

EMERALD NECKLACE MEMORIES & DREAMS



Franklin Park and the Jewish Community
1920–1970

BY ELISSA HOAGLAND



THE JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL OF GREATER BOSTON

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This booklet was funded through a grant from the estates of Frank and Alice Adelberg.

Graphics by TobinDesign

Cover: Ann Zolot poses with her parents and brothers in Franklin Park after High Holiday services in 1941. Photo courtesy Shep Wolsky

In 1946, the South Boston neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan, home to 77,000 Jews, comprised the largest Jewish community in New England. Not a traditional ghetto, the area was nevertheless packed tightly with humanity, houses, apartment buildings, shops and offices.

For these urbanites, the great green space that served simultaneously as the landmark and the boundary of the neighborhood was Franklin Park, the largest jewel in the Emerald Necklace designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1890s. Of course, Franklin Park served as a destination park for all of Boston, rather than as a neighborhood park for the Jewish community, but its most significant large-scale amenities were built during the Jews' tenure in Roxbury and Dorchester: a world-class zoo, an eighteen-hole golf course, and a football stadium which could seat 10,000.

And it was due in part to the stability that the Jewish community preserved that citizens from across the city were able to enjoy the park as a cherished destination.



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The Playstead in Franklin Park, circa 1915.

THE CREATION OF FRANKLIN PARK

Although Boston boasts a historic Common that goes back to Pilgrim times, work on a city-wide park system didn't begin until 1878, well behind places like New York, Buffalo, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted — famous for Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park, among many others — was chosen for the task, but by the 1870s Boston's core was already densely populated with little available land for green space. Thus, Olmsted pounced on land at the city's periphery, creating a five-mile system of interconnected parks he called the "Emerald Necklace." The 2,000-acre network of the Back Bay Fens, Muddy River Improvement (now Olmsted Park), Jamaica Park (now Jamaica Pond), Arnold Arboretum and Franklin Park spiraled counter-clockwise from the already-existing Boston Common, Public Garden and Commonwealth Avenue. The gems of the necklace were connected by tree-lined parkways.

Of Olmsted's five parks, Franklin was the largest. It was also the most simply designed, meant to serve as a pastoral retreat from the bustle of city life. Located in the town of West Roxbury (which had not yet been annexed into Boston), its 500 acres encompassed roughly a dozen suburban farms, and the park's development was delayed by bitter lawsuits against the use of eminent domain. The land itself was attractive but not remarkable, lacking a prominent high point or body of water. Spindly,

second growth trees predominated, and pudding-stone boulders and granite ledges breached the vast meadows. Nonetheless, the space inspired Olmsted; he submitted a proposal in 1881, and on January 30, 1886 a new and minimally developed Franklin Park opened to the public.

Franklin Park's most prominent feature was the "Country Park," 334 acres of forest and meadow, surrounded by an attractive stone wall. Specifically designated for scenery and passive recreation, the space was crisscrossed with walking trails and dotted with stone arches and steps. Of the Country Park, Olmsted wrote:

"The all-important feature of the West Roxbury site is a gentle valley nearly a mile in length and an average breadth between the steeper slopes of the bordering hills of less than a quarter of a mile...this would at once supply a singularly complete and perfect though limited example of a type of scenery which is perhaps the most soothing in its influence on mankind of any presented by nature."

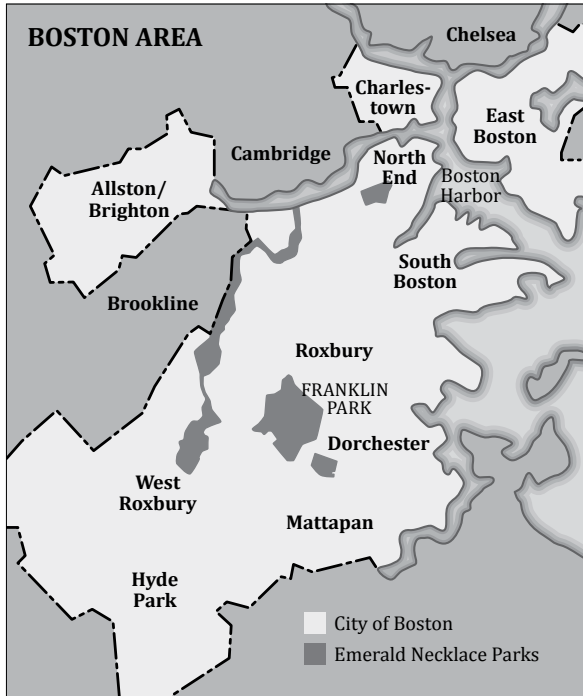
Smaller landmarks added interest. Schoolmaster Hill, where Ralph Waldo Emerson lived for two years before the park was built, offered views of the South Meadow. Scarborough Hill looked out over Scarborough Pond, which was added in 1891 at the urging of citizens; the natural depression was filled with water piped in from Jamaica Pond. Halfway up the hill, Olmsted planned a Dairy, where picnickers could acquire supplies, including fresh milk, warm from the cow, and fresh eggs. The Dairy never came to be, but sheep were introduced to keep the meadows trimmed. Near the park's southeast entrance was the Refectory, a large yellow brick and terracotta structure that housed a cafeteria and that remained popular through the first half of the 20th century. In the country park's western corner, a section of marshy grass named Ellicottsdale was filled to form an eight-acre field for "lawn games, such as tennis and croquet." The area was graced by a stone arch.

The locale for active recreation was the 40-acre, grassy Playstead, designated for boys under the age of 16 (later raised to 20). The Playstead didn't open un-



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Franklin Park, Frederick Law Olmsted's third masterpiece, opened to the public in 1886.



til 1889, as workers struggled to clear the rocky soil. On opening day, the *Boston Herald Traveler* reported that it was the “finest playground ever set apart for children’s exclusive use in this country.” The Playstead quickly became so heavily patronized that Olmsted, concerned by the compaction of the poor soil, urged the city to buy more land nearby for active recreation. The city responded by purchasing 100-acre Franklin Field — named to reinforce the connection to Franklin Park — on Blue Hill Avenue. When Franklin Field opened in 1898, it quickly became the most popular park in the city, used especially for baseball.

