How Boston Played

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Playgrounds for Children

IN DECEMBER OF 1869, a group of amateur baseball players met in the clubroom of Boston’s Lowell Baseball Club. Their purpose was not to discuss past or future seasons, but to plan a dramatic protest of the gradual exclusion of recreation from the Boston Common. The result was the “Red Ball” ticket in the aldermanic elections held that month. In describing their platform, the Red Ballers claimed that their purpose was to foster outdoor sports in general, not just baseball. “The Common has been taken and nothing left in its place as a playground,” they complained, “and the main object is to elect men who will grant our youth some spot for recreation.”¹ The system operated like present consumer lobbies, which endorse candidates according to their records on nuclear power or no-return bottles. Rallying committees marshaled support in every ward and passed out “Red Ball” tickets at each polling place. The results were heartening; eight of the twelve elected aldermen were on the Red Ball ticket. The following spring, the lower end of the Common was reassigned to boys’ sports.

Play space had not seemed such an urgent problem before the Civil War. Descriptions of antebellum Boston by men like Edward Everett Hale portray an uncongested town. The Common was but a central play area, large enough for games such as baseball; but indeed, all of Boston seemed a playground for Hale and his friends.² These childhood memories of a pastoral environment made the diminution of open space even more intolerable.

So the advocates of playgrounds became more vocal after the Civil War. We can trace their cause as it was pleaded in City Hall. In 1881, an alderman reminded his listeners that twenty-five years
before there had been plenty of open land in South Boston. "You could go across the land," he claimed, "and there was no trouble about the boys playing on the ground." Things had changed quickly, however; now there wasn't a "fit place in South Boston where the boys can go and play football without being ordered off the grass." This was not an isolated complaint. Petitions had been circulating since the Red Ball ticket. Play areas were needed with great urgency, if the instincts of youth were not to be subverted to baser activities.

For a variety of reasons, Boston responded to this need. Within thirty years, both public and private forces combined to conceive a comprehensive playground system, one of the first in the country. By 1915, the city operated forty playgrounds of varying sizes and uses. The fortieth Annual Report of the Board of Parks Commissioners boasted that all residents of the city, young or old, could find ample space and activities to suit their recreational fancy. Every section of the city provided some facility of "full advantage" to its residents. Including the special areas in the parks, one could find scores of ball fields, one hundred tennis courts, two golf courses, three toboggan slides, dozens of skating areas, eight beaches, twelve bath houses, and nine gymnasia. All were public facilities. Some KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs still existed, but Boston was confident that she was meeting her citizens' desires for active play. The beneficiaries of this response included men and women of all ages, but the main focus of concern was the child and the youth, in particular the boy.

The Red Ball ticket had signaled the beginning of a chapter in Boston's history that stands out as far more than an addendum to the movement for public parks. The parks represented a grand scheme, radical surgery to implant a new arterial system that would push the lifeblood of fresh air, health, and morality throughout the urban system. Playgrounds attempted to address many of the same issues, but in a smaller, localized manner. The rhetoric of parks, while grandiose, was also general and vague; the arguments of playground advocates stressed concrete, local, specific remedies. Parks were designed as an antidote, a refuge from the hectic, congested conditions of life in the city. Playgrounds were too small for such a purpose and, moreover, were often located in the very heart of the problems. Rather, playgrounds quickly came to provide a solution of direct control and organization of social life in
the city. Parks offered an escape for all ages, playgrounds a counterattack through the impressionable substance of youth. And both parks and playgrounds represented active attempts to develop community in the city.

The links between parks and playgrounds were important. The major initiative for public playgrounds came from neighborhood lobbies who were sold on the simple proposition that outdoor exercise was wholesome, a deterrent to crime and disease. One of the principal sources of this position was of course the parks debates. The early playground advocates wanted “breathing spaces” or mini-parks for children; their support came from a broad-based, unsophisticated belief in the importance of open space. Only when the drive for playgrounds was well under way did genteel reformers exalt the movement with sophisticated theories about play, child development, and social behavior. In other words, we find elites reforming a process begun by a wider constituency—just the reverse of what we found in the parks movement.

Most research into Boston’s playground movement has unfortunately overemphasized the role of private, philanthropic, and
progressive organizations, such as the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association or the Massachusetts Civic League. Historians in this tradition see playgrounds as the fruits of voluntary reform groups who closely analyzed the plight of their social inferiors. As one such historian has put it, they "formulated tentative approaches, and finally, through experimentation, evolved successful techniques for dealing with [the problem]." Only when proven by experience did the "techniques" become "public property."

