How Boston Played

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Vicious Amusements & Wholesome Recreations

THE CHANGES IN URBAN LIFE and conditions, growing ever more visible during the nineteenth century, elicited responses that affected the course of recreation and sport when they bloomed in full after the Civil War. By the same token, sporting activities played a significant role in community search and formation during this period. In order to appreciate this relationship, it is necessary to examine the ideological background against which it developed. Arguments about the relative vice or virtue of sports and pastimes are of a long lineage—many ancients, including Cicero and St. Augustine, questioned the effects of athletics, chariot races, and gladiatorial combats. The modern city, however, gave the problem a new sense of urgency. Ultimately, certain interested groups—principally clergy, journalists, and social reformers—fashioned a popular philosophy that championed the use of certain sports as remedies for urban vice and immorality. In short, they defended “sport” as a form of innocent “recreation.” We are so likely to confound the two concepts today that it is worth examining their fusion a century ago.

In large measure, the problem of sport has historically been a part of the larger problem of leisure. If, as Daniel Rodgers outlines, the work ethic has been an integral part of America’s moral life, and if the concept of work has been glorified in the nation’s culture, then Americans have been equally concerned with what their people do in their “nonwork” time.¹ If work has served to enhance the community, then nonwork activity has been carefully scrutinized to ensure that it has not destroyed progress made on the job. Sport has been and remains basically a leisure activity; that is, one consumed by participants and spectators in their hours
away from work. Thus, it is not surprising that thoughtful people have questioned whether sport has served to cultivate or debilitate the body and spirit of the individual and the community.

Rodgers has outlined the dominance of the work ethic in America as it awoke to an industrial age. The work ethic elevated work over leisure in "an ethos that permeated life and manners." It surfaced "in countless warnings against the wiles of idleness and the protean disguises of the idler." But even when work was exalted over nonwork, it was necessary for moral guardians like the clergy to organize leisure activities into a ladder of legitimacy, rising above such noxious pursuits as the brothel or the saloon to exercises in social and individual salvation, like Bible study. Within the overall scheme of the work ethic, sports have occupied various positions on the ladder of nonwork affairs. For instance, because of their obvious connections with organized gambling, such sports as cockfighting, boxing, and horse racing have typically been held in lower regard than rowing or sailing. What is significant to our study, however, is the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century, most sports had assumed a level of high legitimacy. Indeed, they became for many almost a panacea for social and individual ills, and nowhere was this more evident than in cities like Boston.

If, like Michael Marrus, we define leisure as "free activity, determined by individuals who make a choice independent of direct obligations of work, family, or society," then it is clear that the rise of the modern city and its related modes of production created an "emergence" of leisure, and with it, an aggravated problem of nonwork pursuits. The swirl of life in the growing city eroded many of the old customs and traditions that had controlled nonwork time. More important, the precise coordination of efforts demanded in a capitalist economy created clearer divisions between work time and nonwork time. The regimentation of time evolved slowly, and it was met with some resistance by workers who maintained traditional, self-paced patterns of work and leisure, filled with self-imposed holidays like "Blue Monday." Also, the erratic cycle of booms and busts meant that workers had frequent stretches of slack time. Ultimately, though, as E. P. Thompson points out, the factory clock, the division and supervision of labor, and the money incentives of the wage system all served to punctuate a new rhythm of work and leisure.
Assured a larger and steadier audience, the market forces of the city nurtured the creation of a booming enterprise in commercialized amusement, as witnessed not only by the tremendous growth of the theater, the music hall, the dance hall, the museum, and, ultimately, organized sport, but also by the stunning popularity of amusement apostles such as P. T. Barnum. Thus the new problem of leisure. If urban man was faced with more clearly defined, if not larger, segments of free time, what could he do with it? What activities could he pursue that would not destroy himself or his community? By the end of the century, many had found the answer in organized sport.

In Boston, the concern for work and idleness was as old as the Bay Colony itself, for the fear and loathing of the idle man or mind were firmly entrenched in the Puritanism of Governor Winthrop and his followers. From the beginning, nonwork activity was scrutinized to ensure that it served the community’s calling to God. One minister summarized this philosophy while the “chosen ones” yet remained in England, reminding his flock that they must constantly “performe service to God,” in all activities, no matter how trivial, “yea even in our eating and drinking, lawful sports and recreations, when as we do them in faith.” 4 It is always dangerous to impose present-day meanings on words taken from the past; and such a course would be quite precarious in dealing with Puritan attitudes toward sport. While our society tends to consider sport, recreation, and amusement as largely interchangeable terms, our forefathers treated them as separate entities, with distinct relationships to the problem of work versus idleness.