THE JEWISH MIGRATION TO DORCHESTER

When Franklin Park opened in 1886, Boston’s Jewish community was centered miles away in the crowded North End, the inner-city working class neighborhood first settled by German Jews in 1840. (The North End’s first synagogue was built in 1852.) Tens of thousands of Jews had also settled in Chelsea, just north of the city, where many made a living buying and selling junk. In 1908, a fire from a Chelsea junkyard, feeding on the wooden

tenements, blackened more than 500 acres and left 17,000 Jews homeless. Many of the displaced families moved to Roxbury and Dorchester, joining a small Jewish community already living in Roxbury Highlands. As more of the low-income families relocated, hundreds of wooden triple-deckers were quickly erected — spaced the legal minimum of 14 feet apart — along Blue Hill Avenue and the surrounding streets. For the next 50 years Blue Hill Avenue served as the spine of a vibrant Jewish ghetto with delicatessens, retail stores and countless fruit vendors. It also served as the community’s gateway to Franklin Park and Franklin Field.

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*“The finest playground ever
 set apart for children’s exclusive use
 in this country.”*
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As World War I drove up housing prices and white Protestant residents of the area began to sell out, it wasn’t just the poor who moved there. Middle class Jews flocked to the spacious single and double family homes in Wellington Hill, Roxbury Highlands, Mount Bowdoin, Mattapan, and Elm Hill. Among many synagogues they founded were Temple Beth El on Glenway Street, Agudas Israel on Woodrow Avenue, and the Fowler Street Shul off Greenwood. By 1920, there were 44,000 Jews in a community that ultimately stretched from Roxbury’s Townsend and Quincy Streets to the railroad tracks near Mattapan Square. And marking the approximate center of the community was the grand entrance to Franklin Park.

In the 1910s, as the Jewish community was transforming Roxbury and Dorchester, the fundamental character of Franklin Park was being transformed, too. Many of the elements of the Olmsted plan, particularly in the region closest to the Jewish community, had not come to fruition before the designer’s death, and as a result the ideas of others influenced the details of park development.

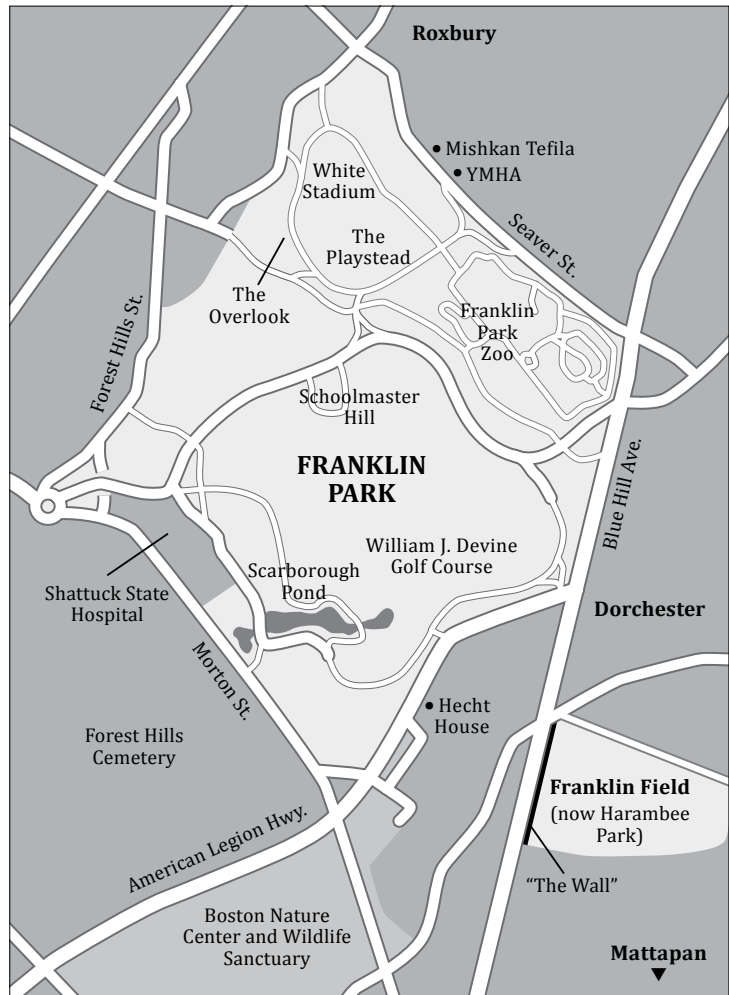
Among the never-realized plans were a grand entrance from Blue Hill Avenue, a tree-lined promenade, a deer park and a “Little Folks Fair” — an 18-acre open space “for childish entertainments,

to be furnished with Swings, Scups, See-Saws, Sand Courts, Flying Horses, Toy Booths, Marionettes, Goat Carriages, Donkey Courses, Bear Pits, and other amusing exercises and exhibitions, mostly to be provided by lessees and purveyors, to be licensed for the purpose.” Play areas for children had become increasingly common in parks at the end of the 19th century, and Olmsted’s plan sought to contain such elements in a designated space, 50 acres in the east corner of the park by Seaver Street and Blue Hill Avenue, blended into the surrounding park land with clever landscaping to preserve the pastoral aesthetic. But a shortage of public funds and Olmsted’s death in 1903 doomed these attractions. By the end of the decade, large swaths of the pastoral space had been converted into a golf course, a zoo, and a cross-country running track.

The Franklin Park Zoo opened in 1914, beginning as an aviary and bear dens. Most famously, children in Boston’s public schools collected nickels and dimes to purchase three hippos. The zoo rapidly became Franklin Park’s most popular attraction with two million people visiting in 1921.

In the following year, 1915, construction of the Franklin Park Golf Course was initiated. This began the official transition of the largest portion of Franklin Park from public pleasure ground to a facility for active recreation. (The course had begun as an informal 3-hole layout on the meadow, then grown to nine holes in the late 1890s.) In 1922, Donald Ross, a legendary Scottish-born golf architect, laid down the 18-hole, 6009-yard spread that is still in existence today, cementing golf’s place in the heart of Dorchester though further reducing the acreage of open space intended by Olmsted.

