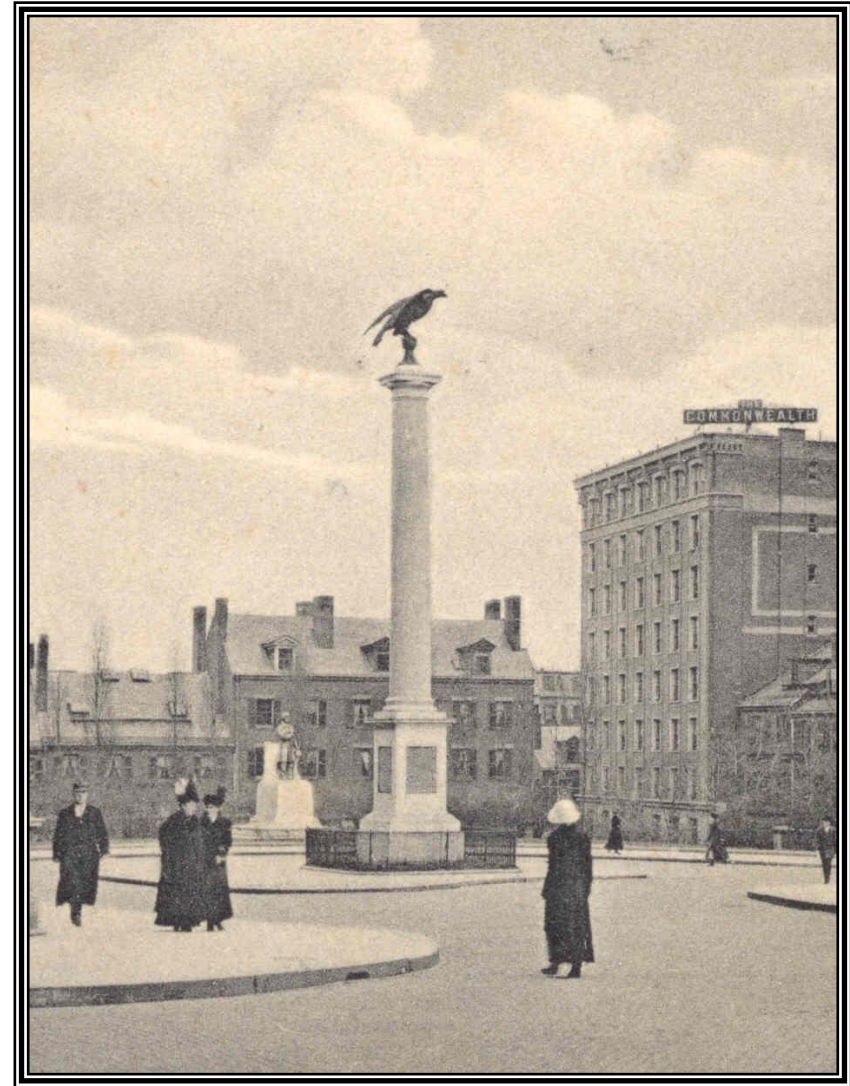


AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF ASHBURTON PARK



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS, STATE HOUSE ART COMMISSION
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AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF ASHBURTON PARK

ASHBURTON PARK stretches along the eastern side of the Massachusetts State House and occupies a flat tract of land that was created after the summit of Beacon Hill was excavated during the early 19th century. The park's borders - along Bowdoin Street and between Mount Vernon and Derne Streets - were defined when the capitol was extended in the 1890s.

TRIMOUNTAIN AND THE BEACON



Three hills originally composed the Shawmut Peninsula. Capps Hill (sometimes called Mill Hill, as it abutted Mill Pond) covered the northern tip in today's North End. Fort Hill (Corn Hill) rose from the water near Boston Neck. Sentry Hill (located toward the center of the peninsula), the third and tallest, afforded the best vantage point for guards to watch the harbor for unfriendly ships.

Sentry Hill lay along a ridge with three small, distinct peaks of its own, known over time by various names, the most familiar of which are now Mt. Vernon, Pemberton and Beacon Hill. Thus, the area was known to early settlers as Trimontain, or three mountains, until 1630 when the town of Boston was founded. Upper Tremont Street still wraps

around the former eastern base of Trimountain.

