

“Minutes away, worlds apart”: The changing imagination of the Boston Harbor Islands

Pavla Šimková

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich

pavla.simkova@rcc.lmu.de

Abstract: The Boston Harbor Islands are a historically urban archipelago. Since its founding in 1630, the city of Boston has embedded them firmly in its urban infrastructure. The islands have served as sources of wood and building stone, common pastures, sites of harbor defenses and lighthouses, and as ‘dumping grounds’ for materials, businesses, and institutions undesirable in the city proper. In the middle third of the twentieth century, however, Bostonians imagined their city’s harbor islands in a new way: one that has obscured most of their long human history and has cast them in the role of a natural landscape fundamentally different from the city. This changing perception resulted in the islands recently becoming places reserved almost exclusively for conservation and recreation. This article explores the way in which a certain kind of island narrative that frames islands as isolated, extraordinary places of mystery and adventure came to dominate the imagination of Boston’s previously mundane urban islands.

Keywords: Boston, Boston Harbor Islands, island history, island imagination, urban islands, urban archipelago.

<https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.169> • Received February 2021, Early Access July 2021

© *Island Studies Journal*, 2021

Introduction

“Calling all explorers,” a video advertisement for the Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park, begins, “all Alices in search of Wonderland, all Maxes seeking the Land of the Wild Things” (Bostonharborislands, 2012). From a bird’s eye view of Boston’s skyscrapers, the screen switches abruptly to a treasure map: suddenly the scene is not downtown Boston, but Treasure Island. “Set sail for undiscovered country,” the advertisement urges, “where castles guard the shoreline and wild beasts patrol the waters; where adventure takes root on the rocks and ramparts. Find yourself in a land far, far away—which, it turns out, is much closer than you think” (Bostonharborislands, 2012).

The “land far, far away” referred to here are the Boston Harbor Islands: 34 small islands dotting Boston Harbor, the largest of them barely two miles long, the smallest merely a shoal only visible at low tide. Since 1996, they have formed the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, currently known as the Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park. Geologically speaking, the islands are a product of the last ice age, a partly submerged field of

glacial drumlins (Rosen & FitzGerald, 2009). Their appearance ranges from ragged rocks overgrown with scraggly vegetation, over wooded hills gently sloping towards the water, to manicured parks. Although no actual castles guard their shores, they are still home to several sprawling nineteenth-century fortresses and the second-oldest working lighthouse in the United States. It takes the ferryboat less than an hour to reach even the farthest of the islands; most lie within a ten-mile radius from the city. Together, they form a popular summer playground where Bostonians and visitors alike can pursue leisure activities and enjoy ocean breezes in a natural setting.



Figure 1. The Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park. *Source:* OnTheWorldMap (<https://ontheworldmap.com/usa/city/boston/boston-harbor-map.html>).

The ‘Calling All Explorers’ ad is clearly aimed at families with children, but the imagery it employs closely mirrors the general way in which the park management presents and the public perceives the Boston Harbor Islands. The national and state park’s website presents the harbor islands as places full of sun and fun: images of the park invariably show blue skies, sparkling sea, and smiling visitors frolicking in the attractive harbor setting. The dominant narrative, perhaps best summed up in the official motto of the park, “Minutes away, worlds apart,” frames the islands as radically different from the city despite their close proximity to its shores. The water separating them from the mainland is interpreted as an interval between places that have very little or nothing in common. The islands are portrayed as a direct

opposite of the city, a respite from urban bustle and congestion. To board a boat bound for the harbor islands, this narrative suggests, is to step outside the dreary reality of urban life and into an extraordinary land of mystery and adventure.

The harbor islands may seem like another world at first sight: their green, natural aspect contrasts conspicuously with the built environment of the city, and their location seemingly sets them apart from the mainland. A closer look at the islands' history, however, reveals a close functional attachment to Boston that has lasted for centuries. Over the four hundred years of Boston's existence, the harbor islands have been firmly embedded in its urban infrastructure, making them into a prime example of an urban archipelago (Grydehøj, 2015). Both the early town of the colonial era and the city of later times used them for various purposes according to its current needs. The colonial town of the seventeenth century cut the islands' trees for firewood and timber and dug for gravel on their shores. The booming port of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made use of the islands' position in the middle of its all-important harbor; the federal government built several of them up with forts and harbor defenses. The sanitary metropolis of the late nineteenth century attached the islands even more closely. Businesses and institutions unwanted in the city proper yet indispensable to its functioning found a home on the islands: rendering works, garbage and sewage plants, but also hospitals, poorhouses, and prisons. These uses made the harbor islands into working landscapes that did not seem so very different from the city itself: they were an unremarkable, if at times unsavory, part of Boston's urban space.

It was only in the middle third of the twentieth century that the land uses and perceptions of the Boston Harbor Islands began to change. By the 1950s, the port was in a decades-long decline, the military had abandoned its island fortifications, and many of the institutions and industries previously occupying the islands had closed down or moved elsewhere. This decline in the old uses created the physical space for new ways in which the islands could be employed for the city's purposes.

The change in land use coincided with a change in the way the harbor islands were perceived by Bostonians. Long-standing escapist tendencies accompanying urbanization since the nineteenth century converged with the romanticizing efforts of several popular writers, most prominently Edward Rowe Snow, to initiate a transformation of the harbor island imaginaries. Coupled with the emerging environmental concerns of the 1960s, they brought about a process of "islanding" (Baldacchino, 2007, p. 2): since the 1970s, Boston's previously urban islands were gradually being constructed as places separate from the city, places where adventure, mystery, and wild nature beckoned. Their urban past has been all but obscured in the process.