The pressure for more recreational activities was intense. In the winter, scenic Schoolmaster Hill’s toboggan run attracted thousands, and the skating rink at Franklin Field was equally crowded. Iconic meadows in Ellicottsdale were transformed into baseball fields. Sports dominated all aspects of the landscape in ways Olmsted, 30 years prior, never could have envisioned. But these attractions



proved exceedingly popular to people of all ages and both genders.

In the early 1920s, Mayor James Curley pushed for the creation of a Rose Garden. Inspired by popular rose gardens in Chicago and New York, he hoped to boost what he called “flagging” attendance at Franklin Park. Construction began in 1923, and was completed by May of 1924. Sited at the west end of the zoo’s lagoon, the oval garden was centered on a majestic fountain and was immensely popular — an estimated 50,000 curious visitors showed up during construction alone.

Perhaps the most severe change to the park came from the introduction of the automobile and the paving of the Carriage Roads. Like other Bostonians, many Jewish families enjoyed Sunday drives in the park, often following services at the one of the nearby temples.

Even as modern amenities — golf course, zoo, formal landscaping, tobogganing and automobiles — crowded out Olmsted’s bucolic vision of Franklin Park, they entertained thousands of visitors and became central to the local community. The alterations occurred just at the time the Jewish community was establishing its place in the neighborhood, and the additions became the very landmarks with which the new community identified.

A BELOVED SPACE, 1920-1950

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Jewish population of Dorchester and Roxbury continued to grow, and its institutions became more established — 18 synagogues, Roxbury’s Hebrew College, two large community centers on the edge of the park, plus the always-bustling shops of Blue Hill Avenue, packed with food vendors, kosher groceries, delis, and pharmacies where patrons would pass the time at soda counters. Additionally, the benches surrounding the park’s Blue Hill Avenue entrance attracted clusters of elderly Jews who would sit and socialize throughout the day. One former resident recalls 30 or so locals sitting by the park, all day, every day: “It was a place to be.”

The grandest of the institutions was Temple Mishkan Tefila. Founded in 1895, the conservative congregation met in a variety of spaces in Roxbury until 1925 when it built an enormous Greek revival edifice on Seaver Street across from the Playstead. The location of Mishkan Tefila, along with the other park-side temples, served to symbolize the connection between the Jewish community and Franklin Park. Following services, congregants would often drive or promenade through the park.

The attractions, too, served as a point of pride for the community. One woman recalls the Rose Garden as a place to go on the weekends, to walk to with a babysitter when she was young and to visit with friends as a teenager. Similarly, many residents remember the zoo, which (prior to its renovation in the 1970s) was free of charge. The bear dens, monkey house, and aviary were among the favorites of the local community. One resident remembers returning time after time to watch the elephants being washed. Of course, for some young boys, the park

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was a place for adventure and games: renting bicycles to traverse the bikepaths, playing pick-up football and baseball in the Playstead, sledding on Schoolmaster’s Hill, and fishing in Scarborough Pond.

In point of fact, beautiful Franklin Park, with its vast acreage and cherished scenery, did not serve as the social or recreational focus for the Jewish community. The true community hub was Franklin Field, a few blocks away, the place for sports, special events and socializing. Surrounded on all sides by Jewish neighborhoods, it was smaller (at 100 acres), safer and more centrally located. Its flat field design made it ideal for all sorts of community activities: tennis, kite flying, bike riding, basketball, hockey in the winter; and the Independence Day celebration mid-summer. “When

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The Bird House at the Franklin Park Zoo.

I was young,” remembers Mollie Glanz, “my little girlfriends and I would decorate our baby strollers and push them in the Fourth of July parade.”

Franklin Field was a place where Jews could comfortably mingle with other Roxbury and Dorchester ethnic groups. In his memoir on growing up in Dorchester, *Ghetto Memories*, Norman Morris recalls:

“The Field was used by everyone for all sports. Periodically, groups of English would set up a cricket area in the numerous open spaces and play. While soccer was not a big American sport during those days, it was played heavily on the Field by people of Spanish origin from outside the area. Additionally, who can forget the ‘bocci’ [sic] court near the pool? Older Italians would be there every day with their friends to roll the ball. The Field was used by everyone.”

One of the best-used social spaces at Franklin Field was the Wall, which ran the length of the field’s west edge along Blue Hill Avenue. According to Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon in *Death of an American Jewish Community*, “Every few yards, a knot of elderly men sat on the wall watching the passing traffic. Behind them, young boys competed relentlessly on makeshift baseball diamonds, sliding into large stones used as bases.” During the High Holy Days, the wall at Franklin Field took on added significance as a gathering point for the entire community. Here, social divisions melted away, and the observant community joined together. Levine and Harmon describe the tradition:

“...in early fall, with the advent of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, wall space would be at a premium. All commerce along Blue Hill Avenue came to a halt on the High Holy Days. Sidewalks usually crammed with food stalls and dry goods would soon be cleared for a parade ground for the legions of men in dark suits and fedoras, the women in silk dresses and stylish hats, and boys and girls stiffly attired in new holiday outfits....The wall at Franklin Field was the one opportunity for all of the disparate neighborhood characters to

connect. The members of the socialist Workmen’s Circle...would share wall space with followers of the Hasidic Bostoner Rebbe, Levi Horowitz...By early afternoon, the field would be filled with Jews...Despite the solemnity of the holy days, it would be impossible for even pious parents to keep their children from play. Little ones would push nuts along the ground with sticks...Adolescents would take over a

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portion of the field furthest from public view for spirited games of “buck buck,” in which a team of jumpers would catapult themselves onto the backs of a row of defensive players in an attempt to topple the human bridge.”

The Jews of Boston describes the same occurrence, adding, “Jewish children gathered at the wall at Franklin Field each year on the High Holy Days, the oldest boys and girls getting the wall’s best section.”

Besides the Field and Park themselves, there was also, for a time, an unofficial greenway connecting the two that was just as important to the children of



In the park’s early days, the lawns were kept trimmed by sheep.

