

had five unequal sides that gave it an irregular shape. Beacon Hill bordered it on the north, Boylston Street on the south, Park and Common (now Tremont) Streets on the east, and the shallow waters of the Back Bay on the west. Several low hills interspersed with small ponds gave the landscape a rolling quality as it sloped gently toward the Back Bay. Only one tree of any note stood in the whole interior expanse of the Common, the Old Elm, which rested near the center and was said to predate the first English settlers. The Common's open space made it a perfect pasture, and that same openness created the views over the Back Bay that made the edges of the Common such pleasant places to stroll. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, visitors were just as likely to praise the Common's usefulness as grazing land as to admire its attractiveness as a leisure space. The Common lent itself to both.

Transforming the relationship between Bostonians and their Common would require not only a change in land use but a re-imagining of the land's meaning. Many Bostonians, particularly the laboring classes, clung to a traditional interpretation of the Common embedded in the English common lands tradition. In this view, Boston Common was foremost a landscape of work where residents had an established legal right to graze their cows that dated back to the purchase of the Common in 1634. Since the pasture provided an important source of fresh milk to residents who owned a cow, extinguishing the right of pasturage—or “enclosing” the Common—would be a serious matter. By the early nineteenth century, however, wealthier Americans were widening the distance between their businesses and homes. They were also developing a preference for a more recreational relationship to natural landscapes, one that reinforced their social status by emphasizing leisure over labor. As a result, many upper-class Bostonians came to believe that productive activities like the grazing of cows were inhibiting their ability to enjoy the Common and making the space less refined. Pressure mounted throughout the 1820s to trade traditional grazing rights for

the cultural cachet of a pastoral playground. When the movement finally succeeded, it transformed the way that Bostonians related to the city's most prominent green space. It also created something entirely new: America's first public park.<sup>1</sup>

### *Boston Common as Common Land*

Boston Common entered the expanding world of English colonial settlement as private rather than public land. When Winthrop and the first wave of Puritans arrived on the Charlestown Peninsula, the neighboring Shawmut Peninsula was already occupied by a single inhabitant. The Reverend William Blackstone had been part of an earlier and failed English settlement on the southern shore of Massachusetts Bay, and he had wandered northward to the slope of Beacon Hill where he built a cottage, planted an orchard, and lived a solitary life. Five years later, when the Puritans began building their settlement across the Charles River, Blackstone invited them to join him on the Shawmut Peninsula to take advantage of its better water supply. He retained his house and a fifty-acre parcel of land, but after living with his new neighbors for four years, Blackstone decided to leave for less crowded ground in Rhode Island. In 1634, he sold most of his land as a single parcel to the settlers, who purchased it as a common pasture and military training field. This parcel became Boston Common.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship that the settlers established with this area was rooted in a centuries-old English common land system that regulated access to productive natural resources like pastures and woodlands. The character of common rights varied widely in England depending on the community and the resource in question, but they could include the right to graze animals, dig for stones or sand, take wood from a forest, remove turf, or catch fish. To prevent over-exploitation of a particular resource, many communities restricted access to those people with a legitimate right in common, and limited use to personal rather than commercial purposes. If a resource

was large enough, commoners might also permit those without common rights to use it. Such close management was essential, for the economy of an entire village might depend on the prudent use of its common lands.<sup>3</sup>

Access to a common was a legally protected property right in England, although it did not imply ownership of the actual resource. Rural lords or municipalities held title to the common, while certain property owners or renters enjoyed carefully defined uses. Such use rights did not adhere to a commoner but rather to his property, perhaps a nearby house with some land, and could not be sold or transferred separately from that property. The actual ownership of the common resource was therefore not absolute. A lord or municipality typically needed the consent of the commoners or an Act of Parliament to sell, develop, or cultivate common land.<sup>4</sup>