This article asks how this turnaround in perception and use came about: which developments have been responsible for the fact that over the last fifty years, Bostonians have perceived the Boston Harbor Islands as essentially different from the city—despite the archipelago's proximity to Boston and despite its urban history. Through the history of the Boston Harbor Islands, this article explores the way in which Western imagination of islands as extraordinary places fundamentally different from the mainland was extended to an island group previously characterized by accessibility and attachment to "their" city's body. Finally, it asks what real-world consequences this change of perception had for the islands and the way they were used and managed. The article traces the harbor islands' historical links to Boston from its founding in 1630 until the early twentieth century. It subsequently contrasts

this close connection with the framing of the harbor islands as separate and remote, a narrative that emerged in the 1930s and gradually gained ground throughout the twentieth century. Finally, it shows how this new narrative is reflected in the way the Boston Harbor Islands are managed today: as Boston's urban wilderness and principal recreational area.

Historical study of urban islands: Literature overview

This article is embedded in the historical study of urban environments and builds on the large body of literature that exists about the topographical history of Boston. Through its focus on an urban island group, it hopes to both add a historical perspective to the budding field of urban island studies and to shed some light on a topic that has so far received very little attention in both urban environmental history in general and the history of Boston in particular.

The Boston Harbor Islands are an understudied part of Boston's urban environment. Even though Boston's changing topography has been the subject of a number of historical and geographical studies, most of them have stopped at the water's edge, not regarding Boston's harbor islands as part of the city (Kennedy, 1992; O'Connell, 2013; O'Connor, 2001; Whitehill & Kennedy, 2000). Even *Gaining Ground*, Nancy Seasholes' (2003) admirably detailed study of Boston landmaking from 1630 until the late twentieth century, pays attention almost exclusively to the mainland and only mentions those harbor islands that have been permanently attached to the city by made land or causeways, such as Governors Island (Seasholes, 2003, p. 377) or Moon Island (Seasholes, 2003, p. 337). Two outstanding volumes on Boston's environmental history, *Remaking Boston*, edited by Anthony N. Penna and Conrad E. Wright (2009), and Michael Rawson's *Eden on the Charles* (2014), mention the Boston Harbor Islands only in passing. Books focusing solely on the harbor islands tend to be popular accounts which provide the reader with colorful anecdotes from the islands' history while focusing mainly on the islands' current recreational potential (Kales, 2007; Klein, 2011).

Historical literature in general has so far paid little attention to urban islands. Urban histories, especially urban environmental histories, offer valuable insights about how coastal cities have treated their urban space and their hinterlands over time (Booker, 2013; Dagenais, 2017; Kelman, 2003; Klinge, 2007; Sanderson, 2009). However, they usually do not see coastal islands as part of the cities' environment and, accordingly, devote very little space to their study. The focus of histories of coastal regions tends to lie in the complex interplay of sea and land within the littoral zone (Gillis, 2012; McKenzie, 2010; Pastore, 2014; Stilgoe, 1994) and is usually too broad in scope to pay special attention to urban islands. Only in recent years have historical studies of urban islands and island cities begun to emerge (Bissell, 2019; Sichertman, 2019).

Within the field of island studies itself, there has been a rise in interest in island cities since 2014. This new focus was spearheaded by Adam Grydehøj (2014a, 2014b, 2015; Grydehøj et al., 2015), who has argued in several publications for the need to study the connections between islandness and urbanity. The topic of island cities has been explored in the contributions in a 2014 special section of *Island Studies Journal* (Grydehøj, 2014b) as well as in several pieces published in the now-inactive journal *Urban Island Studies* (<http://www.urbanislandstudies.org>). The focus here has been on island cities, defined by Grydehøj and colleagues (2015, p. 5) as "major population centres of large islands or

archipelagos” and “densely urbanised small islands or archipelagos.” While Boston is not an obvious “island city” like Venice or Tokyo and most of its harbor islands do not readily look like an urban landscape, I argue that the Boston Harbor Islands still constitute an urban archipelago: an island group that has been drawn deeply into the adjacent city’s urban infrastructure.

Most of the research within the field of island studies so far has been done from the point of view of anthropology, geography, and urban studies. However, history, with its focus on chronological processes and its ability to discern change over time, can make a unique contribution to the study of urban islands. On the example of the Boston Harbor Islands, this article sheds light on how the perceptions and uses of this urban island group have transformed over time and why. As such, it hopes to add an important dimension to the study of urban islands.

Boston and its Harbor Islands: A history of connection

When English Puritans sailed into Boston Harbor in 1630 and established a settlement on its shores, the harbor’s many islands were one of the features that attracted them to the place. The islands acted as natural windbreaks that screened out the rough seas of the open ocean and made Boston Harbor a suitable place for shipping. The importance of a good harbor for the early New England colonies could not be overstated: when the Puritans first arrived, the mainland seemed to them an uninviting wilderness devoid of roads, covered with thick woods and impenetrable marches (Bridenbaugh, 1938; Pastore, 2015). Water transportation thus emerged as the only reliable means of communication with the other colonies along the coast and with the mother country. The early colony developed what historians Petra van Dam (2010) and John T. Cumbler (2014, p. 41) have termed “amphibious culture,” relying on water as a medium for moving goods and people from one place to another. Boston Harbor thus functioned as the main entrance to the town—as a highway leading to its shores.

The Boston Harbor Islands, located as they were within Boston’s marine front yard, occupied a relatively central position in the nascent settlement. Almost immediately after the settlers had arrived in Boston Harbor, they started to appropriate its islands. Early records of the colony show that merely a year after Boston’s founding, in 1631, the islands were brought under the town’s jurisdiction and used as commons (Noble, 1904). They provided early Boston with resources like timber and building stone; they were also used for harvesting hay and served as agricultural land and as pastures for livestock. These practices were reflected in their names: Boston Harbor included not only a Slate, but also a Hog and a Sheep Island. Their accessibility, their relatively intensive use, and the amphibious nature of the early town made the islands an integral part of colonial Boston.

