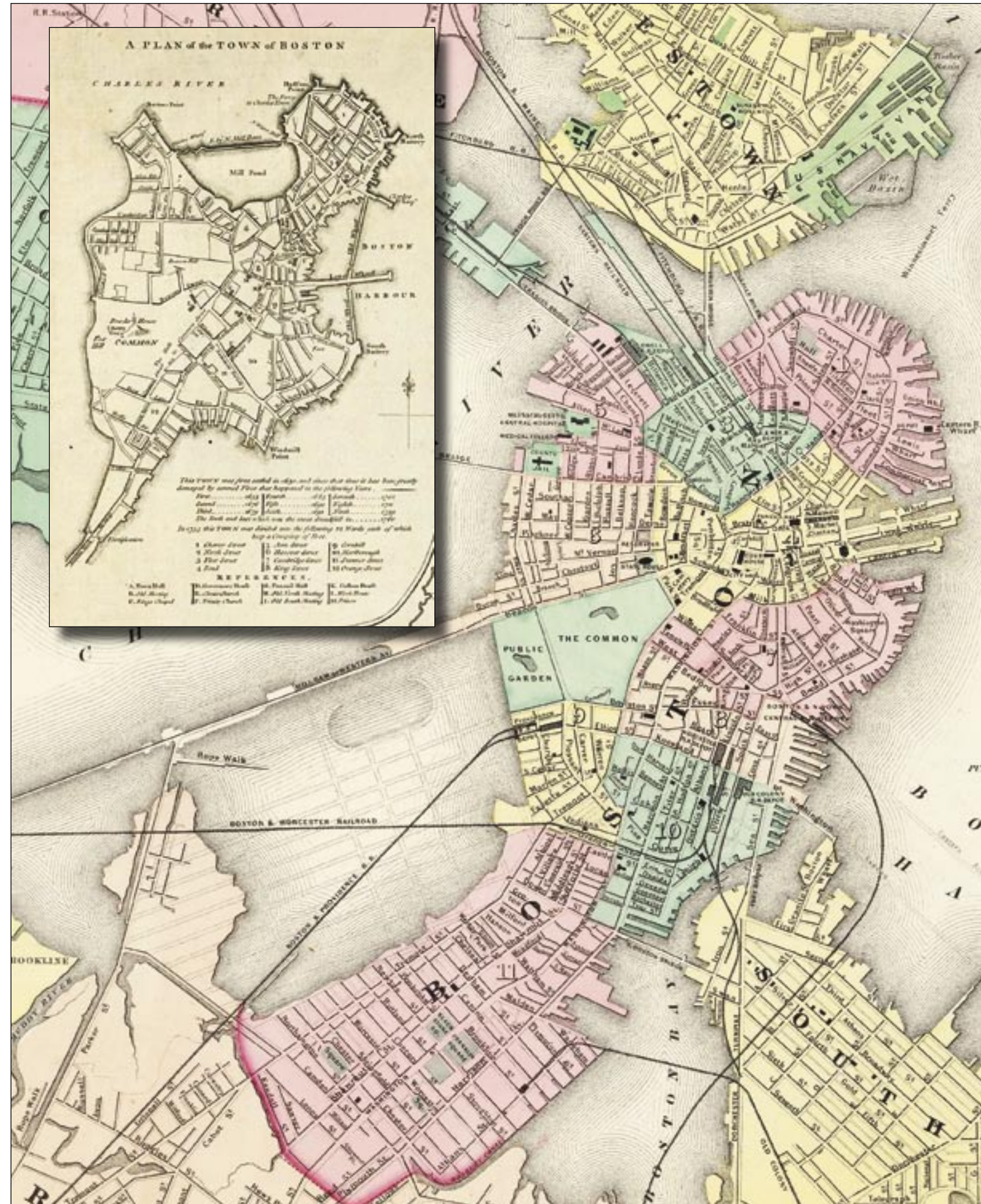


An elegant and practical solution

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 edge 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 at low tide. The stench was impossible to ignore.

So in 1879, it fell to Frederick Law Olmstead, 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 swells. The Fens, which resulted, appeared to be undisturbed nature. The meandering pathways Olmstead designed around the perimeter made it a popular recreational park as well.



