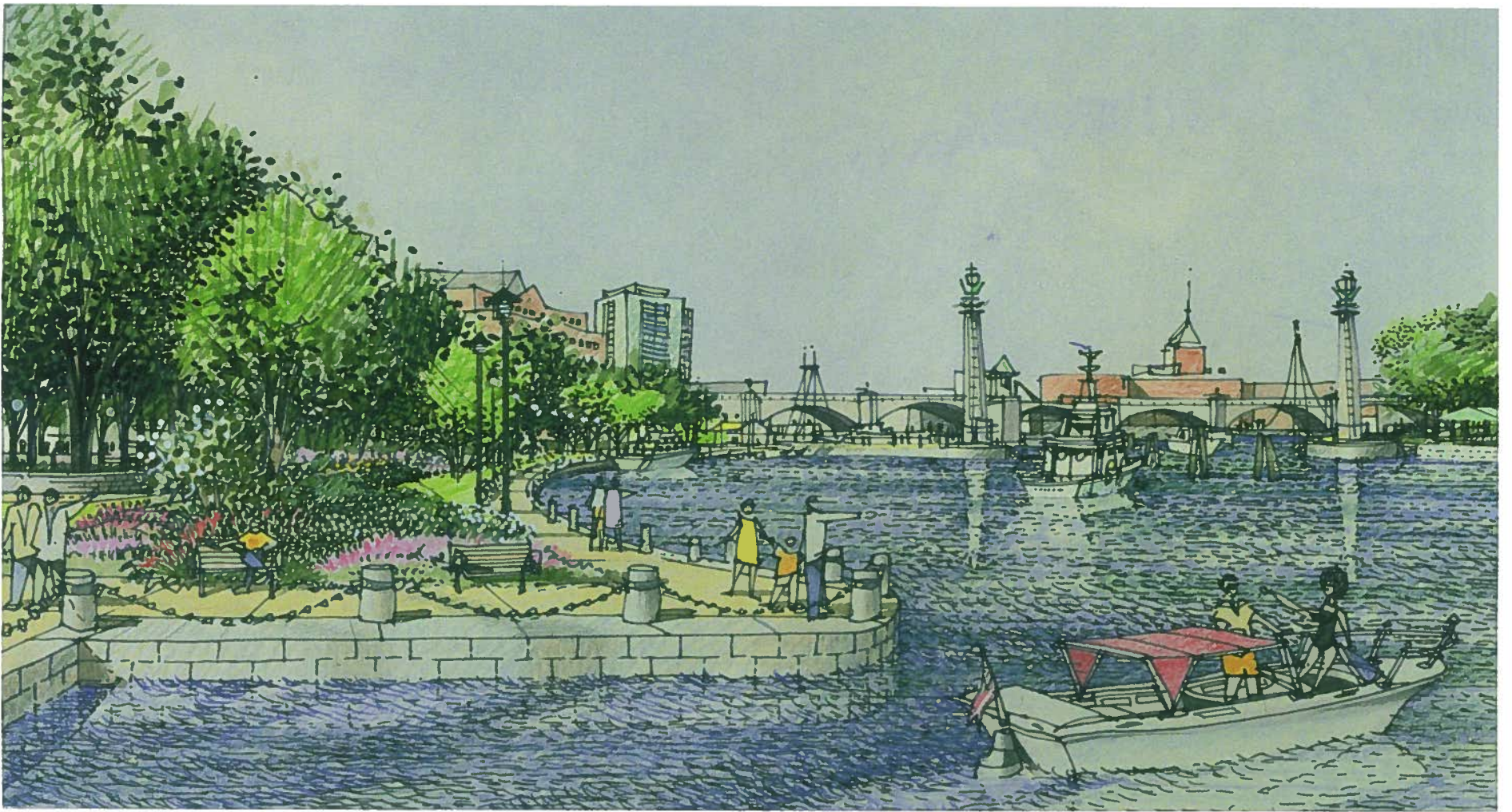


NEW CHARLES RIVER BASIN

CHARLES RIVER RESERVATION



The New Charles River Basin will transform the "lost half mile" of the river and provide continuous waterfront esplanades, green parks, and a variety of recreational and interpretive opportunities at the center of the Metropolitan Park System. From the railroad bridges that cross the river near North Station, views of the Nashua Meadows open out to the beacons and the Green Line viaduct upstream. Beyond the viaduct are the towers of Charles River Park and the Museum of Science.

