

Spectacle: A History of Boston's Urban Islands

Pavla Šimková

The dramatic way Boston has transformed its natural environment has captivated historians for decades. This is hardly surprising: more than a half of the city we know today stands on made land. In the course of its history, Boston cut down its hills to fill tidal flats, was constantly changing the shape of its shoreline and its harbor by either dredging or filling, and has completely altered the nature of its rivers. Yet curiously, one part of the city's environment hardly ever receives any attention at all: the Boston Harbor Islands, a group of 34 small islands dotting Boston Harbor.

Despite their perceived physical separation from the city, the Boston Harbor Islands have been an integral part of Boston's urban network since the colonial days, transformed by the city's changing values and catering to its current needs. Nowhere else is the city's transformative power more striking than at Spectacle Island, a 105-acre island located four miles from Boston's downtown. Since the founding of Boston in 1630, Spectacle was used successively as a source of wood, hay, and gravel, as a quarantine hospital site, and as Boston's primary dumping ground, hosting a horse-rendering factory, a waste-reduction plant, and finally a landfill that operated until the 1950s and covered the island in a layer of garbage 70 feet thick. In the 1990s, in its latest—truly spectacular—incarnation, the island emerged as an urban park, the crown jewel of the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area.

Retracing the dramatic historical transformations of Spectacle Island offers a unique opportunity to explore what it means for a place to be an urban island, what their specific geographic situation has meant for the way these islands have historically been perceived and used and how these perceptions and uses have changed over time.

Between urban history and island studies, small islands located near coastal cities often fall through the cracks: urban histories tend not to regard them as parts of the cities, whereas island studies, which focus predominantly on larger islands and issues of resilience, risk, or climate change, often see them as too small and insignificant. Perhaps this is true when small islands are considered on their own; for “their” cities, however, they represent an often invaluable resource and an instrumental part of urban networks. The example of Spectacle Island and the Boston Harbor Islands allows me to draw comparisons with other coastal cities and their islands in North America, and to bring these inconspicuous yet essential parts of urban topographies back into the picture of urban environmental history.