The Puritans carried the idea of common land from Old England to New England and used it to create a distinctive common land regime that influenced land use as far away as Long Island and northern New Jersey. The first English settlers, sometimes called “commoners” but more often “proprietors,” initially owned all property in a given land grant as a group. They divided some of it among themselves, kept some for common use, and reserved other areas for future settlers. In the early years, to be a proprietor or a resident of a town was more or less the same thing, and decisions about common lands were made in town meetings. But as immigration increased and land became more valuable, proprietors stopped admitting new people into their select group and began guarding their rights more closely. In Boston, the freemen voted in 1646 to bar future residents from access to common land unless the newcomers rented or purchased the right from an existing commoner. The restrictions lasted until 1672, when a new vote extended the right of commonage to all residents of the town. After that, the power to regulate Boston’s common lands was invested in the collected citizenry when assembled in town meeting. Common rights neverthe-

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Boston Common, which appears on the upper left in this 1722 map, was originally on the western shore of the Shawmut Peninsula. The areas surrounding it

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tended to develop later than other parts of Boston because they faced away from  
the sea. (Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library)

less remained a valuable property right, with Boston's early settlers routinely buying and selling the right to pasture a cow on the Common.<sup>5</sup>

Not all of the first settlers liked the idea of keeping land in common, however. In fact, Boston Common barely survived an early debate over the balance between public and private resources in the new city upon a hill. In December 1634, just a few weeks after purchasing the land, the voting inhabitants of Boston selected a committee of seven to divide some of the town's property and assign the parcels to particular families. To the surprise and consternation of the community's leading members, the inhabitants excluded most of them from the committee. With the exception of a deacon and one of the elders, the committee was composed of men "of the inferior sort," as Governor John Winthrop reported. "This they did," he wrote, "as fearing that the richer men would give the poorer sort no great proportions of land, but would rather leave a great part at liberty for new comers and for common." The suspicions of the voters were well founded. With an eye to the needs of future settlers, Winthrop had been a strong advocate of giving existing residents no more land than they could work. After the Reverend John Cotton convinced the assembly that God intended the elders to make such decisions, the inhabitants scheduled a new election where they chose a more balanced committee. Winthrop's views prevailed, and Boston Common remained in the public realm.<sup>6</sup>

### *Mixing Work and Play*

In its early years, the Common supported a wide variety of productive uses that reinforced its role as a landscape of labor. With special permission from the selectmen, the residents of Boston could dig clay and gravel from its Fox Hill section, build windmills on its high points, and remove stones for use in building. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the town constructed a complex of municipal buildings on the eastern end of the Common that in-

cluded an almshouse, powderhouse, pound, prison, granary, and workhouse, and it used part of the Common as cemetery space. Women did their weekly washing under the Old Elm, first drawing water from the Common's Frog Pond and then heating it over a fire. The selectmen banned most forms of resource extraction as the town grew, but by the early nineteenth century the cleaning of carpets, grazing of cows, and drilling of militias still continued as daily evidence of the labor that had always defined the Common.<sup>7</sup>

The grazing of cows was one of the Common's earliest and most important productive uses, and the selectmen made regulating the animals and protecting the grass a priority. Over the years, the number of animals ranged from fifty to two hundred, and the selectmen restricted Bostonians to the grazing of only one cow per family from early spring to late fall. They also banned horses, sheep, and dry cattle from the pasture. The restrictions protected the pasture from overgrazing, ensured that residents used the Common for subsistence rather than commercial purposes, and reserved the space for milk cows. The selectmen watched nearby construction closely to ensure that no damage occurred to the grass, and they ordered the building of wooden fences to prevent carts and horses from trampling the turf. To help pay for improvements, the selectmen instituted a cow tax as early as 1638 that required anyone with cows pastured on the Common to pay a fixed tax per head. Residents were still paying a tax and grazing their cows as late as the 1820s.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of domesticated animals in a large and growing town was not unusual. In fact, the streets of most American cities served as a kind of "urban commons" well into the nineteenth century. Many Bostonians bypassed the Common and its cow tax by simply letting their cows wander the streets to snack on any tuft of grass they could find and any garden they could raid. In New York, the laboring classes routinely released their pigs into the streets to root through garbage, just as their country cousins let their pigs loose in the woods to search for acorns. Urbanizing America was