Later, the harbor islands started to play an important role in the functioning of Boston’s port. From the mid-seventeenth until the nineteenth century, Boston was first and foremost a seaport, its wealth coming from Atlantic cod fishing and from the profitable trade with the Caribbean (Cellineri, 1976; Hall, 2019; Rutman, 1965). The harbor islands were drawn into the port’s operation in multiple ways. One of them was, as in earlier periods, resource extraction: the islands’ remaining trees were now cut down for ship masts and planking. Incoming ships also helped themselves to gravel and pebbles from the islands and used them as ballast (Rawson, 2009). Even more important, the islands became sites of harbor defenses: already in 1634, a primitive mud fort was erected on Castle Island. In the course of the

eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Governors, Noddles, and Georges Islands had fortifications built on them as well—the first of a long succession of military facilities designed to protect the city of Boston and its shipping (Parkman, 1978). The islands thus became the town's outposts and contributed to its maritime economy.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the Boston Harbor Islands attached even closer to the city's body. With the emergence of the idea of the "sanitary city" (Melosi, 2008) in the 1840s, Bostonians looked with increasing dismay on the various "nuisances" that, on the one hand, were indispensable to the city's functioning but, on the other hand, made life in Boston less than pleasant: tallow works, meat-processing factories, and rendering and garbage-reduction plants. Boston's advancing urbanization, which went hand in hand with spatial stratification, also meant that public institutions caring for the socially outcast—poorhouses, workhouses, or prisons—became increasingly undesirable in the city proper. Finally, Boston's explosive growth—from some 34,000 souls in 1810, the city swelled to nearly half a million inhabitants in 1890—generated unprecedented amounts of waste of all sorts, from household garbage to industrial refuse to sewage. Looking to push these unwanted businesses, materials, and people out of their city, Boston's political representation turned to the harbor islands as a receptacle for anything the city did not want within its limits. Deer Island became the site of an asylum for female paupers and, later, of a prison; Rainsford Island, since the eighteenth century the site of a quarantine hospital, received in the 1870s a city-run almshouse; Moon Island had half of its area taken up by four large sewage tanks. In the most striking example of this development, Spectacle Island, a 42-acre island some four miles from Boston's waterfront, evolved into the city's unchallenged garbage hub. The first waste business to come to Spectacle was, in 1857, a rendering plant processing dead horses and cows into leatherware, dog food, glue, and other products (McShane, 2001). In the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was joined by other waste-reliant factories, including a garbage-reduction plant banished from the mainland because of the offensive smells that accompanied its production process. Finally, in the 1930s, Spectacle Island became the site of a landfill, daily receiving an estimated 350 tons of refuse that was ferried over from Boston.

These uses made the Boston Harbor Islands into Boston's urban fringe, fit to receive whatever was undesirable within Boston's city limits. At the same time, these uses, however unpopular, turned the islands into integral parts of Boston. They were now tied to the mainland by power and telephone lines, water pipes, and regular boat service. Some of them, like Castle, Deer, or Moon Islands, were connected to the shore by causeways; Long Island was made accessible from the mainland by a bridge. The most important attachment, however, was the functional one: by siting indispensable businesses and institutions on the harbor islands, Boston integrated them into its urban infrastructure. The factories and public institutions located on the islands also required a workforce that either lived on site or commuted daily from Boston and the surrounding communities. The city, while seeking to put a water expanse between itself and its "nuisances", turned the islands into urban facilities in the process and firmly embedded them into its urban fabric.

A sea change: A turn in the use and perception of Boston Harbor and its islands

In the middle third of the twentieth century, both the uses and the prevalent perception of the Boston Harbor Islands underwent a dramatic change. After the Second World War, the

fortifications that stood on several of the islands were decommissioned; the Army then either transferred the islands it had owned to the state of Massachusetts or sold them at public auctions. Some of the old “dumping ground” facilities were slowly disappearing, too: the landfill on Spectacle Island closed in the 1950s, as did a little later the rudimentary sewage-treatment plant on Moon Island; the buildings of the quarantine station on Gallops and the paupers’ house on Rainsford Island stood empty. These developments coincided with a relative decline of the once all-important Boston port. The port’s gradual loss of trade was already evident during the first years of the twentieth century. A complex set of factors, ranging from a lack of a bulk export product to unfavorable railroad rates, caused goods to move increasingly through Boston’s rival East Coast ports of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and especially New York. While in 1901 Boston occupied second place among the United States’ ports in foreign exports, in 1920 it slipped to sixth and in 1929 to the eighteenth place. Whatever remained of the once-proud port was swept away by the Great Depression of the 1930s (Cellineri, 1976). This economic decline of the port also spelled doom for Boston Harbor’s importance as the city’s geographical focal point: from Boston’s front gate, it slowly turned into its back yard.

Hand in hand with the loss of the port’s economic importance went a social change. The decline of shipping, augmented by the advent of containerization and automation from the 1960s on, meant that an ever smaller number of people engaged with the harbor as a place of work on a daily basis. The port workforce of longshoremen, shipyard employees, and fishermen, for whom the harbor was a familiar, well-known space that held little mystery, was gradually diminishing—and with them disappeared an understanding of the harbor as a working landscape. The harbor islands fared similarly: with many of the old industrial and institutional uses in decline or gone, they disappeared from most Bostonians’ mental maps. Boston’s inhabitants now had little or no first-hand experience of their city’s harbor and its islands and were free to imagine them in new ways.

