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Boston and New England: Rich in Geographical Variety

Boston and its metropolitan region—site of the upcoming 2008 AAG Annual Meeting—offer a rich resource for geographers, comprised of a manageable area and providing multiple avenues for exploration.

Although the European settlement is now about 400 years old, the close relationship of the landform to the settlement patterns persists. Most of the cities and towns that now have populations exceeding 50,000 rest on sites occupied before 1660. Only a few structures from these earliest years survive, but a long historic suc-

cession of buildings appears everywhere throughout the metropolis. So too the culture and economy of the region is embedded in many of today's institutions. An imaginative and attentive geographer can thereby detect the choices of the past, both successes and failures.

The underlying platform of land comes as a surprise because it is neither North America nor Europe. Six hundred million years ago, an offshore chain of islands and mountains much like the Japanese archipelago



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A replica of Henry David Thoreau's cabin stands near this statue on the grounds of Walden Pond, one of many places of interest to geographers in the greater Boston region.

today, stretched from Newfoundland to North Carolina. About 300 million years ago, the African continent smashed the archipelago against North America. Later, when the two continents drifted apart, remnants of the old chain held steadfast to Boston and established the underlying platform of eastern Massachusetts. The pressure of the collision also thrust up a belt of stone that deflected the north-south flow of the Merrimack River off to the east at the present-day city of Lowell, thereby laying the foundation for the region's early water-powered industrialization.

Most of what a visitor sees lies on top of the ancient platform: the sand piles of Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, and the stones, sand, and gravel hills and valleys left by the retreating glaciers 10,000 years ago. Valuable minerals do not reside here, only the thin soils beneath a mixed hardwood and pine forest that farmers almost totally cut down by the time of the Civil War. Yet such has been the extent of farm abandonment since the mid-nineteenth century, a visitor who arrives by airplane can look down on a clear day to see a city hidden beneath a blanket of trees.

Lacking mineral or farm wealth, Bostonians took to deep sea fishing, particularly cod fishing, and thereby launched an extensive international trade. For two centuries following the first settlement in 1630 the city flourished as North America's leading seaport, only to be surpassed in per capita exports by New York City in 1825.

Only a few old houses and churches, Faneuil Hall, and the old and new state houses survive from this era, but its institutions and traditions have remained powerful, manifesting themselves first in one form and then another. The township form of governance endures such that the Boston metropolis is composed of over 140 independent governments. Most towns still govern themselves by town meetings open to all citizens, although the largest ones have adopted representative forms. There are no unincorporated areas awaiting the subdivider's homeowner associations as in the South and West. Also, the county is but an unimportant judicial

unit of government here. The seventeenth century town commons, of which Boston's is an exemplar, survives to give physical evidence of the Puritan methods of land division. So do the white churches that gather at the commons' edges.

The first two centuries of commerce financed the Boston region's early grasp of English methods of industrialization. The river settlements of colonial times now flourished, first with water power, and later using steam mills. Textiles and shoes were the region's specialties. The lawyers and bankers of the old port of Boston contributed their own inventions to the economic surge: the legal instruments of common stock and the trust. The first invention proved an essential companion to corporate mill building and large-scale manufacturing. The second, a device established to secure the well-being of ship-captains' families, later flourished in modified forms for the businesses of pension fund and mutual fund management.

The profits from the mills funded the development of Boston's core institutions: Harvard College, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Massachusetts General Hospital, the Boston Symphony and their many off-shoots. In time the region's clusters of educational, health and cultural institutions fashioned the Boston of today. The most visible influences of the mill owner's profits can now be seen in the elegant rows of town houses on Beacon Hill and in the Back Bay and in the city's magnificent park system. These two sets of constructions, the fashionable town house and the pastoral park, symbolize a deep ambivalence among the city's leading families. Beginning as early as the 18th century, wealthy Bostonians built country estates for themselves. In the subsequent century, the elaboration of gentlemen's farms and summer houses fostered waves of popular imitations, the styles varying according the fashions of each era. Their legacy continues as miles upon miles of suburban wooden houses, lawns, and plantings.

By 1900, the economic advantages of an early start on the path to industrialization had melted away. Textiles and shoe firms moved south and west for cheap non-

union labor and closeness to raw materials. The post-World War I collapse of prices brought mill speed-ups, wage cutting, and bitter strikes. At the same moment, New England leaders lost their nerve. Formerly the principal beneficiaries of open borders and cheap immigrant labor from Canada, Europe and the Middle East, they feared the immigrants' foreign ideas and their own loss of political and cultural control. Yankee Bostonians became strong advocates for the passage of the immigration restriction laws of the twenties.

A long regional depression set in. It lasted from 1921 to 1960, broken only by the war years. Although the process of regional obsolescence is thought to be the necessary consequence of capitalist innovation and growth, as Harvard Professor Joseph Schumpeter wrote in the thirties, Bostonians failed to discover any public solution to the suffering. In time the unpredictable transition from the science of electricity to microwaves fostered a post-World War II boom in electronics. Suddenly the region's tradition of academies, schools and colleges came to be seen as functioning together as engines to produce economic success. Today the technology of the computer and the biology laboratory are Boston specialties.

Less dramatic changes have also helped to generate wealth and employment. Boston manufacturers abandoned large-scale production in favor of custom work fashioned to closely match their customer's needs. Local storekeepers invented discount retailing, thereby launching some large national chains. The city of Boston lost all its manufacturing, but new opportunities in finance made it a center of venture capital investment and pension fund and mutual fund management. Finally, the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Harvard Medical School have set an example for many hospitals, medical schools and clinics, so that health care is Boston's largest single employment category. A visitor can get a sense of this by walking the medical complex on Longwood and Brookline Avenues where over 30,000 health workers gather every day.

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Such an economy is a source of satisfaction to a city and a region that possesses no natural resources save human beings and abundant rainfall. Yet like all cities in the nation, deep failings undermine our well-being. Persistent poverty and seemingly intractable automobile dependence chasten our achievements.

The geography of poverty takes its form from the hub and satellite mill town pattern laid down 150 years ago. Most of the region's poor reside in the old mill towns: New Bedford, Fall River, Taunton, Brockton, Framingham, Fitchburg, Lowell, Methuen, Gloucester, Salem and Lynn. The inner-city poor in the Roxbury and Dorchester sections of Boston get in the news, but they are only a fraction of the region's poor. Boston has its African-American, Haitian, Korean, Cape Verdean

and Puerto Rican concentrations, but this mix occurs across the region where it joins a rainbow that further includes Azoreans, Portuguese, Brazilians, Dominicans, Cambodians, Vietnamese and members of all the preceding immigrant groups. In the old mill towns the poverty rate can rise to 27%, and everywhere food pantries are feeding the low-wage working poor. Such poverty in the midst of our regional prosperity eats away at the opportunities of our schools, the safety of our neighborhoods, the health of our families, and the justice and creativity of our democratic society.

A similar ever-gnawing failure lies in our inability to fashion a region-wide public transportation system. Our partially restored commuter rail and transit systems merely repeat in a small way the spider web

of roads, streetcars, and railways of former times. They do not serve the cross-commuting that now characterizes the economy of the region. Most Boston families rely on one or more automobiles to reach their jobs, to shop, and to visit friends. I am sure geographers can propose excellent schemes for region-wide public transportation, but such alternatives have not yet reached Boston's public consciousness. ■

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