No reliable measurements of the summit of Sentry Hill exist, but most reports estimate that it was between 138 and 151 feet (above an ever-fluctuating sea level, or an undefined “city base”).

Taking advantage of this elevation, colonists, in 1635, erected a beacon – a cauldron of flammable substances – to serve as a signal in case of danger, and the area soon became known as Beacon Hill.



A number of beacons followed on this spot until the Revolution, including one in 1768 that was readied in anticipation of the arrival of “peace keeping” troops, which the royal governor Francis Bernard promptly removed, citing unwarranted concern of the selectmen and colonists.

By the spring of 1775, with Boston surrounded by nearly 20,000 provincial militiamen, the British found themselves in a defensive position. General Thomas Gage's troops constructed a small fort on Beacon Hill that was used primarily for observation. From the summit, Lt. Richard Williams, a cartographer and artist with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, documented Boston and its environs for British military strategists.



That June, many watched in horror from Beacon and Copp's Hills as colonists engaged British troops at Bunker and Breed's Hills across the channel while Charlestown lay burning.



Illustrations of the post-battle conflagration set by the British upon their final retreat might appear exaggerated, but the smoke rose so high that it could even be seen by Abigail Adams, who watched from Penn's Hill in Braintree, over ten miles away.

THE MEMORIAL COLUMN

Upon the evacuation of British troops in March 1776, Bostonians re-erected the beacon in the center of the enemy fort where it stood for another thirteen years until it was destroyed in a storm in 1789. Architect Charles Bulfinch, whose four-acre estate was located at the bottom of the hill on present-day Cambridge Street, proposed to mark its location with a memorial column like those he had seen on his recent tour of Europe.

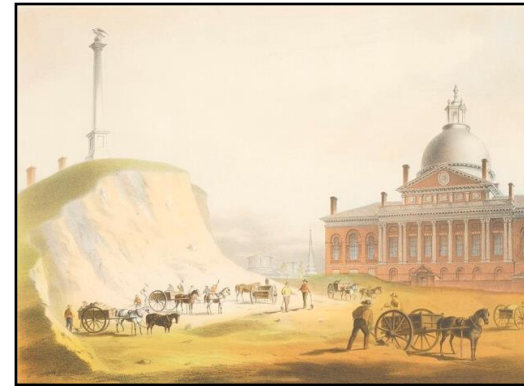
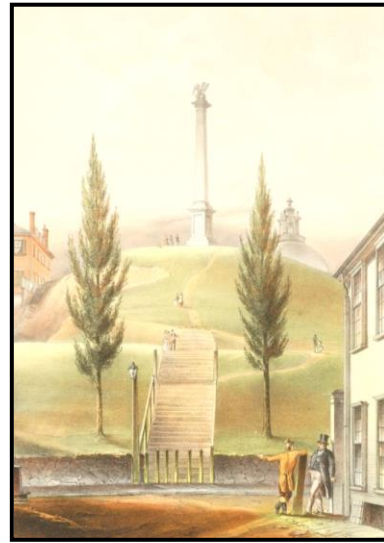
The column which has lately been erected on Beacon Hill by the subscription of a number of inhabitants of this town, is a plain column of the Doric order, raised on its proper pedestal, and substantially built of brick and stone. On each side of the pedestal is an inscription adapted to render the column of use in commemorating the leading events of the American Revolution, as well as an ornament to the hill and a useful landmark. (Massachusetts Magazine, December 1790)

Bulfinch's 60-foot-tall column, erected eight years before the construction of the new State House (also his design), became the country's first memorial dedicated to the War for Independence.

