Introduction

The Islands of Boston Harbor have long been recognized as badly misused natural resources of great potential. Pollution, institutional abuse, and lack of a variety of military and private uses have pre-empted the public enjoyment of one of New England’s finest natural resources. Numerous proposals for the future use of the islands have been advanced over the years. These proposals ranged from intensive residential and recreational development to conservation and restoration of the islands’ natural resources.

The Massachusetts Legislature, by enacting Chapter 742 of the Acts of 1970, brought to a close these years of public debate. This act specified that the privately held harbors of Boston Harbor should be purchased by the Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources and, together with the islands already held under public control, developed for conservation and recreation purposes.

The landmark act specified that the islands held islands of Boston Harbor should be developed in accordance with a Comprehensive Plan for the proposed recreation and conservation purposes.

Boston Harbor History & Present Condition

The existence of a large well-protected harbor was the original reason for settling Boston. The harbor offered safe channels for travel and the surrounding hills diminished the northwest winds. The islands and the numerous coves and bays offered easily defendable locations for communities around the harbor.

Use of many of the islands was continuous from the beginning of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Even in 1619, a trading post was established on Thompson Island. Here Indians exchanged Indian furs for articles of European civilization. Of the many islands, most of the islands were occupied by the British, but gradually the settlers cut down the trees for firewood for the nearby towns and for shipbuilding. Cultivated fruit trees were planted on Governor’s Island by Governor Winthrop in 1633. Deer Island was a famous hunting island, the deer swimming to the island to seek refuge from the wolves on the mainland.

In time, many of the islands were granted to Boston and the other surrounding communities. The settlers on the islands paid rent to the respective towns, the rents were often used for support of free schools and teachers. The settlers used the land for farming and grazing cattle and sheep. Many of the islands were apparently cleared for mainland settlements. State, from State Island, was used in the construction of many homes.

As early as 1679, there was some kind of beacon at the entrance to Boston Harbor. Stacks of poles were burned in a basket or iron grate. In 1713, the first lighthouse on the continent was built on Little Brewster Island. This lighthouse stood until 1776, when it was blown up by the British. The present structure was erected in 1783.

The military significance of the Islands began in colonial times. The first military post built in the Northeast was on Castle Island. The harbor, its Islands and hills had military significance during the Revolution. A sailing party of American infantrymen raised a signal flag on Red- dock’s Island and carried off eight hundred cattle and sheep to the mainland. A year later, British militia were encamped on the island. Yankee privateers with batteries on Long Is- land destroyed one of King’s transports.

Boston saw little action during the War of 1812, although some of the Island forts had fortifications. However, the British amphibious attack launched against other east coast cities and fortified islands was brought to a close by the United States to protect the shores. Fort Independence remained on Castle Island and Fort Warren on George’s Island were built at this time. Fort Warren had its greatest use during the Civil War when it served as a prisoner of war center.

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islands when designing facilities
with a different function.

The Harbor Islands Park System de­
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tial for boating, swimming, fishing,
and passive and active recreation.

Locate private recreational boat­
docks at Long, George's, and Peddock's Islands.

The proposed ferry system consists of
passenger ferries. The third and fourth
routes consist of small boat loops
serving the Brewster Islands and the
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Summary Map

Boston Harbor Islands Comprehensive Plan

Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources

Metropolitan Area Planning Council

October, 1973