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## BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION

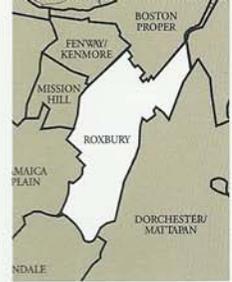
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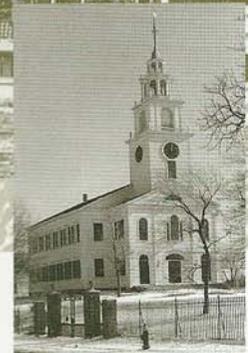
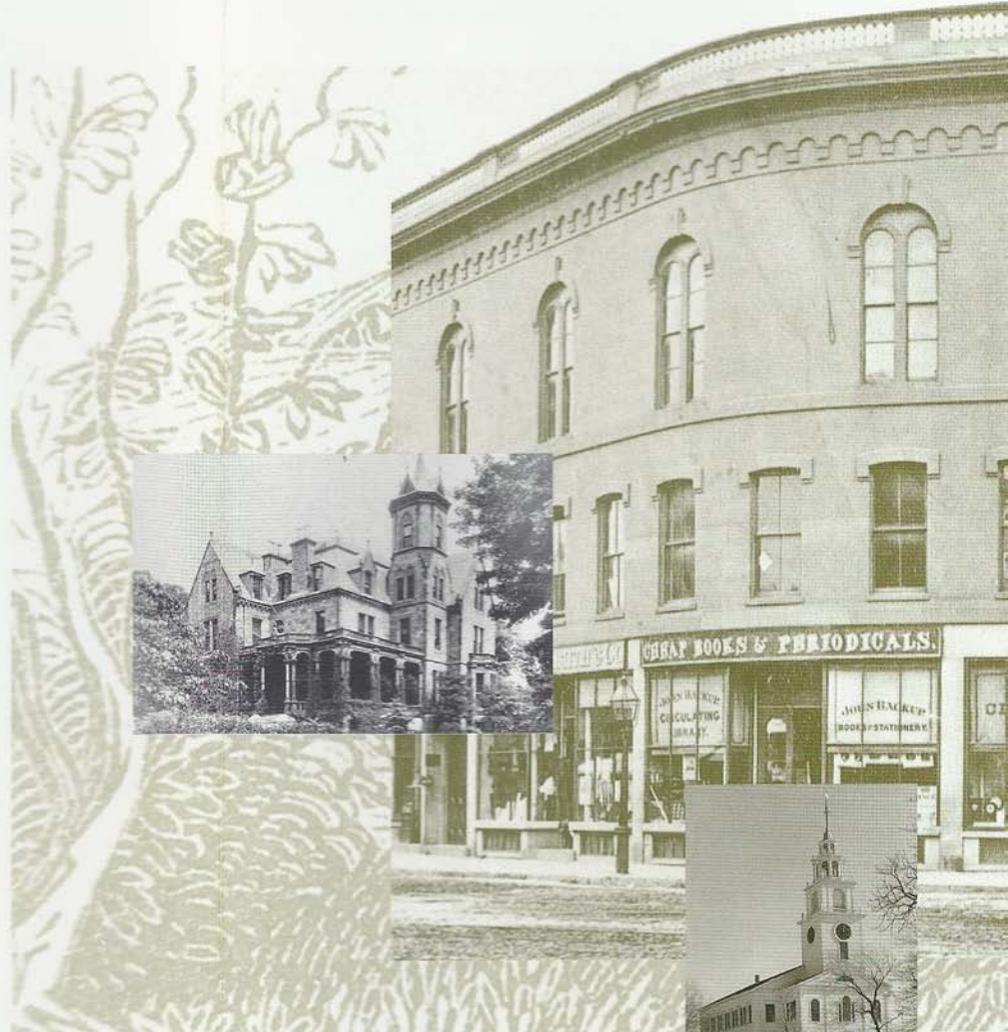


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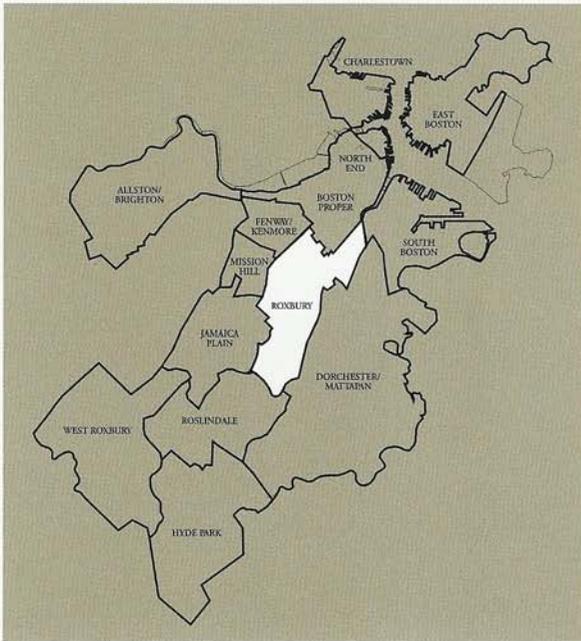
# ROXBURY

