

Introduction: Unsettling Greater Boston

Boston, like any particular place, is many things. Among those who have celebrated it, or do so now, it is that “City on the Hill”—a biblical phrase used by the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s first governor to highlight the dangers of failure—but now (mis)understood to suggest the promise of great things to come. In addition, as the physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes once baptized the city, it is “the Hub” (of the universe), the center of the world. Moreover, it’s the “Athens of America” due to Boston’s preeminent place in the intellectual and cultural life of the United States, and its leading role in the establishment of educational institutions—from public schools to elite universities. And it is the “Cradle of Liberty” (a title claimed by others, not least Philadelphia) for helping to birth and nurture the American Revolution and subsequent freedom struggles.

But Boston is also a *colonial* enterprise—and has been since its very founding—one with two faces. First, it is a colony in the most literal sense of the word: a place where

people from elsewhere have settled. Indeed, its very name comes from a town in England from where a number of the original Puritan settlers came in the early 1600s. When one speaks of colonial Boston, it is this first face that is typically intended. It is one, particularly in its earliest manifestations, that embodies a colony’s most unjust form: one involving a relationship of domination (by a “mother country”) and subjugation (of the colonized land and people). Its second face reflects the fact that Boston has also long been a place involved in the colonization of places and peoples. One manifestation is the area’s dispossession of the non-European, indigenous inhabitants and the absorption of the Native lands upon which the city and its environs now sit.

Prior to European contact, many Native groups—from the Massachusett and Nipmuc to the Pennacook and the Wampanoag—populated the area. Moreover, there were points during the first several decades of European settlement when relations

between settlers and Indians were constructive and respectful—even if often only superficially so—or when dissenting colonists challenged war-making against Indian groups. The potential of these relations was significantly limited, however, by a larger context: the quest—at best, paternalistic—to “civilize” the indigenous population. Such efforts were thus part of a project to “kill the Indian, and save the man,” as Richard Henry Pratt, a US Army officer credited with establishing the first Indian boarding school, phrased it in an 1892 speech. These civilizing endeavors are inseparable from the many episodes and various forms of overt violence against Native peoples.

These speak to another project, one that saw Indians and their claims to the land as obstacles to the colonial enterprise, and that thus focused not on “saving” Indians, but instead on “removing” them. It was a project facilitated not only by direct violence—violence intensified by rivalries involving competing European projects in North America and shifting alliances among Native groups—but also by a combination of economic, ecological, and epidemiological forces that led to drastic reductions in Native numbers and far-reaching changes in how they lived. Even before English colonists settled what is today eastern Massachusetts, pathogens introduced by European traders had wreaked havoc on many Indian groups. Between 1616 and 1618, for example, an epidemic or a series of them killed upward of 75 percent of southern New England’s coastal Algonquian population, according to one estimate.

And for those who survived the new diseases, as many did, other challenges abounded, which together greatly transformed the area’s landscape and the socio-ecological relations of its indigenous peoples. These challenges included new goods and trade networks, as well as novel labor regimes—which involved the enslavement by English settlers of large numbers of Indians as laborers in the emerging colonial economy and for sale in the Caribbean. Also central was the sheer number of arriving colonists with their voracious hunger for land and, with it, for trees to build and fuel their homes, to construct ships, and for export. Moreover, there was the matter of European plants and animals. As they encroached on Indians’ traditional lands, the settlers’ cows and pigs consumed their food sources, while, like English plants in relation to flora indigenous to the region, crowding out local fauna. And as colonial settlements and agricultural establishments grew, so too did roads and fences, which greatly inhibited the mobility of the Native population and thus their ability to access the land’s diversity to provide for themselves as was their custom.

Such developments challenge a dominant perception of nature, one which suggests that the city is nature’s antithesis. In fact, urban areas depend upon and embody nature. Hence, the urban and the rural, cities and the countryside, are tightly tied. Indeed, they make each other. Take, for example, the largest inland body of water in present-day Massachusetts, the Quabbin Reservoir. Sixty-five miles east of Boston, it

is today the city's primary source of water—as well as that for forty surrounding municipalities. Encircled by forested land and rolling hills, this “natural” body of water and its bucolic environs were built in 1930s. It involved the destruction of four small towns and the relocation of about 3,000 people and 7,613 graves.

The example demonstrates how the commandeering, transformation, and use of environmental resources have been central to the making of Greater Boston, as they have been to any place on the globe, from the time of its founding. As an affluent region of the modern global economy, Greater Boston consumes a grossly outsized slice of the world's resources and similarly produces a disproportionate share of its pollutants. That the region's residents (as a whole) are able to do so is not unconnected to the fact that local actors have played key roles, politically, economically, and intellectually, in giving rise and contributing to, and perpetrating, imperial violence against distant lands and peoples. From the violent annexation of much of what is today the US West as well as the Southwest (and its “taking” from Mexico and the peoples living there) and the colonization of Hawaii in the 1800s to the brutal US wars against the Philippines at the twentieth century's dawn and Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s, and the present-day and seemingly boundless post-9/11 wars, Greater Bostonians have been pivotal figures.

