



## HISTORIC CHARLES RIVER DAM (IE)

### KEY RESOURCES

- *Historic Charles River Dam (1910)*
- *Locks and lock gate houses (1910)*
- *Washburn Pavilion (1910)*
- *Boathouse and stables (1910)*
- *Stop plank house (1938)*
- *Museum of Science (1951, 1958, 1962, 1968, 1972, 1987)*
- *Museum of Science garage (1972)*

### HISTORY

John Ripley Freeman designed the Charles River Dam and locks. Completed in 1910, the dam created a controlled-elevation river basin, replacing the tidal river that had previously existed. An eight-acre park designed by Guy Lowell was built on the dam, linking the parklands to the north and south. Lowell also designed five structures in the park: the stables, the boathouse, the upper lock gate house, the lower lock gate

house, and the pavilion. The Boston Elevated Street Railway Viaduct, designed by Peabody and Stearns and completed in 1912, served to close the Basin visually and screen the industrial uses to the east. At the time of its construction, the Basin was considered an important civil engineering feat. In 1981 it was designated a National Civil Engineering Landmark.

For its first 40 years the dam was defined by an open park and park drive, with the backdrop of the train

viaduct to the east. In 1951 the Museum of Science was permitted to establish a modest presence on the dam site. Over the years the museum grew to occupy the entire park site. Major expansions occurred in 1958, 1962, 1968, 1972, and 1987.

### EXISTING CONDITIONS AND ISSUES

The expansion of the Museum of Science eliminated the original park atop the 1910 dam and created a major obstacle to passage from one riverbank to the other. The completion of a parking garage for the museum in 1972 further complicated the connection between north and south banks.

This utilitarian garage overhangs the original dam edge, covers the hand-operated lock that once served small vessels, and crowds the historic boathouse and stables. The old dam, though present, is virtually unseen; some of the best stonework in the Basin is buried under the garage. This development has created a major circulation bottleneck around the Basin. At peak-use times 300 or more people



THE CHARLES RIVER DAM AND THE CAMBRIDGE VIADUCT IN 1913, SHORTLY AFTER COMPLETION



THE MUSEUM OF SCIENCE, WITH THE 1910 WASHBURN PAVILION IN THE FOREGROUND.

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per hour use a six-foot walkway in front of the museum to cross between Cambridge and Boston. The walkway is inadequate for this level of use, especially in areas where light poles and other obstructions narrow it even further. Dangerous conflicts between pedestrians and cars at the museum drop-off are common.

#### **GOALS**

- **Reconnect the north and south banks of the Basin with a new pathway.**
- **Restore and reuse the lock houses, stables, and boathouse.**
- **Mitigate the intrusive nature of the parking garage.**
- **Take full advantage of the interpretive opportunities offered by the dam and locks.**

Two studies should be consulted in conjunction with the Master Plan. Chan Krieger & Associates prepared a plan for a pathway on the upriver side of the Museum of Science in 1993, and Pressley Associates is analyzing the dam complex in a study now under way.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Establish a multiuse pedestrian and bicycle path along the upriver face of the Museum of Science and dam.** Such a path should be handicapped-accessible and wide enough to accommodate a high level of use.
- **Soften the appearance of the parking garage by incorporating the new walkway directly into the first floor** of the structure, opening up its upriver face. Enhance the downriver façade of the garage by transforming the existing obsolete ramp into a landscape structure or removing it entirely to reveal the historic dam's stonework.

- **Respect the integrity of the historic structures and the views to them as new development occurs.** The pedestrian bridge proposed at the mouth of Lechmere Canal should respect views of the historic boathouse, as should a proposed footbridge at the locks. An alternative would bring the multiuse walkway through the garage and have it exit behind the MDC boathouse.

- **Restore the historic boathouse to accommodate the MDC Park Ranger Marine Unit.** This structure, with its covered facilities for three or more water vessels and its direct access to the Lower Basin and the lock, would be ideal for this use. The level of boat traffic between the boathouse and the Lechmere Canal precludes locating a public rowing program here. The boathouse is not large enough to accommodate eight-person shells, the historic stable adjacent to it would be very difficult to convert to boat storage, and there is insufficient room for launching shells.

- **Study the feasibility of establishing a visitor center at the lower lock house** to provide visitor services and accommodate an MDC Park Ranger unit. Develop indoor and outdoor exhibits and tours focusing on Basin-related themes—the industrial era, the filling of the marshes and growth of the city, the engineering of the dam and Basin, the establishment of the Metropolitan Park System, and a century of recreational use. Develop a cooperative agreement with the Museum of Science or others to help create and manage these exhibits and programs.