One should be careful, however, not to slight the important impetus that public officials and "uninformed" citizens' groups gave to the playground movement. The fact is that elite, philanthropic organizations simply refined the concept and purpose behind playgrounds.5

A major reason that scholars credit voluntary reform groups with the establishment of organized playgrounds lies in the fact that the most available source material was written by members of these very groups. Thus works by Luther Gulick, Joseph Lee, Everett Mero, Jacob Riis, or their disciples are commonly used as basic source material for understanding the role that playgrounds played in answering historical urban problems.6 This is not to say that private organizations were minor contributors to the development of playgrounds, nor that leaders like Joseph Lee deliberately warped the historical record in order to aggrandize their own role. By consulting the public records, however, we can better understand that all elements of Boston's social environment played roles in the development of her playgrounds, and that these various groups, both public and private, offer insights into the ways Bostonians and all Americans responded to urban growth. Irish politicians were as concerned about the need for playgrounds as were Brahmin philanthropists. All groups involved in the playground debate were anxious about the changing nature of community in Boston. It is the divergence in their approaches to playgrounds and to change that is of special interest. For this reason, the efforts of one group cannot be highlighted to the exclusion of another's.

THE ANNUAL REPORTS of Boston's Auditor of Accounts (see the accompanying table) unveil an interesting trend in the appropriations earmarked for playgrounds from 1869 until 1898, when

88
### City Appropriations for Playgrounds, 1869–1898

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
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**SOURCE:** City of Boston, Annual Reports of the Auditor of Accounts, 1869–98

**NOTES:**

<sup>a</sup>spent $740 of appropriation

<sup>b</sup>spent $582 of appropriation

<sup>c</sup>spent none of appropriation

<sup>d</sup>$40,000 of total earmarked to Franklin Field, a 77-acre tract adjoining Franklin Park

<sup>e</sup>figure represents authorized loans

<sup>f</sup>figure represents authorized loans

A major bill passed in the State House, ensuring a “comprehensive system of playgrounds for the City of Boston.”

Several obvious patterns stand out in need of explanation. The first is the lack of appropriations from 1869 to 1877. The debate that the Red Ball ticket incited in 1869 seems to have had little real effect on the problem of open space for playgrounds. The next is the sputtering start of appropriations from 1878 to 1881, followed by the six-year drought from 1881 to 1887. The last important trend one notices is the steady, then tremendous growth of appropriations in the ten-year period beginning 1887. After 1898, spending on playgrounds continued at a very high rate as
the city engaged in building a comprehensive playground system. The events that occurred within these patterns illustrate the public phase of playground growth.

Let us return to the beginning. The debate over baseball on the Common resumed in 1873 when the Beacon Baseball Club petitioned the aldermen to appropriate more Common space to baseball. The ball club claimed to represent not only the two thousand persons who directly backed their petition but also the estimated “25,000 to 30,000 young men who must have some games to play.”

The petitioners began the debate on a harsh note, accusing the Committee on the Common of perpetrating class discrimination. In their words, the committee had paid too much heed to the objections of “a few wealthy citizens, most of whom pass the summer months, when the playground is in requisition, away from the city.” The aldermen, they claimed, had neglected the interests of the young men who were “unable to afford expensive recreations, nor have the time to go to the outskirts of the city to obtain exercise.” Although the baseballers backed off this harder line, real class resentment could fester below and occasionally surface to envenom subsequent debates.

A number of other advocates of this measure decried the gradual shriveling of open space and the exclusion of play areas. They further cited reports from school and health authorities stressing the need for schoolchildren to exercise, or as one put it, the desire “to have his children come out of school with a good constitution [rather] than to have their brains crammed with debilitated bodies [sic].”

Opponents of the measure were able to call upon other health authorities who stressed the dangers involved in baseball playing. Citing a number of actual cases, these remonstrants pointed out that innocent passersby would be wounded, maimed, and otherwise injured by flying baseballs! The old baseball had been soft; the newer version “more like a grape shot, or a paving stone.” This, coupled with the control of fields that older boys exerted, led one opponent to maintain that “the present game is to that of our school days almost as a rifle to a pop gun.”

