

THE ESPLANADE (2S)

Storrow Drive between Longfellow Bridge and Harvard Bridge

KEY RESOURCES

- *Back Street Seawall* (begun mid-1840s)
- *Harvard Bridge* (1891)
- *Boston Embankment* (1910)
- *Union Boat House* (1910)
- *Bench Shelters* (1930s)
- *Storrow Memorial Embankment* (1935)
- *Edward Hatch Memorial Shell* (1940)
- *Restroom building* (circa 1940)
- *Community Sailing Boathouse* (1941)
- *Storrow Drive* (1950s)
- *Monuments, memorials, and statues:* *Charles Eliot Memorial*; *Arthur Fiedler Memorial*; *Edwin Upton Curtis Memorial*; *David G. Mugar Fourth of July Memorial*; *Lotta Fountain*; *Maurice J. Tobin statue*; *Oliver Wendell Holmes Memorial*; *Gen. Charles Devens statue*; *Gen. George Smith Patton, Jr. statue*; *Sen. David Ignatius Walsh statue*;

MDC Centennial Memorial; *James J. Storrow Memorial*; *Trimblod X sculpture*

- *Concert Lagoon and canoeway* (1951)
- *Lagoon Bridges* (two 1935; three 1951)
- *Concession Stand* (circa 1980)

HISTORY

The Boston Embankment (later called the Esplanade) was created 1903-1910 in conjunction with the Charles River Dam to serve as a simple promenade on a narrow strip of parkland between the seawall and Back Street, the alley along the back yards of the Beacon Street houses. It marked the edge of the Back Bay district.

The embankment has undergone two major transformations in form and character. Because the vertical stone walls surrounding the original Basin created poor rowing conditions, in 1935 the MDC widened the parkland and reconfigured the edge as a 1:5 slope of boulders set in coarse gravel. Landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff, who designed the river bank, also laid out straight paths and a series of formal overlooks and boat landings along the shore of this expanded Esplanade area. He added picturesque massing of trees to soften this formal appearance. He also created the Storrow Lagoon, which covers an area 250 feet wide and 1,000 feet long, for pleasure boating, skating, and the sailing of toy boats rather than for swimming or wading, which were considered unsafe activities in this crowded stretch of the Charles. The lagoon was bounded by a “substantial footway” of four-foot granite curbing. A flight of stone steps 800 feet wide led down to the edge of the



THE BOSTON
EMBANKMENT, 1911

lagoon and provided views across to the island and the river beyond. These steps may be buried under the elevated asphalt walk that now runs along this section of the river. A low boating and skating house, with an observation deck on top, was built at the top of these steps.

Shurcliff's bird's-eye view of the Dartmouth Street Overlook clearly shows his intent to make it and the Gloucester Street Overlook formal, shaded spaces for sitting, conversing, and viewing the river scenery. Broad pedestrian paths on axis with Dartmouth Street and Gloucester Streets linked the Back Bay neighborhood directly to the river. This connection was destroyed when Storrow Drive was built.

The second transformation of the embankment occurred during the construction of Storrow Drive in 1950-51. Because the parkway threatened to obliterate much of the Esplanade parkland, the state legislature stipulated that all parklands lost to the construction of the new road be replaced with newly created land. Once again Shurcliff was commissioned to reshape the Esplanade. He developed designs for the entire shore from the Boston University Bridge to the Charles River Dam. The original concept envisioned islands and a "canoeway" stretching from the Hatch Shell past the Harvard Bridge. The Gloucester Street Overlook and landing would have served small boats in an enclosed lagoon, much as the Dartmouth overlook originally did. The section west of the original Storrow Lagoon, however, was never completed, nor were the planned overlook and landing upstream of the Harvard Bridge. The lagoons that were completed were used for rowing and ice-skating. Colder climatic conditions earlier in the century ensured good ice during most winters, and skating

continued until the 1950s. A new boat and skate house was built at the Dartmouth Street Overlook to support these activities. Unreliable winter weather and a more litigious climate have suspended skating on the lagoons.