still relating to its domesticated animals in a manner that was more reminiscent of the country than the city.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the chaotic urban common of Boston's streets, the Common was a heavily managed pasture and the site of constant labor from spring to fall. Residents of the workhouse spread extra dirt where needed to keep the turf in good order, and workers dredged the Common's small ponds to ensure adequate drinking water for the cows. A cowkeeper employed by the town monitored the cows and the bulls that the town kept for breeding purposes and had the unenviable job of collecting the cow tax. The owners of the cows led the animals each day from home to pasture and back again, a job often delegated to children. But the cows performed the most work of all. They grazed all day and did the biological labor of turning grass into milk. The process of making that milk relied on a highly structured system that integrated public and private needs through the labor of the cows, the families that owned them, and a number of town dependents, employees, and officials.<sup>10</sup>

Until the early years of the nineteenth century, the Common's labor-intensive activities coexisted easily with leisure pursuits. Children spent their days refighting the Revolutionary War in the eroding British battlements that still clung to Powder House Hill, while adults strolled through the pasture or along the tree-lined Malls that bordered the Common's eastern sides. One of the biggest attractions for those with leisure time was the view westward across the treeless Common and over the Back Bay. From almost any point on the Malls or the pasture, one could see the gently rolling water of the bay with the green hills of Roxbury and Brookline beyond. With the right wind, one might even catch the scent of the sea. Visitors to Boston never failed to mention the Common's beauty, and they never complained that carpet dust or cow manure had marred their experience.<sup>11</sup>

Everyday activities like grazing and strolling sometimes gave way to special or unusual events that were neither wholly work nor

wholly play. Bostonians protested, celebrated, dueled, and brawled on the Common, and until the end of the eighteenth century the pasture hosted the huge gatherings that accompanied executions. Public festivals also marked the General Election of state officers in May, the Artillery Election in June, and Training or Muster Day in October. In Boston Common's first two hundred years, there were few kinds of activities that it had not accommodated at one time or another.<sup>12</sup>

This mixture of labor-oriented relationships with leisure ones was mirrored in the organization of American social life. Into the early nineteenth century, urban artisans routinely combined their homes with their places of work. A typical master craftsman's house would shelter not only his wife, children, and perhaps a servant, but also the journeymen and apprentices he employed. Those involved in the trade would live and work under the paternalistic guidance of the master. They toiled together in a shop that was most likely attached to the house, ate meals at the same table, slept under the same roof, and even went to church together. The line between labor and leisure was just as blurry in the day-to-day operations of the shop itself. Master and journeymen might elect one of their group to read the newspaper aloud while the others worked, or take impromptu breaks around a shared bottle of rum, or go fishing when business was slow. The mix of environmental relationships that defined Boston Common at the beginning of the nineteenth century fit perfectly into the larger framework in which many Americans lived their lives.<sup>13</sup>

### *Gentility Reaches the Common*

As central as the Common was to Boston's social life, it was geographically remote from the center of population through the end of the eighteenth century. In 1790, Boston's population was about 18,000, only 2,000 more than in 1740. The town had grown very little in fifty years. That was in large part a legacy of the Revolution,

when occupying British troops had heavily damaged the town and two-thirds of the local residents had fled. But the end of the war brought economic expansion, and between 1790 and 1810 the population almost doubled to 34,000. A wave of migrants moved to Boston seeking economic opportunities, and the need for more housing pushed the population toward the thinly-settled lands around the Common.<sup>14</sup>

Boston's wealthiest inhabitants led the exodus from the older sections of town and used the move to reinforce their status as members of the "genteel" classes. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, America's elites had copied the homes, furnishings, clothing, and manners of the European aristocracy. By the end of the century, the desire to appear genteel was also spreading to the middle level of American society, which purchased symbols of refinement like carpets and clocks to distinguish their social status from the laboring classes. But the middling classes still followed the pace set by the nation's most affluent families, which used their wealth to replicate the geography of gentility they saw across the Atlantic. As upper-class residents of European cities built larger homes with gardens along tree-lined streets, their American counterparts followed suit.<sup>15</sup>