Exploring Boston's Neighborhoods

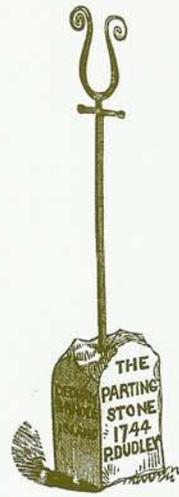


BOSTON LANDMARKS  
COMMISSION

**F**ounded by English colonists in 1630, Roxbury began as an independent community, connected to Boston only by a narrow neck of land along Washington Street. Today, after massive landfill and annexation to Boston, Roxbury is at the city's geographical center. It contains build-



ings and landmarks that tell the story of three centuries. Even with dense urban development, Roxbury has much open, green space, a legacy of its days as a farming town and as an early suburb.



### ROXBURY AS A COUNTRY TOWN

The English settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Company established a group of six villages, including Boston on the Shawmut Peninsula. Three miles south of Boston along the only land route to the peninsula, they founded Roxbury. The original boundaries of the town included the neighborhoods of Mission Hill, West Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain as well as present-day Roxbury.

Roxbury had many resources the colonists were looking for: open farmland, timber and stone for building, and the Stony Brook for water power. Additionally, its location on the only road to Boston gave the town an advantage in transportation and trade and a strategic military position. Roxbury was defined by its rocky hills, drumlins left by a prehistoric glacier. In the area of Rox-

bury Highlands are many outcroppings of native Roxbury puddingstone, a kind of composite rock used over the centuries in buildings throughout the Boston area.

The colonists soon began constructing buildings and roads that still define the neighborhood today. Washington, Dudley, Centre, Roxbury, and Warren streets were all laid out in the first years of settlement. The town center was located at John Eliot Square, where the first meetinghouse was built in 1632, with its burying ground nearby at the corner of Eustis and Washington streets (see Boston Landmark panel). Other landmarks from early Roxbury are the three milestones that still mark Centre Street in Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and West Roxbury, recording the distance to downtown Boston.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, farming was the basis of Roxbury's economy. The town was locally famous for its fruit trees, and noted varieties were developed on local farms – including the Roxbury Russet apple, particularly prized for cider. As the town grew, some fine residences were built that are now among the few 18th-century houses remaining in Boston.

An 18th-century marker, known as the parting stone, is still embedded at the fork of Roxbury and Centre streets, pointing the ways to Brookline and Dedham.

Roxbury also has a pre-Revolutionary mansion, the Shirley-Eustis House (31 Shirley Street). Built around 1747 for William Shirley, the royal governor of Massachusetts from 1741 to 1756, the house was confiscated by the colonists during the Revolution for use as a barracks and hospital. It was later purchased by Dr. William Eustis, a surgeon who was governor of Massachusetts in the 1820s. This



The Dillaway-Thomas House (183 Roxbury Street) was built about 1750 as the parsonage for the First Church, just across John Eliot Square. Surviving a series of fires, the house has been restored as part of Roxbury Heritage State Park. (Open to the public; 445-3399.)

*Background photo from Roxbury Directory, 1850, courtesy of The Bostonian Society*

National Historic Landmark is designed in the Georgian style of its time. (Open to the public; 442-2275.)

Roxbury's location and high hills made the town strategically important during the Revolutionary War. The colonists constructed a fort in the Roxbury Highlands in 1775 to help secure land access to Boston, and troops camped on the lawn of the First Church.

After the American victory, Roxbury's citizens faced the task of rebuilding much of their war-damaged community. One important project was the construction of the present First Church in Roxbury, built in 1804 on the site of the original 1632 meetinghouse in John Eliot Square.