The monumental set of stairs at Commissioners Landing, with its flanking boat landings, forms a grand threshold to Beacon Hill and the Massachusetts State House. Before the construction of Storrow Drive, a governor would have been able to walk down the steps of the State House,

down the hill, and onto a vessel waiting at Commissioners Landing. Shurcliff had anticipated a large oval at the head of the steps, similar to that in front of the Hatch Shell. The intrusion of Storrow Drive eliminated that possibility and left this grand landing without a forecourt. Nevertheless, the landing provides a frame to the boat haven and is one of the grandest formal gestures in the Charles River Reservation.

The existing public boat landings along the Esplanade are very popular with pedestrians and boaters. They afford wonderful water views, and their wood decking makes them comfortable to lie upon. They offer shore-side visitors the chance to get on the water and the boating community a place to tie up for short periods.

Centennial Fountain, located in the lagoon on axis with Dartmouth Street, celebrates the one-hundredth anniversary of the Metropolitan Park System and is a wonderful addition to the Esplanade. It is an example of how new elements can be added to the park while maintaining the Basin's essential historic character.



THE STORROW LAGOON RECREATION AND BOATHOUSE BUILDING, SHOWN IN A 1939 PHOTO, WAS DEMOLISHED TO MAKE WAY FOR STORROW DRIVE.



THE CANOEWAY AND ISLAND WERE ADDED IN THE 1950S TO COMPENSATE FOR PARKLAND TAKEN DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF STORROW DRIVE.

EXISTING CONDITIONS AND ISSUES

The Hatch Shell area

The music oval, pathways, and bank near the Hatch Shell experience tremendous use for concerts, walkathons, and special events. Many events that do not rely on the Hatch Shell have been staged from the oval. Consequently soil compaction is high, parts of the turf are bare, and vegetation has been destroyed. Many of the monuments that encircle the oval also have sustained damage.

Neighbors have complained in recent years of the noise from overamplified bands at the Hatch Shell. The intensified schedule of concerts and special events during the 1990s has had an adverse impact on users' ability to enjoy the Lower Basin quietly, one of the Basin's primary purposes.

Use and Circulation

Bicycling, inline skating, and other motion sports have come to dominate the Esplanade in recent years. Its accessibility to public transportation, its location along an uninterrupted pathway from Watertown to the historic



Charles River Dam, and its lovely setting make the Esplanade one of the most popular skating and bicycling areas in the Basin. On warm evenings and weekends the Esplanade is a high-energy environment. Crowding and excessive speeds on the shared pathways degrade the experience for everyone.

Two parallel paths run almost the entire length of the Esplanade from the Harvard Bridge to the Lee Pool, a

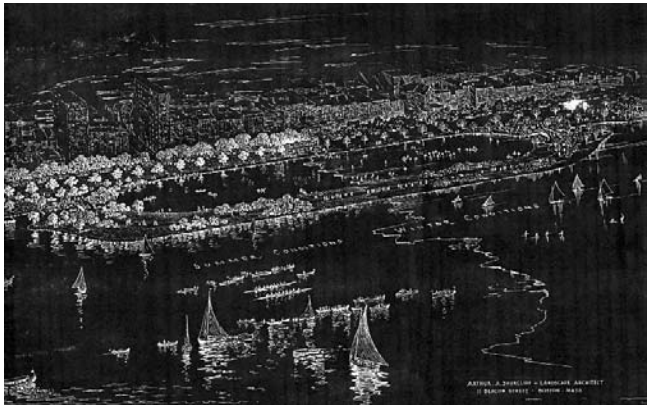
distance of about 8,000 feet. These dual paths provide a convenient way to separate fast and slow traffic. The striped route running parallel to Storrow Drive is the first choice of most high-speed bikers. The vast majority of recreational users prefer the paths along the water's edge, resulting in overcrowded and dangerous conditions for pedestrians. Far

from providing a respite from the pressure of urban life, a walk along the Esplanade exposes one to the hustle and bustle of youth on wheels. Consequently, older people and small children must exercise caution.

