

Photo below courtesy of Emerald Necklace Conservancy Twitter. Photo to the right courtesy of Olmsted Archives.



VICTORY GARDENS

The Back Bay Fens has transformed over and over again throughout the years. The original shallow bay became a foul salt marsh after the filling in the Back Bay in the mid-19th century. Then, Frederick Law Olmsted, working with the city engineer, converted the smelly grounds into a “park” with a stream running through it that Olmsted described as a “sanitary improvement”. Later, the park changed again when the Charles River Dam was built in 1910, changing the water flow patterns throughout the Fens. Olmsted’s original design became obsolete.

In the 1940s the park changed yet again. Here, like across the Nation, Victory Gardens sprang up—gardens in which to grow produce for the home front, allowing more food to be available for the soldiers fighting in WWII. The program was successful; Victory Gardens grew over half of the produce used during the war. But in the Back Bay Fens, the Victory Gardens were sustained and 70 years later they are the nation’s only continuously operating WWII Victory Gardens and they remain a beautiful landmark in the park. Many of the gardens are now filled with flowers instead of vegetables, but the spirit of the gardens has stayed the same.

Olmsted believed that parks should aim to emulate a natural environment as closely as possible. Yet, he was a firm supporter of our nation and believed that practicality should trump aesthetics in public parks. With all of that in mind, what do you think Olmsted would think of the Victory Gardens—both as they were 70 years ago and as they are today?

When was the park at its best - in your opinion? If you could visit it at any stage in its development, which stage would that be?

To participate in this program, take a picture of this place as you see it today, respond to our questions in the text on the left, and then post your photos with your reflections in the caption online using #ENSafari and #FindYourPark.

