

The Rhode Island State Park Centennial

Imagine lagoons, little bridges, festooned banners, strolling couples, and small boats in the center of Providence adjacent to the junction of the Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck Rivers. Not too far away is the bustle of trains pulling in and out of Union Station. Imagine greenways radiating out from Providence to Lincoln, Barrington, Warwick, and Johnston. Does it sound familiar? Does it say, Waterplace Park, bikeways?

The years of origin for these ideas were prior to 1900. The energy behind these concepts stemmed from what is perhaps the first environmental public policy lobby in Rhode Island, the Public Park Association. Gathered in 1883, and the decade thereafter, the Public Park Association took on the railroad interests and their adherents in the Rhode Island General Assembly to battle out the how the old Cove Lands on the flats near the railroad station were going to be developed. Were they to be a public park to fill in the waters girded by the existing circular promenade, or were they to be improved for extensive railroad facilities such as terminals and train yards?

The struggle and debate went on for years. In the end, the impressive new home of the Governor and the General Assembly, sited on Jefferson Plain, overlooking the Cove got the view of coal car gondolas instead of boats of the same name reminiscent of Venice. But as so often happens in Rhode Island if you wait long enough old opportunities come around, again. Today, the State House looks out over Waterplace Park.

The radial parkways from the Cove Lands and the periphery of Providence actually did get built. Think Veterans Memorial Parkway in East Providence, Narragansett Parkway from Pawtuxet into Warwick, Pleasant Valley Parkway, and Blackstone Boulevard.

There was a lot of vision and momentum behind the organizers of the Public Park Association. They were working off of design ideas that went back into the midst of the 19th century, ideas that came out of the rural cemetery movement, the Centennial Celebration of 1876 and the Columbian Exposition's White City and the City Beautiful Movement of the 1890's. Progressive era urban reformers seeking to create 'air holes' and the 'lungs for the cities' by bringing parks into proximity with factory workers stranded in crowded, grimy industrial neighborhoods suddenly intersected with the new professional cadres of city planners. The new recreational craze of the 1890s – bicycles – probably exerted greater political influence for paved roadways than the emerging technology of the automobile.

All of these influences, and others, seemed to have coalesced and converged in Rhode Island in the years just after 1900. In 1904, the same year it created the state's first highway department, the General Assembly passed a bill creating the Metropolitan Park Commission. The make-up of the Commission was standard 'government issue: all the mayors or presidents of the town councils of the municipalities surrounding Providence, plus the Presidents of Brown, RISD, the Providence Art Club, and the Chamber of Commerce. The one exception was the small group of appointees from the Public Park Association. They comprised the executive committee of the new commission, and they ran the show.

All of their nostrums they had been gathering since 1883 were rolled into the Commission's master plan. It was as if the Board of Save the Bay were brought in to manage all of DEM's bay programs and policies. Put into office in November of 1904, by June of 1905 they had a plan of action. In November of 1906 they asked the voters for a bond issue of a quarter of a million

dollars. It was approved, and they immediately began negotiating for sites and parcels that they had been eyeing for years. On Abraham Lincoln's birthday in 1909, at Hearthsides in Lincoln, they concluded the purchase of their first reservation, or park, and they never looked back. One hundred years of parks began.

The first scenario of state parks called for a ring of reservations, beginning on the Ten Mile, near Slater Park, swinging west to Lincoln Woods, south to Meshanticut and the shore of Cowesett Bay, east along the Pawtuxet River to Pawtuxet, and then across the Bay to Barrington. The roughly circular arc dotted with these reservations was six miles to the north of Providence and ten miles to the south. Seemingly limited as a state-wide program, it actually encompassed three quarters of the state's population at the time. Scenic parkways were to be the spokes to these rims, and greenways along the banks of local rivers and streams connected the parks like a string of beads. An efficient system of trolley lines provided the transportation for city dwellers.

By 1935 there were some 14 major state parks, like Goddard Memorial. The ring had been expanded to include beaches on the Atlantic south coast. In the reorganization of state government that year, parks went into the new Department of Agriculture and Conservation. In subsequent reorganizations, parks became part of Public Works (1952), Natural Resources (1965), and DEM (1977).

Over the 100 years two conditions have prevailed: careful planning and the seizure of unplanned opportunities. Careful planning shows in the unfolding of the bikeways, and opportunities appeared in the disposal of former Navy lands like portions of Bay islands. Surprisingly, a good portion of the aims of the Public Park Association's vision has become reality.

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