Use of the Lagoons and Boat Haven

The Storrow Lagoon, with its broad sheltered water, was designed for ice skating, model boat sailing, and rowing. The system of lagoons added later was intended only as a canoeway. The shallow water and narrow channel exclude large, motorized vessels and continue to be ideal for non-motorized craft.

The lagoons have not been used formally for ice skating or model boat sailing for years. Creating artificial ice on the lagoon would be prohibitively expensive and the necessary equipment would be hard to maintain. The existing MDC skating rinks in Charlestown and the North End and the new Frog Pond ice rink on Boston Common should meet the demand for outdoor ice skating in this part of Boston, though the potential remains for natural ice skating when conditions are right. Reviving skating on the lagoons would require careful management to advertise the opportunity, control the use, and prevent unauthorized use when ice is dangerously thin. Model boat sailing should be revived in the Storrow Lagoon, but it would have to be scheduled to avoid conflicts with boaters. The exclusion of motorized vessels from the lagoons would help to minimize conflicts with model boats.



A 1935 SKETCH OF STORROW LAGOON BY ARTHUR SHURCLIFF.

Commissioners Landing

The steps of Commissioners Landing have been seriously undermined and have partially collapsed. They constitute an immediate public safety hazard and are among the most visible signs of disrepair in the entire Basin. A design for the restoration of Commissioners Landing is under way.

The Dartmouth Street and Gloucester Street overlooks

Storrow Drive has severed the link between the Back Bay neighborhood and these overlooks. Their strong architectural form still provides a transition from the regular streets and blocks of the city to the more “natural” forms of the reservation.

Boat docks

The existing “temporary” plywood patches on the docks create a tripping hazard; at a minimum all are in need of new decking. The docks and supporting piers need to be assessed for structural integrity and potential reconstruction.

Community Boating

Several opportunities exist to improve Community Boating, the oldest public sailing programs in the country—and one of the most successful. The paths near Community Boating are poorly laid out and confusing. An informal path cuts from the pedestrian bridge through a grove of trees north of the boathouse. Erosion and a flooding drinking fountain have isolated a historic shade structure across from the boathouse entrance. Most people ignore the monument to Charles Eliot, located a short distance off the main path. Fencing and outdoor storage of boats and equipment along the edge of the Charles River have cut off views from this parcel and blocked access to the historic overlook on the east side of Commissioners Landing.

Playgrounds

The playgrounds along the Esplanade near Governor’s Landing, on the island, and near the Harvard Bridge have been removed. A public/private partnership is underway to create a new Esplanade play area in the Gloucester Street area.