Boston has also been, since its establishment, a place predicated on global trade, and Greater Bostonians have been central

to the making of a capitalist and highly unequal world economy. Merchants in Salem, for instance, dominated the world's black pepper trade in the beginning decades of the nineteenth century, and a Boston-based company that focused on bananas came to be the world's largest agricultural enterprise in the early 1900s. Area merchants and industrialists helped to fuel the slave trade through cotton textile production and sale, while some of Greater Boston's leading figures enriched themselves and the local economy by buying and selling enslaved human beings of African origin, as well as by hawking opium in Asia. Even while sermonizing in anticipation of his New England voyage, Puritan leader John Winthrop was contemplating the riches that slavery in the West Indies would produce for his family. Later, in building the city and his personal estate, Winthrop would rob both land and labor from the region's indigenous people.

The hierarchy of humanity applied not only to Native and African-origin peoples. Since the time of its founding, inequality has been at Boston's core. John Winthrop, a member of England's landed gentry, saw poverty and the need for the destitute to submit to the powerful as part of God's plan. He was similarly explicit about his disdain for democracy, calling it “the meanest and worst of all forms of Government.”

Responding to a shortage of arable land in England as common holdings were being enclosed and privatized, Winthrop had encouraged settlers to head for the Massachusetts Bay Colony by boasting of the rich

availability of low-priced land. The vision of religious freedom was in fact less of a lure than the vision of profit, and, among the twenty-one thousand individuals who arrived in the 1630s, the Puritans were a minority. According to historian Nancy Isenberg, “For every religious dissenter in the exodus of the 1630s, there was one commercially driven emigrant from London or other areas of England.” The majority of settlers arrived as extended families, and many of them with servants in tow. While many of the new elite “owned” enslaved people of Indian or African origin, they far more commonly used heavily exploited child laborers and indentured servants (those forced into servitude due to debt or for having been convicted of a crime).

Slavery, child labor, and indentured servitude are, with occasional exceptions, long gone in present-day Greater Boston. Marked inequities and highly exploited labor, however, persist. A 2016 report found that the City of Boston had the greatest income inequality among the one hundred largest cities in the United States. Among metropolitan areas, Boston was the sixth most unequal, with the top 5 percent of households averaging \$294,000 in annual income, and the bottom 20 percent averaging \$28,000. A 2017 *Boston Globe* “Spotlight” series on race in the Greater Boston area revealed a shocking statistic: the median net worth (meaning half are above, and half below) of African American (nonimmigrant) households was \$8. The corresponding figure for whites was \$247,500. Immigrant labor, typically very poorly remunerated

and much of it done by individuals who lack basic rights and many of the key protections of citizenship—a significant number of them “undocumented”—provide many of the goods and services consumed and enjoyed by those at the upper end of the income hierarchy.

That the top 5 percent of households in the City of Boston have incomes of at least \$266,000 provides insight into who resides in its tony areas. These areas include old-money neighborhoods such as the Back Bay and the new and gentrified high-end residences of the South End, as well as Downtown’s Millennium Tower (where the smallest apartments sell for just under \$1 million and the “grand penthouse” sold for \$35 million in 2016). And then there is the Seaport, Boston’s newest area, one that benefited from about \$18 billion in public investment and that city planners pledged would be for all Bostonians. This key center of the city’s “innovation economy” so celebrated by area elites is, instead, a playground for the affluent. Households in the Seaport have (as of 2017) the highest median income of any of Boston zip codes. It is also one of Boston’s least racially diverse areas, with a population that is 3 percent black, and 89 percent white—this is in a city, with a population of almost 700,000, where people of color constitute a slim majority. This is just one manifestation of a metropolitan area that is among the most racially segregated in the United States.

What makes such stark socioeconomic inequality and residential segregation all the more remarkable is that Boston, and

the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a whole, is dominated by the Democratic Party. Author Thomas Frank calls Boston “the real spiritual homeland of the liberal class.” It is, he writes, “the city that virtually invented the blue-state economic model, in which prosperity arises from higher education and the knowledge-based industries that surround it.” These very strengths, he opines, help explain why Boston and the wealthy areas that surround it embody one of the country’s most unequal cities in one of its most unequal states, one composed of many struggling, postindustrial municipalities marked by deep and pervasive poverty. In a state that purports to be progressive, its income tax is a flat one, meaning the rich and poor alike pay at the same rate.

The dominant political-economic narrative is one that embraces meritocracy. The convenient story (convenient for those on the upper ends of the proverbial food chain) is built on the notion that Greater Boston’s successful and affluent deserve what they have. The flip side is, of course, that the have-nots get their just rewards as well. In other words, inequality is a result not of how society’s resources are organized and allocated—of how political-economic power functions—but of individual (and group) strengths, and failings.

Central drivers of the model are “knowledge industries”—higher education (the City of Boston alone has more than 150,000 college students, and the metropolitan area has eight-five private colleges and universities), hospitals and medical research, and high technology (with much of it tied to US militarism)—

fueled by federal research funds and venture capital. Also key are the real estate and hospitality sectors.

