The Hub's Archipelago: The Connected Histories of Boston and Its Harbor Islands

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Summary

The Boston Harbor Islands are today natural-looking places. Established as a national park in 1996, they seemingly form the perfect opposite to the urban environment of Boston. However, a closer look at the history of Spectacle Island, a representative example of the islands' historical development, reveals close ties between the islands and the city. Over centuries, Boston has shaped and transformed its harbor islands, embedding them firmly within its urban fabric.

The Boston Harbor Islands are "minutes away, worlds apart" from Boston, according to the motto of the National Recreation Area that includes all 34 of them. They do look like another world when regarded from Boston's waterfront: tranquil green elevations rising gently above the waters of Boston's oceanic threshold, several kilometers from the city's shores. The reverse is also true: standing on Spectacle Island, one of the larger islands closest to the city, the Boston skyline in the distance seems like the shore of a strange continent. The water expanse between the island and the mainland seems to mark a boundary between two completely independent environments. The national park, established in 1996, seems to have solidified this division: the parched concrete of the city on one side and the pristine nature of the harbor islands on the other.

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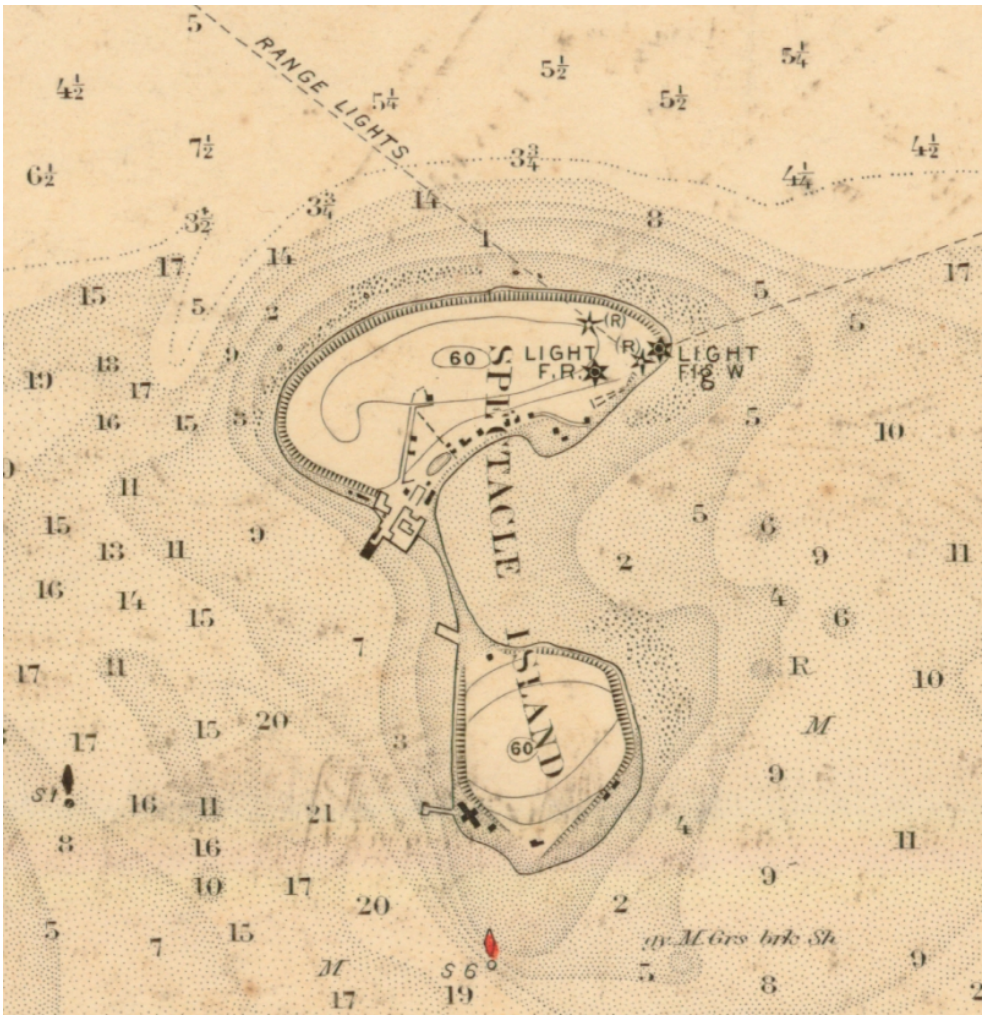
The Boston skyline seen from Spectacle Island, 2016.

Photograph by Pavla Šimková, 2016.

