

## 9 - Blue Hills History - The Evolution of the Reservation

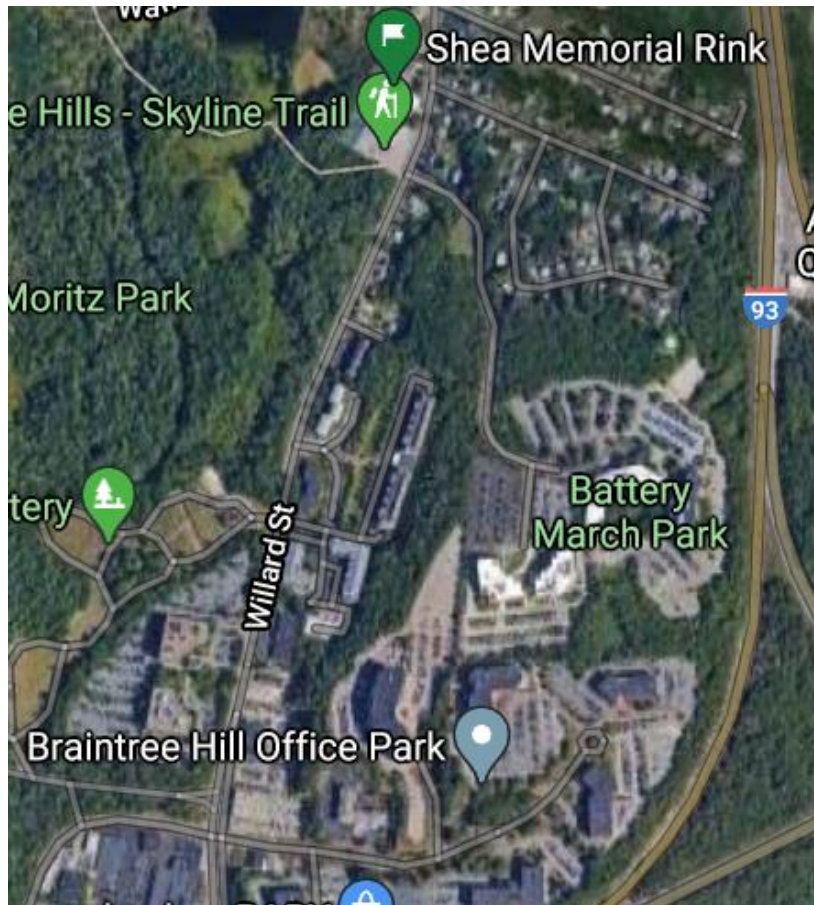
When we think of the creation of the Blue Hills, most of us probably think they were ‘preserved’. This isn’t *quite* accurate. While the Blue Hills, when the Europeans arrived c.1620, looked *somewhat* like they look today (although they were ‘old-growth’ vs. today’s ‘second-growth’ forests) by the time the Blue Hills were ‘preserved’ in 1893 things had changed, and not for the better. Eastern Massachusetts had ‘grown up’. All of the good land had been converted to farms, which involved clearcutting most of the trees. Most of the Blue Hills were too hilly to easily develop into a farm, or a town. It is said that even the sheep farmers never took their stone walls above the 200’ elevation, however I’ve never personally tried to verify that.<sup>i</sup> Less productive land, like many of the actual Blue Hills ‘hills’ were used as woodlots. Fortunately (for us) the granite that existed in most of the Blue Hills was inferior to the Quincy Granite (which *was* quarried in the area near Ricciuti Drive), so the rest of the Blue Hills were never quarried.<sup>ii</sup>

“Two hundred years of continuous cropping and burns had resulted in a sort of dried-out chaparral of oak and chestnut sucker growth littered with ashes and bristling with gray-white, fire-killed skeletons waiting to fall down. Every fifteen or twenty years the cutters came in and chopped the suckers from the stumps. They left the trimmings where they fell; the sun baked them dry; the next burn charred them black. Fires occurred every year — ground fires in the spring, maybe some hot ones in the fall. A few cart tracks wandered through this interminable thicket of bleached sticks and brown, clinging leaves. There was no shade in it, no depth, no relief.”<sup>iii</sup>

The reality is that the Blue Hills were not ‘preserved’ because of how nice they were... they were set aside because they were the open space that was still available at the time. And they were only available because no one had yet found an economically viable use for them.



A. Lawrence Rotch, 1887 - *HathiTrust*



Aside: The one hill not included in the Blue Hills Reservation was Pine Hill. It is located to the East of Willard Street, across from Wood Road and Shea Rink. Over time, as land has become more valuable, Pine Hill has been developed, and today is the home to Battery March Park (a four-building, 50-acre office park<sup>v</sup>) and the Braintree Hill Office Park (“situated on the Braintree/Quincy line in a highly visible 40-acre campus setting.”, “The building’s hillside setting offers excellent highway visibility, coupled with panoramic views of the Boston skyline, Quincy Bay and the 7,000 acre Blue Hills Reservation.”<sup>vi</sup>) This is what the whole Blue Hills might have looked like if it hadn’t been ‘preserved’ in 1893. Whew!