The outsized influence of these interests helps to explain the seemingly endless construction in recent decades of high-end buildings in and around Boston’s downtown and significant gentrification, which is wreaking havoc in many of the city’s neighborhoods, as well as in surrounding municipalities. Waterfront development is particularly intense—this in an area greatly threatened by climate change and, relatedly, rising sea levels. A study in 2018 found that 22 percent of Boston’s housing stock will be at risk of permanent inundation or chronic flooding by 2050 if greenhouse gas emissions continue to climb. In neighboring Cambridge, the figure is 33 percent. Particularly vulnerable are those who already live at the region’s socioeconomic margins.

The focus on such matters speaks to our taking a perspective on Greater Boston that is explicitly one “from below,” a perspective of “the people”—while appreciating that who constitutes “the people” is ever changing. A people’s perspective privileges the desires, hopes, and struggles of those on the receiving end of unjust forms of power and those who work to challenge such inequities and to realize a Greater Boston, and the larger world of which it is part, that is radically inclusive and democratic and that centers on social and environmental justice. It also privileges spatial justice by focusing on the places “the people” inhabit, work, and claim, and where their memories, hopes, visions, labor, and histories are embedded.

Here we bring you to sites that have been central to the lives of “the people” of Greater Boston over four centuries. You’ll visit sites associated with the area’s indigenous inhabitants and with the individuals and movements who sought to abolish slavery, to end war, challenge militarism, and bring about a more peaceful world, to achieve racial equity, gender justice, and sexual liberation, and to secure the rights of workers. We take you to some well-known sites, but more often to ones far off the beaten path of the Freedom Trail, to places in Boston’s outlying neighborhoods. We also visit sites in other municipalities that make up the Greater Boston region—from Lawrence, Lowell, and Lynn to Concord and Plymouth. Our travels also include homes, because people’s struggles, activism, and organizing sometimes are born and unfold in living rooms and kitchens.

A “people’s city” is a place not only of struggle, activism, and organizing. It is also one of dreams, ones that envision a fundamentally different world. Insofar as powerful forces and interests stymie the realization of those dreams, they remain deferred. But given the pronounced challenges, and even existential threats (at least for many people and species) faced by Greater Bostonians, the area’s denizens no longer have (and of course never did) the benefit of an unlimited future. History’s debts, nature’s hard limits, and the rift between nature and our political and economic institutions, practices, and relationships necessitate a reckoning. For these reasons and more, we hope that *this* people’s project, is suggestive of, and

contributes to, the best of the implicit and explicit futures envisioned by the people’s dreamers, agitators, rebels, dissidents, organizers, and movements—those of yesterday and today.

Trying to capture a place as diverse and dynamic as Boston is highly challenging. We thus want to make clear that our goal is not to be comprehensive. Given the constraints of space and time as well as the limitations of knowledge—both our own and what is available in published form—we have not included many important sites, cities, and towns. Our modest goal is to paint a suggestive portrait of the greater urban area that highlights its long-contested nature. In many ways, we merely scratch the region’s surface—or many surfaces.

In writing about Greater Boston as a place, we run the risk of suggesting that the city writ large has some sort of essence. Indeed, the very notion of a particular place assumes intrinsic characteristics and an associated delimited space. After all, how can one distinguish one place from another if it has no uniqueness and is not geographically differentiated? Nonetheless, we conceive of places as progressive, as geographer Doreen Massey insists, as flowing over the boundaries of any particular space, time, or society; in other words, we see places as everchanging, as unbounded in that they shape and are shaped by other places and forces from without, and as having multiple identities. In exploring 400 years of Greater Boston from many angles, we embrace this approach. That said, we have to reconcile this with the need to delimit Greater Boston—at

least simply to be in a position to name it and thus distinguish it from elsewhere. We likewise also “freeze” the city and its many sites at various points to be able to capture it in time, all while trying to keep in mind that what we’re discussing has an ancestry and is helping to lay the foundation for what is yet to come. As geographer Don Mitchell writes, “Place is the stopped frame in the continuous film of change.”

Place is also tightly tied to who we are, how we live, and what we know—and do not know. In his acclaimed book *Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape*, Keith Basso asks a Western Apache elder by the name of Dudley to define wisdom. Dudley responds by recounting what his grandmother told him: “Wisdom sits in places. It’s like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don’t you? Well, you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep on thinking about it. Then your mind will become smoother and smoother. Then you will see danger before it happens. You will walk a long way and live a long time. You will be wise.”

This book is about both the stopped frame and the continuous film of the place called Greater Boston—past, present, and future—and many places within. May we all drink from them.

A NOTE TO THE READER

This book has many entry points. We have organized it geographically, grouping our sites by neighborhoods (in the case of the City of Boston), and we conclude the book with a series of tours. Each neighborhood or municipality has a brief introduction and is followed by a selection of site entries.

For each entry, we provide (under “Getting There”) directions via public transit. Typically, we also provide the walking distance from the closest MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority) station or bus stop, and the amount of time it would take an average walker from that point to reach the destination. A map of the MBTA system is available on page 287.

Within many entries, readers will come across sites and municipalities that are in **bold and italics**; these are discussed elsewhere in the book.