In Boston, neighborhoods of this sort first began appearing on High, Pearl, and Summer Streets. This district was just a few blocks from the wharves where merchants kept their offices, yet still retained the spaciousness of the country. While visiting from Philadelphia, Enoch Wines found Summer Street to be "the handsomest street in Boston. Town and Country seem here married to each other, and there is no jar between the husband and the wife."<sup>16</sup>

Later, Boston's gentility began migrating to the area of Beacon Street on the far side of the Common, which most locals considered to be the very edge of town. In 1790, *Massachusetts Magazine* referred to the Beacon Hill area as a "rural hamlet" in contrast to the town itself. The next year, when apothecary John Joy built a home on the

hill so that his ill wife could benefit from the country air, she insisted that their stay away from the center of town be a short one. Even as late as 1802, when state senator John Phillips completed a home on Beacon Street, people wondered why he had moved so far out of town. What made Beacon Street a “rural hamlet” was, in part, its distance from the turmoil of the town center. But the adjoining Common’s physical qualities—its expansive pasture and distant views—were largely responsible for the area’s country-like atmosphere.<sup>17</sup>

Trailblazers like Joy and his wife did not have to wait long for company, for the Common had also caught the attention of state officials. In 1795, the legislature chose a scenic spot on Beacon Hill as the site for an elegant new State House designed by local architect Charles Bulfinch. At the same time, the town announced that it would sell the nearby east end of the Common, where the almshouse, workhouse, and other public buildings were located, to finance new facilities elsewhere. The news sparked a building boom around the Common that produced a large number of well-appointed residences for wealthy citizens, including a Bulfinch-designed block of fashionable row houses along Common Street and a number of homes for prominent citizens on Park Street.<sup>18</sup>

What drew these new residents to the borders of the Common was the aura of refinement that radiated from both the Common and the new State House. In the early nineteenth century, proximity to a garden or other well-groomed green space made a building site highly desirable, with the fashionable residential squares of London providing a model for American cities. Philadelphia began enhancing its Franklin and Washington Squares in the 1820s, and New Yorkers created the public Union Square and the private Gramercy Park in the 1830s. Boston preceded them both with the construction of Franklin Place and Louisburg Square, both private garden squares on Beacon Hill surrounded by expensive townhouses. Living across from the Common was beginning to provide the same kind of ca-

chet as proximity to these parks. But the new State House added immeasurably to the Common's appeal, since America's upper classes also valued neighborhoods near elegant seats of government. They gravitated toward city halls and state houses the way that European elites clustered around royal palaces. The capitol buildings in Richmond and Philadelphia and the city hall in New York all attracted grand houses that basked in the dignity and power emanating from civic buildings, and Boston's State House did the same. Across urban America, beautiful houses near parks or squares and adjacent to stately civic buildings identified their residents as genteel.<sup>19</sup>

The same year that construction began on the new capitol building, a group of Boston investors began pursuing an ambitious residential development scheme that combined proximity to the State House with unequalled views of the Common. Leading Federalist Harrison Gray Otis teamed with several other businessmen to purchase pastureland on Mount Vernon, a hill bordering Beacon Street across from the Common. Operating as the Mount Vernon Proprietors, they cut the top fifty or sixty feet off the hill and began to transform the area into a neighborhood of grand houses with beautiful gardens and views of the Back Bay. Mindful of the Common's use as a pasture, but needing to preserve the new yards from unnecessary damage, builders left lanes between and even under the houses so that cows from the poorer neighborhoods north and west of the hill could reach Beacon Street and the Common. The development was a great success. Beacon Street, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, became "the sunny street that holds the sifted few," and by the early 1830s more than a third of Boston's richest families lived on streets near the Common. Its scenery had drawn the new State House, and together they formed an irresistible magnet for the upper classes.<sup>20</sup>

