



PREHISTORY

The archaeological record indicates that the region's aboriginal inhabitants established temporary settlements at the fall line of the Charles at Watertown and elsewhere along both the north and south shores of the basin between 9,000 and 12,000 years ago. Coming from the south and southwest, these paleo-Indians entered the region not long after the glacier had receded, leaving in its wake a barren, tundra-like landscape similar to that found in the northern reaches of modern-day Canada and much broader in extent than what confronted the first Europeans.

Over the next several thousand years continuously milder climatic conditions encouraged a succession of forest types—first spruce parkland/woodland, then pine-oak forest, and finally the mixed deciduous forest of today—on the once-treeless land bordering the river. At the same time sea level rose continuously until it submerged much of the former coastal plain. The region's estuaries were created along the newly defined coast between 4,000 and 6,000 years ago. Climatic and topographical changes created a woodland habitat for edible plants and wildlife, an estuarine habitat for fish, and fertile coastal land.

Massachusetts Historical Commission files record a minimum of sixteen prehistoric sites within the Charles River Basin, twelve of them on or near the north bank of the river and three on the south side between the Back Bay and Newton (table A-1). Archaeological evidence suggests the existence of two clusters of sites. The first, earliest, and perhaps the most continuously occupied appears to have been roughly on the site of the Watertown Arsenal and Perkins School for the Blind, adjacent to the first set of falls on the Charles River and just above the head of the estuary. Six sites are recorded in this area at the Perkins School and the Arsenal. Portions of these sites are known or thought to extend onto MDC property on or close to the river's edge.

Very few of the tools and implements recovered from this cluster, largely farmland until the early nineteenth century, are similar to those typically dated to the paleo-Indian period, between 9,500 and 12,000 years ago; others document more or less continuous occupation of this riverside location through the Early, Middle, and Late Archaic and Early, Middle, and Late Woodland periods (2,400 to 11,000 years ago). Archaeologists have also identified a distinctive ceremonial burial complex, dating from the Late Archaic period (3,300 to 3,600 years ago) at the Watertown Arsenal Site.

The appeal of these sites about 8,000 years ago was the seasonal availability of a nearly endless supply of fresh fish. Species such as salmon, herring, alewives, and shad entered the Charles and other estuaries to spawn in freshwater lakes upstream. During their spring runs these fish gathered at the base of falls in such quantities that Indians harvested them with simple baskets, nets, traps, or spears and cured them to provide food during the winter months. Some native families inhabited these sites in summer to gather other fish that made the estuary their breeding ground and nursery (including smelt, tomcod, winter flounder, and sturgeon) as well as shellfish from the extensive marshes. The seasonal abundance of migratory birds within the marshes was also undoubtedly attractive. In later prehistoric times groups remained at these sites through the summer and fall to tend gardens. In late fall and winter months Native Americans along the lower reaches of the Charles River typically dispersed in small groups—probably extended families—to the more sheltered interior uplands that surrounded the Boston Basin, including Middlesex Fells and the Blue Hills.

The second cluster of prehistoric sites in the basin is located downstream from the former head of the estuary on the north side of the river (Cambridge). Here, three sites—Simon's Hill, Longfellow Park, and Steven's Garden—were located at the confluence of small streams and the saltwater

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marshes surrounding the river: Artifacts recovered from these sites indicate occupancy during the Middle and Late Archaic and Early and Middle Woodland periods. A fourth site, Anderson Bridge, is located a short distance downstream of these sites but appears to date to the same periods. Native American subsistence activities within this cluster no doubt focused on the tidal zone. A final site within this cluster is Magazine Beach further downstream, from which artifacts of the Middle Archaic period (6,000 to 8,000 years ago) have been excavated.

From the beginning of the contact period, about 475 years ago, early European explorers and settlers described numerous Indian villages and small gardens in forest clearings throughout the area. Native family groups continued to travel

considerable distances to set up temporary camps at waterfalls, a seasonal assembly that evolved into a major event marked by gamesmanship, oratory, and gift exchanges among tribes as an occasion for reaffirming group identification, perpetuating cultural ways, and creating trade networks and alliances. Local place names—Nonantum, Waban, Mystic, Aberjona, Menotomet, Mishawan, Neponset, Sauguset, Mattapanock, and Muoswetuset—commemorate the aboriginal occupation of what is now Greater Boston.

While urban growth has destroyed many sites of prehistoric occupation, archaeological work to date has demonstrated that partial or entire sites may well have retained integrity into the present. “Areas where prehistoric sites could survive in Boston and Cambridge are places

where extensive filling buried original shoreline and estuarine margins,” a 1982 MHC study noted. “Small lots of parkland and even cemetery land also survive in the area, and fragments of the once large prehistoric sites may have escaped destruction.” Indeed, largely intact “fragments”—possibly living floors with workshop areas, storage pits, and possible cremation sites—have been discovered along the river’s southern shore at the Watertown Arsenal site(s), where such disturbances as road and sidewalk building have been numerous and extensive. The MHC study found that remnants of prehistoric sites have survived “in the less densely developed areas, particularly in the MDC parklands on the north and southwest sides of the Boston Basin” as well as “in backyards, beneath parking lots and even beneath standing structures.”

TABLE A-1: PREHISTORIC SITE INVENTORY

SEGMENT	SITE NAME	COMMUNITY	CONDITION
1-11	Charles River Basin in its entirety	1903-1910	fair to poor
171	Lechmere Point Shell Midden	Cambridge	urban/destroyed
172	Magazine Beach	Cambridge	partially destroyed; survivals possible
173	Anderson Bridge (north)	Cambridge	partially destroyed; survivals possible
174	Steven’s Garden	Cambridge	partially destroyed; survivals possible
175	Savin’s Pond	Watertown	partially destroyed; survivals possible
176	Watertown Arsenal East	Watertown	disturbed; survivals demonstrated
177	Perkins School for the Blind	Watertown	partially destroyed; survivals possible
269	Simon’s Hill	Cambridge	destroyed
332	Watertown Arsenal	Watertown	disturbed but mostly intact
364	Longfellow Park	Cambridge	disturbed; survivals possible
372	Union Market Station	Watertown	disturbed; survivals demonstrated
373	Watertown Arsenal	Watertown	disturbed; survivals demonstrated
374	Joshua Stone Farm	Watertown	destroyed
19-SU-12	Boston		
15	Boston		
537	Lemon Brook	Newton	disturbed; survivals possible