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Spectacle is one of the most popular and most often visited islands in the park: its green meadows, rolling slopes, and grand vistas of the harbor make it appear like a perfect antidote to the city bustle. Yet this natural appearance is precisely that: an appearance. If one digs a little deeper into Spectacle's history, it quickly becomes clear that the island's present shape is the result of centuries of interactions with the city at the head of the bay. Spectacle Island would not look the way it does today if it were not for Boston.

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Spectacle Island on a naval chart from 1909, showing the island's characteristic shape.

Detail of a map by the United States Department of Commerce and Labor, 1909.
Courtesy of NOAA's Historical Map & Chart Collection. Accessed via Wikimedia on 14 January 2020. Click here to view source. The full map is available here

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When Boston was founded in 1630, Spectacle was a 17-hectare, conspicuously shaped island, its two drumlins connected by a narrow spit that made it look like a pair of eyeglasses. The small rural town of the colonial days soon appropriated Spectacle and the other islands as sources of wood and safe cattle pastures, and dug for gravel on their shores. These uses left the island treeless and prone to erosion. With its sanitary concerns, the rapidly growing metropolis of the nineteenth century put the island to a new use. Starting in the 1850s, Spectacle became Boston's primary dumping ground and hosted a succession of waste-processing businesses, the first of them a factory rendering dead horses and cows. This plant was followed by a glue factory, a garbage reduction plant, and finally a landfill that buried the northern portion of the island under 20 meters of trash. In the 1990s, the island received more than 2.3 million cubic meters of earth excavated from the mammoth Boston construction project colloquially known as the Big Dig. In the process, its area has swollen to 42 hectares, more than twice its original size. During its subsequent makeover as an island park to quench the crowded city's thirst

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for recreation, Spectacle was landscaped, planted with thousands of trees and shrubs, and built up to become the highest point in the harbor. All of these changes are attributable to the transforming influence of Boston. The town appropriated the island early on and over the next four hundred years put it to various uses that reflected its current needs—and in the process altered the small piece of land in the harbor quite beyond recognition.



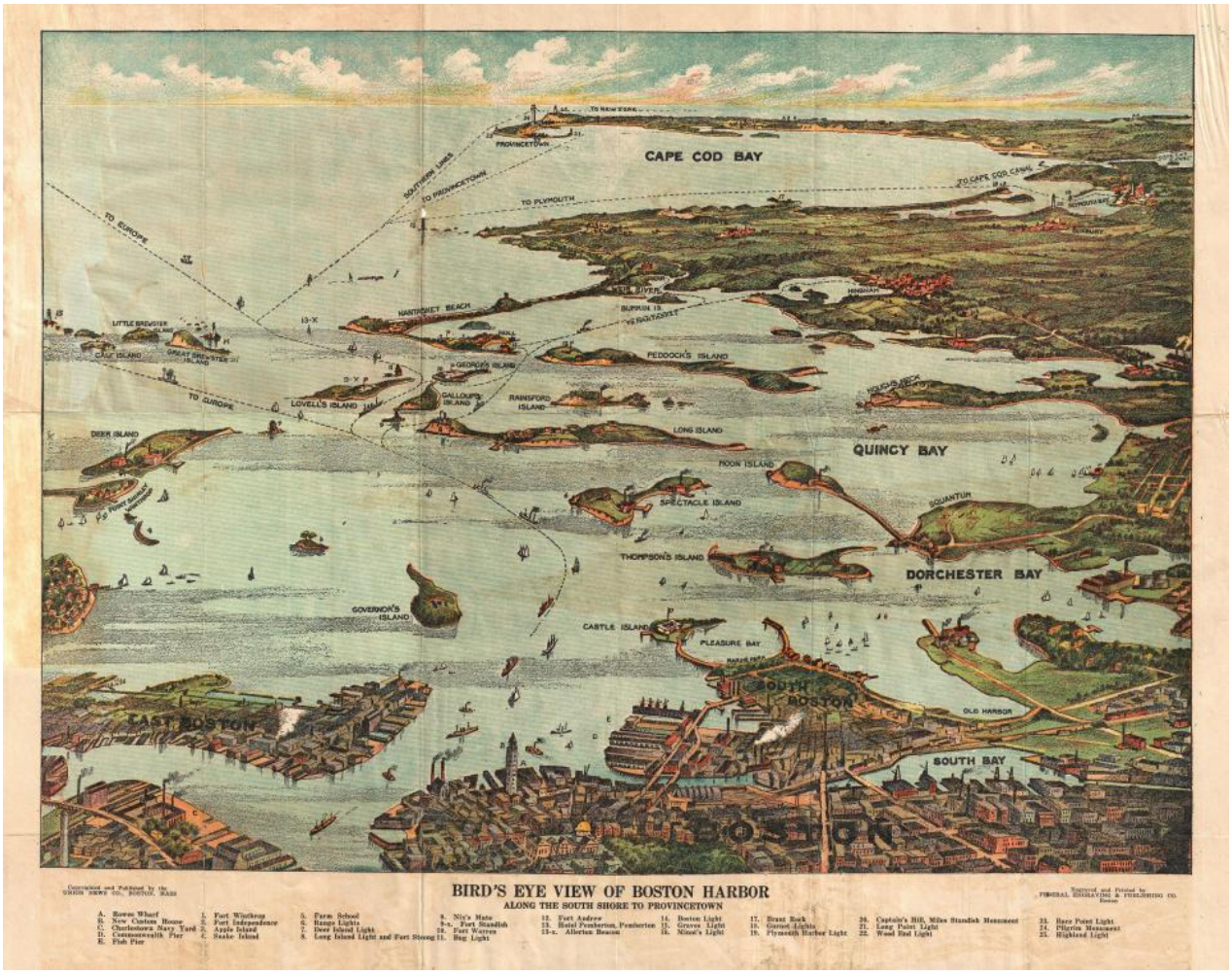
In the early 2000s, Spectacle Island was remade into a green, park-like environment, obscuring the historical layers underneath.