The aldermen denied the request for increased baseball grounds on the Common. Public authorities did not feel acutely enough the need for special allocations of play areas for children. Besides,
the debate on public parks was currently raging, and park advocates stressed the improvement in recreations that these acquisitions would bring to young and old alike.\textsuperscript{12}

By 1877, however, the issue of play space for children surfaced again. There seem to have been several reasons for this. The Committee on the Common, in an effort to beautify the area with more lush grass, had further restricted the section for open recreation. The councilor from nearby Ward 9 pointed out that grass might be beautiful, but so would the sight of "two or three hundred boys playing there who would otherwise be back in the slums, or perhaps in saloons, and other places qualifying themselves to be criminals, and entailing expense upon the city in reforming them."\textsuperscript{13} Many playground advocates also sensed that the parks commissioners, newly appointed in 1875, were not going to offer solutions to the problems of inner-city space. The second report of the Parks Board offered a detailed plan that proposed the placement of most parks in an "emerald chain" on the suburban perimeter.\textsuperscript{14}

In the interests of city children and in the spirit of compromise, the Common Council and the aldermen voted in May of 1877 to appropriate two thousand dollars to provide "playgrounds for boys in the several sections of the city." During the debate over this issue, however, several comments indicated the total novelty of this concept. One councilor from Ward 10 requested a reconsideration of the vote:

\begin{quote}
The City Council have never made an appropriation of that kind before, as I am informed. It is something new; it might be considered a new departure for the amusement of the people, or instruction—whichever you please to call it; and therefore we have not any experience to look to by which we can gain any information in regard to exactly what the character of these playgrounds is to be.
\end{quote}

A colleague, equally bewildered about this new concept, admitted that if the proponents had stated their desire for a park he could have understood them "perfectly." Likewise, if they meant a baseball ground. But if they meant neither, he despaired, "I do not know what a playground means."\textsuperscript{15}

The uncertainty over playgrounds as a special use of urban space underscores a point made by Dominick Cavallo in his recent study of the organized play ideology. A sophisticated rationale for
children's playgrounds rested on top of a general "rediscovery" of the child as a special type of human being, demanding special forms of moral and physical education. This current of thought flowed strongest from 1885 to 1910 in the works of G. Stanley Hall, John Dewey, Mark Baldwin, and others. Our city fathers were ten or more years ahead of all this! They had heard much about parks and baseball fields, but virtually nothing about playgrounds. A majority of them, however, had a sense that play space was a worthy appropriation, and so they set aside two thousand dollars for the summer rental of private property.\(^{16}\)

As it turned out, only two areas were rented, for a total cost of $740. The choice of locations triggered a round of parochial bickering that typified the early debates over parks and playgrounds. The following year, stiff opposition awaited a request for another appropriation of playground rental funds, as councilors from inner-city wards protested the locations of the past year's playgrounds: Brighton, Jamaica Plain, West Roxbury—all "suburban" areas. As a councilor from Ward 8 (who had voted against the Back Bay park) complained, these were of no "benefit to the boys of the North and West Ends." A counterpart from South Boston said, "I fail to see why the boys of South Boston should have to go to Roxbury or to the Back Bay."\(^{17}\)

There were, then, no special public playgrounds for fiscal year 1878–79. As the table shows, however, the city reacted with a two-year spurt of modest rental appropriations in 1880 and 1881. The City Council Proceedings indicate organized pressure from citizens' groups in Dorchester, West Roxbury, and Brighton. Neighborhood newspapers like the Charlestown News or the East Boston Argus vigorously asserted the need their local boys had of playgrounds.\(^{18}\) These parochial lobbies would become an important ingredient in later playground development. But the parks commissioners appeared to be hearing these early rumblings as well. Their fourth annual report contained an elegant lament for the lost central playground that the Common had provided, comparing the city's youth to the Indians; both were forced to move "steadily westward."\(^{19}\) Thus, 1878 to 1881 witnessed a cautious response to public discussion about the need for playgrounds. More important, two key ingredients of the entire movement surfaced during this early phase: the activity of localized interest groups, and the focus on play for children.
The next six years saw a lapse in momentum. To begin with, the parochial bickering over the placement of playgrounds in particular areas hindered the development of playgrounds in any section of the city. This problem illustrated a dilemma that had slowed the growth of parks. On the one hand, neighborhood citizen lobbies provided the key impetus for the development of playgrounds. Petitions for local play areas spurred the City Council and parks commissioners to action. On the other hand, the same local, neighborhood attachment caused city councilors and aldermen to delay voting to build playgrounds in neighborhoods too distant from their own.

The other reasons for the hiatus in playground growth stem from the heavy financial and emotional commitment that Boston made in the early 1880s to the public park system. After six years of study and debate, in late 1881 the City Council voted over one million dollars in bonds for the development of a park system. And as we have seen, this grand design initially appeared as a panacea to the recreational ills of a growing city.²⁰

On the other hand, as the parks commissioners deferred increasingly to the views of Frederick Law Olmsted, it became clear that public parks would not provide the answer to playground needs. Olmsted’s opinions on recreation for the urban masses carried great clout with city officials, and unfortunately, active play was not a primary ingredient in Olmsted’s scheme. His control of park policy, coupled with his philosophy of passive recreation, proved a hindrance to the development of playgrounds.