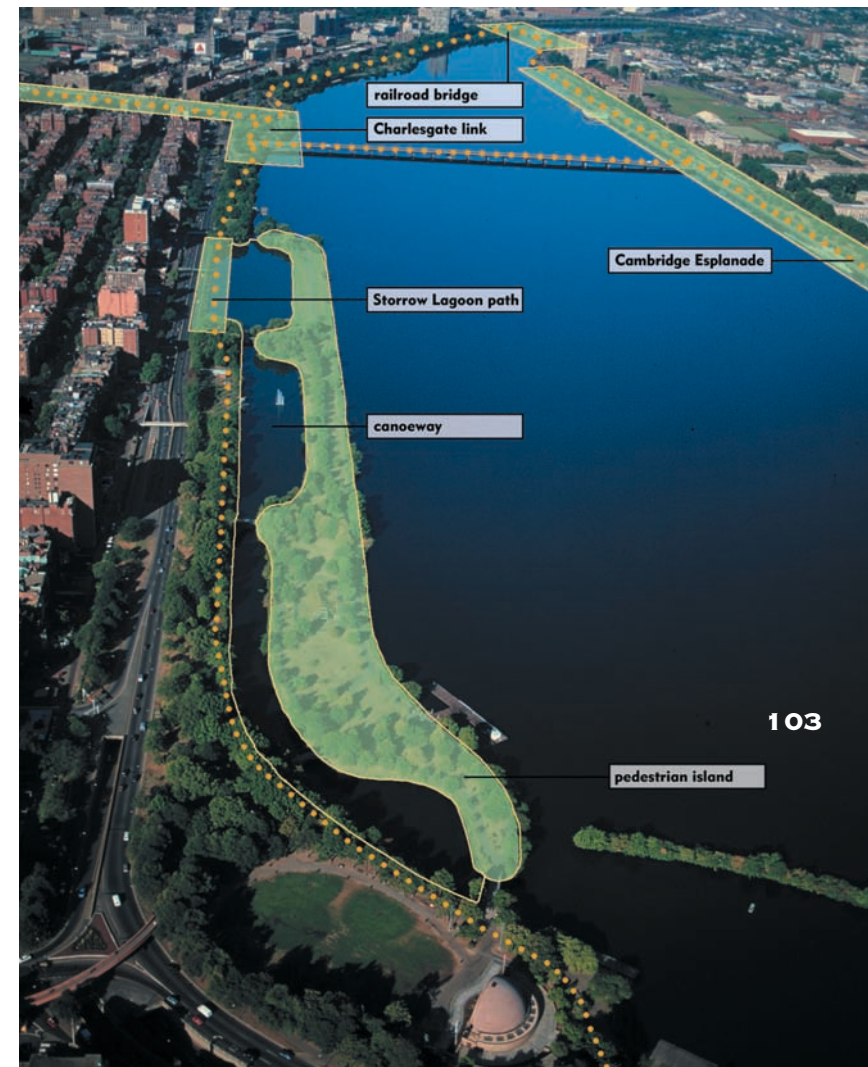
Dog runs

There is a large dog population in the Back Bay and Beacon Hill. Dog walkers, out every morning and evening, constitute a small but active group of Basin users. Their regular presence helps to monitor the reservation. Regulations require dogs to be leashed, but they often run free once on the islands. Because owners are present, dogfights and conflicts with other users are rare. Most complaints about dogs focus on owners who do not clean up after their pets or who use long leashes. Dogs on extendable leashes are apt to tangle with skaters and bicyclists, and MDC regulations require leashes no longer than seven feet. A dog run is provided on the upstream side of the Harvard Bridge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Manage the scope and nature of special events on the Esplanade** to avoid degradation of the resource and unnecessary impacts on surrounding neighborhoods.

- **Establish the island as pedestrian zones and exclude wheeled users.** This will separate high- and low-speed traffic along the Esplanade and provide safe areas for people who wish to walk along the river. Establish this new pattern of use through signs, ranger enforcement, and a change in pavement at the entrances. Without losing their formal quality, the pathway alignments should be varied to discourage speeding and to create more open, grassy areas for sunbathing and picnicking. The middle section of the island pathway could be shifted toward the Charles, leaving a larger portion of the island open for passive uses.



- **Improve conditions for wheeled traffic along the Storrow Lagoon,** where the pathway narrows next to Storrow Drive. A dangerous drop-off reduces the usable portion of the already overcrowded path from eight to approximately six feet. A fall off the elevated edge could lead to serious injury. A line of trees in a very narrow planting strip provides little buffer to the traffic along this 800-foot pathway. Two proposals were examined to address this issue.

Alternative A (recommended): Move the pathway back from the parkway and broaden the path to accommodate increased traffic. Establish an expanded planting zone for shrubs and trees between the pathway and the parkway. Fill a small portion of the lagoon in order to locate the path along the inside edge of the lagoon and create a grassy bank toward the water. If the historic granite steps that once occupied this



A PHOTO OF EXISTING CONDITIONS (TOP) AND A SKETCH OF THE SAME PERSPECTIVE ILLUSTRATING ALTERNATIVE A RECOMMENDATIONS

site are discovered under the fill, restore them as an edge to the new path. A landing at the center of the new path could mark the site of the old boat-house. This scenario would have a marginal impact on the appearance of the lagoon, would not disturb historic fabric, and might reveal additional granite work buried by development of the parkway. The original coping would not be moved, and the original outline of the lagoon would continue to be visible.

Alternative B: Drop the elevation of the existing pathway down to that of the granite coping, and broaden the path by four feet. This action would not appreciably expand the strip for additional plantings and would require the

removal of any historic structures that may be buried under the present path. It would not require filling a portion of the lagoon. Either of these alternatives requires review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Boston Landmarks Commission.