THE VISION

The New Charles River Basin will complete the Metropolitan Park System's famed water park, reshaping the river and its banks in the lost half mile between the existing Charles River Esplanades and Boston's HarborPark. It will change the image of the river and the city. The mouth of the Charles, now obscured by dams, bridges, and derelict industry, will be rediscovered and celebrated. Over the next ten to fifteen years, these presently under-used and disjointed edges of Boston and Cambridge will be knit into a lively urban district, centered on a new recreational resource comparable in its impact to the creation of the Emerald Necklace in the late 19th century and the Boston waterfront renewal in the mid 20th century.

Over forty acres of parklands will offer broad green meadows, colorful plantings, and stately trees, as well as plazas, walkways, and bike paths on lands which are now mostly in public ownership. The Boston and Cambridge Esplanades will be connected along the river to HarborPark and the Freedom Trail. The large-scale engineering works — bridges,

dams, pumping stations, locks, and viaducts — will be set off and complemented by the powerful sweeps of parkland and water.

Three miles of tree-shaded bike-ways will be built, together with almost four miles of pathways within the parklands and at the water's edge, across and under viaduct, rail and bridge barriers. New walkways will lead people across the river in several locations. Gateways will tie the New Basin to Charlestown, the North End, downtown Boston, the new Boston Garden, and nearby office development, and from the West End, East Cambridge and North Point. These communities will be linked as never before. People will be able to stroll through fascinating parklands, animated by history, art, and science, from East Cambridge to the North End or from the West End to Charlestown.

The river banks will be reshaped to strengthen the focus on the water, relate the two edges more strongly and create a powerful procession of river spaces leading out to the sea. The banks will be sloped down to the water's edge so that the river is visible from everywhere in the New Basin. There will be landings for tour boats

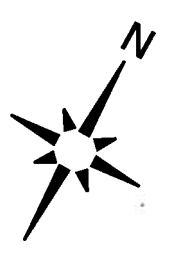
and water taxi service, and a central cove for transient docking. Small boats will ply sheltered waterways, bordered with native wetland plants and wildlife.

Central themes of these new public spaces will be the industrial and shipping history of East Cambridge and Charlestown, the social and cultural heritage of the North End and the West End, the ecology of the Charles River, the

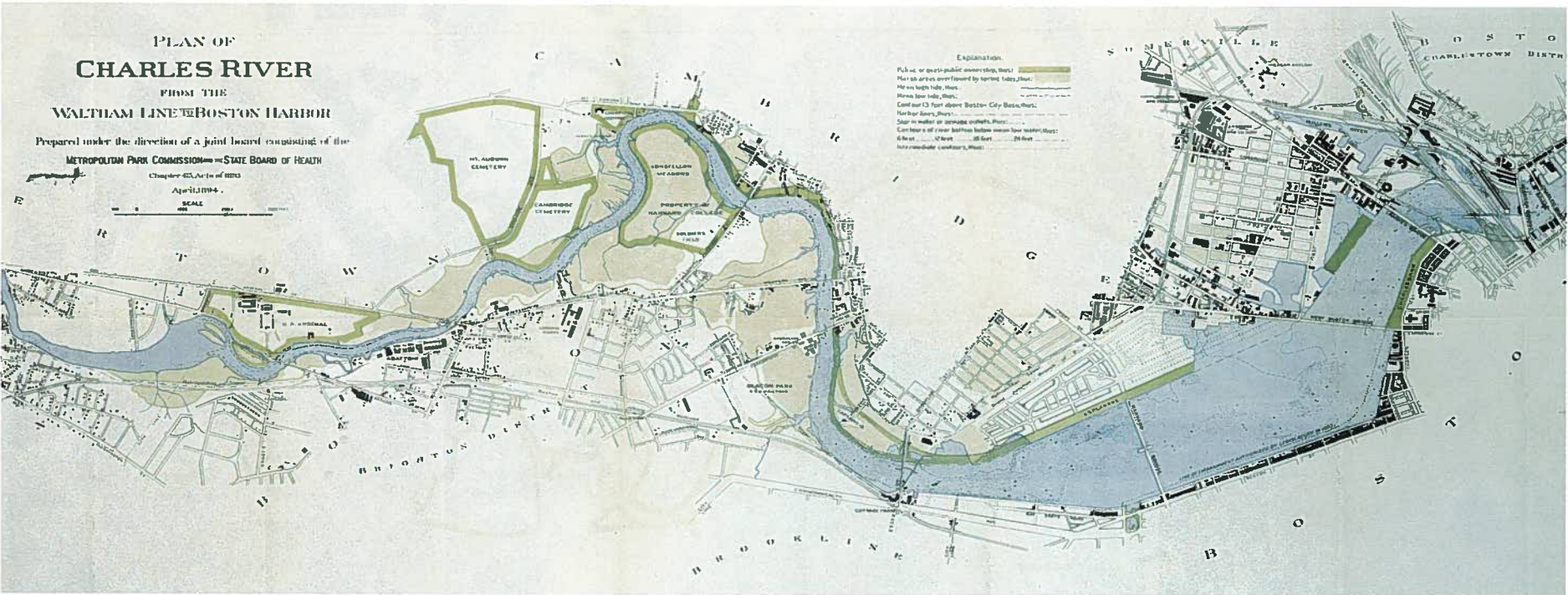
history of transportation in Boston, and the creative forces of science and art. Designers, artists, and artisans will develop these themes, enriching the possibilities for exploration, learning, and celebration. Guided by this vision, the New Charles River Basin will become a gathering place for its neighbors, for school children, for downtown business people, for visitors — for the whole metropolitan community.