THE TAKING OF THE HILL

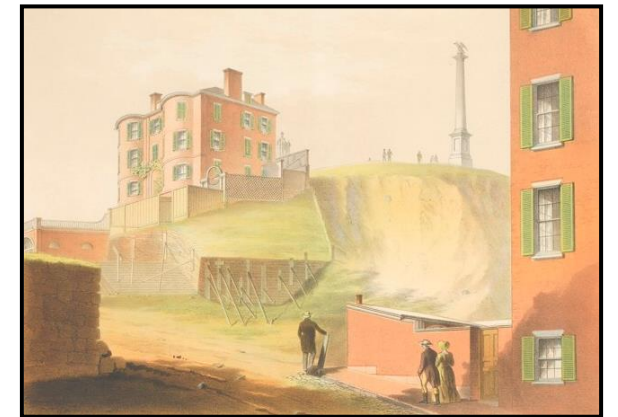


landowners who were more than willing to sell their holdings to developers.



The peak of Mt. Vernon Hill (in the vicinity of present-day Louisburg Square) was cut down around sixty feet and used for additional fill for Charles Street and the lower parade grounds. The effort was expedited by the construction of the first gravity railroad in the country.

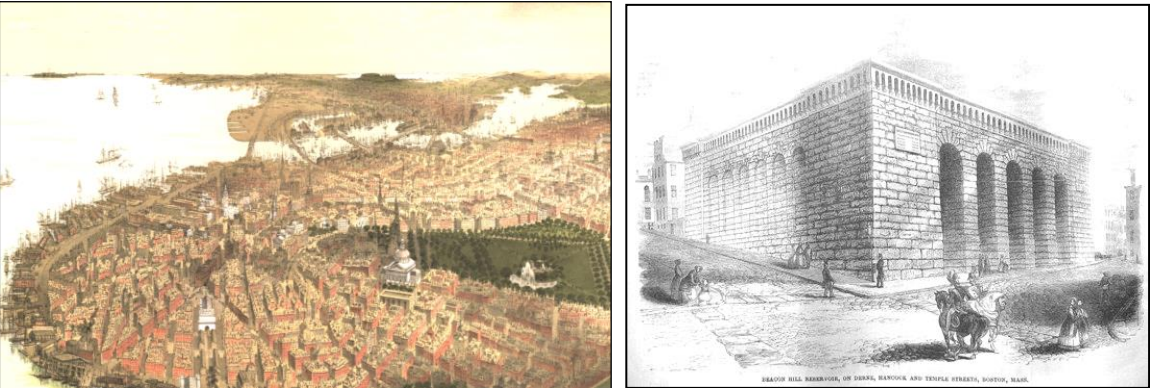
The Mill Pond Corporation, established in 1804, sought to capitalize on Boston's desire to expand its footprint by filling the swamp that resulted from the damming of a natural cove 150 years earlier. For this, they transported gravel north from Copp's Hill, Beacon Hill and elsewhere until the project was completed around 1828. The William Thurston House (1804), unwisely constructed above Bowdoin Street at the eastern edge of the monument, was lost in the relentless digging in less than ten years.



Long considered public land, the summit of Beacon Hill, which measured approximately 100 square feet, was the last to be cut away. Seeing little value in the shrinking hill at the edge of the governor's former pasture, but much value in the fill it would provide, John Hancock's heirs indicated their intention to excavate the southwest corner in 1807. Confusion and litigation over land rights and ownership boundaries however, delayed them from profiting for several years until the cash-strapped city auctioned the summit in 1811. Bulfinch's memorial column was dismantled, and the remainder of the hill taken down to the level of the new State House. The four original inscribed slate tablets were all that were saved.

DEVELOPMENT

The remaining land at the top of the hill was developed not long after that. The city extended Temple Street to Beacon, and the State House was soon surrounded by residences and businesses. A new system of waterworks brought water from Western Massachusetts to the rapidly growing city, and a reservoir was erected behind the capitol (abutting Derne Street) in 1849 to address the growing demands demand of the crowded neighborhood.



Still, there was no thought of marking the ancient location of the beacon, until a committee was formed in 1864 to consider the expediency of erecting a replacement column. Resources for the project were scarce, however, because of the Civil War. Nonetheless, the committee’s resolve proved to be as steadfast as that of the Bunker Hill Monument Association out of which it grew.