The Puritan held that sport, as a physical exercise and diversion, might be legitimate as long as it was taken as recreation; that is to say, as long as its purpose was to restore the body and spirit to a more efficient state of proper usefulness. William Burkitt, an English Puritan whose works were popular in New England, carefully outlined the possibility in a seventeenth-century “self-help” guide. God never intended man to endure constant toil, Burkitt argued, so He “adjudged some Diversion or Recreation (the better to fit both Body and Mind for the service of their maker) to be both needful and expedient.” The rub, of course, lay in letting “Religion” choose the activities which were “healthful, short, recreative, and proper.” Burkitt’s instructions contained sentiments that echoed repeatedly in colonial Boston. 5 The town’s intellectual lead-
ers, including John Winthrop, John Cotton, Increase Mather, and Cotton Mather, countenanced diversions that were “recreative” in nature, provided they were not taken to excess, were followed in the proper spirit, and were not disruptive of community welfare. At the same time, however, these guardians of virtue lashed out against idle amusements, like dancing or gambling, with arrows “drawn from the quiver of the Scriptures.” Contrary, then, to many existing interpretations, it is clear that there was no monolithic “Puritan” attitude toward sport. Lawful or unlawful sports were part of a larger, subtly distinguished continuum that spanned work, recreation, amusement, and idleness. As Cotton Mather insisted, he and his intellectual colleagues never meant to insinuate that “a due pursuit of Religion is inconsistent with all manner of Diversion.”

In this light, the well-documented laws of the Colony and Commonwealth that proscribed sport were not a blanket condemnation. Closer inspection reveals that these laws were directed at Sabbath merriment, corruptive gaming and gambling, or disruptive sports such as football and horse racing which made the streets unsafe for the ordinary citizen. (Street sports were a recurring urban problem, and played a crucial role in motivating the early playground movement.) While the Puritans detested idleness and debilitating amusement, they harbored no similar hatred of recreation and lawful sports.

One must also remember that the Mathers and their ilk clearly had greater reservations about idle amusements than did many of their brethren. The numerous, repetitive laws as well as the repeated jeremiads citing wanton amusements as causes of famine or disease are all testimonies to this fact. The growth of the commercial seaport and its dilution of central, Puritan values aggravated the situation in the eyes of clergy like John Danforth, who fretted over the “vile profanations of prosperity” in places like Boston; where good harvests turned to “bad revels,” where “streets of people” supported “bad houses of Entertainment,” where “Precious Sabbaths” suffered “notorious profanations.” As we have seen, however, both lawful and unlawful sports and amusements enjoyed increasing popularity as Boston prospered.

Nonetheless, the early intellectual traditions concerning sport and its relationship to work and idleness are quite important because they were perpetuated by later clergy and, to a degree,
worked their way into the attitudes of businessmen and workers alike. Into the early decades of the nineteenth century, the morality of free-time activities was still an issue. Even "innocent" amusements could be found guilty by a conservative theological persuasion which felt that "they counteract the designs of all religious institutions whose restraining and reforming influence is beneficial to men in time, and eternity." At the same time, however, temperance societies and temperance laws like the Fifteen Gallon Law, passed in 1838, found widespread support among merchants and skilled workers alike. They also met with heavy resistance from other members of the same occupations.

The tensions over temperance laws underscored the problem that Puritan intellectuals had grappled with two centuries earlier. Even if the Bostonian's principal calling was work, commerce, banking, or industry, it was clear that man could not labor during all his waking hours. Those who tried would find themselves burned out, physically, mentally, and emotionally. But this observation didn't answer the nagging question of what activities would be socially or spiritually profitable while one was off the job. The question was old, and yet there was no consensus in an answer. Moreover, there was no agreement about who could suggest or impose an answer. Boston's emergence as a city gave a new sense of urgency to this problem of leisure. While gambling, drinking, and bawdy houses had appeared as manageable aberrations in colonial Boston, their nineteenth-century counterparts appeared in more threatening guise, which in turn led to a more concentrated search for rational and innocent recreations.

AS THE DECADES TURNED in the nineteenth century, then, the concern over amusements focused increasingly on the city. Many popular novels retold the ancient tale of the rural virgin, of either sex, corrupted by the sins of the city. But even if the author meant to moralize, the metropolis usually emerged as a warehouse of fun and excitement as well as a haven of vice and corruption. Indeed, only a fine line separated the two, and how many worried if the former turned into the latter? Where else to find the splendor of the opera or the art gallery, the roar of the music or the concert hall, the electric atmosphere of the theater, the chance to strike it rich in the gambling den? Were not the saloons, the billiard parlors, and the brothels more fun than the drudgery of farm and

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village? Many thought so, for much of the urban growth during the first half of the century came from rural American migrants. And the popular books of the day did nothing to dissuade them from striking out for the city. It was not just the country bumpkin, however, who yielded to the baser pleasures. Investigative reporters like George G. Foster provided their readers with lurid descriptions of bordellos and groggeries among the “proletaires” and of gambling houses packed with members of prominent families. The images were as inviting as they were menacing.

