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Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston (review)

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(Review)

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industrial materials to construct transit stations with intricate ironwork to go to Queen Anne or Craftsman homes, Gothic churches, and Romantic parks. In contrast to the functionalist strain in twentieth-century modernism, Victorian urbanism supplemented rationality with turrets, carvings, odd angles, and haunted corners. Hepp has effectively identified the structured plot around which the Victorian middle class constructed its Philadelphia. In the myriad diaries and letters he consulted, he may have overlooked the unexplained twists and the eccentric characters that gave life to Victorian cities as well as Victorian stories.

ALAN LESSOFF

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Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston.

By Nancy S. Seasholes. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003. Pp. xiv+532. \$49.95

Many coastal settlements have expanded their land area by filling in along the water's edge, but Boston probably leads all other North American cities in the amount of land created through filling. In *Gaining Ground*, Nancy Seasholes gives readers a blow-by-blow account of this process, which added about 5,250 acres of land, or approximately one-sixth of the area of the city, to Boston's perimeter.

Seasholes's purpose is to document landmaking from the start of European settlement in the seventeenth century to the present. Her focus is on projects in the water-washed northern parts of the city, which includes the downtown as well as formerly separate towns that Boston annexed. Landmaking, she explains, is a term coined by archaeologists, and it means making land by filling areas covered by water. Thus, it differs from other methods of gaining usable land, such as draining.

Because topographical change is such a prominent feature of the city, the topic has already been treated by many writers, including Walter Muir Whitehill in his standard, if unreadable, *Boston: A Topographical History*, which is still in print in a third edition, updated by coauthor Lawrence Kennedy. Such earlier works contain errors, however, and none are as comprehensive as *Gaining Ground*.

Seasholes's method was to first locate and date filled areas using historical maps, then "to find out why and how these areas were filled" (p. 431). Why did Bostonians make so much land? One reason is that the topography lent itself to filling. Colonial-era settlement was on a small peninsula, practically an island, surrounded by shallow water and dotted with inconveniently tall hills. Bostonians cut down the hills and used this earth to build up the shoreline. Another reason for filling was that city's concen-

trated population turned the tidal rivers and harbor into cesspools and garbage dumps; when these became unbearable nuisances, the state and city resorted to burying polluted coves and flats. Not all fill came from within the city or from hills; for some projects, most famously the Back Bay, earth was brought in by rail from the suburbs, and part of South Boston was filled with material dredged from the harbor.

The projects were undertaken by the state, city, and even the federal government, as well as by private entities, and the cost of many nineteenth-century projects ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Readers can learn a bit about how projects were financed, but I would have liked to find out more about what I suspect was a local specialty in the nineteenth century: the speculative land development corporation. Moreover, projects could take years to complete and contractors might be paid with new land; in such cases, one wonders where the contractor got working capital until the project was complete and the land sold.

The technology of filling is treated mainly in a short thematic chapter. The common method was to build a retaining wall at the boundary of the area to be filled and then deposit fill—earth, gravel, ashes, rubbish, or whatever—between the land and the wall. Building reliable walls on water-covered sites was not easy. To move earth from the hills to the project sites, various kinds of tipping carts and railroad cars were used. Early steam shovels clawed down the hills and steam dredges plowed up the river and harbor bottoms. But the reader learns little about construction processes or machines, or whether they were commonplace for such projects.

While the use of the new land was not *Seasholes's* focus, it inevitably comes up. In the colonial and early national periods, land was made for wharfs, warehouses, and manufacturing. Then, railroads needed depots and the growing population needed houses, and land was made for these. Beginning in the late 1850s, land was made for parks. And in the twentieth century, land was made for transportation infrastructure, including arterial roads and an airport. Reasons for filling are outlined in an introductory chapter, but the book's geographical organization makes it hard to get a sense of what projects were underway simultaneously and for what purposes. *Seasholes* scrupulously cross-references, but I found that the frequent references forward and back interrupted the story.

Gaining Ground is a monumental piece of research: *Seasholes* combed a great range of primary sources, archeological reports, maps, and images to piece together the history of landmaking in Boston. That she succeeded in finding out where fill actually came from—for dozens of projects across nearly four centuries—is amazing. She provides an informative essay on sources, and the book's many illustrations and maps help readers visualize how much the city has changed over time.

While a work this detailed is invaluable for anyone interested in the history of Boston, except for citing relevant studies in a long endnote it does

not discuss landmaking in other cities. Seasholes encourages researchers to undertake studies of landmaking elsewhere, but does not present a convincing case for doing so. What questions would such studies answer, beyond where, when, and with what?

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Dr. Wermiel's research focuses on construction history. She recently completed a book on American lighthouse construction.

Capitalism, Politics, and Railroads in Jacksonian New England.

By Michael J. Connolly. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.
Pp. ix+210. \$44.95.

If you want to understand politics, first you have to understand railroads. That is the case, at least, in parts of New Hampshire and Massachusetts from the late 1830s well into the 1840s. Railroad development dominated political discourse while ripping apart established political alliances. More compellingly, the railroad issue allows historians to develop a richer understanding of the complex attitudes that Jacksonian Democrats exhibited toward business enterprise and economic development. Michael Connolly explores these issues in a book that is persuasively argued even if lacking some of the scope and analytical sophistication of Steven Usselman's *Regulating Railroad Innovation*, Colleen Dunlavy's *Politics and Industrialization*, or Gerald Berk's *Alternative Tracks*.

Jacksonian Democrats opposed railroad expansion in New Hampshire, not because they opposed capitalism and property rights but because they were trying to defend a particular vision of capitalism and property rights—a vision of private property that guaranteed independence through economic self-sufficiency. Railroads threatened the private sphere on three counts. First, eminent domain gave the state the power to seize private property, rather than safeguard it. Second, the railroads usurped the traditionally public responsibility for mail delivery. And, finally, there was a clear conflict of interest when elected officials (including Governor Isaac Hill) simultaneously invested in the railroads that they were supposed to control.

What followed was a seesaw battle that pitted radical, antirailroad Democrats against their more conservative colleagues, with the only real winners being the prorailroad Whigs. The acrimonious debate culminated in the Railroad Bill of 1840. This act, by repealing 1836 legislation that granted railroads the right of eminent domain, effectively halted railroad construction in the state. But the victorious radicals soon realized that they had gone too far. First they exempted individual railroads from the terms of the 1840 legislation, and later they repealed the law altogether. Ultimately, legislators and the public realized that railroads had a quasi-public function. They should be allowed special, state-sanctioned authority, in the