We know, however, that many park patrons were not interested in the enjoyment of rural scenery. To them, Franklin, City Point, Wood Island, and Marine Park offered open areas for the pursuit of active sports and games. The initial response of the parks commissioners was repression! The first “Instructions” for park patrolmen, issued in 1883, noted that “games of ball and similar sports are to be allowed upon the greensward.”²¹ Yet one year later the regulations indicated that “baseball and other games are prohibited on Sunday and will be restricted on other days of the week to such grounds as are from time to time designated, under penalty of a fine not exceeding $20.”²² If there had been too much baseball and active recreation in 1883, there was more in 1884, for the commissioners continued to retrench. In September of 1884, the new park rules noted that no athletic games or sport would be
allowed within a public park except with the prior consent of the commissioners. Not only the days and grounds, but also the very activities now were restricted.\textsuperscript{23}

At this point, the parks commissioners were squeezed between Olmsted’s principles and the demands of neighborhood groups, who were pressing the City Council for play space.\textsuperscript{24} Again, the emphasis lay in the needs of children, particularly boys. Well-organized lobbies from East Boston, Dorchester, and Brighton pressured their representatives to carry the playground banner. One alderman summarized the compelling theme of the playground proposals. Private land development was fast enclosing the old play areas, he said, “and the consequence is you find them on the corners insulting passers by, and presently the police take them to the station houses for their first petty crime, and from there they go to something worse.” It was a matter of law and order, said a colleague in the Common Council. Since the boys had no playgrounds in the denser areas of the city, like the South End, South Boston, and Roxbury, they were “forced to play on the public streets, thus violating the city ordinances.”\textsuperscript{25}

Since it was clear that Boston needed a concerted effort to develop playgrounds, the City Council determined that the Parks Department should be a major party in the process. In view of the department’s stance toward “active play,” there was little wonder why some councilors desired the Health Department to control playgrounds. But the city wisely stayed with the Parks Department, as it carried significant clout with the public. Furthermore, it was far better to ally with Olmsted, and thus gain the benefit of his genius for design.\textsuperscript{26}

In the end, the Parks Department slowly responded to the challenge. Its next report asked whether it would not be wiser to appropriate the play areas that the city had rented in the past.\textsuperscript{27} Even Olmsted reasoned that the flat “Playstead” area of Franklin Park could be properly used for “youthful” sports.\textsuperscript{28} After this beginning, the next decade witnessed a unified public response to the need for play space in the Hub.

Two permanent play areas for children were added to the city’s roster in 1889. The first was the Playstead, a flat, grassy portion of Franklin Park’s north end, designed specifically for children from seven to sixteen years of age. The Playstead opened in June of 1889, with much fanfare. Schoolchildren had the day off and
were provided free transportation on the West End Street Railway to the festivities, which included a dramatic flag raising, a salute by the school regiment, and patriotic renditions of the national anthem and "America the Beautiful." In that year's annual report, the parks commissioners admitted the need to provide more play space to the many thousands of children "living in the denser part of the city," whose only arenas of activity were the "more or less filthy street pavements." If Franklin Park offered all citizens an asylum from the hustle of Boston, the Playstead was the children's ward.29

The second new play area, the Charlesbank Gymnasium, was located on a half-mile embankment of the Charles River, within easy walking distance of the West End slums. It included separate gymnasiums for men and women, as well as play areas for children. Olmsted designed the Charlesbank, shielded by mounds and trees from excessive street noise. A blend of park and playground, the Charlesbank contained more vegetation, shrubbery, and trees than running tracks, vaulting horses, or sand gardens. But it must stand as the first attempt to provide active play space within a recognized "slum" area. Its popularity was beyond question. The Boston Journal applauded its creation. There was cause for thanksgiving, it said, among the hundreds of poor men and women who struggled daily from morning to night only to face the prospects of "some wretched tenement house, whose poor drainage and close and often stifling atmosphere, lay the foundation for malarial and other complaints." This class of citizens, "who scarcely know the meaning of a summer vacation," would find in the Charlesbank some compensation for their inability to enjoy the "beauties of nature."30 When (for lack of funds) the City Council delayed the Charlesbank's opening in 1892, a huge public uproar ensued. One councilor claimed he had "never heard so much clamor in regard to anything of the kind since I have been a member of the government." The Council unanimously appropriated the necessary five thousand dollars.31

The popularity of these local pleasure grounds underscored the limitations of distant parks; even if poor children could reach Franklin Park, they might never appreciate the quiet and serenity of meadows or forest groves. As South End settlement workers knew, the "sights and sounds of the street" were the "recreative resources" of inner-city youngsters. Why not combine the benefits
of open space with the familiarity of local surroundings? In this vein, neighborhood lobbies kept pressuring their representatives and the parks commissioners for playgrounds "for youth." The city, in turn, responded by renting or constructing playgrounds in all sections of the city, as the figures of the city auditor indicate.