The New Basin extends from the old Charles River Dam (lower right) to the new dam, just beyond the highway bridge. Downtown Boston is at the upper right. The esplanades of the MDC's Charles River Reservation will be connected to Boston's HarborPark, and gateways to the new public spaces will reinforce the ties between the river and surrounding neighborhoods. Funding for the first phase of this long-term master plan will be provided by the Massachusetts Highway Department.







A joint commission of the Metropolitan Park Commission and the State Board of Health produced a remarkable map in 1894 showing the deplorable state of the Charles River Basin. Along the waterfront were two prisons, three coal-burning powerplants, numerous shabby commercial ventures (including slaughterhouses in Brighton and East Cambridge), a bankrupt residential development in Cambridge (today the site of MIT), and “temporary” railroad trestles below Craigie’s Bridge. The only park on the river was the Charlesbank, near Boston’s West End (MDC Archives).



The metropolitan park plan of 1893 was bounded by the rock hills that surround Boston about ten miles from the State House. Forest reservations — the Middlesex Fells and the Blue Hills — were laid out along this ring of hills. The radial spokes of the park system were the three rivers — the Mystic, the Charles, and the Neponset. Comprising the third element of the plan were the beaches of the bay and sea shores; tree-lined parkways linked the hills, the rivers, and the shores. By 1899, over nine thousand acres of reservations and parkways had been acquired (MDC Archives).

THE CHARLES RIVER AND THE METROPOLITAN PARK SYSTEM

In 1893 the Boston Metropolitan Park Commission published its first report, written by Sylvester Baxter, the commission’s secretary, and Charles Eliot, its landscape architect. They proposed a park system that would preserve the “rock hills, the stream banks, and the bay and the sea shores” of greater Boston. Once in the public domain these natural features of the region would establish the framework for urban development, not the haphazard and unplanned assemblage of street, lots, railroads, and streetcar lines.

The first reservations to be acquired — Beaver Brook, the Blue Hills, the Middlesex Fells — represented “unique and characteristic” New England scenery. The rivers and bays, with their shores reclaimed, offered “permanently open spaces provided by nature without cost.”

In spite of the foul condition of the Basin, Eliot was certain that it

would become the central reservation of the metropolitan district and the most celebrated “water park” in the entire country. The Cambridge and Metropolitan Park Commissions made their first takings along the river in 1894-95.

Six years later James Storrow led a new campaign for a dam at Craigie’s Bridge, and the dam, along with a 100-foot embankment on the Boston side, was finally completed in 1910. A few lamented the loss of the last “once primitive and beautiful salt meadows,” but the stabilized river drew to its banks new campuses for Harvard, MIT, and Boston University. The Storrow Memorial Embankment — now known as the Esplanade — was designed by Arthur Shurcliff and dedicated in 1936, ninety years after a water park was first proposed on the Charles.

The public spaces of the New Basin to be built in the next decade will continue the 100-year improvement of the river as the “Central Park” of the Metropolitan Park System.

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We invite your comments.
Contact the Metropolitan District
Commission Planning Office
20 Somerset Street
Boston, MA 02108
(617) 727-9693, ext. 267