It is no wonder that reformers focused on amusements as a critical problem that spread rapidly in the urban environment. In this regard, Boston was like other cities. As early as the 1820s, the North and West Ends were labeled as shelters of vice. The City Missionary Society detailed all the “facilities and fascinations of crime” to be found in Ward 6, including gaming houses “fitted up with imposing splendor,” and dancing halls “ablaze with light.” Ann Street (now North Street) harbored brothels known as the “Tin Pot” and the “Beehive.” Raids by vigilantes and later by Marshal Tukey’s police proved to be short-lived solutions. “Nymphs” of the night had other haunts, such as the notorious “third tier” of many popular theaters where, as one historian of Boston’s theaters put it, “a portion of the house [was] set apart by custom for the abandoned and profligate of both sexes.”

There were numerous theaters in Boston; dozens opened in the decades before the Civil War. Not all offered a third tier, and many endured but short and uncertain existences. Nonetheless, they presented a varied menu of amusement, from serious drama to minstrel shows and musical burlesque. What is more, the admission price was within popular reach—in 1852, the Howard Athenaeum’s tickets ranged from 12½ to 75 cents. The traveling circus was also an annual attraction. As an advertisement for “Welch and Delavan’s Olympic Circus” announced during the summer of 1843: “They crack the lively whip in Atkinson Street—merry music, gay horses, bold riders.”

Those who sought their amusement at the gambling table could easily locate a game of faro, “policy,” or “dead props.” The more bloodthirsty could seek out a rat pit. A veteran Boston police captain described the operation at one North End rat pit of long standing. The animals’ arena was located in the basement of a saloon, so the patrons could pass the time between events mingling
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with the barmaids who tempted with "vermilion cheeks and low-necked dresses." A trapdoor led down to the rat pit, a tightly secured "board crib," three and one half feet high and eight feet in diameter. Rows of board seats surrounded most of the pit, except for the proprietor's work area. Here stood a wire-covered flour barrel half-filled with live rats, which the proprietor fished out with tongs. When a set number had been placed in the pit, a "ratting" dog was brought out and held by an assistant, while the patrons, who had paid a 25-cent admission, bet with each other on the speed with which the dog could dispatch the rodents. Betting completed, the dog enters the fray, "the growling, and chomping, and squealing, and scratching is soon over," time is called out, the bets decided, "and all hands go up and liquor." The exhibitions would continue, with different dogs, until the barrel of rats was empty. The next night's performance would be ensured by the enterprise of local denizens who scoured the stables at night, bagging rats for a shilling apiece—five dollars for "a pretty good evening's work." 17

The third tier, the faro hall, and the rat pit saw a social mixture: sailors on leave, young society "swells" (possibly some of Charles W. Eliot's fellow rowers!), professional thieves, downtrodden immigrants. By the 1840s, school authorities were of the opinion that a major purpose of the public school system was to combat the base amusements of the city by inculcating an appreciation for the "higher" over the "lower" pleasures. The idea was that schools could cultivate "a taste for simple and innocent pleasures, rather than a love for vicious excitement." A laudable idea, but perhaps unrealistic amid the temptations of the city. Shortly thereafter, the superintendent of the state reform school observed that truancy from school was the first link in a chain of delinquency that consisted of debasing excitements like "horse racing, the bowling saloon, the theatrical exhibitions, and other similar places of amusement, debauchery and crime." The associations formed in these havens of iniquity became schools of crime that offered as a curriculum profanity, drunkenness, and lust. For many, however, these course offerings were far more attractive than those of the public school. 18

The problem of amusements in the urban setting had become more acute and wide-ranging. In reaction, one can see during the first half of the nineteenth century a splintering of attitudes and
in some cases a blurring of the once-rigid distinction between idle "amusement" and wholesome "recreation." Old-light Protestants, however, tended to retain the sharp contrast. As the *New Englander* of 1851 reminded its readers, the difference between amusements and recreations lay in their respective purposes and motives: "the motive of the latter being to recruit and restore, and thus prepare for greater usefulness; the motive of the former being a love of pleasure, or the desire of personal gratification." Traditional sports like cockfighting or horse racing were included with gambling and tippling as degenerate amusements. Straining the horse beyond its power or setting cocks to the death duel was clearly an abuse of man's dominion over God's creatures. Worse yet, as one minister reasoned, was the infectious patronage of brutal sports by members of the social elite: "With such examples of irreligion, profanity and cool calculating cruelty 'in high places,' is it wonderful that the inferior classes of society become dissipated, careless and indifferent about divine things?" 19 Charles Dickens complained that "the peculiar province of the Pulpit in New England (always excepting the Unitarian ministry) would appear to be the denunciation of all innocent and rational amusements." It seemed to Dickens that the only legitimate sources of excitement were the church, the chapel, and the lecture room. 20
As Dickens insinuated, the amusement problem was aggravated by the failure of conservative theologians to suggest realistic alternatives. At the same time, he was perceptive in noticing that some Unitarians were reconstructing the question at hand. Realizing that amusements were a fixed part of the urban scene, that they could be neither eradicated nor reduced, these clergy chose to consider how to single out the better forms, which some called “Christian” amusements, and direct the people toward them. Moreover, a number suggested that exercise and athletic sports might serve as a model of proper amusements.21