A new kind of island imagination was indeed slowly filling the space previously occupied by the notion of the harbor islands as the city’s useful though unsavory appendages. By the 1930s, Bostonians were increasingly inclined to perceive their city’s islands through the lens of a generalized imagination of islands as remote and isolated “locales of desire” (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 55; Lübken & Hofmann, 2018). Fueled by island fiction such as Jules Verne’s *The Mysterious Island*, R. L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, and, perhaps most prominently, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, modern Western island imagination saw islands as essentially disconnected places existing out of reach and out of time (Baldacchino, 2018; Gillis, 2014). Within this imagination, islands evolved into spatial and cultural counterparts of continents, into the mainland’s ‘other’ (Loxley, 1990). The literary depictions spilled over into popular perceptions and, perhaps even more importantly, into historical and material realities (McMahon & André, 2018). In the mid-twentieth century, this imagination took hold of the Boston Harbor Islands: the urban archipelago with a long history of connections to its city was undergoing a process of “islanding”.

This change in the way Bostonians saw their harbor islands was brought about by several factors. It was rooted in the tendency of wealthy nineteenth-century urban dwellers to see coastal islands as rugged and romantic and as a welcome antidote to the city’s congestion (Gillis, 2012). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, well-to-do Bostonians would flock to the seashore and to New England’s coastal islands to enjoy the picturesque scenery, ocean

breezes, and a respite from the strains of urban life. By the turn of the century, they would extend this perception of islands as fundamentally different from the urban environment to the outer Boston Harbor Islands, a group of weather-beaten, rocky islands at the harbor's entrance that most readily corresponded with the notion of islands as wild, isolated, and essentially non-urban. Prominent landscape architects of the late nineteenth century, such as Frederick Law Olmsted (1887) and Charles Eliot (1902/1999), built on these perceptions when they proposed turning the "wilderness" of the harbor islands into a recreational area for Bostonians to enjoy. Since the turn of the century, some of the harbor islands were thus in the process of being reimagined as spaces that offered Bostonians an escape from the everyday, from its routine and monotone (Gillis, 2004; Kremer, 2018).

From the 1930s on, these "islanding" tendencies were enhanced by the writings of several popular authors who portrayed the Boston Harbor Islands as places of mystery and romance. One of the writers who made the previously so mundane and inconspicuous harbor islands seem like embodiments of romantic insularity was the Boston postmaster Patrick J. Connelly. In 1932, he published a slim volume about the Boston Harbor Islands with the poetic subtitle *Green Isles of Romance*. In it, he framed the islands as places of natural beauty and witnesses to the "romance of the ages" (Connelly, 1932, p. 9):

Through all the centuries, men in all climates and lands have been building romantic visions of the beautiful green isles far off, where their dreams would come true [...]. And to those who first sailed into and up the Harbor of Boston, passing the green isles and seeing the beautiful contour of their lines, all the dreams and pictures of their minds, visions and hopes unfolded into a reality.

The true master storyteller of the Boston Harbor Islands, however, was Edward Rowe Snow, a former schoolteacher who devoted his life's work to popularizing a particular vision of the New England coast and especially of Boston's harbor islands. In his narrative, the islands appeared as places of adventure and mystery, their actual history obscured under a layer of exciting anecdotes emphasizing their detachment from the city. In his 1935 book, *Islands of Boston Harbor: Their History and Romance*, Snow painted a picture of a landscape outside everyday experience: a realm of pirates, shipwrecks, and chests of gold. He provided a detailed account of extraordinary past events that supposedly happened on each of the islands, making them appear as historic places. An important part of his island narrative was contrasting the "isles of romance" with the mainland, specifically the city, which for him was governed by "hectic rush and dull routine" (Snow, 1950, p. v). His islands were places of wonder where the dreary reality of the mainland held no sway. Their boundedness was not a mere geographical fact: translated as isolation, it was the foundation of their otherness and their difference from the city. An island, Snow (1950, p. v) insisted, was "a body of land surrounded by adventure, romance, mystery and excitement." Edward Rowe Snow promoted his vision of the Boston Harbor Islands in countless books, newspaper articles, talks, and radio and television broadcasts throughout his career which stretched for almost fifty years, from the 1930s until the 1980s. His *Islands of Boston Harbor* appeared in two subsequent editions, in 1971 and in 2002, bringing his narrative to new generations of readers. Over time, he became the most authoritative voice on the subject of the Boston Harbor Islands and the most prominent proponent of the new island imagination. In the view of Snow and other harbor

boosters, the islands were places with their own histories that were in many cases independent of Boston. No longer regarded solely as urban facilities and the city's appendages, the popular understanding of the harbor islands gradually shifted to that of places that stood on their own and possessed an intrinsic value.

The framing of the islands as historic places coincided with another phenomenon that changed Bostonians' perception of their harbor islands: the emergence of environmental concerns in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The era saw the rise of the American environmental movement and the adoption of important environmental legislation such as the *National Environmental Protection Act* (Sale, 1993). The growing public interest in the state of the nation's nature and the increasing concern about environmental pollution was reflected at the local level in Bostonians' changing attitude towards their harbor and its islands. By this time, most of the islands were natural-looking places: they had either been planted by their erstwhile owners or were spontaneously overgrowing with vegetation after their former uses had been abandoned. Many of them hosted waterbird colonies; the remnants of their salt marshes offered refuge to shellfish and other marine creatures. Bostonians now increasingly regarded them as places that possessed natural beauty and were part of a valuable ecosystem. Environmental sensibility thus added another layer to the new perception of the harbor islands: they were now seen as open space worthy of protection.