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Thongs watch and wait their turns on the Franklin Park toboggan run in February, 1923.

the neighborhood. In his September 30, 1979 article in the Boston Globe Magazine, “Who Lost the Emerald Necklace?: In Search of Franklin Park,” Mark Jay Mirsky wrote:

“In my childhood, a natural corridor of rocky cliff and field, wild flowers and tar pits extended from the corner of Franklin Field, after crossing Blue Hill Avenue to the west, all the way to Franklin Park. This was the run of gangs from our streets when playing cowboys and Indians—for with two brief asphalt intermissions one was deep in brush, grass, or woods from one end of the roundup to the other. Here I followed in the footsteps of the toughest eight-year-old thugs from Warner Street, a brood of kids whose bare front yards and back pens were full of toads, turtles, and snakes.”

The Field, Park, and wild places around them gave the children of Blue Hill Avenue a chance to interact with nature beyond the narrow yards of the triple-deckers.

Of course, not all recreation took place in the park. Younger children were restricted to the quiet side streets and alleys near their homes. Many residents remember playing street hockey and street base-

ball in the evenings, stopping only when neighbors threatened to call the police about the noise. For older Jewish children and teenagers, the go-to places for socializing and athletics were Hecht House, just south of the park, and the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) on Seaver Street in Roxbury. Hecht House had the best-loved basketball court in the neighborhood. Squeezed into a cramped gym, the baskets and sidelines were mere feet from the walls, and most players hardly dared to rush in for a lay-up. The court also hosted weekend dances. Many high school social clubs also met in Hecht House, and when not in meetings, the teens entertained themselves on the handball court and at the billiard and ping pong tables. The YMHA served a similar function, hosting basketball games, Roxbury social clubs, Saturday night dances, and athletic leagues.

It wasn’t all fun and games. While their gentile peers often spent afternoons playing outdoors, Jewish children had Hebrew School. In his memoir, *Ghetto Memories*, Norman Morris quotes Moe Skoler, who grew up in the neighborhood in the 1940s and 1950s: “From the third grade on I went to Hebrew School Monday through Thursday, synagogue every Saturday morning, and Sunday School every Sunday morning. I couldn’t play football until the ninth grade because I had to go to Hebrew School.”

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“Jew and Gentile alike joined each other on the edge of Franklin Park’s Playstead on that magic day when President Franklin Roosevelt was driven past in his grand blue Packard around the corner of Elm Hill Avenue and down Seaver Street in his presidential campaign motorcade through Jewish Boston.”
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But it wasn’t solely other obligations that kept Jewish children out of Franklin Park; anti-Semitism and conflict with youths of other ethnicities made many young Jews fearful of going there. With Blacks on the north in lower Roxbury, working-class Irish on the east in Dorchester, lace-curtain Irish on the west in Jamaica Plain, Jews on the south and southeast, Franklin Park may have been a place for different types of Bostonians to meet, but rarely to mingle. More than once the park was the scene of a violent confrontation between the adolescent boys of Irish Dorchester and Jewish Blue Hill Avenue or Mattapan.

At many other times, Franklin Park did serve as place for coming together. Large events, such as athletic contests, drew a diverse crowd. Children of all backgrounds enjoyed the winter toboggan run as well as trips to the Zoo. And in September 1936 a particularly special event drew a big turnout. “Jew and Gentile alike joined each other on the edge of Franklin Park’s Playstead on that magic day,” recounted former Franklin Park Coalition President Richard Heath, “when President Franklin Roosevelt

was driven past in his grand blue Packard around the corner of Elm Hill Avenue and down Seaver Street in his presidential campaign motorcade through Jewish Boston.” Across the street at Mishkan Tefila, congregants tossed carnations to the procession.

Despite the community’s sometimes tortured relationship with the park, it was nonetheless the object of much adoration. Norman Leventhal, who later co-founded The Beacon Companies, was so influenced by Franklin Park that, at age 75, he passed on the torch by leading the effort to create the exquisite park at Post Office Square in the heart of the Financial District. Leventhal’s friend, presidential historian Theodore H. White, who grew up near Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester, agreed, writing:

“My favorite place was Franklin Park, which in those days was one of the greatest municipal parks in the country...When we got to be fourteen or fifteen, we’d take our girlfriends to the Park at night. That’s the best memory I have of my beloved birthplace.”



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Former resident Shep Wolsky said in an interview, "I still dream of the things we did in Franklin Park." Others remember the park for its beauty, and for the grandeur and status it brought to their poor neighborhood. "Of course, we didn't know anything about Olmsted," Wolsky added. "We just knew we loved the park."

POLITICAL SUPPORT STAVES OFF DECLINE

In the 1940s the Jewish influence on Franklin Park was expressed most strongly through politics. Roxbury and Dorchester — containing the largest Jewish voting block in New England — was contained within Massachusetts' Ward 14, represented by beloved State Representative Julius Ansel, and Ward 12, represented by such prominent men as Herman Greene, Charlie T. Taylor, and war veteran Herman Busch. Ansel assured his political longevity through his campaign slogan, "My heart belongs to Ward 14," and by holding meetings at the G & G delicatessen rather than in the State Senate dining room. Despite persistent charges of corruption and vote buying, the men were revered for their service to the community — whether negotiating with the (largely Irish) Boston police or ensuring that streets were plowed in the winter. Ansel in particular gave a high priority to his district's parkland, regularly securing funds for renovations of Franklin Field. Norman Morris recounts in *Ghetto Memories Revisited*,

"Julie did whatever he could to improve the facilities within the area. He...had a great part in the Little League facility that was built on the Field, made sure there was ice for skating in the winter...and above all, was the catalyst who made sure the Fourth of July celebration [at Franklin Field] was always tops."

When Franklin Park Zoo's much-loved hippopotamus, Happy, died, Ansel himself purchased a replacement, Putzi. Unfortunately, he had failed to get the decision approved by the City, and the hippo had to be relocated to an out-of-state zoo. Nonetheless,

the state senator was fiercely loyal to the neighborhood, and his commitment ensured safe streets and well-funded parks. There is debate over who was responsible for maintaining Franklin Park's high quality through the end of World War II. Many believe that the local politicians were critical; others think that the parks department was invested and committed on its own. One resident remarked, "Jews didn't do anything to support the park, but they used it. The park didn't need support. It was always well taken care of."