Photograph by Alice, 2012.
Accessed via Flickr on 14 January 2020. Click here to view source.

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This relationship, although admittedly asymmetric, has not been a one-way street: if it were not for Spectacle Island, Boston would not look the way it does today, either. Pushing its trash onto the island enabled nineteenth-century Boston to pursue the vision of a sanitary city within its mainland boundaries. The option to deposit a mountain of clay and sediment from the Big Dig on Spectacle has allowed Boston to reshape its waterfront district into a pedestrian-friendly, livable part of town. As Boston transformed the island, so did, in a way, Spectacle Island transform the city.

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An 1899 bird's-eye view of Boston Harbor. Notice the smokestacks suggesting the industrial uses of many of the harbor islands.

Map by the Union News Company, c. 1899.
Courtesy of Geographicus Rare Antique Maps. Accessed via Wikimedia on 14 January 2020. Click here to view source.

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Boston has made Spectacle and the other harbor islands its own. It transformed them into what I call urban islands: small islands close to coastal cities that have been integrated into their cities' urban networks. The "islandness" of the Boston Harbor Islands has over time mostly been interpreted as a quality that set them apart and made them suitable for very specific uses that were either not wanted or not available in the city: they became both the dumping grounds and the recreation spots of the metropolis. These uses capitalized on the islands' ambivalent position vis-à-vis the city: they were separate yet within sight; remote yet accessible; attached and detached at the same time. The water between them and the city has mostly been interpreted as a boundary, separating different land uses and different spatial units from one another. It was the surrounding water expanse that made the islands special.

The Boston Harbor Islands are a unique part of Boston's environment. A broadening of the geographical perspective, however, reveals dozens of similar islands along the coasts of North America. Urban islands dot the

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harbors of New York and Seattle, they line the shores of San Francisco and Baltimore. They have all over time become attached through their uses to the adjacent urban centers. They all share the specific status within the urban infrastructure that goes back to their "islandness". These urban islands may be minutes away from their cities, but they have never been worlds apart.

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Further readings:

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- Penna, Anthony N., and Conrad Edick Wright, eds. *Remaking Boston: An Environmental History of the City and Its Surroundings*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.
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Related links:

- The official website of the Boston Harbor Islands.
  https://www.bostonharborislands.org/
- The Boston Harbor Islands on the National Park Service's website.
  https://www.nps.gov/boha/index.htm

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- https://historicalcharts.noaa.gov/image=LC00246_01_1909
- https://www.flickr.com/photos/84825775@N08/7761609008/in/album-72157631022825280/
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1899_View_Map_of_Boston_Harbor_from_Boston_to_Cape_Cod_and_Provincetown_-_Geographicus_-_Boston-unionnews-1899.jpg

About the author:

Pavla Šimková
Pavla Šimková studied American cultural history and English literature at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, and at LMU Munich, Germany. She finished her dissertation on the environmental history of the Boston Harbor Islands at the Rachel Carson Center/LMU Munich in 2019. Her dissertation explores the essential yet often obscured role the harbor islands have played in the history of Boston and, more generally, the ways in which coastal islands have been used by harbor cities. She is currently a researcher at Collegium Carolinum, a Munich-based research institute focusing on the history of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

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