This surge of pressure culminated in 1898 with "an act to provide for a comprehensive system of playgrounds for the city of Boston." This bill authorized half a million dollars in city bonds to be used in building "playgrounds in such different locations, not exceeding twenty in number, as they may deem best adapted for such purpose."

In 1897, Mayor Quincy had joined hands with the parks commissioners to push for passage of such a comprehensive playground package. The mayor reasoned in his annual address for 1897:

I know of no direction in which the expenditure of a few hundred thousand dollars will do more for this community through the healthful development of its children than by the judicious provision of properly located and equipped playgrounds. So much public
attention has been given to the advantages of extensive park areas that the equally great need of comparatively small open spaces, particularly in the thickly settled districts, for use as playgrounds, has been overlooked. If one-twentieth of the sum expended for park systems could be devoted to playgrounds, in my opinion there would be a still larger percentage of return in healthful physical development and social well-being.35

The mayor’s remarks typify the overblown rhetoric that led later researchers to believe that a serious neglect of public playgrounds existed to this point.36 In fact, as the parks commissioner outlined, the city already had more than twenty playgrounds either in operation or currently under construction. But there was no doubt that Boston needed more.37

The inferences about past neglect of playgrounds do bear some meaning when one remembers that Olmsted had retired in 1895. While Olmsted had included playground areas in some of his parks, he clung to the very principle that Quincy wished to overturn—that is, that one large park area was more beneficial than a number of small, scattered “breathing spaces.”38 Perhaps it is no coincidence that the small-playground concept flourished only after Olmsted’s ideological grip had loosened.

The passage of the 1898 bill ensured a commitment to public playgrounds. Support continued to grow and money continued to flow, and by 1915 the city had constructed twenty-six playgrounds for full-time operation. These were playgrounds proper, not simply attachments to parks or public gymnasiums. Further, every section of the city enjoyed the blessing of one or more playgrounds.39

It is worth reemphasizing the fact that, at their core, all playground arguments represented a reaction to industrial-urban growth that surfaced in most late nineteenth-century cities. Like parks, they were a medium for the control of space, time, and behavior. In the early proposals of city fathers and neighborhood activists, the playgrounds were but a simple mechanism—they would get the children off the streets. This argument had clout, however, and so it continued to surface; its logic was hard to refute. As one Common Council committee put it, a playground was necessary in South Boston’s northern ward because, without one, the boys naturally played their athletic contests in the streets. Peace, quiet, and windows suffered. The alternatives seemed to be
either a playground or a mass arrest! Neither the police nor the residents desired the latter, so both put up with "a great deal of annoyance, hoping all the time that the city will come to their relief, provide a playground for the ward, and thereby take the children off the streets." And so went the principal argument, from 1869 to 1915.40

Playgrounds as a relief for children had been a public issue since the days of the Red Ball ticket. The major lobby behind the acceptance of playgrounds had not been private philanthropic or reform groups, but the local neighborhood citizenry. These coveys of community sentiment successfully pressured city politicians for local playgrounds. Who were these groups? Their composition, and their motives, varied. Many were residents in the "streetcar suburbs"; basically middle and upper classes who desired to avoid the congestion of the inner wards. As Sam Bass Warner has demonstrated, "each homeowner wanted to believe that his new house was in the country, or at least near it." The tone of their petitions suggests that they viewed playgrounds as a safeguard to the financial and emotional investment that they had made in their flight from the city's center. This fear of loss led to a surge of requests for local playgrounds that poured into City Hall in the 1880s and 1890s.41

It was not just the more prosperous neighborhoods that pressed for open space; the "zone of emergence" was also represented in the petitions recorded by the City Council and the Parks Department. In 1899, forty-one residents of Ward 18 requested a playground in their district of Roxbury. Thirty-three of the petitioners could be positively identified in the city directory. They were a decidedly working-class group, albeit skilled workers. Their common bond lay not in protecting the future, but in salvaging the present.42