To be sure, no sacred associations were connected with Beacon Hill; but it had been a marked spot in our colonial history from the early settlement of the town, and on it was erected the first memorial to the patriots who made us a nation. The legislature has granted to our Association the right to rebuild the monument in some other place in its original form and has placed the tablets in its possession at our disposal when we wish for them. (Address of Frederick W. Lincoln, *Proceedings of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, June 1882)

Although authorized to choose another location for the column, the Association kept a watchful eye on Beacon Hill as plans were unfolding for a substantial enlargement of the State House.

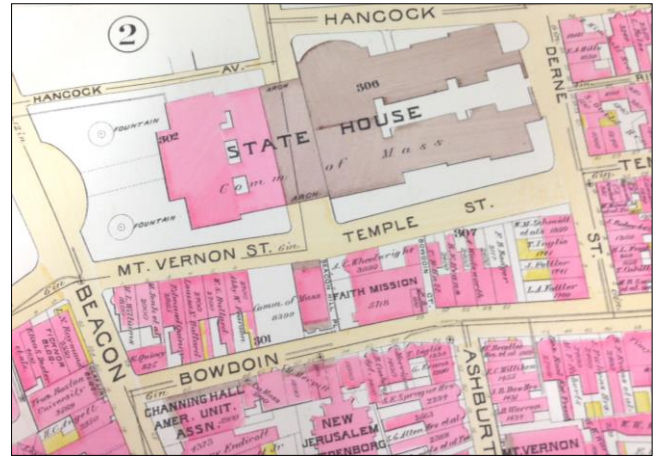
THE BRIGHAM EXTENSION AND CREATION OF THE EAST PARK



The reservoir behind the capitol served Beacon Hill until it too was demolished in 1883 to make way for a massive extension for the State House designed by Charles Brigham. According to the original plan, the building was to be wedged in between Hancock and Temple Streets, and only the houses on these and upper Mt. Vernon Street were to fall prey to construction. But as plans progressed, more and more abutting land, streets and residential property were acquired by eminent domain. Construction began at the northern (Derne Street) end of the

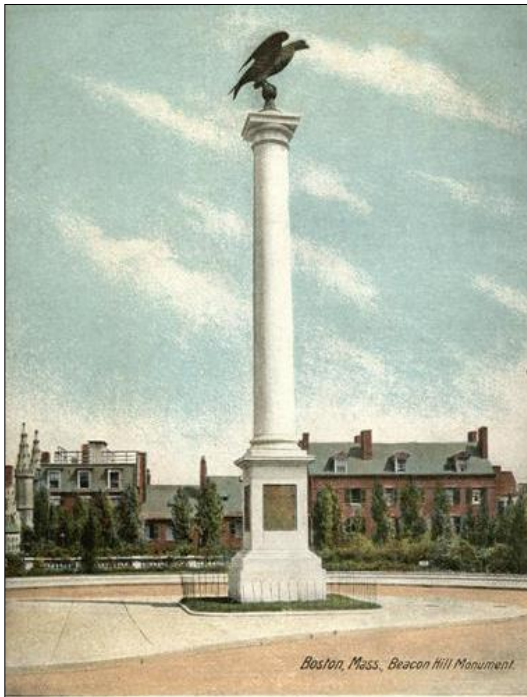
building in 1888 and proceeded south toward Beacon Street until 1900 when the Bulfinch capitol and the extension were merged.

In 1892, the legislature authorized the State House Construction Committee to take all property east of the extension between Temple and Bowdoin Streets, below the Commonwealth Building on Mt. Vernon Street, “to provide an open space.” In 1893 and 1894, further land acquisitions were made and the whole laid out as “an ornamental park.”





Brigham's original plan never called for an East Park. While acquired at great cost, the additional acreage provided a welcome, airy setting for the newly enlarged building on the thickly settled hill. With the open space re-established, public monuments soon adorned the park.