In several of his public lectures and addresses during the 1830s, William Ellery Channing set the framework of this new perspective. Advising on the “ministry for the poor,” Channing recognized the threat of “stirring amusements”:

Human nature has a strong thirst for pleasures which excite it above its ordinary tone, which relieve the monotony of life. This drives the prosperous from their pleasant homes to scenes of novelty and stirring amusement. How strongly must it act on those who are weighed down by anxieties and privations! How intensely must the poor desire to forget for a time the wearing realities of life! And what means of escape does society afford or allow them?22

Very little, that Channing could see. As a result, many succumbed to intemperance; not just the poor, but “multitudes in all classes.” As a solution to alcohol and other degenerate amusements, Channing expressed the hope that “by the progress of intelligence, taste, and morals among all portions of society, a class of public amusements will grow up among us.” Some of his possibilities included music, dancing, the theater (at least legitimate drama, without a third tier!), and recitation. But Channing also considered “physical education.” He had no specific activity in mind, but he sounded like the author of a modern Joy of Jogging manual as he argued that “physical vigor is not only valuable for its own sake, but it favors temperance, by opening the mind to cheerful impressions, and by removing those indescribable feelings of sinking, disquiet, depression.”23

Channing's suggestions were continued in the next decade. His protégé, the energetic and controversial Theodore Parker, in his Sermon on the Moral Condition of Boston, chastised his fellow citizens that “there are no amusements which lie level to the poor in this country . . . save only the vice of drunkenness.” Parker saw a ray
of hope in the recent work of some local philanthropists who had treated a group of the city's poor children "to a day of sunshine, fresh air, and frolic in the fields." Parker was some fifty years ahead of the movement for organized play; similar answers to the amusement problem were emerging on other fronts. A book entitled *A Plea for Amusements* argued that if wholesome alternatives, such as "athletic institutes" for gymnastic exercises, "would be established in all our towns and cities, for the free use of the people . . . we shall see to it, that we have enough healthy sources of recreation to empty the gambling rooms, the tippling shops, and the brothels." Slowly, these and similar treatises were making the case that amusement could serve the purpose of recreation; the answer was not suppression but reform.  

This sentiment gathered momentum. In 1857, Boston's Edward Everett Hale, Unitarian minister, prolific writer, and tireless crusader for urban reform, reviewed for the *Christian Examiner* eight articles on the subject of public amusements and public morality. Rejoicing that the "interest which now seems to be excited in the subject" might foster further discussion among his fellow clergy, Hale argued that the church must not withdraw from the realities of the urban world but must rather jump in with both feet to ensure that amusements remained wholesome. But with insight, Hale added some new dimensions to the question. He agreed that the "haste of the age," with its "increased competition, increased demands, increased and increasing labor and accelerated methods of meeting the demands" necessitated an antidote like amusements. He then discussed the new leisure time of the working class, and noted that "all this complicated labor question, the discussion of ten-hour systems, of the work of women, of the work of children, asks what men, women and children are to do with the hours of rest."  

In his own lecture on the subject, Hale further recognized that the problem of amusements existed only in the city:

So long as we live in the country, the subject does not come up for discussion, for there God provides the best entertainment for everybody. Every boy can find it in the trout streams, and every girl among the buttercups. But when we choose to bring people into crowded towns; to substitute pavement for the meadows, and mains six feet under ground for the trout's brook, we must substitute something for the relaxation and amusement which we have taken away.
Indeed, Hale linked the very growth of the city to the lure of its amusements. There was no use in arguing that the countryside provided better economic opportunities, if all the while the magnet attracting native immigrants was not the fact that “they think they shall grow rich,” but rather that “they are tempted by the excitement of crowds, of concerts, of bands, of theatres, of public meetings, of processions, or exhibitions, of parties, of clubs, or in general of society.”

Finally, Hale stressed that the solution lay in discovering and nurturing amusement forms that were at once both wholesome and popular. He recalled walking downtown while pondering the whole question, and seeing a sign in bold print that read, “Rare Sport for Everybody.” Excited that he had fallen on the answer to how the city might amuse all, rich and poor, learned and simple, he hurried to read the fine print, only to discover the promotion of one “celebrated terrier,” Mad Jack, who was scheduled to enter the rat pit that day with the assigned task of killing one hundred rats in five minutes. Dismissing that sport as no solution, Hale concluded that private enterprise could not be expected to provide amusements that were attractive to all tastes and at the same time soothing to the harried urban resident. He knew that the commercial alternatives were either degradation or boredom:

So a sad public returns next morning to its filing of iron, its balancing of accounts, its sewing of seams, or its digging of mud, without one wrinkle smoothed, without one care lightened. The killing of rats has not soothed it; the death-rattle of Camille hath not soothed it; and the lecture certainly has not rested it. The evening has been killed, and that is all.

Hale earnestly hoped that the church and the city government would join hands and actively foster public amusements for all citizens.

