First settled in 1630, Boston was situated on a low-lying peninsula in a large, well-protected bay. With a perfect natural harbor and an easily defensible neck of land connecting the peninsula to the mainland, the small village prospered and grew quickly, so quickly that homesteads soon crowded upon each other. To ease the crush, a pasture on the western side of the city was set aside as common ground for everyone’s cows to graze on. Cows grazed there for the next two centuries, and the Common also came to serve as the center of public life, with parades, military drills, and even hangings.

Southwest of the Common was the Back Bay, a large, brackish basin fed by the Muddy River. In the 1830s, a small section next to the Common was filled in to become the formal, ornamental Public Gardens. But crowding continued to be a problem. So in the decades that followed, the rest of the Back Bay was filled in, sealing off the mouth of the Muddy River. Afterward, at each high tide, the river overflowed, dwindling to putrid pools of mud and filth. The smell was impossible to ignore.

So in 1879, it fell to Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of American landscape architecture, to design an elegant and practical solution. He restored the mouth of the Muddy River to a saltwater marsh, diverted sewage and storm water through submerged conduits, and wound a stream through the marsh to accommodate tidal floods. The Fens, which resulted, appeared to be undisturbed nature. The meandering pathways Olmsted designed around the perimeter made it a popular recreational park as well.