- **Limit the lagoons to their original use—nonmotorized rowing or paddling boats and model boats.** Their shallow water and sheltered conditions are ideal for small craft. Restoring this traditional limitation would eliminate conflicts between motorized and nonmotorized craft that occur during large events at the Hatch Shell.
- **Prohibit any large boat rental program on the lagoons.** Insufficient room exists on the banks and in the channel to accommodate a facility and its fleet of boats. In order to provide access to and activate the lagoons, Community Boating should consider establishing as a community service a modest fleet of rowboats that would be rented from its existing docks and restricted to the lagoons.
- **Stabilize and restore three historic landings.** This action should rank as the highest priority on the preservation list for the reservation. The adjacent grove of trees should be reshaped to acknowledge and reinforce the historic landing design.
- **Reestablish the Dartmouth Street and Gloucester Street overlooks as well-defined gathering places on the river's edge.** While acknowledging the historic axis of Dartmouth and Gloucester streets, screen both overlooks from Storrow Drive with low sitting walls, curbs, and shrubs to delineate their back edge. Maintain the uniform tree canopy with a cleared space at the center as originally intended. A tightly spaced, high-branching shade tree with an open branching habit would create enclosure while allowing sunlight to reach the ground.

- **Eliminate the worn grass and replace it with stone dust, pea gravel, or unit pavers.** The original Shurcliff design for the overlooks shows a preponderance of pavement to accommodate benches and crowds. This character should be reestablished, given the fact that previous attempts to grow grass in these heavily trafficked and shaded areas has failed.
- **Broaden the paved area at the center of the Dartmouth Street Overlook to accommodate skaters and bicyclists.** The main bicycle path and pathways emanating from a pedestrian bridge cross the Dartmouth Street Overlook. A broader paved area at the center would relieve congestion and accommodate the skaters and bicyclists who gather there.
- **Reestablish benches at the Dartmouth Street Overlook.** Benches were removed from this overlook, leaving a vacant area with diagonal desire lines from the footbridge. Visitors using this space currently sit on the granite walls and steps. Placing new benches at the edges of the overlook would enhance the historic character of the site and provide needed opportunities for passive use.

- **Reinforce the pedestrian character of the Gloucester Street Overlook.** Maintain the current geometric layout of twenty-one benches; although seldom used to capacity, this arrangement of Shurcliff-designed benches reflects early twentieth-century park use and design.

The overlook, which holds the Storrow Memorial, stands apart from the bicycle route. Introduction of a soft surface around the benches and trees would favor pedestrians and emphasize the room-like qualities of

the space. A shift from the ubiquitous asphalt would help set the overlook apart.

- **Add pedestrian-scale lighting, reminiscent of the original fixtures along the Esplanade, to both overlooks.** This would improve the overlooks as comfortable places to visit in the evening. A streetlight set directly on axis currently intrudes upon the setting at the Gloucester Street Overlook and should be removed as soon as appropriate lighting is in place. Consider replacing all modern pedestrian light fixtures along Esplanade pathways with historic fixtures.
- **Survey and, if warranted, rebuild all five wooden docks.**
- **Establish a maintenance schedule for the docks and support piers.**
- **Promote an adopt-a-dock program with local businesses, institutions, and individuals.**
- **Remove extraneous material stored along the edge of the Community Boating site.** Explore new storage arrangements on or off site. Consider a small, properly fenced equipment yard on the north side of the boathouse as one option.
- **Install an appropriate fence along the dock and reopen open public access to the historic overlook west of Community Boating.**
- **Redesign the path system around Community Boating** to eliminate excess pavement and accommodate desire lines.
- **Restore the historic shade structure and correct the grading and drainage in the area.** Because the boathouse entirely blocks the view, the shade structure should be relocated. In addition to seating it might be used to shelter graphic boards interpreting the history of the Charles River Basin.
- **Ban parking on the pathways around Community Boating.** Parked cars detract from the park user's experience and disrupt pedestrian flow. Eliminate the parking spaces under the Longfellow Bridge and

FLUCTUATIONS
IN THE BASIN'S
WATER LEVEL EXPOSE
WOODEN PILINGS TO
AIR, HASTENING ROT.