Moreover, Hale hinted that “a right understanding of athletic amusements” might reveal the answer to the problem. In his opinion, the clergy spent too much time exposing the evils of gambling and not enough effort promoting the advantages of cricket and football. Throughout his career, Hale would value athletics for building health, courage, and character, qualities essential to survival in the city. In this regard, he must be numbered among the apostles of “Muscular Christianity,” a consortium of clergy and intellectuals who advocated physical exercise both as an antidote to the sedentary habits of urban life and as a solution to the
problem of free time. Included in this group were Hale, Henry C. Wright, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. At mid-century, these men first suggested sport and exercise as the ideal urban amusement.

Of all the Muscular Christians, Thomas Wentworth Higginson alone rivaled Hale in his devotion and zeal for athleticism. In fact, his reputation as an athletic advocate probably surpassed that of Hale. Born in Cambridge of a successful merchant family, Higginson graduated from Harvard College in 1841 and from the Harvard Divinity School in 1847. A striking figure over six feet tall, Higginson was throughout his life an activist and reformer. He cut a dashing figure as commander of an all-black regiment during the Civil War, a service that was the culmination of his outspoken abolitionism. Also a committed advocate of temperance and women’s suffrage, Higginson found time during his ministry at Worcester to pen a series of articles for the young Atlantic Monthly, extolling the virtues and necessities of athletic exercise.

In the first article, entitled “Saints and Their Bodies,” Higginson stated his desire to crush the impression “in the community that physical vigor and spiritual sanctity are incompatible.” With the growth of cities, the dominance of the business mentality, and the loss of the outdoor life, Higginson found that “it has been supposed that a race of shopkeepers and lawyers could live without bodies.” He hoped that the “terrible records of dyspepsia and paralysis” would urge a reaction in favor of outdoor activities and exercise. Having laid out his basic thesis in this essay, he continued to build his argument in future articles for the magazine. Along the way, he called for improvement in dietary habits, the adoption of exercise in the school curriculum, and the need for exercise among the nation’s female population.

Higginson specifically treated the city in his article entitled “Gymnastics,” an outstanding description of the exercise rage sweeping many eastern cities in the early 1860s. Addressing the urban reader—the “average American man, who leaves his place of business at nightfall with his head a mere furnace of red-hot brains and his body a pile of burnt-out cinders, utterly exhausted in the daily effort to put ten dollars more of distance between his posterity and the poorhouse”—Higginson advised him to eschew the Chess Club and “come with me to the Gymnasium.” Echoing
the thought of many contemporaries, Higginson stressed that neglect of physical health was a vital problem facing all Americans, on the farm or in the town. And the danger was compounded in the city, with its constant "mental excitement." As a solution, the gymnasium offered a program of exercise that could be altered to suit the physical needs of anyone, no matter how fatigued or excited.

Beyond this, Higginson noted, the gymnasium helped to prevent the young men in cities from patronizing vicious amusements, particularly when it divided their evenings "with the concert, the book, or the public meeting." Not only would there be little time left for alternatives, there would be little energy as well. Higginson stressed that "it is the nervous exhaustion of a sedentary, frivolous, or joyless life which madly tries to restore itself by the other nervous exhaustion of debauchery." The "honest fatigue" of exercise called for "honest rest." The argument must have been pleasing to colleagues like Edward Everett Hale.31

Higginson and Hale were spokesmen for an increasingly popular opinion that physical exercises in the gymnasium or on the playing field, were important and legitimate sources of urban amusement. These activities were clearly more wholesome and desirable than those found in the commercial temples of dissipation: the billiard parlor, the music hall, the saloon, and the rat pit. Beyond this, they contributed to health, a quality under siege in the city.

The arguments of these clergy, and their replications in the popular press, were significant in a number of ways. They signaled the beginning of a new current of thought that flowed against the older tide condemning activities pursued for their own sake. They linked the amusement problem itself to broader concerns about social life in the city: wasteful indulgences among elites, degenerate escapism among impoverished workers, sedentary and enfeebling work routines among clerks and storekeepers. The ailment, and its solution, involved all classes. The call for public action laid the groundwork for the first major civic response to the problem: the development of a public park system in the 1870s and 1880s. Finally, the gradually favorable climate of opinion helped to explain the development before the Civil War of organized sports clubs in rowing, cricket, and baseball.32
SPORTS AND AMUSEMENTS continued to grow in northern cities during the war years, as urban social life quickly recovered from the initial shocks of Fort Sumter and Bull Run. The amusement problem, however, appeared to worsen. The decades after the Civil War were filled with a growing perception that the inhabitants of the industrial cities enjoyed (or were burdened by) increasing amounts of free time. During this period labor unions increased their demands for fewer hours. The movement for a ten-hour day had begun as early as the “Ten-Hour Circular” and strike of 1835 among Boston’s skilled workers. Agitation continued during the 1840s. By 1865, a Grand Eight-Hour League had formed in Massachusetts; the tension reached a peak in Boston with the May Day strike of 1886. Relief came slowly. In 1874, Massachusetts passed a Ten-Hour Law for women and children in manufacturing, but it was easily evaded by crafty operators. State and municipal workers got the nine-hour day in 1891. The Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor monitored the downward drift of the average workday, including the trend toward a partial holiday on Saturday. During the second half of the century the average work week in nonagricultural industries declined from sixty-six to fifty-six hours. The interests of capital resisted shorter hours for workers, arguing that there would be a corresponding increase in “intemperance, vice and crime.” A spokesman for the Eight-Hour League protested this vehemently, and claimed that the short workday had filled the meeting halls and the reading rooms.