### **ROXBURY BECOMES A SUBURB**

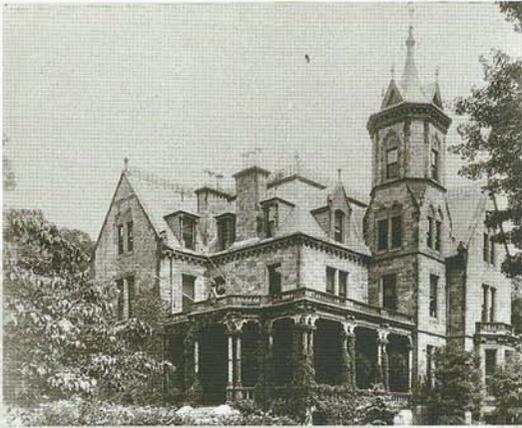
In the first generations after the Revolution, American society went through many changes as cities grew and industries developed. This process included a new ideal of "the good life." Instead of living near their work in the city, people wanted to live in freestanding, single-family houses with yards and trees.

Changes in the economy and developments in transportation made it possible for many families to pursue this suburban ideal, and Roxbury was close enough to Boston to be a good choice. The first developments took place in the 1820s, when a horsedrawn bus line was established along Washington Street, linking Roxbury to Boston for commuters, and in 1835, when the railroad from Boston to Providence was sited along the Stony Brook Valley.

Soon farmland began to be subdivided for single-family dwellings. Many of these handsome early frame houses were built in a style called the Greek Revival, modeled after columned Greek temples. This style caught the imagination of Americans because ancient Greece, like their new nation, was a republic rather than a monarchy. Many of these Greek Revival houses still line Highland Park and Mount Pleasant.

As the century went on, other times and places appealed to Americans, and various revival styles took root, with inspirations from Italy and France and from the Middle Ages. Many of the revival-style houses in Roxbury's early suburban

**The front facade of the Georgian-style Shirley-Eustis House features giant pilasters, or flattened columns. Inside is a two-story salon for formal entertaining.**



*Courtesy of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Inc.*

Walnut Avenue. (Open to the public; 442-8614.) This building is significant to Roxbury for several reasons. The most obvious is its beauty – it is a stately mansion that commands its site, and continues to be important to the community as the setting for the museum. In addition, it is built entirely of Roxbury puddingstone, a local building material. Finally, this building tells much about how people thought about their houses and their lives.

Designed by Boston architect Alden Frink for the prominent industrialist Aaron Davis Williams, Jr., Abbotsford was built in 1872 in the High Victorian Gothic style. Just as the American economy was becoming industrialized, many people looked with nostalgia to times before machines and factories. Ironically, Aaron Davis Williams, Jr., used his profits from industry to build a house that could remind him of a medieval castle.

days were quite grand, the homes of wealthy industrialists who chose the tops of the hills in the Roxbury Highlands because of their views and breezes.

One of the best examples of these early suburban houses is Abbotsford, now the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, at 300

▲  
The pointed arches on Abbotsford's windows and main entrance are characteristics of the High Victorian Gothic style, inspired by the architecture of the Middle Ages.

## BOSTON LANDMARK

### Eustis Street Architectural Conservation District



**Eustis Street Fire Station**

**T**his historic district, near Dudley Station, contains sites from the earliest period of Roxbury's history to the late 19th century.

John Elior Burying Ground, at the corner of Washington and Eustis streets, was established by the English colonists in 1630, and was used until the middle of the 19th century.

The Eustis Street Fire Station (20 Eustis Street) was built on the edge of the burying ground in 1859 to improve fire protection service. Designed by local architect John Roulestone Hall, it is built of brick with granite-trimmed windows in the Italianate style.

On the opposite side of the burying ground, at 2080 Washington Street, is the Owen Nawn Shop. This site had been used for manufacturing since 1815, housing a soap factory and later a tannery, one of Roxbury's most important industries. The existing brick Italianate building was built about 1880 by contractor Owen Nawn, one of the builders of the elevated railway at Dudley Station.

As an official Boston Landmark, this district is protected from changes that would adversely affect its historic character. For information on designating local landmark buildings and districts, please contact the Boston Landmarks Commission at 635-3850.

Abbotsford also provides a link to Roxbury's early farming economy. The property on which Williams built his suburban mansion was part of a large farm that had been in his family for over 150 years and was known for its orchards. In fact, the Williams apple, like the Roxbury Russet, was a famous local variety.

Following setbacks in his business, Williams was forced to sell Abbotsford. By 1923, the mansion was too large for private use, and the City of Boston purchased it as a disciplinary school for boys. In 1976, the National Center for Afro-American Artists bought the property and turned it into a museum. This new use has made it possible for community residents to enjoy Abbotsford today.

### LATER SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT

Not all suburban development in Roxbury was as grand as Abbotsford. In the later years of the 19th century, the old farms in the highlands were subdivided for housing. When electric trolley service began in 1887, more and more families poured into the neighborhood, creating a market for rowhouses and three deckers as well as single-family homes.