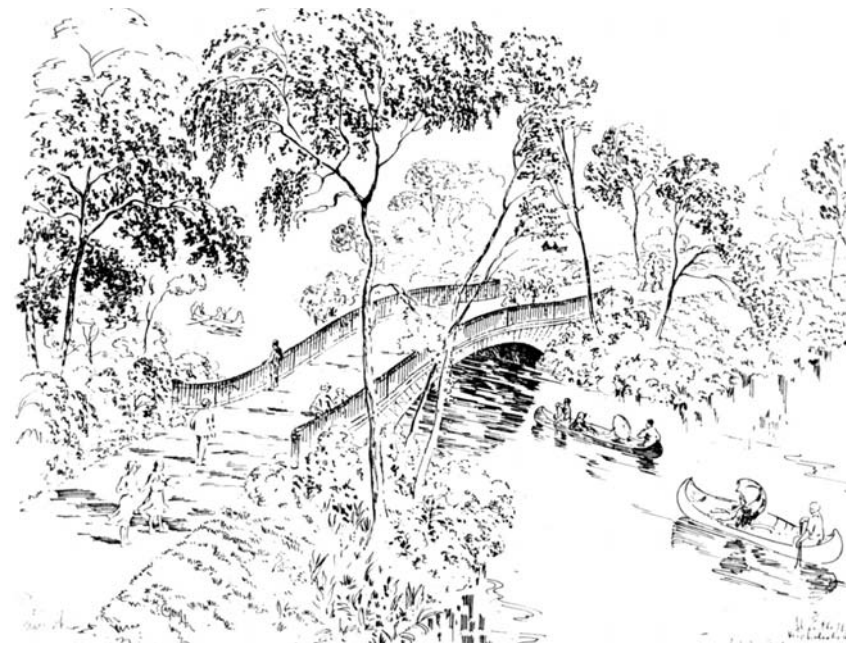


improve the pathway at this critical point. With the sole exception of handicapped spaces, all parking for Community Boating should be limited to the nearby Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary lot.

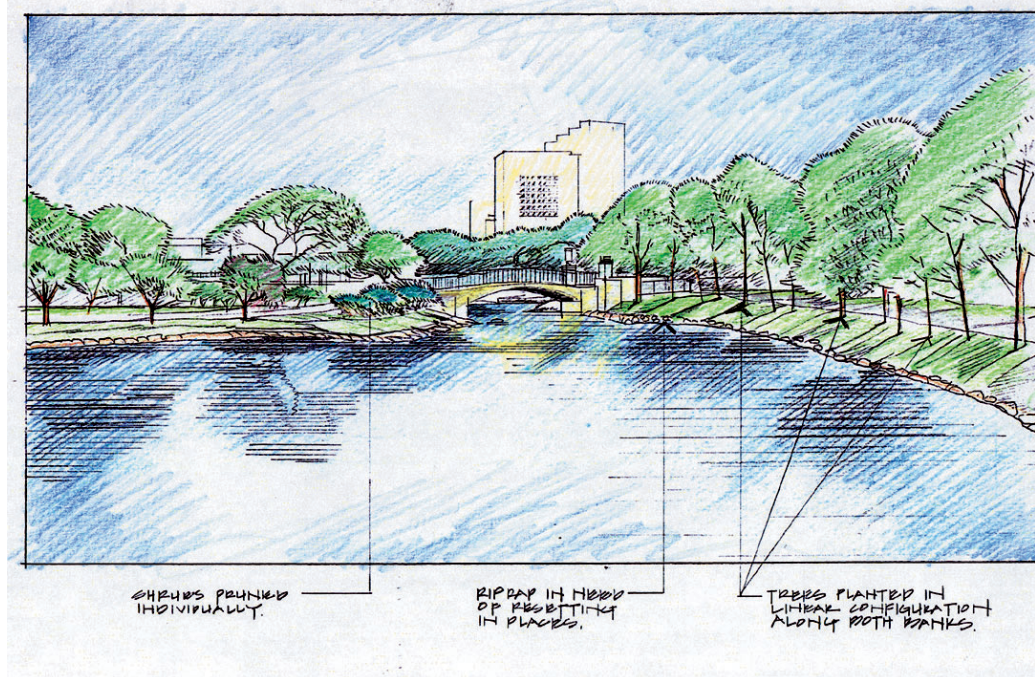
- **Do not replace the playground on the island. Reestablish turf in this location.**
- **Remove the playground at Commissioners Landing and restore both the grove and oval envisioned by Shurcliff.** This would be an appropriate relocation of the underused shade shelter near Community Boating.
- **Rebuild the Gloucester Street playground.** A public/private partnership is working to reestablish this playground. Monitor the use of this playground before considering any additional playgrounds on the Esplanade.
- **Ensure that the fences and play equipment at all future playgrounds fit with the landscape of the Esplanade.** The bright colors and artificial materials of much modern playground equipment would be entirely out of place in this setting. Playgrounds should be set well back from the shore, and the pathways should be landscaped to blend with the river setting.
- **Monitor the performance of the new fenced dog run between the Harvard Bridge and the Bowker Overpass and provide additional improvements if warranted.** Dog runs allow owners to let their dogs off leash in a controlled environment. They provide a focus for the dog-owning community and are largely self-managed; they also concentrate the wear and tear from dogs. The dog run should have a fence four to five feet high, spring-loaded gates, watering stations, benches, a bulletin board, lighting, lidded trash barrels (which should be emptied twice a week), and possibly a poop bag dispenser. Because grass wears out quickly without constant care, pea gravel with curbing is an option for dog runs.