The development of Beacon Street began during a period of unusual social fluidity in Boston's history. The departure of well-to-do

loyalists during the Revolution had left room for people of more modest backgrounds to move up the social ladder. Into the first decades of the nineteenth century, a large number of newly rich families found themselves trying to demonstrate the high level of refinement that would win them acceptance in elite circles. The location of one's house was a prominent marker of refinement, as William Dean Howells vividly showed in his 1885 novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The title character is a rising businessman whose efforts to enter Brahmin society include the erection of a house on Beacon Street. The destruction of the house by fire at the end of the novel marks his failure to achieve the social acceptance he desired. Although the story is set later in the century, its use of a house near the Common as a metaphor for social ambition would have rung just as true in prior decades. But had Lapham been a man of fact rather than fiction, and a resident of Boston before the uppermost classes coalesced into the Brahmins about 1820, his quest for genteel status might have had a more positive ending.<sup>21</sup>

### *Nature and Gentility*

As attractive as the Common was to wealthy Bostonians, the relationship between America's urban upper classes and nature was much more complicated than a simple desire for a view of grass and trees. The characteristics of refined life in the nation's growing cities were promoting a different kind of engagement with the natural world. Most Americans still lived in the countryside and related to their environments largely through their labor. They picked corn, mowed hay, chopped wood, and herded, fed, milked, saddled, and slaughtered their domesticated animals. Many urbanites had left various parts of that lifestyle behind, but only upper-class urbanites and some of the aspiring middling classes could avoid it almost entirely. In fact, evading such activities became a hallmark of gentility. Direct contact with productive nature receded into the experiential background of urban elites, and they began to derive more of the

meanings they assigned to nature from what they saw with their eyes than from the feel and smell of wringing a living from the land.<sup>22</sup>

Most importantly for the future of Boston Common, the upper classes' distaste for manual labor inspired a landscape ideal that treated productive work as if it were inconsistent with nature. Early nineteenth-century romantics like Emerson embraced this sentiment. "You cannot freely admire a noble landscape," he explained, "if laborers are digging in the field hard by." The suppression of such productive activities could therefore enhance the uplifting effects of traditionally productive landscapes, like common pastures. In fact, Emerson had some of his greatest epiphanies while traversing them. "I do not cross the common without a wild poetic delight," he wrote in 1834, "notwithstanding the prose of my demeanour." Two years later, he described a twilight walk across a common that produced "a perfect exhilaration" and the transcendent state that he achieved when lost in the embrace of the natural world. In Emerson's experience, however, productive commons were at their best when no productive activities were taking place. Within this developing landscape ideal, nature abhorred a worker.<sup>23</sup>

The removal of work from the upper-class landscape ideal reflected a larger unraveling of the close relationship between labor and leisure in American society. By the early years of the nineteenth century, the expansion of manufacturing was producing large shops that functioned more efficiently when journeymen and apprentices lived on their own rather than with a master. Although the full separation of work from home would take decades to complete, many Americans were already finding that the two were drifting ever farther apart. Historians have long understood that the reduction of the old paternalistic system to a simple exchange of labor for money had enormous social consequences: the apprentice system would fade away, the rigor of industrial time would replace irregular work patterns, and masters and employees would lose their sense of mu-

tual responsibility. But the sundering of job from home and work from play also reshaped how Americans related to the natural environment. An understanding of labor and leisure as best pursued in different landscapes had to precede the dedication of a public space to solely recreational pursuits.<sup>24</sup>

Since Boston's refined women experienced the greatest separation from the messy realities of working with the natural environment, it should not be surprising that they developed the most strained relationship to a central aspect of urban nature: cows. Rural women—many urban ones as well—had regular contact with cows because women usually managed the production of milk and dairy products within a family. But wealthy urban women had no such responsibilities. In fact, to exhibit alarm at the nearness of such large animals became a mark of refinement. "The fear of the cow," noted a local minister, "which prevails among the fair in cities and large towns, is one of the elegances of cultivated life." What refined Boston women thought about the local cows thus became deeply entangled with what they thought about themselves. But whether genuine, feigned, or simply imagined by men wanting to paint women as the weaker sex, the supposed fear of cows among Boston's ladies would become one of the chief arguments for their removal from the Common.<sup>25</sup>