To these early lobbyists, playgrounds were a simple response to physical changes in the community. Playgrounds would keep the children off the streets, out of the haunts of dissipation, and in good health. They had no theories to explain why this would happen; only a gut feeling that open space was a moral elixir for youth, and that parks were not effectively serving this purpose. This basic contention was to be quickly transformed by genteel reformers into a sophisticated manifesto on the relationship of organized play to child development and social engineering. When
one considers the backgrounds of these later reformers, this transformation becomes understandable. If early groups revealed the existence of local neighborhood community sentiment, reform groups lamented the breakdown of an older city-wide community. Playgrounds became to them a scientific means of slowing this collapse.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN the old and the new philosophies of playgrounds can be seen in the following recollection of Joseph Lee (1862–1937), sometimes called the “father of Boston’s playgrounds.” The son of Colonel Henry Lee, a prominent banker, Joseph Lee had graduated from Harvard College in 1883 and Harvard Law School in 1887. After a continental tour, he began a lifetime in local and national social work, including a long tenure as president of the Playground Association of America. An associate of Mayor Quincy, Lee’s interest in playgrounds began when he sensed that the fruits of the 1898 legislation were not being utilized. Here there were thousands of boys, he said, “thirsting for a chance to play and getting into all kinds of mischief for lack of opportunity.” At the very same time, the new playgrounds were lying empty. Why? A boy in the North End told him, “Oh, dere’s a tough crowd down dere who would knock the stuffin out of yer.” Play space itself was not enough, Lee concluded. What was needed was supervision! Lee was perceptive, for the early advocates had been more concerned with providing playgrounds than with organizing the activities within them. More than a plea for organized play, however, these later demands for supervision within the playgrounds were very much rooted in anxiety over changes in the social fabric of the entire community.

Although several reform groups sporadically sponsored vacation-school play areas after the Civil War, the first organized and well-articulated argument for supervised playgrounds came from the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association, which during the second half of the 1880s had successfully operated “sand gardens” for young children. Ellen Tower, chairwoman of the association’s Committee on Playgrounds, was among the first to cite the moral effect of supervised play. Her report of 1889 noted that “the moral influence of the playground and the steady, kind treatment of the children are of large service in the formation of their character.” In 1891, the MEHA convinced the parks com-
missioners to let them run a supervised play area at the Charlesbank Gymnasium. The reports of this committee continually stressed the "refining influence," the "moral or civilizing work," and the obedience training emphasized by supervisors. The greater the diversity of ethnic groups, the greater the need for the work:

The happiness and at-home feeling of the children has been strongly in evidence. Their little bows and courtesies on entering and leaving the classes, their shy friendliness or their more boisterous regard has proved their affection for the city enclosure, which to so many of them is the only steady summer resort they know. The more the population in that part of Boston has changed in nationality, the plainer has become the hygienic and moral necessity for just such a playground as Charlesbank affords.

And so the delight that Jews, Germans, Russians, Irish, and negroes came in large numbers.
The Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association played an important part in the development of Boston’s playgrounds. Its members successfully petitioned the Boston School Committee for the use of schoolyards during the summer months. Under the leadership of Kate Gannett Wells, the children’s playground at the Charlesbank Gymnasium was both popular and successful. But their influence on major playground development was limited, for as we have seen, the great surge of public support for playgrounds at this same time was due more directly to the successful lobbying of unrelated neighborhood citizens’ groups. Beyond this, the MEHA did not clarify the importance of supervision to the extent where the public clearly understood its value. For instance, although the MEHA deserves credit for introducing the playground idea into the school system, it did not successfully convey the gospel of supervision. One senses this in a school committee report of 1902 which expounded a philosophy of playgrounds little different from that of earlier city councilors. Playgrounds were destined to be a “blessed success,” said the committee, “as a factor which helps to keep away much that is vitiating in the lives of these children.” But for all this, the school committee still talked of playgrounds as but a substitute for the “noisy, dangerous streets.”

It remained for Joseph Lee and the Massachusetts Civic League to popularize the importance of supervised playgrounds as a weapon of social order.

Joseph Lee had founded the Massachusetts Civic League in 1897 as an organization suited to the careful study of Boston’s social problems. In 1899, the league’s Committee on the Prevention of Juvenile Law-Breaking had determined that the crime rate for ten-to-fifteen-year-olds increased 119 percent in August, while the crime rate for the city as a whole increased by only 30 percent. The committee concluded that these juveniles turned to crime for want of other activities. The playground committee coincidentally reached the conclusion that the city’s existing playgrounds “were not used to nearly their full capacity and that the principal reason was the lack of supervision.” Without supervision, it seemed, the bigger boys broke up constructive play by carrying off the bats and balls of the younger boys.