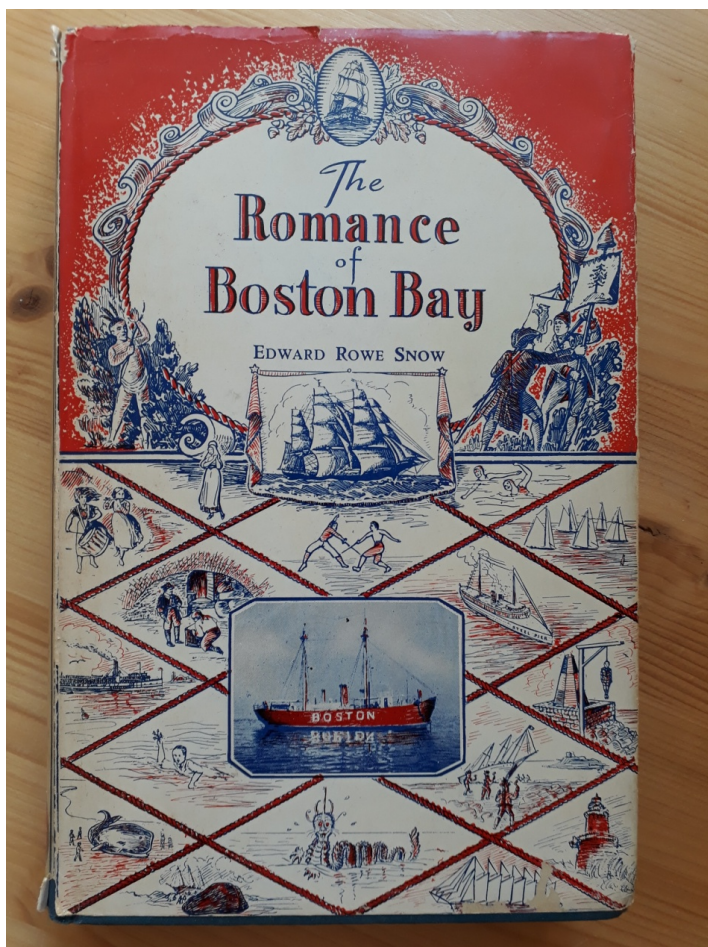


Figure 2. The cover of Edward Rowe Snow's 1944 book *The Romance of Boston Bay*. Source: Pavla Šimková.

So, in the latter part of the twentieth century, a new island imagination took hold in Boston Harbor. Bostonians came to regard their city's former island appendages as places in their own right that offered both an access to their region's eventful past and nature that should be protected and could be enjoyed by Boston's population. The new combined narrative was also promoted by the press: during the 1970s and 1980s, writers for Boston-area newspapers frequently reported about the harbor islands as places which, although "mistreated" in the past, could now offer the tranquility of nature and a sense of their colorful histories to their visitors. The marriage of a conventional island imagery based on literary depictions and the environmental concerns of the latter half of the twentieth century produced a new narrative about the Boston Harbor Islands: from an urban extension, they were transformed into an urban antidote.

The Boston Harbor Islands as a storied wilderness

The new imagination of the Boston Harbor Islands cast them as a "storied wilderness" (Feldman, 2011)—an area where the experience of wild nature mingled with visible traces of a long history of human habitation. The islands would be managed, preserved, and developed as a landscape whose natural aspect was to be restored while retaining some carefully chosen evidence of its past human use. Thus, increasing attention was being paid to preserving the islands' historicity. In the late 1950s, rumors surfaced that Georges Island, the site of the Civil War-era fortress Fort Warren, was being contemplated as the location of a landfill or even a storage site for radioactive material. In earlier times, when the islands had still been understood as Boston's fringe and suitable places where to dispose of the city's waste, such uses would have raised few eyebrows. In 1957, however, these allegations led to a public outcry about the imminent threat to the "historic island [...] replete with military legend" ("3 Harbor Islands Sold", 1957). The presence of the historic Fort Warren on the island eventually resulted in Georges Island being purchased by the state of Massachusetts for the benefit of the public. In 1961, the fort was opened to visitors and became one of the symbols of the islands' cultural heritage.

It was, however, only a certain kind of historicity that was deemed desirable. The new narrative of the harbor islands' past being steeped in mystery and adventure and having few ties to the pedestrian world of the city led to the suppression of their less attractive historical connections to Boston. So was Fort Strong, an Endicott-era fortress on Long Island, deemed "visually and historically interesting" by the metropolitan planning authority and was slated for restoration. The equally historical building of the hospital for the chronically ill on the same island, however, was labeled an example of "institutional misuse of the island" (Metropolitan Area Planning Council, 1972, p. 11) and was seen as an unwelcome reminder of the island's unsavory past.

Seeing the islands as a valuable natural area at Boston's doorstep proved even more decisive for their future management. In 1969, a high-profile conference about the future of the Boston Harbor Islands that brought together federal, state, and local government officials was convened at the Massachusetts State House. At the conference, United States Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy put forward a proposal to create a national recreation area in Boston Harbor. The stated goal of his proposal was to protect and enhance the harbor islands' qualities as a natural landscape contrasting with the city's built environment and providing Bostonians

with much-needed open space and recreation opportunities. Although nothing came of his proposition at the time, it set the stage for similar initiatives. In 1970, the Boston Harbor Islands State Park was created, with the vision of protecting the islands' nature and making them accessible to the public. Characteristically, the park's first management plan combined nature conservation with restoration of some of the islands' historical buildings, emphasizing both their natural and cultural attributes.