In the later 1940s, however, the park's management began to change. In 1946 the Overlook Shelter by the Playstead burned down and was not replaced. A few years later, when the park administrators sought a spot for high school football games, half of the 30-acre Playstead was given over for construction of George Robert White Schoolboy Stadium. The 10,000-fan facility opened in September 1949, with a game between the largely Jewish Roxbury Memorial High School and Boston Latin High School. The stadium was soon hosting large athletic events for the whole city, but it wasn't universally loved by neighborhood youth: according to Shep Wolsky, the facility had been built directly on top of the best baseball diamond in the park. The stadium also soon became a hangout for aimless young men in the Jewish community who would gamble on the outcome of the youth sports. According to Harmon and Levine,

"Friday afternoons...were special for the neighborhood's self-proclaimed 'in-town degenerates.' It was then that grown men would skip off from day jobs to converge on the nearby Schoolboy Stadium in Franklin Park for the afternoon high school football matches. As their fathers prepared for *shul*, the "degenerates" gathered high above the stadium's 50 yard line and wagered not only on the outcome of the game but on the outcome of a half, a quarter, and even a single play."

Sometimes the gamblers' heckling would interfere with the play of the game. But for Jewish teens, the new stadium meant an opportunity to play rival high schools on their home turf, and to feel safer and more comfortable within Franklin Park.

A SHRINKING COMMUNITY

In 1946, the Jewish population of Dorchester and Roxbury peaked. As far back as the 1920s, upwardly mobile Jews had been moving out of urban triple-deckers and into single-family homes in the nearby suburbs of Brookline and Newton, but until the mid-1940s, Jewish in-migration had counteracted the outflow. By 1950, the tide was turning with more families moving out than in. Not only that, the community was growing poorer. Gerald Gamm notes in *Urban Exodus*:

“The great body of middle-class Jews, who had established the Jewish enclaves of Roxbury and Dorchester and built the area’s leading institutions, moved away, following middle-class Protestants to the suburbs... The total number of Jews in upper Roxbury and Dorchester... remained relatively stable until the 1950s, but the number of middle-class Jews supporting the area’s institutions diminished year by year.”

In a report entitled “Jews in a Changing Community,” Yona Ginsberg illustrates the class disparity in 1965:

Occupation of Heads of Greater Boston Area Jewish Families in the Labor Force

(1965, occupations reported in percentages)

Occupational Category	Dorchester/ Mattapan	Greater Boston Area, Total
Professionals	11%	31%
Managers and Proprietors	26	37
Clerical and Sales	27	20
Blue Collar	34	12

Mark Jay Mirsky, who has written multiple novels and articles about his experiences growing up in Jewish Dorchester and Mattapan, recalled how much of the pressure to move to the suburbs came from within families, as well as from external economic factors:

“They moved because it was an undesirable address for a girl who wanted to get married.



COURTESY SHEP WOLSKY

Ann and Shep Wolsky in the Franklin Park Zoo, Passover, 1949.

So the pressure on families to move to more desirable places, if the father had any kind of income, the pressure from the mother and daughter, and son, too, was very powerful.”

Even the difference between Dorchester’s wooden triple-deckers and the brick houses in the outer suburbs seemed significant. Of his family’s move to Mattapan at one point in his childhood, Mirsky said, “all the houses out in Brookline and Newton were brick, and so we were like the three little pigs: we finally got to the brick house.”

Jewish Roxbury crumpled first, as African-Americans migrated to the neighborhood from nearby Lower Roxbury. The black gentry had lived in Roxbury’s Elm Hill district for as long as the Jews had, but it wasn’t until the 1950s that lower-class blacks began moving to the area. As a result, in the late 1950s, YMHA membership declined due to safety concerns — there were multiple incidents of patrons being physically assaulted and their cars being vandalized — and in the early 1960s it closed, merging its assets with the Hecht House. Other institutions throughout the community gradually followed suit, including

many of the synagogues and businesses. Even the landmark G & G Delicatessen closed in 1968.

After 1950, Boston's swelling Black population filled the void left by departing Jews. Between 1950 and 1960, the African-American population doubled to 80,000, even as Boston's total population declined. As African-Americans migrated in from the Deep South, they followed a settlement pattern similar to the city's Jews 50 years earlier. The first concentration of Blacks spread between Lower Roxbury and the South End — just north of the Jewish community — centered on Washington Park. It soon extended southward, first into Jewish Roxbury, then Dorchester, and finally into Mattapan by the end of the 1960s. As the black community advanced, the Jews retreated south. Following the final, rapid collapse of 1968-72, many of the neighborhood's remaining Jews relocated to distant suburbs like Sharon and Northrop, which were more affordable than Brookline or Newton.

A number of factors led to the concentrated migration of African Americans into Jewish neighborhoods. For one, middle-class blacks had historically lived alongside middle-class Jews in Roxbury and Dorchester. Also, Jews were relatively more open to the concept of integration, at least compared to the Irish of South Boston, leading African Americans to move toward Jewish territory. Finally, the mobility of Jewish religious and cultural institutions as compared to the rigid, location-based parish structure of Catholic congregations, led wealthy and successful Jews to move — with their synagogues — to nearby suburbs, like Brookline and Newton, while their Irish counterparts were more rooted in neighborhood and parish.

DETERIORATION

The decline of the Jewish community was mirrored by deterioration within Franklin Park. At the end of the 1940s, the city turned over 27 acres in the park's western corner to the State of Massachusetts for Lemuel Shattuck Hospital, eliminating the Heathfield section of the park. Though the facility provided badly needed public medical care, and though the staff has long been extremely supportive of Franklin Park, the facility further shrank the

amount of unassigned land within the park. Moreover, the hospital's entryway on the Arborway competed with the park's entrance and served to slowly break the gem off from the rest of the Emerald Necklace. In 1955, the city fully severed the Park's connection to the Arborway when it constructed Casey Overpass above the renovated Forest Hills Station in Jamaica Plain

During the same period, Franklin Field was also greatly diminished. In the mid-1940s, the southern section was converted to housing for war workers. In 1954, 504 units of public housing were added to the complex. While this change was well received by the community and was a hard-fought victory for Julius Ansel, it eliminated 40 acres of athletic fields.