Proceeding directly, the league requested and received permission from the Boston parks commissioners to organize and oversee supervised play at the North End Park and the Columbus Avenue
Playground. As the league's Playground Committee noted, their principal aim was to provide organization and structure to the spirit and energy of boys between the ages of eight and sixteen. But they hoped that the result would be more far-reaching:

Popular support is essential for every reason; not only to get the playground used, to make it a true popular and neighborhood institution, affecting social life and ideals as well as individual health and muscle, but also for the very practical reason that our object is to get the city to introduce similar work in all the public playgrounds, our function being merely to carry the work through the experimental stage [their emphasis].

Through private and public appeal, Joseph Lee raised both money and consciousness in support of more supervised playgrounds. He stressed that, to be successful, Boston should provide enough playgrounds for every child in the city to have one within a quarter of a mile of home. In this effort, the league enjoyed much success—by 1913 it could point to seventy-three equipped and supervised playgrounds in Boston.

But the growing ideology of supervised play was the greatest success of philanthropic societies like the Massachusetts Civic League, and this could be measured by more than sheer numbers of supervised playgrounds. Within this philosophy lay the groundwork for altering the concept of sport so that it would become a tool by which urban youth, the victims of a fragmented community, might fit into the new industrial order.

To Lee and other play theoreticians, the traditional structures of social stability appeared to be in serious trouble. The "greatest menace to civilization," he said, was "the weakening of the family relation," but to this he added the shredding of wider community ties, in the face of wholesale immigration, and rapacious economic individualism. Playgrounds and supervised play might, in Lee's plan, prove a source for reweaving the social and moral fabric of neighborhood, city, and nation.

Lee believed that the teenage years represented an "age of loyalty," a disposition that lay at the heart of the urban gang. Through supervised play and organized team sports, he believed, this loyalty could be redirected toward the larger community. Lee described the process on many occasions. "In playing these games," he said, "the boy is not going through the forms of citizenship—learning
parliamentary law, raising points of order and moving the previous question—he is being initiated into its essence, actually and in a very vivid way participating in the thing itself.” While a boy played football, he subordinated his individual aims to the common purpose, and thus became “part of a social or political whole.” In Lee's opinion, the playground's greatest function was to transform this “budding loyalty,” which was being “perverted by lack of opportunity,” into the foundation of the future citizen. Lee did not invent this philosophy, but he was by far its greatest salesman. Indeed, he was a major force in the Playground Association of America, so his success reached beyond Boston's city limits.

Yet the picture of Lee is often incomplete. While he is often portrayed holding out his hand with playgrounds to urban youth, he is seldom revealed as a prominent supporter of the Immigrant Restriction League. In Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition, Barbara Miller Solomon demonstrates that many Brahmin reformers like Joseph Lee could delicately balance their philanthropy with financial and ideological commitments to immigrant restriction. Lee should not be considered a hypocrite. To be sure, when forced to accept the gloomy vision of “a medieval empire of autonomous groups in which the newer stocks would live side by side with the old American remnant without fusing into a single nationality,” he decided that the time had come to cut down the surge of immigrants flooding into the country. Yet this did not prevent him from fighting against slums, delinquency, or corruption. It did not prevent him from leading the battle for civic improvements.

Therefore the campaign on the playgrounds was directed at preserving a cherished community that was once dominated by Brahmins and was now splintered by the pressures of immigration and urbanization. As Lee put it, “The idea is not that we, the rich, out of our great goodness and kindness of heart, should help you the poor, but that we... insist on being proud... of the sort of citizen we produce; for the honor of the family we cannot have rags and drunkenness.” It is not surprising that the Massachusetts Civic League actively sought Harvard students as football coaches, or that of sixty volumes in its North End playground library, ten were copies of Tom Brown’s School Days. It also becomes clearer why the Playground Committee exuded such euphoria in
reporting that its "hockey and football teams ignored, to a great extent, the race lines between Irish, Jews, and Italians, which are so marked at the North End." 61

Lee and the Massachusetts Civic League were influenced by the communitarian themes of Charles Horton Cooley and of Josiah Royce, his old Harvard mentor. Concerned about the social effects of laissez faire industrial capitalism, Royce and Cooley stressed the need for humanizing society and restoring the fellow feeling and identity that had seemingly vanished from American life. Along similar lines the Massachusetts Civic League concluded its report for 1913. The playground movement assumed a "new and added significance," its members noted, in view of Royce's "discovery" that the "salvation of the individual can be effected by cultivating the spirit of loyalty to the 'blessed community,' or social group." In their words, "it makes our work seem indeed consecrated." 62