Boston Common had not created the desire to gaze on a natural area free from productive activities, nor had it created the fear of cows among genteel women. But once enough elite families had moved around its borders, the Common gave Boston's upper classes a whole new landscape through which to express these particular cultural attitudes toward nature. As a result, a cow nuisance emerged where there had never been one before. As early as 1818, a lawyer, author, and great fan of the Common named Samuel Knapp voiced displeasure over the continued presence of the cows. Knapp expressed disbelief that a place so perfect for pleasure and recreation was still used for something as base as production. "Will it be

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In this 1804 image of Boston Common, a woman and her children pose just a few feet away from grazing cows, while a figure with a wheelbarrow trundles by in the background. Such a mingling of labor and leisure in a natural setting was not unusual at the time, but it would grow increasingly objectionable to Boston's upper classes over the next two decades. (Author's collection)

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believed,” he asked, “that this enchanting common takes its name from its being a *common cow-pasture*, and is actually given up to that animal!” Although most of his contemporaries referred to the Common as a “field” or “pasture,” Knapp called it an “extensive square.” The choice was telling, for the term emphasized an urban and leisure-oriented relationship to the Common rather than a rural and productive one.<sup>26</sup>

### *From Town to City*

The upper classes would have had a difficult time securing the necessary votes in a town meeting to end the right of commonage and remove the cows. Although wealthy Bostonians held many of the town’s chief offices and provided much of the community’s leadership, any policy that was unpopular with the laboring population could be blocked by a large turnout in town meeting. Closing the Common’s pasture to cows would be a serious revocation of a traditional right, and the class benefiting most from that right—the poorer ones in this case—could be expected to defend it fiercely. That did not stop the upper classes from trying. Nathaniel Shurtleff, a physician, politician, and local historian, remembered years later that “those who were wont to perambulate the numerous bypaths and byways of the old common land” wanted to “remove the trouble” of the cows. He claimed that “many attempts were made, in vain,” although he did not record their details. Such efforts to change how Bostonians related to their Common could find success only if the citizens gave up the direct democracy of their town meeting.<sup>27</sup>

Boston’s government worked like most others in New England. Its heart was the town meeting, where qualified voters gathered periodically to make decisions directly rather than through representatives. A board of selectmen, board of health, and board of overseers of the poor met the town’s daily governmental needs. Each body acted independently of the others, and their members served with-

out pay. The system was cheap and reasonably efficient, and it gave direct input into the lawmaking process to every voting citizen.<sup>28</sup>

But a town meeting worked best with a small population bound together by a sense of community and mutual interest. By the turn of the century, that description no longer fit Boston. The number of residents was far too large for any one individual to know most of the people in the community or for a single building to hold the thousands of citizens who were qualified to vote in town meetings. As a result, the system was not as democratic in practice as it was in theory. Most town meetings had become exercises in apathy in which only thirty or forty people showed up to make decisions about town policies. The discussion of especially controversial issues, on the other hand, drew such large crowds that the gatherings overflowed Faneuil Hall and made it impossible for speakers to be heard.<sup>29</sup>

Since as early as 1784, Bostonians had made periodic attempts to adopt a representative or “city” form of government, but such efforts were always unsuccessful because residents remained emotionally attached to their town meetings. Part of the reason was that Boston’s town meeting, like others around New England, conjured memories of patriotic voices calling for resistance to the oppressive policies of Great Britain. “This sentiment,” remembered Mayor Josiah Quincy, Sr., “united with the natural reluctance with which every people part with authority they have long and successfully exercised, rendered all attempts at change, not so much unpopular, as hateful, to a majority of the inhabitants.” But more than nostalgia was at work. Based on close to two centuries of experience, New Englanders had come to believe that their direct democracies were the ideal form of municipal government. For Boston to abandon it for something else must have seemed like a step backward rather than a step forward on its path toward perfection.<sup>30</sup>

Many Bostonians also feared that representative government