Many remained unconvinced about the effects of more free time, but it seemed that the distinction between work and leisure was growing sharper. Sensing this, the Reverend O. B. Frothingham described the conundrum that faced all classes:

How to employ leisure, is the problem we have to deal with. Everybody has leisure, more or less. Nobody works literally all the time. In every day there are vacant hours, that should be used to balance the occupied ones.

A new generation of investigators approached the problem, and the answers were always the same: things were getting worse.

In 1867, the American Christian Committee examined thirty-five cities in an effort to identify the obstacles that confronted the mission of the church. Among the commonly identified afflictions
were "the multiplied temptations of the city in the way of debasing amusements." In Boston, the YMCA urged contributions so that it could press its assault on the lure of the city's sporting establishments, gambling halls, fifty-nine billiard halls, fifteen hundred saloons, and hundreds of houses of prostitution. Boston supported all levels of amusement, for rich and poor. But the last decades of the century saw increasing attention focused on the dissipations in the poorer districts. The popular press headlined the infrequent police raids on streetwalkers; they ran investigative reports on the numerous dens of organized gambling, and young clerks driven to suicide by their losses. Newspapers walked a tightrope, however, since they commonly ran advertisements for the same "low and vulgar" entertainments that they condemned in editorials.

Reformers like the Reverend Henry Morgan were less compromising. Morgan, an independent Methodist minister, ran his own mission in the South End. In 1880, he wrote a fictional "story of real life," entitled Boston Inside Out! Sins of a Great City! The novel sold more than five thousand copies in a few weeks, as Bostonians tried to guess who could have been the model for Father Titus, the power-mad priest who has a harem of "nieces"; or Frank Gildersleeve, the despicable Brahmin rake who violates young Minnie Marston's virginity while she is under anesthesia in a dentist's chair! The reader could also follow Morgan's investigations into "Boston's darker side," with its two thousand liquor dens and one thousand bawdy houses: "As I strayed through the streets, the dark curtain of midnight was pierced by myriads of flashing lights. Strains of bacchanalian song, drunken shouts, and ribald laughter greeted my ear."

In the next two decades, Boston's settlement workers, under the direction of Robert A. Woods at the South End House, published nonfictional accounts of life in the city's working-class districts. In their view, degrading amusements, along with poor housing and unstable, transient populations, constituted a most serious threat to neighborhood life. The South End's cheap theaters attracted the masses to its vaudeville and its burlesque. Places like the Dime Museum, the Grand Opera, and the Columbia Theatre, packed the crowds at 10 cents for a gallery seat and 50 cents for a box. The experienced observer could pick out a cross-section of residents: "the corner loafer, the out-of-work, the casual laborer, the mechanic, and the clerk... the cheap and flashy aristocracy."
theater, along with the dance hall, the pool room, and the saloon, had little competition, causing one reformer to utter the much-echoed sentiment that "the parents, clergy, teachers and social workers in this region regard the problem of providing healthful amusement for young people as one of the most serious which they have to face." The more alarming realization was that commercial amusements were simply filling a large void created by the inactivity of public agencies. This led to a vicious circle which saw "inferior amusements degrading the people; degraded people enjoying inferior amusements."\[41\]

The call for action was being sounded, however, with an argument that followed the lines of antebellum reformers like Hale and Higginson. The trend that had begun slowly before the Civil War emerged more clearly. Moralists were forced to accept amusements as an integral component of urban life. They could not be suppressed through stern warnings about their idle nature. Rather, the dominant theme emphasized a search for alternatives by which to combat the attraction of commercialized dissipations. After summarizing the opinions of nine sermons on the subject, an article of 1867 in the New Englander concluded that all must "recognize the need which human nature has of amusement and recreation." The answer lay less in suppression than in the "Christian duty to bring recreation within the pale of Christian thought, and to make such provision for innocent enjoyments as to protect our youth from sinful indulgences and perilous amusements." A few years later James Freeman Clarke, popular pastor at the Church of the Disciples, stressed the same ideas in a series of public lectures on "self-culture."\[42\]