Charles Eliot, who was the Landscape Architect to the Metropolitan Park Commission (predecessor to today’s DCR) had a vision. He saw the Blue Hills as part of a green belt surrounding Boston.<sup>vii</sup> (Everything from the Fens, to the Esplanade<sup>viii</sup>, to... public beaches. Maybe we’ll come back in a future article and look at all these other, related, places that tie in to the Blue Hills as just the southern terminus.)

As for the Blue Hills. He saw them as a park. He envisioned folks riding their, or in provided, carriages down the paths, and coming around corners to reveal scenic vistas. He *was* a landscape architect after all. He didn’t just want woods he wanted a place “affording widespread panoramic prospects in all directions.”<sup>ix</sup>

He then set out to ‘restore’ them, and create the reservation he imagined. He provided instructions.

- “Late in the year, after the first snow, send gangs of men to all parts of the Reservation. Have them cut all dead wood, cart away that which is salable, and burn the rest in heaps.
- From February through April, when the danger of ground fires is greatest, divide the Reservation into hundred-acre parcels and assign one man to each. Equip him with water cans and a Johnson pump. Put out all fires.
- In late summer, send men with hatchets throughout the Reservation to chop sprouts and suckers from all fire- and ax-killed stumps. Do not harm seedling trees.
- After several years, when all the stumps have stopped sprouting and seedling trees are established, thin the seedlings. Continue to burn dead wood and suppress fires.”



While his plan worked, and the results can be seen today, Charles Eliot didn't live to see the results, he died from Spinal Meningitis at age 37. Eliot Tower on Great Blue, and the 'bridge' next to it are named for, and a memorial to, him.



Here is the plaque, located on the bridge.



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### Charles Eliot



**Born** November 1, 1859  
[Cambridge, Massachusetts, US](#)

**Died** March 25, 1897 (aged 37)  
[Brookline, Massachusetts, US](#)

**Resting place** [Mount Auburn Cemetery](#)

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In 1883 Eliot had become an apprentice for Frederick Law Olmsted and Company, where he worked on designs for Franklin Park (1884), the Arnold Arboretum (1885), and the Fens (1883) in Boston among other projects. In 1886, Eliot had opened his own office.

On March 5, 1890, Eliot published an article entitled "Waverly Oaks" to defend a stand of virgin trees in Belmont, Massachusetts, in the process making a plea for preservation of the oaks and

outlining a strategy for conserving other areas of scenic beauty in the same way that the Boston Public Library held books and the Museum of Fine Arts pictures. This article resulted in a conference held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1890 on preservation of scenic beauty, and led to the enactment of Massachusetts legislation creating The Trustees of Reservations in 1891 — the world's first organization created to "acquire, hold, protect and administer, for the benefit of the public, beautiful and historical places."

After the death of their partner Henry Sargent Codman, Olmsted's son Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and stepson John Charles Olmsted asked Eliot to become a full partner in their firm. In March 1893, the firm's name was changed to Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot. Within a few months, Eliot assumed the leadership role as the elder Olmsted's health continued to fail.

### **The gypsy moths**

The gypsy moth was accidentally introduced into Massachusetts from France in 1869 and appeared in the Blue Hills in 1904. At first the MDC responded by painting the nests with creosote. This seemed to work for a period of time, but then the moths came back again. The MDC responded by spraying with lead arsenate. By 1938 30,000 pounds of lead arsenate were being sprayed throughout the Blue Hills. Eventually this too stopped being effective, and, belatedly, it was also learned that lead was a hazardous substance, which built up in the soil...

So, they progressed to the next 'solution'... DDT. (And we all know how *that* one played out.) It wasn't until 1962 and Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* showed the environmental effects of DDT that the public began to take an interest and eventually were galvanized to action and DDT was finally, in 1972, banned from agricultural use in the US.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **The Chestnut Blight**

In the 1800s the American Chestnut was among the largest, tallest, and fastest growing trees in America. It could grow to over 100' tall, and could be 7' in diameter. The wood was rot resistant, so good for fence posts, and the lower logs of log cabins. And it was straight grained, and easily worked, making it a good wood for furniture construction.<sup>xiv</sup> We are all familiar with...

"Under a spreading chestnut-tree  
The village smithy stands; ..."

The Village Blacksmith, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

And...

"Chestnuts roasting on an open fire..."

You're probably singing the Nat King Cole version right now.