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*“They moved because it was
an undesirable address for a girl
who wanted to get married.”*
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Franklin Field had been reduced to its 56 northernmost acres.

Then there was race. At the national level, Jews and African-Americans were great partners in the civil rights movement, and suburban Jews were among the primary donors for black civil rights. (At the height of the civil rights movement, American Jews contributed three-quarters of the operating funds for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.) When Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Boston, he was hosted by Brookline's Temple Israel. But at the local level, black/Jewish relationships were often strained, harmed by Jewish landlords who did not properly maintain buildings with black tenants, by young blacks who committed crimes against Jewish residents, and by civil rights radicalism.

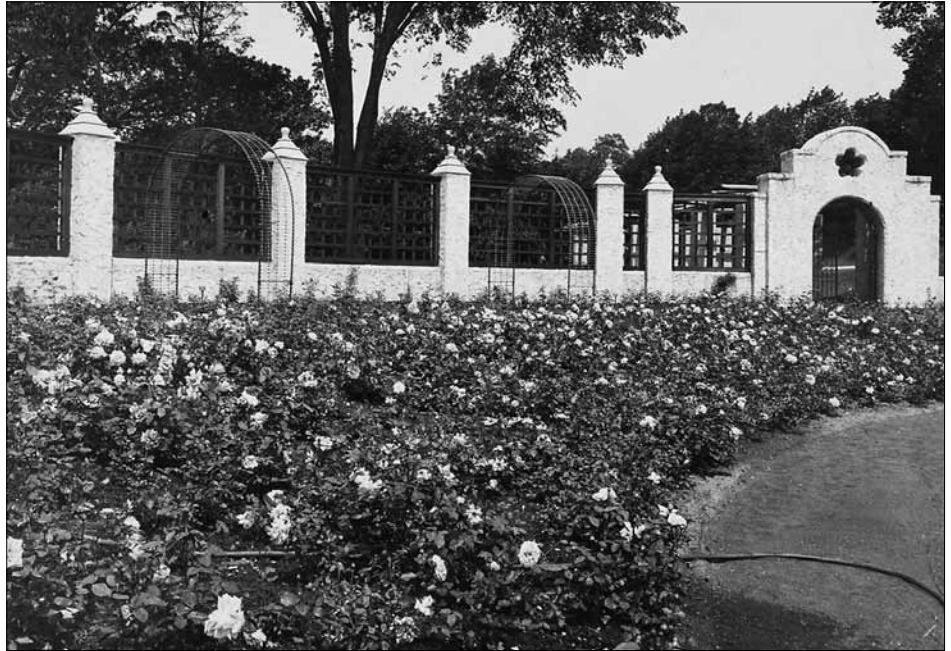
Jewish landlords in Black neighborhoods were often perceived as slumlords. In the face of housing shortage, many African Americans moved into housing abandoned by Jews leaving Roxbury. These properties often became Jewish-run slums, where families doubled up in apartments to save on rent

while landlords charged a premium. As early as 1965, Sol Kolack, the New England head of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, noted that Jewish-owned slum housing "loomed as a major cause of tension between the Boston Jewish and Negro communities." Though in most cases city building codes provided a legal framework to promote healthy living environments, State Representative Julius Ansel repeatedly defended slumlords, supporting incentives rather than penalties. His advocacy allowed inhumane conditions to persist in some of Roxbury's Jewish-owned apartments.

Perhaps the most famous slumlords were the Mindick brothers — Israel, Joseph and Raphael — who managed 44 multifamily buildings housing nearly 800 tenants in the predominantly black and Latino South End. In 1968, tensions escalated to a point where tenants demonstrated in front of Israel Mindick's floundering Temple Beth El on Blue Hill Avenue. This was not the first opposition that Beth El had received from the black community. According to Harmon and Levine,

"For decades, the pride of the Orthodox congregation had been its five-day-a-week afternoon Hebrew School...By the early 1960s, however, Beth El and other Jewish institutions in North Dorchester came under pressure from incoming black refugees...With increasing frequency, Jewish children leaving classes at dusk were attacked by black street toughs... Break-ins, vandalism, and assaults had made Beth El's name a frequent entry on the police log. In March 1965 black neighbors had even marched in front of the stucco synagogue demanding the 'whites get out.'"

Demographic change within the community had left Beth El particularly vulnerable, and both con-



The Rose Garden in 1924. It was bulldozed in 1978 for an expansion of the zoo.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

gregants and the temple's leadership were eager to cooperate with the black community.

Following the tenants' demonstration, Rabbi Judea Miller took interest in the Mindicks' properties. He toured one of the buildings and was horrified by the broken plumbing, safety hazards, exposed wiring and cockroaches. After unsuccessfully asking Israel to provide adequate housing, and without hope of legally sanctioning the Mindicks, Rabbi Miller took the case to Boston's Jewish religious court, the *bet din*, to be settled.

In an unprecedented ruling, the *bet din* stated that the landlords had the duty to provide tenants with a safe and sanitary living environment. The Mindicks pledged to maintain the buildings in accordance with city codes and to provide daily janitorial service. But months later, when elements of the Mindick's promise had not been met, the tenants appealed again to the *bet din*, which promptly penalized the Mindicks with a \$48,000 fee to be distributed among the renters. Even as delinquent landlords mistreated their black tenants, Boston's Jewish leadership strove for harmonious race relations.