Was there an alternative form of amusement that was, at once, healthy, "Christian," uplifting, and attractive to all elements of the urban population? Many found an answer in certain types of physical recreation and sports. Increasingly, from Edward Everett Hale to Robert A. Woods, urban critics and reformers concluded that sports and athletics, whatever their deficiencies, were far more desirable than the billiard parlor or the brothel. In a more positive vein, this group supported outdoor exercise as a vehicle to health, an endangered quality in the urban environment. When properly directed, sports and games could develop morality and character, as playground advocates would continually stress. They were, at the same time, popular with the masses.
The Protestant church felt the effects of this ideological change. By the turn of the century, the church was promoting organized sports both as a wholesome alternative to commercialized entertainments and as a powerful agent for strengthening the moral fibers of humanity, so frayed by urban living. In Boston, the YMCA, the YMCU, the Berkeley Temple, and the North End Union added a new Christian dimension to exercise. Under the direction of Robert J. Roberts, whose motto advised, “If you have time to eat you have time to exercise,” the YMCA was a focal point of activity. In 1888, the “Y” began leasing the Union Athletic Grounds on Dartmouth Street; the facilities included a ball field, a running track, a cycle track, and tennis courts. Exercise and sport could bring people to Christ by improving the temples of their souls. Moreover, these forms of amusement could lure the wayward back into the fold, where their spiritual regeneration might begin. As Charles Dickinson of the South End’s Berkeley Temple concluded, if manly sports and innocent games could reach young men and keep them “from the streets and the saloons,” then every church should have a gymnasium and a ball field.  

Along similar lines, Robert A. Woods and his fellow reformers advocated organized forms of sport and exercise as desirable alternatives to the amusements found in the inner wards and in the zones of emergence. Time and again, they heaped praise upon the public parks and playgrounds, the municipal baths and gymnasiums, the private athletic clubs, and gymnastic organizations like the German Turnverein. To Woods, recreation was ultimately a “way to liberation and exaltation of life,” and sport was a desirable avenue of recreation. After examining the entire spectrum of popular amusements, one reformer concluded that “amateur athletics are the most wholesome and encouraging phase of the whole general problem; indeed, they are less a phase of the problem than an effective solution.”

The problem of urban leisure and the solution of sport came to a head in two related issues. The first was the saloon and the attempts to combat its widespread influence among the working classes. The second was the broader question of the Sabbath laws. At the end of the century, numerous cities grappled with the liquor and saloon questions, Boston among them. The attempts to control liquor licensing could lead to confrontations between
Yankee Republicans and Irish Democrats. In 1885, Republicans struck at Democratic "rum power" by securing state legislation which put Boston's police, and therefore liquor licensing, under the control of a commission appointed by the governor. As one Yankee put it, "the administration of law in Boston is a farce. . . . The liquor interest controls affairs in the city." In 1895, the Committee of Fifty for the Investigation of the Liquor Problem conducted a survey to determine the extent of the saloon's influence in Boston. The committee, which included such influential citizens as Charles W. Eliot and Francis A. Walker, concluded that the saloon succeeded because it offered more than drink; it was "ministering to a much deeper desire than that for alcoholic liquors. . . . Nothing less than the satisfaction of the deeper thirst for fellowship and recreation" could explain its success. The saloon lured the worker into its embrace with its bright lights and its "cheery exterior in the midst of the prevailing gloom." Once inside, the weary worker enjoyed music, baseball scores, fellowship and gossip, racing news, pool, kinetoscopes, and other entertainments along with his beer. More alarming was the awareness of the saloon's central position in the machinery of ward bosses and criminals. But the most startling revelation was the saloon's popularity. A headcount by Boston patrolmen indicated that daily patronage of Boston's six hundred saloons amounted to almost half the city's population.

The Committee of Fifty cited a number of solutions to the saloon problem, including stricter enforcement of licensing codes, wider and sparser distribution of saloons and, more important, the provision of attractive substitutes that might offer companionship and amusement without the evil of liquor. Once again, organized sport and exercise headed the list of ideal substitutes. Raymond Calkins, who examined the substitutes for the saloon, concluded that "possibly the gymnasium is the most effective substitute; it offers a definite aim to its habitués, something to work for, and it satisfies, at the same time, the primary social desire and the purely physical demand." The athletic club, cycling and cycle meets, and even professional baseball games, when properly directed, could prove attractive enough to lure workers out of the saloon. Further, these substitutes would satisfy social and physical cravings in a wholesome manner.

Reformers knew that the "liquor problem" existed seven days a
week, so their concerns for temperance sometimes led them to challenge the orthodox Sabbath. The General Court had, in a series of restrictive laws, long protected the Sabbath from profana-
tion by "labour, business or work of ordinary callings . . . game, sport, play, or recreation." By the 1880s, however, great pressure had begun to mount, much of it based on the realistic needs of an urban environment. Reverend James Freeman Clarke urged churches to adopt a more "rational Sunday observance," and thereby attract the "multitudes who have abandoned church-going" by "offering them innocent recreation in the place of in-
temperance and its evil consequences." Carroll Davidson Wright, director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, issued a report that challenged the realism of the Sunday blue laws. Wright argued that while no one wanted a seventh day of production, certain services had to continue on the Sabbath, including transportation and the distribution of food, medicine, and information. The Sunday newspaper was "almost a necessity." From here it was but a small jump to a concluding question: "Is not the wearied worker fairly entitled to the opportunity of the rest that comes of recreation on Sunday, if it is not granted to him on other days?" 50