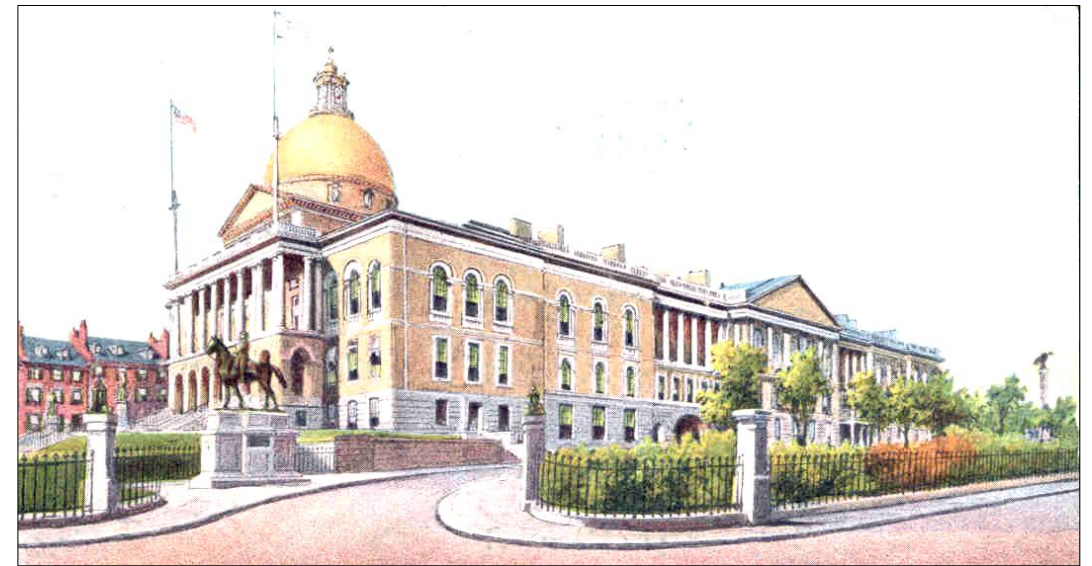


In 1898, the Bunker Hill Monument Association requested permission to erect an exact replica of Bulfinch's column in approximately the same location (albeit 60 feet lower) as the original monument. Four original inscribed slate plaques that had been preserved for one hundred years inside the State House were incorporated into the new column and the *Beacon Hill Monument* was dedicated on Bunker Hill Day, June 17, 1898. Final cost: \$6,152.60.



Not long after the installation of the *Beacon Hill Monument*, the Commonwealth commissioned memorials to three Civil War generals. A rare view at the Library of Congress shows the newly installed statue of *General Charles Devens* (by Olin Warner, 1898). Behind it, at the far left, the Commonwealth Building, formerly the Way estate, appears just before an 1899 Resolve authorized

building commissioners to raze it. By late 1900, all the buildings along Bowdoin Street, between Beacon and Derne Streets, had been demolished, and the park was extended the length of the capitol.



In 1903, Daniel Chester French's equestrian *General Joseph Hooker* was placed prominently at the head of the park on Beacon Street. Five years later, the bronze memorial to *Nathaniel Banks* by Henry H. Kitson was installed at the park's northern end.



20TH CENTURY ALTERATIONS



Despite the sizeable extension, it was not long before the State House once again ran out of room. The lovely sweeping boulevard was demolished to permit construction of the east wing from 1914-1916. (The west wing would follow, increasing the size of the building to nearly 600,000 square feet.) The considerably reduced park opened behind intricate wrought-iron gates at the top of the Derne Street stairs, ca. 1916.



Although grassy areas were restored for the statues, a portion of the space was eventually reclaimed for the now ubiquitous automobile. Parking expanded over the decades until, in a questionable move in the mid-1950s, the Commonwealth relocated two of the state-commissioned memorials -- the *Charles Devens* to the Charles River Esplanade, and the *Nathaniel Banks* to his hometown of Waltham -- and converted what little green space that remained entirely to a parking lot.

RESTORATION AND RENAMING: ASHBURTON PARK



And so it remained until the late 1980s, when commissioners excavated the park in order to construct an underground garage to address the ever-present need for parking. The *Beacon Hill Monument* was reinstalled in its former location, and the small lawns north and south of the column reinstated.

Ashburton Park opened in 1991, taking its name from Ashburton Place, the small road onto which it opens. Formerly Somerset Court, Ashburton Place was renamed in 1845 for Lord Ashburton (Alexander Baring), a British diplomat sent to the United States to assist Daniel Webster in concluding the treaty that drew the northeast border of Maine with New Brunswick in 1842. The treaty also resolved other border issues and called for an end to slave trade by all signatories.