With similar motives, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies attempted to find a recipient for

the once-grand Mishkan Tefila Temple building. As the Temple's patrons had continued to move west to Brookline and Newton in the early 1950s, the congregation had broken ground on a new site and sold the massive old structure to a group of Orthodox Lubavitcher Jews for \$80,000 — a paltry fraction of what it had cost to build. But the Lubavitchers, who ran a humble school out of the Temple's ancillary buildings, could not afford to maintain the grand sanctuary either. As the years of neglect accumulated, the space became less and less suitable; by the mid 1960s, the roof was filled with leaks, and water damage threatened the structural integ-

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riety of the building. One representative from the Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) remembers inspecting the building and finding pigeons living in the Holy Ark.

Elma Lewis, a prominent leader in Roxbury's black community, saw an opportunity to repurpose the space for performances at her school for African-American performing artists. She began conversations with the CJP, but the longer the Lubavitchers held ownership of the building, the tenser the negotiations became. The CJP hoped that Lewis and her colleagues might contribute some amount to cover the outstanding mortgage on the building. Instead, citing the building's poor condition, Lewis became increasingly insistent that the black community would pay nothing at all. During a 1967 visit to the city, Bernard Grossman, lay president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, was awakened early one morning by three black men at his door. “You give us the temple mortgage free or else we burn, baby, burn.” In 1968, the CJP pulled together funds to buy the building from the Lubavitchers and pay the remaining balance on the property. As a gesture of good will and in hopes of good publicity, the CJP transferred the property to Elma Lewis for one dollar.

EXODUS

Despite these efforts, Roxbury and Dorchester were shaken by riots in the late 1960s. During the Grove Hall Riots of June 1967, many Jewish businesses were burned and looted. To quell the riot, Boston Police organized reinforcements in Franklin Park's Schoolboy Stadium.

Schoolboy Stadium was also used by black activists during the civil rights struggle. After Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, 5,000 African-Americans gathered there to vote on the Black United Front's demands to the city government. Those that passed included 1) that majority black schools have all black staff, 2) that white-owned businesses in black neighborhoods be transferred to blacks, and 3) that the mayor pull together \$100 million for black community development. The second proposal seemed aimed directly at Jews, who were the primary business owners in Roxbury and Dorchester. These business owners had incurred severe financial damages from looting and arson following Dr. King's death, though fortunately there were no fatalities.

The City yielded to many of the Black United Front's terms, renaming city streets and public facilities in majority-black areas after prominent black leaders like Malcolm X and Melnea Cass. Additionally, the mayor's office, with financial support from the Brookline Jewish elite, raised \$100 million from a consortium of banks for black homeownership. This became the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group (B-BURG) which offered home loans at just over the FHA housing rate to aspiring homeowners within the so-called “Model City” area. Model City served as a reverse redline, allowing low down payments and low-interest mortgages only within the designated neighborhoods. It turned out that the designated area corresponded — to the accuracy of a block — to the neighborhoods where 40,000 of Boston's Jews lived, studiously avoiding nearby Irish Dorchester where residents defended with force the homogeneity of their community.

Begun with idealism, B-BURG became a disaster. Real estate brokers capitalized on the availability of mortgage financing with widespread blockbusting,

whereby Jewish residents were frightened into selling their homes at below-market prices by the use of stereotypes associated with their new black neighbors. Combined with actual crime, the blockbusting was overwhelmingly effective.

The sorts of crimes perpetrated became increasingly anti-Semitic. On May 27, 1970, an arson fire devastated Mattapan's Chevra Shas synagogue, destroying the Holy Ark and Torah. The same night, a second fire down the street at Agudas Israel caused \$10,000 worth of damage, although the sacred texts were unharmed. Later that year, Rabbi Gerald Zelermyer was attacked at his home by two young black men who tossed a vial of acid in his face. They left the wounded Rabbi with a note saying: "Lead the Jewish racists out of Mattapan."

In response to the violence, Jews continued to move away. While they had been welcoming to middle-class blacks who worked hard and took pride in their homes, the Jews were alienated by the radical and criminal elements in the changing community. As one remaining Mattapan resident noted to Yona Ginsberg in the early 1970s, "For every five bad blacks there are probably a hundred good ones, but the image of blacks is that of a slum people." By 1973, the Jewish population of Dorchester and Roxbury dropped below 2,500.

COURTESY FRANKLIN PARK COALITION



Volunteers under the leadership of the Franklin Park Coalition provide key support for the park, from removing invasive species to planting trees and restoring wetlands. The Coalition also raises funds for large-scale rehabilitation projects.

The blockbusting proved devastating to the black community as well when many new homeowners found that their homes had been inadequately maintained. A 1971 study by B-BURG found that 65 percent of homes purchased under the program needed major repairs within two years. The physical deterioration of the homes, combined with the stagnating home values that resulted from Jewish out-migration, left many new black homeowners with mortgages higher than the value of their houses. Fifty percent of homes bought through B-BURG were foreclosed within 5 years of purchase.

FRANKLIN PARK TODAY

For the past 40 years, Franklin Park has evolved without the benefit or involvement of an adjoining Jewish community. For the previous half-century, although they had in no sense controlled the park, Jews had helped provide the political support and neighborhood stability that kept it well maintained, well used and relatively safe. Since then, surrounded by poverty, Franklin Park has had a turbulent, crisis-laced existence markedly in contrast to Frederick Law Olmsted's two other crowning achievements, Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in

Brooklyn, both of which have been brought back to their former splendor by private conservancies and public commitment. Franklin Park's challenges have also been in contrast with many of Boston's other park triumphs, including Post Office Square, Columbus Park, the Rose Kennedy Greenway, Millennium Park, the East Boston Greenway, the Southwest Corridor Park and refurbishment of the Fenway, the Common and the Public Garden.

Not that there was a shortage of outstanding local resources among the new residents. One of the driving forces was Elma Lewis, who, in 1966, had received permission from the city of Boston to build a stage for the Playhouse in the Park. Located by the Franklin Park overlook, a boulder-strewn high point on the east edge of the Playstead, the Playhouse served as an extension of

Lewis's African American School for Performing Arts and was used for school productions, including an acclaimed *Twelfth Night*. Throughout the 1970s, the Playhouse also attracted big-ticket acts, including Duke Ellington, the Commodores, and the Boston Pops, and enjoyed enormous success, with over 100,000 visitors in its first season.