The idea of the Boston Harbor Islands as a landscape with the twin qualities of natural beauty and historical significance, although increasingly popular with the city and state political representation, was promoted first and foremost by the region's nonprofit organizations. Citizen groups with telling names such as Save Our Shores or Friends of the Boston Harbor Islands devoted their efforts to raising awareness of both the harbor islands' ecological importance and their historicity. Through their volunteer work, guiding visitors on the islands and introducing them to their history and nature, they helped frame the archipelago as a landscape where history met nature and whose only appropriate use was conservation and recreation.

The new perceptions were also soon reinforced by new practices. The Harbor Islands Week, an annual event organized by the state park since the 1970s, accentuated activities that framed the islands and the harbor as a historic landscape replete with natural beauty. The program of the Harbor Islands Week in 1976 included a turnaround of the Tall Ships and a Civil War muster at Fort Warren, but also tours of the more pristine-looking of the harbor islands that offered a supposedly undisturbed natural scenery and a respite from the city. Thus, the image of the harbor islands as a storied wilderness and Boston's cherished open space was increasingly coming to govern the uses of these former urban appendages.

Reshaping the Boston Harbor Islands

The triumph of the new island imagination came in 1996 when Congress declared the Boston Harbor Islands a national recreation area. The establishment of the park was preceded by a study conducted by the National Park Service: its purpose was to determine whether the Boston Harbor Islands were a suitable addition to the United States national park system. The National Park Service consulted hundreds of stakeholders including city and state officials, island owners, business organizations, and nonprofits. The way the islands were framed in the resulting report closely mirrored the narrative which by that time had already come to dominate Bostonians' view of their harbor islands. It united the century-old visions of landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Eliot of the harbor islands as principal recreational area for Boston with narratives championed by harbor boosters like Edward Rowe Snow and by harbor nonprofit groups such as the Friends of the Boston Harbor Islands and Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. The report painted the islands as possessing natural and cultural value and it stressed both the role the islands had played in the metropolitan area's history and their potential to educate the urban population about the region's ecosystem (National Park Service, 1994). The places that used to be valued for their fringe position in relation to Boston and for their ability to absorb materials and institutions undesirable in the city proper were now being appreciated for their nature and history and contrasted favorably with the urban landscape. The law establishing the park specifically mentioned the protection of both natural and cultural resources of the islands and described them as a landscape of scenic

and cultural value (*Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act*, 1996). The understanding of the harbor islands as places in their own right that offered what the city lacked—a notion that had been slowly building up for the past several decades—was now codified.

The way the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area was managed also reflected the exceptional success of the “storied wilderness” imagination of the islands. The park’s general management plan, which has been in place since 2002, identifies four major “park themes” which all revolve around the islands’ natural and cultural significance. Although much more complex than Edward Rowe Snow’s anecdotal renditions of the islands’ adventure-studded histories, the island narrative that the park put forward is still building on much the same cornerstones: even as it praises the islands’ value as recreational spots for Boston’s population and thus reinforces their connection to the city, it portrays them as fundamentally different from the urban environment and as separate, self-contained places in their own right.

As the narrative of the islands’ historicity became more established, it also grew more inclusive. Beside the familiar histories of forts and maritime importance, the park themes also include the Native American history of the Boston Harbor Islands. Before the arrival of the Europeans, Indigenous peoples had used the islands as seasonal fishing camps and had established small agricultural hamlets on several of them (Luedtke, 2000). During the seventeenth-century colonial conflict known as King Philip’s War, Deer Island in Boston Harbor became a dreaded internment site for several hundred “Christian Natives”, many of whom died while imprisoned on the island. These events have been commemorated since 1992 by Native American communities in the region (DeLucia, 2012). The local tribes, united in the *Muhheconnew National Confederacy*, had a say in the making of the harbor island park’s management plan and, in the 1990s at the latest, Native American history became integrated into the generally accepted narrative of the Boston Harbor Islands.

The “storied wilderness” imagination of the Boston Harbor Islands did not remain on mere narrative level. It brought about very real changes in the islands’ material realities and in their uses. Centuries of catering to the city’s needs have left the islands’ appearance and their ecological communities substantially altered. Many of the islands had been subjected to resource extraction and had eroded and diminished in size in the process. In the course of eighteenth-century gravel harvesting, Deer Island at the harbor’s entrance lost an estimated sixty acres of its area, and the previously twelve-acre island of Nixes Mate was reduced to a shoal only visible at low tide (Rawson, 2014). Most of the islands had at some point been denuded of trees. Decades of agricultural uses have disrupted their ecologies and exotic plant and animal species had been introduced to many of them. Almost all had their shape altered and buildings constructed upon them. The islands’ semi-urban past was, in a word, hard to miss.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the state park managers strove, in keeping with the new island image, to make the islands look more like a wilderness and less like a Boston suburb. At the same time, they recognized that if they wished for an original-looking New England wilderness on the islands, they had to reconstruct it there first. The alterations made to the islands since the 1970s were aimed at restoring or re-creating salt marshes and “original” plant communities, and at preserving native animal species. The result was to be not only islands “as they might have existed [...] before the 17th century” (Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, 1986, p. 3), but also islands suited to their new role as Boston’s primary recreation area. Nowhere was this makeover of the Boston Harbor Islands more striking than at Boston’s erstwhile garbage hub, Spectacle Island.