A Plan of the Town of Boston, an inset in A Map of the Most Inhabited Part of New England, Containing the Provinces of Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire (Northern Section). (inset)

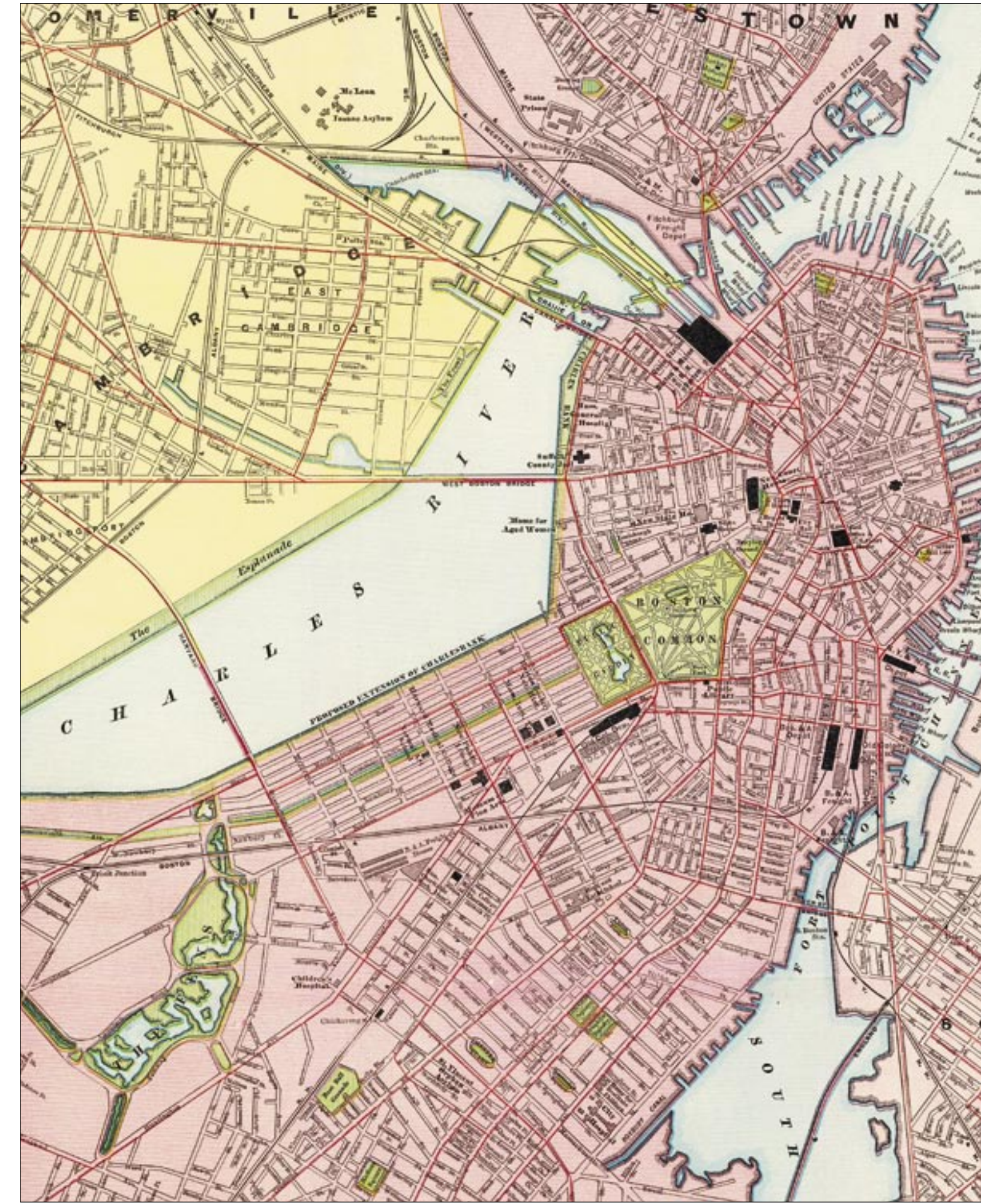
Thomas Jefferys, 1776. London.

The irregularly shaped Shawmut Peninsula, where Boston began in the early seventeenth century, was almost entirely surrounded by water at the time of the American Revolution. There was enough space for one narrow road to head out of the city to the mainland. Even the Boston Common, today well inland following centuries of land fill projects, had one edge on the shore.

Map of Boston and Adjacent Cities. (background)

George W. Colton, 1856. New York.

Seventy-five years later, the city had grown tremendously, and the thin neck of land connecting the peninsula to the mainland had been widened to where it could sustain a whole grid of streets. A small portion of the Back Bay had been filled to create the Public Garden, adjacent to the Boston Common. Lightly-drawn streets in the waters of the Back Bay suggest that plans were in the works to reclaim still more land.



Boston.

Rand McNally and Company, 1897. Chicago.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the origins of Shawmut Peninsula were unrecognizable. The entire Back Bay had been filled, and Commonwealth Avenue, a wide park-like thoroughfare, had been built through the middle of it to connect the Boston Common and Public Gardens to The Fens, Olmstead's masterful marriage of recreation and water management.