remained unsold 287,258 square feet; the whole quantity belonging to the State in 1857



BOSTON IN 1722: The First Map.

being 4,723,998 square feet, of which 314,740 square feet have been given to the city and to divers institutions, and 2,037,068 square feet devoted to streets, passage-ways, etc.

The whole territory is now very largely filled; and what, but a very few years ago, was a dreary waste of water and unsightly flats, is now the most valuable of the real estate in Boston, with stately avenues and well-improved streets, that every year advance farther south in the direction of the Roxbury district. From the map of Boston in 1722, which is given on another page, one can see what a small pear-shaped peninsula the town of Boston was. He will also be unable to find any indication of what is now the Back-bay district. By comparing this old map with a modern one, it can easily be seen what a vast area Boston has gained on every side by reclaiming the land from the bay. Boylston Street was extended in 1843; but it was not until 1856 that Arlington Street was laid out. Columbus Avenue, eighty feet wide and one mile and a half long, runs from Park Square to Northampton Street. The sidewalks, being each eighteen feet wide, give the avenue virtually a width of one hundred and sixteen feet, and make of it one of the finest thoroughfares in Boston. It was laid out in



ARLINGTON STREET, The Western Boundary of the Public Garden.

1869, and is already lined with handsome dwellings, fine family-hotels, and several of the leading churches. It is to be extended to Tremont Street. Huntington Avenue is a smoothly-paved boulevard, one hundred feet wide, and begins at Clarendon and Boylston Streets, four blocks south of the Vendome, and extends south-west about one mile. It is to be continued to Tremont Street, one and a half miles farther. At present there is only one building on the avenue, the Hotel Huntington; but several are soon to be erected, including the great exhibition-building of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, at the corner of Newton Street. Its freedom from foot-passengers makes it a favorite road for fast driving. It was laid out in 1875.

The term "Back-bay district" nowadays is commonly understood to mean simply the section west of Arlington, between Beacon Street and the track of the Boston and Providence Railroad, although the land reclaimed from the Back Bay, as has been heretofore stated, includes all that portion of the city extending as far east as Tremont Street and as far south as the Roxbury line. It is the Back-bay district in its limited sense that we shall describe in this sketch.