If playgrounds could contribute to what Lee saw as a traditional communitarian moral order, they could also prepare workers for a modern productive system. When the Massachusetts Civic League barnstormed the state to drum up support for a referendum on playgrounds, they found a ready audience among businessmen who agreed that organized play promoted qualities that were fundamental to the successful worker. Among them were the "capacity for teamwork, good health, enthusiasm, observation, ability to play a losing game, honesty, clean play, temperance and imagination." 63 As the reform group Boston 1915 put it, with the optimism typical of contemporary progressives, playgrounds were an integral part of the "great business of making a community." 64

REFORMERS LIKE JOSEPH LEE and his Massachusetts Civic League had discovered some consecrated ideals for the playground movement. But what was actually happening on the playgrounds? Were they successfully transformed into training grounds for a genteel notion of elevated and purified American "community"? Or did they remain as they began in the 1870s—simply breathing spaces in the heart of the city's congestion? These are very difficult questions to answer, since the ultimate sources would be the children themselves, and they have left little record of their feelings about organized play. Nor did settlement workers conduct long-term studies comparing the lives of those who were touched by
the mysterious qualities of a sand garden or a team game with those who were not.  

The playgrounds and the organized activities on them doubtless achieved a mixture of success and failure, but the measure depended on the perspective of the measurer. While the reformer hoped that playgrounds would sweep the streets clear, it is doubtful that the young immigrant held a similar wish. In the tightly knit ethnic enclaves, the playground was at best a supplement to street life, which the settlement workers realized was at the core of “life’s amenities.” In the North End or West End, the playground was a temporary substitute not a permanent replacement for the sights and sounds of street pianos and organ grinders, holiday processions, and vegetable carts. As one Boston reformer recognized in 1915, it was the “unbridled freedom” of the street that attracted children. Nor did the playgrounds eliminate street games. As Joseph Lee recognized in 1913, nine-tenths of the city’s play was still done in the streets. But it was not just because there weren’t enough playgrounds. Despite the dangers and disruptions of trolleys and, increasingly, automobiles, the streets could be exciting arenas in their own right, readily adaptable to games like hoop-rolling or stick ball. As North End “corner boys” told William Foote Whyte in the late 1930s, their intergang athletic contests were often nothing more than races around the block. By contrast, the playground was often the scene of “rallies” (fights).  

This was hardly what Joseph Lee and his contemporaries had in mind. Indeed, this was why they argued for supervised play. Even good supervision, however, could not help the “incorrigibles” who preferred to hang out on the corners or in their clubhouses. As a 1930s study, *Juvenile Probation*, had to conclude, the preferred recreations among Boston delinquents were in the “poor” category. The problem of delinquency was not a lack of facilities but a preference for “poor” recreations “when more desirable ones are available.” Similar disappointments awaited the opinion that team games could overcome ethnic or racial differences. If the Irish, Italians, and Jews played together on the playgrounds of the Massachusetts Civic League, they fought one another with equal vigor in gang fights or “rallies.”  

Even if playgrounds and organized play failed to achieve all their intended goals, the belief in supervised play met with increas-
ing acceptance. Saloon-fighters looked to the playgrounds to teach children "order, decency and fair play." But the greatest influence was in the school system. Following the prodding of the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association and the mayor, Joseph Lee convinced the city and the state that the School Committee should have greater control of all public playgrounds. Lee's point, which found its way into state law, was that as professional supervisors teachers were obviously the most qualified at their job, whether in the classroom or on the playground. Subsequent School Committee reports stressed the emphasis on discipline, which included having the students line up each day to receive instruction and salute the flag. At the same time, the Parks Department restricted the use of its playgrounds to adolescents during the "prime time" weekday afternoon and weekend hours. By 1913, the city had appointed a director of playground athletics who organized competition that culminated in a city-wide inter-playground championship. The city hired physicians as medical examiners for the playgrounds. The parks commissioners were even prepared to fight the state's blue laws to ensure that their efforts might be sustained on the Sabbath.

Playgrounds were obviously different things to different people; no one concept ever prevailed. But at their core, playgrounds always stood as evidence of an active and conscious attempt to shape and reshape the physical and social dimensions of community in the city. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the expansion of playgrounds was due to the insistence of neighborhood lobbies concerned with protecting their local environs from suffocation by urban development. This fact stands in partial opposition to the lament of some reformers that Boston suffered from a lack of "local attachments . . . concerted action for a better social life . . . watchfulness over common interests." It remained for reformers with a broader perspective to determine how playgrounds might fit into an overall scheme of social order in Boston. The two visions did not always mesh. Their fusion or their conflict was determined by the peculiar conditions of life in the neighborhoods around the city.