Over the course of its existence, Boston has transformed Spectacle Island almost beyond recognition. In the colonial period, the island lost its tree cover to Bostonians' hunger for timber and a portion of its area to gravel harvesting. During much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its existence was that of a quiet rural landscape. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the agricultural uses were replaced by a growing ensemble of garbage-processing factories and by a small colony of workers' houses. In the eyes (and noses) of most Bostonians, Spectacle became synonymous with garbage and the offensive odors accompanying the rendering process. Spectacle's association with waste reached its peak in the 1930s when a landfill was established on the northern and middle portion of the island. The landfill, which operated until 1959, also caused the most profound change in the island's environment to date: it buried the island under a layer of garbage 70 feet thick in some places and added five acres to its size. By the 1980s, the landfill had been long abandoned, but Spectacle Island was still deeply scarred by its presence: its shores leaked pollutants into the harbor, its ecology was left severely disturbed, and its original environment was obliterated by heaps of trash.



Figure 3. Spectacle Island in 2016, with Boston skyline in the background. *Source:* Pavla Šimková.

It is a testimony to the power of the new island narrative that even this disturbed landscape was considered redeemable and a place of beauty in disguise by park managers and conservationists. Since the establishment of the Boston Harbor Islands State Park in the 1970s, the park management had been eyeing Spectacle as a potential addition to the protected area and as a possible recreational hub in the harbor. In the 1990s, the building of a new Spectacle started: the island was capped with 3.5 million cubic yards of earth excavated from a mammoth Boston construction project, colloquially known as the Big Dig. It swelled to more than twice its original size and its profile was raised by some 60 feet, making it the highest point in Boston Harbor. All traces of its historical, and rather unromantic, uses have been erased: all remains of the garbage factories as well as house foundations and wharves have been torn down or buried under tons of earth. The whole island has been landscaped and planted with native species, hiking trails laid out, and lookout pavilions built. In 2006, Spectacle Island greeted its first visitors in its new incarnation as a recreational paradise and a flagship of the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area. The makeover of the island was consistently

referred to as “redemption” and “restoration” by the press (Scott, 1997); popular books about the Boston Harbor Islands cited it as a transformation from trash to triumph (Schorow, 2008). The new Spectacle was indeed a victory: first and foremost, of the new island imagination which saw it as an extraordinary place with potential precisely because it was an island. Thus, the reinterpretation of the Boston Harbor Islands as the city’s antidotes, invented in mid-twentieth century, has come to dominate their image at the turn of the millennium.

Conclusion

Today, the Boston Harbor Islands are regarded by Bostonians and visitors alike as refreshingly different from Boston’s cityscape. United in a national and state park, the islands now form an ensemble devoted almost exclusively to conservation and recreation. They offer qualities rare or unattainable in the city itself: open space, wild-looking nature, and calm and tranquility that serve as an antidote to the city’s noise and bustle. However, what today seems like a perfectly self-evident division between the built environment of the city and the natural one of the harbor islands is in fact the result of a radical mid-twentieth-century reimagining of the islands’ qualities and value as places and of their relationship to the city. The harbor islands had for centuries formed an integral part of Boston’s urban infrastructure and had been defined by their close connection to the city. In the middle third of the twentieth century, amid sweeping changes in Boston’s port economy and a decline of older land uses, they were reinterpreted along the lines of conventional literary island imagination that sees island places as extraordinary and apart. This change in perception has been mirrored by the changing ways in which the islands have been used and managed since and which have indeed made a “land far, far away” out of them—despite their spatial and historical closeness to Boston. This transformation confirms the overwhelming power of the kind of island imagination that portrays places surrounded by water as isolated, remote, and mysterious regardless of their actual situation—simply by virtue of them being islands.

References

- 3 Harbor Islands sold but MDC may get two of them. (1957, November 23). *The Boston Globe*, p. 1.
- Baldacchino, G. (2018). *The Routledge international handbook of Island Studies*. Routledge.
- Baldacchino, G. (2012). The lure of the island: A spatial analysis of power relations. *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, 1, 55–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imic.2012.11.003>
- Baldacchino, G. (2007). Introducing A World of Islands. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *A world of islands: An Island Studies reader* (pp. 1–29). Island Studies Press.
- Bissell, W. (2019). Monsoon metropolis: Migration, mobility, and mediation in the Western Indian Ocean. In T. Falola, R. J. Parrott, & D. Porter Sanchez (Eds.), *African islands: Leading edges of empire and globalization* (pp. 267–293). University of Rochester Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb6v511.12>
- Booker, M. M. (2013). *Down by the Bay: San Francisco’s history between the tides*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520951488>
- Bostonharborislands. (2012, May 10). *Calling all explorers* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ju5aAszvOw>