An alternative approach for accommodating dogs is to designate an area of the reservation to be an off-leash area during certain hours of the day, as such cities as New York have done with some success. If the Esplanade islands are off limits to inline skaters and bicyclists, as this plan recommends, an experimental program of allowing dogs off leash during limited morning and evening hours on the islands could be implemented. Enforcement of the limited hours and cleanup would be essential to the success of this approach.

- **Maintain the diverse arboretum character of the Esplanade** while massing trees to frame open spaces.
- **Protect and enhance signature trees**—the lindens along the outside edge of the Hatch Shell music oval and the black willows at the five bridges to the islands. The original Shurcliff drawings show columnar trees marking the pedestrian bridges across the lagoon. Reestablish a more distinctive planting treatment at the bridges and monuments.



A SKETCH BY ARTHUR SHURCLIFF OF THE CANOEWAY. CIRCA 1950



- Discontinue the planting of cherry trees here as elsewhere in the reservation. Gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Japan and suggest alternative locations or different species.
- Diversify the plant palette and create winter interest by adding evergreens in the area west of the Esplanade Café. Trees would screen the café from the parkway year-round.
- Realign the trees along the lagoon banks in a less linear arrangement, and create massed plantings to frame views around open spaces. Because they block sight lines, understory trees should not be planted along the lagoon and river banks. Bridge abutments, however, should be anchored with shrub and tree plantings.
- Redesign the planting layout on the eastern end of the island to create masses and frame open space.

- Maintain the distinctive landscape elements of the island. Small groupings of trees should be added selectively near the riverbank to punctuate open spaces while retaining views.
- Protect the major maples at the wall along the terraces with a soft-surface paving treatment such as pea stone to prevent soil compaction around their roots. In general, the formal planting treatment of the terraces should be maintained. Over time, the canopy of maples at the westernmost terrace should be opened up to provide more light and maintain its formal layout.
- Selectively add evergreens in the area between the Esplanade and Harvard Bridge to diversify and increase winter interest while protecting the existing major willows and oaks. Black willows should be added at the base of the pedestrian ramp to the Harvard Bridge to build on the strong willow theme in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE ESPLANADE
(BELOW) INCLUDE ADOPT-
ING A MORE NATURALISTIC
APPROACH TO PLANTING,
MASSING, AND SHAPING
VEGETATION. THE SKETCH
AT THE UPPER LEFT SHOWS
EXISTING CONDITIONS.