[Aside: Why roast chestnuts on an open fire? To enhance the flavor and creamy texture. <sup>xv</sup>]

Chestnuts were a food source for people, as well as were used to feed livestock. And wild animals ate them of course.

In 1900 nearly 4 billion American Chestnuts were growing along the eastern seaboard. And then, about 1904, when some Japanese Chestnut trees were imported *Cryphonectria parasitica*, a parasitic fungus was accidentally imported with them. It spread to the American Chestnut, which had no resistance to it, and they started dying.<sup>xvi</sup> Eventually all of the mature trees died. Because their roots

survived, the stumps would, *and some still do*, send up suckers, which grow for a while, but eventually they too succumb.

[Aside: The American Chestnut Foundation is working to develop a resistant American Chestnut. You can find, and support, them at: <https://www.acf.org/the-american-chestnut/history-american-chestnut/>] It would be nice if the Chestnut tree could make as good a comeback as the turkeys and deer.

The loss of the Chestnut tree left a tremendous void in all of the woods. It is probably one of the factors that lead to...

### **White Pine and other planted trees**

Between 1904 and 1938 more than two million white pine seedlings were set out in the Blue Hills. ...thousands of other trees were started in the same period — mostly hemlock, red pine, and spruce.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **A comparison of the Blue Hills to the recovery of other 'neglected' land.**

The conditions in the Blue Hills in 1893 weren't that far removed from much of New England. Maps of that era show most of the land had been clear-cut, with small areas of woods... these were the wood lots for the adjacent homes. However, after the civil war much of the farming ended in New England as farmers moved westward, to less rocky soil. Walk through many wooded areas around our homes today and we see stone walls. People once farmed these fields, and kept animals on this land. Once the interior of the country opened up, and farmers moved on to better land (Connecticut River Valley, then the Mid-West...) the fields were abandoned and the trees grew back up. (There is a lot to 'forest succession', and perhaps we will come back to that.) But after 100+ years most areas are back to a mix of trees, based on what grows best in that area, and what other trees were around to provide starter seeds. My own 5-acre yard, crisscrossed with old stone walls, is now a mix of hardwood and white pine. I expect that, had they just been left alone these past 130 years the Blue Hills might not look *that* different from the way they look today.

I think sometimes all that is needed is for us to stop trying to *improve* things.

Until next week,

Bob Vogel

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<sup>i</sup> Landscape with Reptile, Thomas Palmer, p23

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t6j09xd1v&view=1up&seq=15>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.batterymarchpark.com/overview.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.flatleyco.com/properties/braintree-hill-office-park/>

<sup>vii</sup> Milton: A Compendium, Anthony Mitchell Sammarco

<sup>viii</sup> <https://friendsofthebluehills.org/3-historic-sites/>

<sup>ix</sup> [https://books.google.com/books?id=nDJAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA497&lpg=PA497&dq=charles+eliot+vision+for+blue+hills&source=bl&ots=SIOVhhzPeT&sig=ACfU3U2EKD2a0CNUL\\_tWUZQwF094jpU4rA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwji\\_K0qDpAhXTj3IEHUNUB-oQ6AEwAXoECCAQAQ#v=onepage&q=charles%20eliot%20vision%20for%20blue%20hills&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=nDJAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA497&lpg=PA497&dq=charles+eliot+vision+for+blue+hills&source=bl&ots=SIOVhhzPeT&sig=ACfU3U2EKD2a0CNUL_tWUZQwF094jpU4rA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwji_K0qDpAhXTj3IEHUNUB-oQ6AEwAXoECCAQAQ#v=onepage&q=charles%20eliot%20vision%20for%20blue%20hills&f=false)

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.hikingproject.com/photo/7005195/the-great-blue-hill-observation-tower> Ron Birk

<sup>xi</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliot\\_Memorial\\_Bridge#/media/File:Eliot\\_Bridge\\_Milton\\_MA\\_01.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliot_Memorial_Bridge#/media/File:Eliot_Bridge_Milton_MA_01.jpg)

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- xii [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles Eliot \(landscape architect\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Eliot_(landscape_architect))
- xiii <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DDT>
- xiv <https://www.acf.org/the-american-chestnut/history-american-chestnut/>
- xv [https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk02f9UXfokrQHBWplwWLdpBjk0FKjA:1589334148201&q=Why+do+you+roast+chestnuts+on+an+open+fire%3F&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiks9SK26\\_pAhWJg-AKHetiAgsQzmd6BAgYEAw&biw=853&bih=588](https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk02f9UXfokrQHBWplwWLdpBjk0FKjA:1589334148201&q=Why+do+you+roast+chestnuts+on+an+open+fire%3F&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiks9SK26_pAhWJg-AKHetiAgsQzmd6BAgYEAw&biw=853&bih=588)
- xvi [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chestnut blight](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chestnut_blight)
- xvii Landscape with Reptile, p. 39