- Bridenbaugh, C. (1938). *Cities in the wilderness: The first century of urban life in America, 1625-1742*. Ronald Press Company.
- Cellineri, L. E. (1976). *Seaport dynamics: A regional perspective*. Lexington Books.
- Connelly, P. J. (1932). *Islands of Boston Harbor 1630-1932: Green isles of romance*. Chapple Publishing Company Ltd.
- Cumbler, J. T. (2014). *Cape Cod: An environmental history of a fragile ecosystem*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Dagenais, M. (2017). *Montreal, city of water: An environmental history*. UBC Press.
- DeLucia, C. (2012). The memory frontier: Uncommon pursuits of past and place in the Northeast after King Philip's War. *Journal of American History*, 98(4), 975-997. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jar599>
- Eliot, C. W. (1999). *Charles Eliot, landscape architect*. University of Massachusetts Press. (Original work published 1902)
- Feldman, J. W. (2011). *A storied wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*. University of Washington Press.
- Gillis, J. R. (2014). Not continents in miniature: Islands as ecotones. *Island Studies Journal*, 9(1), 155-166.
- Gillis, J. R. (2012). *The human shore: Seacoasts in history*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Gillis, J. R. (2004). *Islands of the mind: How the human imagination created the Atlantic world*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grydehøj, A. (2015). Island city formation and Urban Island Studies. *Area*, 47(4), 429-435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12207>
- Grydehøj, A. (2014a). Guest editorial introduction: Understanding island cities. *Island Studies Journal*, 9(2), 183-190.
- Grydehøj, A. (Ed.). (2014b). Special section: Island cities. *Island Studies Journal*, 9(2), 183-292.
- Grydehøj, A., Pinya, X. B., Cooke, G., Doratlı, N., Elewa, A., Kelman, I., Pugh, J., Schick, L., & Swaminathan, R. (2015). Returning from the horizon: Introducing Urban Island Studies. *Urban Island Studies*, 1(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.20958/uis.2015.1>
- Hall, D. D. (2019). *The Puritans: A Transatlantic history*. Princeton University Press.
- Kales, D. (2007). *Boston Harbor Islands: A history of an urban wilderness*. History Press.
- Kelman, A. (2003). *A river and its city: The nature of landscape in New Orleans*. University of California Press.
- Kennedy, L. W. (1992). *Planning the city upon a hill: Boston since 1630*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Klein, C. (2011). *Discovering the Boston Harbor Islands: A guide to the city's hidden shores*. Union Park Press.
- Klingle, M. W. (2007). *Emerald city: An environmental history of Seattle*. Yale University Press.
- Kremer, A. (2018). Die Insel als literarischer und sprachlicher Grenz- und Denkraum. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 68(32-33), 47-52.
- Loxley, D. (1990). *Problematic shores: The literature of islands*. Macmillan.
- Lübken, U., & Hofmann, R. (2018). Laboratorien der ökologischen Moderne? *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 68(32-33), 4-9.
- Luedtke, B. (2000). Archaeology on the Boston Harbor Islands after 25 years. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society*, 61(1), 2-11.

- Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management. (1986). *Boston Harbor Islands State Park 1986 Master Plan*. Department of Environmental Management (DEM).
- McKenzie, M. G. (2010). *Clearing the coastline: The nineteenth-century ecological & cultural transformation of Cape Cod*. University Press of New England. <https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2011.030607>
- McMahon, E., & André, B. (2018). Literature and the literary gaze. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *The Routledge international handbook of Island Studies* (pp. 296-311). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315556642-13>
- McShane, C. (2001). Gelded Age Boston. *The New England Quarterly*, 74(2), 274-302. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3185479>
- Melosi, M. V. (2008). *The sanitary city: Environmental services in urban America from colonial times to the present*. University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wrc97>
- Metropolitan Area Planning Council. (1972). *Boston Harbor Islands Comprehensive Plan*. Metropolitan Area Planning Council.
- National Park Service. (1994). *Boston Harbor Islands: Report of a special resource study*. National Park Service, North Atlantic Regional Office.
- Noble, J. (1904). *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692*. County of Suffolk.
- O'Connell, J. C. (2013). *The Hub's metropolis: Greater Boston's development from railroad suburbs to smart growth*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emu019>
- O'Connor, T. H. (2001). *The Hub: Boston past and present*. Northeastern University Press.
- Olmsted, F. L. (1887). Report of the Landscape Architect Advisory to the Park Commissioners, 30 December 1887. In *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Parks for the City of Boston*. City of Boston.
- Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996, Public Law 104-333, Sec. 1029: Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area (1996, November 12).
- Parkman, A. (1978). *Army engineers in New England: The military and civil work of the Corps of Engineers in New England, 1775-1975*. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
- Pastore, C. L. (2015). Filling Boston commons: Law, culture, and ecology in a seventeenth-century estuary. In J. R. Gillis & F. Torma (Eds.), *Fluid frontiers: New currents in marine environmental history* (pp. 27-38). White Horse Press.
- Pastore, C. L. (2014). *Between land and sea: The Atlantic coast and the transformation of New England*. Harvard University Press.
- Penna, A. N., & Wright, C. E. (2009). *Remaking Boston: An environmental history of the city and its surroundings*. University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wrbm4>
- Rawson, M. (2014). *Eden on the Charles: The making of Boston*. Harvard University Press.
- Rawson, M. (2009). What lies beneath: Science, nature, and the making of Boston Harbor. *Journal of Urban History*, 35(5), 675-697. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144209335856>
- Rosen, P. S., & FitzGerald, D. M. (2009). The drowning of Boston Harbor and the development of the shoreline. In A. N. Penna & C. E. Wright (Eds.), *Remaking Boston: An environmental history of the city and its surroundings* (pp. 19-32). University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wrbm4.5>
- Rutman, D. B. (1965). *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan town, 1630-1649*. University of North Carolina Press.

- Sale, K. (1993). *The green revolution: The American environmental movement, 1962-1992*. Hill and Wang.
- Sanderson, E. W. (2009). *Mannahatta: A natural history of New York City*. Abrams.
- Schorow, S. (2008). *East of Boston: Notes from the Harbor Islands*. History Press.
- Scott, A. (1997, May 31). Creating a Spectacle: Dumping ground rising as a harbor park showplace. *The Boston Globe*, A1.
- Seasholes, N. S. (2003). *Gaining ground: A history of landmaking in Boston*. MIT Press.
- Sicherman, M. (2019). *Brooklyn's Barren Island: A forgotten history*. History Press.
- Snow, E. R. (1950). *Secrets of the North Atlantic islands*. Dodd, Mead and Company.
- Snow, E. R. (1935). *The islands of Boston Harbor: Their history and romance, 1626-1935*. Andover Press.
- Stilgoe, J. R. (1994). *Alongshore*. Yale University Press.
- van Dam, P. J. E. M. (2010). *De amfibische cultuur: een visie op watersnoodrampen*. VU University Press.
- Whitehill, W. M., & Kennedy, L. W. (2000). *Boston: A topographical history*. Harvard University Press.