Although the elaborate gates at the Derne Street stairs were removed, wrought iron gates decorated with the Seal of Boston, Lincolnshire, England, enclose the park at the Bowdoin Street entrance.



The lawns, too, have been revitalized and reinstalled with public art, and the story of Ashburton Park has come full circle. Memorials to heroes of a different kind are now installed at both ends of the park. The *Massachusetts Law Enforcement Officers Memorial*, designed by Michael P. Kenney (2002) is located at the north end, and the *Massachusetts Fallen Firefighters Memorial*, by Robert Shure (2007), at the south. Both monuments are encircled with the names of those lost while on duty, or as a direct consequence of their profession. Although no longer visible from all points, this area of Beacon Hill is once more dedicated to those who provide safety and protection for all citizens while serving as a place of respite away from the city that now surrounds it.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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- Page 2 View of Beacon Hill and Boston Common. Edwin M. Bacon, *Boston: A Guide Book*. Athenaeum Press, 1903 ed.
- View of the Town of Boston from Breed's Hill in Charlestown.* 1792. Engraved by Samuel Hill. Boston Public Library.
- Page 3 *A drawn view of the Country round Boston taken from Beacon Hill, by Lieut. Williams of the Royal Welch Fusiliers.* Numbers 1, 4 and 5 from a series of six by Richard Williams, 1775. Map Library, British Museum.

- Page 4 *View of the Attack on Bunker's Hill, with the Burning of Charles Town, June 17, 1775.* Engraving by John Lodge, ca. 1783, after George Henry Millar. Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery.
- An original sketch of the Burning of Charlestown & Battle of Bunker Hill. Taken by an English Officer from Beacon Hill Boston 1775.* Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library.
- Page 5 *Beacon Hill from Derne Street; Beacon Hill from Mt. Vernon Street.* J. H. Bufford, lithographer, after drawings by John Rubens Smith, ca. 1810-1811. Boston Pictorial Archive, Boston Public Library.
- Page 6 *Beacon Hill, between Hancock and Temple Streets; Beacon Hill, with Mr. Thurston's House, from Bowdoin Street.* J. H. Bufford, ca. 1810-1811. Boston Pictorial Archive, Boston Public Library.
- Page 7 *Boston: Bird's Eye View from the North* (detail). John Bachmann, lithographer. L. Prang, 1877. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
- Beacon Hill Reservoir. *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, December 11, 1852.
- Page 8 Demolition of the Beacon Hill Reservoir, 1889. Boston Pictorial Archive, Boston Public Library.
- Atlas of the City of Boston: City Proper and Roxbury*, plate 1 (detail), 1890. George W. and Walter S. Bromley. Norman B. Leventhal Map Collection, Boston Public Library.
- Page 9 View of the east façade of the Brigham extension of the State House, ca. 1897, prior to the installation of the *Beacon Hill Monument*. A. M. Bridgeman, *A Souvenir of Massachusetts Legislators*. Stoughton, 1898.
- Early view of the Beacon Hill Monument. Postcard, ca. 1900. Hugh C. Leighton Co.
- Page 10 View of the East Park, ca. 1899. National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress.
- Bowdoin at Beacon Street, postcard, ca. 1905, showing the equestrian statue *General Joseph Hooker* on axis with the *Beacon Hill Monument*. Art Commission files.
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- West End, Charlestown, and Bunker Hill Monument from the State House, 1924. Leslie Jones Collection, Boston Public Library.
- Page 14 Construction of the underground parking garage, 1990. DCAMM archives.
- Ashburton Park gate with seal of Boston, England, 2022. Art Commission files.
- Page 15 View of Ashburton Park, with the *Fallen Firefighters Memorial* in the foreground, 2010. Art Commission files.
- Back cover: *Derne Street Terraces of the State House, Beacon Hill*, by John Albert Seaford. Henry P. Dowst, *Random Notes of Boston*. Humphrey, 1913



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