But the community's eagerness was not powerful enough to push the heavy rock of park needs up the steep hill of Franklin Park's underfunding. In 1971, the Franklin Park Coalition found that Franklin Park, with 20 percent of the park department's acreage,

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"Happily, recent efforts by the Franklin Park Coalition have bolstered the use and improved the public's perception of Franklin Park."
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received only one percent of the agency's maintenance spending.

The city, state and private sector reacted by investing in high-visibility, single-use facilities — the zoo, the golf course and the cross country trail. In the early 1970s, Boston completed its long-range plans for an expanded Franklin Park Zoo, calling for a redesign and an expansion from roughly 50 acres to 72 acres, and including a massive, enclosed tropical aviary. Rather than rebuild in the space of unused exhibits, the new displays sprawled south into a significant community gathering point at the entrance on Blue Hill Avenue. The historic rose garden was bulldozed in 1978 as a part of this redevelopment.

In 1989, the golf course received \$1.3 million in state-funded improvements. For decades, members of the Franklin Park Golf Association had maintained what remained of the course, often with borrowed equipment or their personal lawnmowers, but piles of dead vegetation, broken cars, and abandoned appliances still choked many of the 18 holes. The infusion of money allowed the course to be restored to the specifications of the US Golf Association, from irrigation on up. This, in turn, allowed it to be used for official golf events, a turnaround from dereliction that was marked with a celebrity

tournament on its re-opening day in August 1989. That same year, a \$378,000 makeover brought collegiate cross-country races back to the park for the first time since the 1930s.

These investments were met with praise by the wealthier, regional patrons of these facilities, but had the effect of somewhat balkanizing the park between its high-quality, fee-based, city-wide attractions and the lower-quality, free, general parkland used mostly by the local community. Seeking to counteract the pattern and reverse the trends was the Franklin Park Coalition. The Coalition has had some heartwarming accomplishments, but, unlike the Central Park Conservancy and the Prospect Park Alliance, it has thus far always operated on a shoestring budget and without powerful political clout.

Happily, recent efforts by the Franklin Park Coalition have bolstered the use and improved the public's perception of Franklin Park. In 2004, summer concerts restarted at the overlook, site of the former Playhouse in the Park. The coalition now hosts 12 events over five days, including jazz concerts that draw 500 visitors each night. Additionally, a summer youth internship program, employing 25 local teens every year, works to improve the park's remaining natural areas through wetland restoration and reforestation. The coalition has also worked valiantly in advocating for some of the dauntingly more expensive projects, such as rehabilitating the stately masonry which surrounds the park. (In recent years, \$1 million has been appropriated for the restoration of one of the park's six entrances.)

But thus far the Franklin Park effort pales in comparison with what Olmsted lovers have accomplished in New York. There, the Central Park Conservancy has raised and spent close to \$500 million in 40 years, and Prospect Park Alliance raises and spends nearly \$13 million per year. In both cases, the net economic effect to the city and the region has far exceeded the investment. While it is true that Franklin Park does not have many wealthy neighbors like the other two, the city itself is so much more compact that Franklin Park is more truly "everyone's" park in Boston, being only a few miles from the most distant corners of town and many of the suburbs.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The Jewish community's connection to Franklin Park was painfully severed, but that does not mean it is necessarily erased. There is still time for the older generation to share its recollections and for younger generations to rediscover their links with Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan. And, just possibly, some members of the Jewish community — even if now dispersed — might be motivated to contribute personally and financially to repair and improve the green space of their forbears.

Investment in Franklin Park could succeed in making it a welcoming and inviting space once again. Among items on the park department's wish list are rehabilitated playgrounds, improved paving, refurbished fields, a renewed cross-country

Franklin Field could also use investment. Now renamed Harambee Park (from the Swahili word for "pull together"), the space contains a softball field, a Little League field, a field for football, lacrosse, or rugby, five basketball courts, five tennis courts, a street hockey rink, and a "boundless playground" accessible to children of all physical abilities. However, the lawns and facilities are badly beaten down by overuse and inadequate maintenance and repair.

Dyson already sees change. "One of the things that makes me really happy," she said, "is that where new housing was built across from the park on American Legion [Highway], and a crosswalk was installed, there is now a wear line in the grass from people coming into the park. Usually [trampled grass] is a bad thing, but to me it's evidence of many people wanting to be in the park."

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"One of the things that makes me really happy is that where new housing was built across from the park . . . and a crosswalk was installed, there is now a wear line in the grass from people coming into the park."
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course and more welcoming entranceways. Margaret Dyson, director of historic parks for the Boston Parks and Recreation Department, would like to see healthy and diverse woodlands in the heart of the park used to teach about New England forests. She also noted that a new signage system is a high priority, not only for explaining sites' historical significance, but also for just giving simple navigational advice. Franklin Park, she says "is a little like Boston—it's okay if you know where you're going, but really confusing if you don't." Franklin Park Coalition's executive director, Christine Poff, echoes the sentiments about signage and interpretive events in the park. She also believes that park bicycling could be massively increased and would greatly enlarge the park's support base. (Volunteers have measured the paths in Franklin Park and found that two of the largest loops are suitable for shared bike/walk delineation as has been done successfully in Prospect Park.) Poff sees bicycling as a largely untapped market and notes that it is critical to bring people into the park for both safety and vitality.

Despite its many challenges — automobiles, lack of funding, limited transit accessibility, aged infrastructure, crime — Franklin Park remains Boston's greatest recreational asset. Its size dwarfs every other greenspace in the city and it houses nearly all of the system's large recreational facilities. Plus it attracts users from all parts of the city and from all walks of life. The park has evolved significantly to its current state, from a unified pastoral wilderness to a highly segmented series of resources, following and often lagging the needs and desires of both city and neighborhood. By being located within historically demographically changing communities, Franklin Park has not attained the long-term political and funding stability it needs, and it thus has not generated all the benefits it could. Ideally, through the combined efforts of today's area residents and members of the Jewish and other previous communities who have deep and warm memories of the Franklin Park neighborhoods, the park can finally attain the lofty vision that Frederick Law Olmsted and the 19th century citizens of Boston held out for it. ◆



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