The architect of Harriswood Crescent created the picturesque effect that marks the Queen Anne style through a carefully designed variety of materials and shapes.

An excellent example of later suburban development is Harriswood Crescent, a group of 15 rowhouses located at 60-88 Harold Street, between Townsend and Monroe streets. The land was part of the estate of Horatio Harris, whose heirs commissioned Boston architect J. Williams Beal to design the rowhouses for sale on speculation in 1890, Roxbury's suburban heyday. The site was especially desirable because of Fountain Square (now Horatio Harris Park), located across the street.

The design and setting of Harriswood Crescent reveal what appealed to Roxbury's later suburbanites. Like Abbotsford, this development looks back to an earlier, pre-industrial time. Built in the Queen Anne Revival style, it recalls rural England 200 years before with its wood



and stucco half-timbering combined with brick and rough-hewn stone. The architect carefully designed the 15 rowhouses so they appear to be seven single-family houses, reflecting the suburban ideal of the late 1800s. Although the rowhouses are on small lots, they face the park, creating the feel of more land.

### INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE

Even in colonial days, Lower Roxbury, located along Roxbury's border with the South End, had an industrial character with mills and tanneries. As the marshes were filled in, factories and warehouses took their place. Workers' housing was also constructed in Lower Roxbury, usually wooden tenements and rowhouses. The neighborhood also contains an example of

model workers' housing at Frederick Douglas Square (Greenwich, Warwick, and Sussex streets), small brick rowhouses built in the 1880s.

From Roxbury's earliest days, commerce centered at Dudley Station, where Washington, Warren, and Dudley streets cross. By the turn of the 20th century, the area was a bustling mix of department stores, residential hotels, silent movie theaters, banks – even a bowling alley – designed by prominent Boston architects in a rich mixture of revival styles. Dudley Station itself opened in 1901 as the southern terminus of the Boston Elevated Railway, which ran to Sullivan Square in Charlestown and later became part of the Orange Line of the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority. Adapted for use as a bus station after the removal of

Ferdinand's Blue

Store features

prominent display

windows on the

first two floors.

They are framed by

the classically

inspired decoration

of the Renaissance

Revival style.

## URBANIZATION

the old elevated Orange Line in 1989, the elegant, copper-clad Dudley Station is still a major link in the city's public transit network.

Dominating the intersection of Washington and Warren streets is Ferdinand's Blue Store, a retailer once famous throughout New England. Designed by local architect John Lyman Faxon in a mixture of Baroque and Renaissance Revival styles, the five-story limestone and yellow brick building was

Growth created the need for more municipal services, so the citizens of Roxbury voted first to incorporate as a city in 1846 and then to become annexed to Boston in 1868. The demand for services was responsible for public works projects such as the Eustis Street Fire Station (see Boston Landmark panel) and the Cochituate Stand Pipe.

In addition to the small parks that dot the neighborhood, like the one opposite Harriswood Crescent, Roxbury had land available in 1885 to build the city's



Courtesy of SPNEA

completed in 1895, replacing a smaller, wood frame store on the same site. By the 1920s, Ferdinand's had grown to occupy four buildings, including the area's tallest, Ferdinand's Blue Store Addition, at 17-19 Warren Street.

largest park. With its 527 acres, Franklin Park represents the ideal of a "country park," a place where city dwellers can find relief from the urban environment. Designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Franklin Park is the final

jewel of the Emerald Necklace, as the seven-mile stretch of public park land that begins at Boston Common has become known.

## ROXBURY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Until about 1900, Roxbury was a community of English, Irish, and German immigrants and their descendants. In the early 20th century, Roxbury became more diverse with the establishment of a Jewish community in the Grove Hall area along Blue Hill Avenue. Following a massive migration from the South to northern cities in the 1940s and 1950s, Roxbury became the center of the African-American community in Boston.

Social issues and the resulting urban renewal activities of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to a decline in the neighborhood. More recently, grassroots efforts by residents have been the force behind revitalizing historic areas and creating Roxbury Heritage State Park. The relocation of the Orange Line and development of the Southwest Corridor Park spurred major investment, including Roxbury Com-



▲  
**The Cochituate Stand Pipe, designed by architect Nathaniel J. Bradlee and built in 1869, modernized Roxbury's water system. It is located on the site of the Revolutionary War fort in Highland Park.**

munity College at Roxbury Crossing and Ruggles Center at Columbus Avenue and Ruggles Street. Commercial development now promises reinvestment in the form of shopping and related consumer services.