In 1887, the General Court finally legalized a variety of Sunday services, many of which had been operating under a policy of benign neglect. Some of these included the manufacture and distribution of steam, gas, and electricity; the use of telephone and telegraph; the production and sale of newspapers or bakery products; and finally, the letting or use of vehicles for transportation. Sports, games, and amusements were still illegal on Sunday, but the application of the law led to some glaring inconsistencies. Oarsmen and yachtsmen could ply the waters, bicycle clubs could tour the city and its suburbs on hundred-mile "century runs" with impunity, but baseball players, golfers, and cricketers ran the risk of police harassment or arrest. In 1897, nine Harvard students were arrested for playing golf in nearby Waverly, on the same Sunday that saw thousands of cyclists whirling on their wheels! A few years later, Brookline police invaded The Country Club to arrest over thirty surprised Sunday golfers. 51

The parks commissioners, who were forced to prohibit Sunday ball games on parks and playgrounds, frequently complained of this absurd situation. In 1910, they noted that Sunday patrons
How Boston Played

Tobogganing in Franklin Park—A Legal Sunday Sport
Courtesy of the Frederick Law Olmsted Museum

could skate and toboggan in winter on grounds where they could not play ball in summer. “The logic of all this is a little hard to follow,” they declared, “but it appears that skating and toboggan-ing as ‘forms of locomotion’ fare better than anything that can be called a game.” The commissioners hoped that Yankee ingenuity could invent additional “forms of locomotion.”

Reformers like Joseph Lee (see Chapter Five) joined the fight for Sunday sport. A central figure in the campaign for organized play, Lee put the Sabbath laws in first place “as an example of legislation enjoining idleness and producing crime.” What good were parks and playgrounds if they couldn’t be used to full measure on the day with the greatest amount of free time? Many people agreed with Lee, and in 1911 there was a major campaign to change the law. But it would be 1920 before the legislature allowed amateur sports and games on Sunday; the professionals had to wait until 1928.

IN THE END, of course, there was no ultimate solution to the amusement problem, as later reformers painfully discovered. Certainly sport in general was never a panacea for the multiple evils which leisure time in the city presented. Some traditional pastimes

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like boxing and horse racing appeared to many as a continued part of the problem, not the solution. The saloon and the dance hall yielded to the singles bar and the massage parlor, despite the growth of playgrounds and amateur athletics. Yet the record is not as important as the perception, developed a century ago, that organized recreation, play, and exercise might prove to offer an attractive asylum of wholesome and healthy activity within the hustle of drudgery and degradation that seemed to stamp the urban existence.

When reformers and social critics like Edward Everett Hale, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Robert A. Woods suggested that active and physical forms of recreation could fill expanding segments of free time with a positive force to empty the gambling rooms and the tippling shops, their calls found acceptance in ever-widening circles. To be sure, some organizations maintained an older, more authoritarian approach toward the problems of urban leisure. The New England Society for the Suppression of Vice (later the Watch and Ward Society) felt its time was better spent in shutting down the evil than in nurturing the good. But by the end of the nineteenth century, a stronger current of thought counseled a policy that Paul Boyer has labeled “positive environmentalism.” Operating within this framework, many Bostonians organized to advance the cause of parks and playgrounds, which they claimed would remedy a number of urban problems, including the misuse of leisure time. This line of reasoning was adopted by other public and private promoters, who also advertised the idea that sports and games were healthful and of noble purpose to the community and its residents. The acceptance of this argument by a wide range of Bostonians undoubtedly contributed to the tremendous boom of bats, balls, and bicycles that occurred after the Civil War.

The process was not a simple one, however, for it raised serious questions about the control of space and time in a city that was home to social classes, ethnic groups, and neighborhoods that were bound to disagree over issues from which only some could emerge as winners. The tensions were multiple; it was not just a case of the middle and upper classes attempting to manipulate the interests and destinies of immigrant workers. The Irish had a number of active temperance societies. John Boyle O'Reilly directed his ardent pen against the gambler and the drunkard with prose that
rivaled that of Robert A. Woods or Joseph Lee. Black ministers and white were equally concerned about vicious amusements. At the same time, the fight over Sunday baseball could find politicians like John F. Fitzgerald and James Michael Curley on the same side as Brahmin philanthropists, while the strongest voice favoring the Puritan Sabbath issued from Archbishop O'Connell.\textsuperscript{56}

The control of space, time, and behavior was central both to the amusement problem and to the proposed solution of organized recreation and sport. Each, in turn, related to a broader reaction and adjustment that I have termed a search for community. Two significant and closely related thrusts of this search were the movements for public parks and playgrounds. Both were very much an active search for community which hinged on the control of space and time. In both cases, the mediums for action were new political associations—civic organizations, pressure lobbies, mass rallies—developed expressly for the purpose.

Historians have typically linked parks and playgrounds to the efforts of middle- and upper-class reformers like those in this chapter. In so doing, they have tended to overlook the efforts of other urban constituents who were actively seeking to shape their communities on their own terms. Their tools for action were similar to those of the reformers, only they were far less visible in the historical record. As we shall see, however, they were no less effective.