

**Walnut Avenue  
Its Memorable Persons and Places  
Its History**

By Richard Heath

Part I

In 1878 the antiquarian bookseller Francis S. Drake (1828-1885) published his book *The Town of Roxbury: Its Memorable Persons and Places, Its History and Antiquities....* Republished in 1905 by the City of Boston, which had purchased the plates from the Drake estate, it remains the seminal source for the history of Roxbury from 1630 until the Civil War. Drake's history of Roxbury has never been updated. This study attempts to take a fraction of that chronicle, the section on Walnut Avenue, to which Drake devotes barely six pages, and bring it up to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Drake wrote his history of the city of Roxbury a decade after it had been annexed on January 6, 1868 by the City of Boston. His motive appears to be that of preserving the memory of Roxbury that he feared was being erased because of this absorption: "Let us cling to the good old name of Roxbury [and ignore] the temporary substitution for it by the unacceptable misnomer 'Boston Highlands.' After a ten year experience, annexation has not proved an unmixed blessing. The large real estate owners in the easterly part of the town, the prime movers in the project, have been materially benefited."<sup>1</sup>

Francis S. Drake was born in 1828, the son of Samuel G. Drake, who had established the largest antiquarian bookstore in the United States at Boston in the year his son was born. In 1847 Samuel G. Drake published *The History of Roxbury* by the abolitionist attorney Charles M. Ellis (1818-1878). In his introduction, Ellis refers to his book as "Part I." It is conceivable that Drake's 1878 *History* was Part II, although he does overlap Ellis in the chapters on the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ellis died in 1878 at age 60 and may have been unable to continue his work.

F. S. Drake's younger brother was Samuel Adams Drake (1833-1905), a prolific antiquarian writer whose most famous book is *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston*, published in 1872. (Still in print today, it's an invaluable reference source on the history of Boston's first two centuries.) Whereas F. S. Drake was concerned about preserving Roxbury's historic legacy, his brother was increasingly concerned that this past was being corrupted by immigrants crowding into Boston. In his 1894 *Our Colonial Homes*, for example, he rebukes the Catholics and Hebrews for ruining the ancient homes in the North End.

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<sup>1</sup> Drake, p. 42. "The easterly part" probably refers to that section roughly between Townsend and School Streets. Drake was looking nostalgically back before 1851 when the "westerly part" was Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury. In that year Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury became a separate town.

## Part II

Before 1803, there were only two roads which ran through Roxbury: Centre Street (or the “Road to Dedham and Providence”), and Walnut Avenue (or the “Road to the Great Lotts and Freshe Meadows”). These roads connected the civic, ecclesiastic and commercial hub of Roxbury (what is today Dudley Square) with the distant precincts we call West Roxbury. In 1803 Walnut Avenue formed a crossroad with the newly-built Norfolk and Bristol Turnpike, and for a half century this sleepy junction was called Toll Gate, as it contained the first toll collection house after the Bartlett Street terminus just outside Dudley Square.

Most of Walnut Avenue, which snaked its way through the much more rural Jamaica Plain, was absorbed into Franklin Park in 1885, which is the reason why the Avenue abruptly stops and becomes Sigouney Street at Park Lane. Pierpont Road at the Playstead Overlook and the Circuit Drive from the Valley Gates to Forest Hills Street were both originally sections of Walnut Avenue.



**THE RED DOTTED LINE SHOWS THE ORIGINAL ROUTE OF WALNUT AVE. THAT WAS ABSORBED INTO FRANKLIN PARK IN 1885. WALNUT AVE. AND SEAVER ST. ARE AT BOTTOM RIGHT. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX MC LEAN, 1978.**

Walnut Avenue is an interesting street. It begins as a broad way at Warren Street and ends abruptly at Park Lane opposite Franklin Park in Jamaica Plain, about two miles away. It is the oldest east-west road in Roxbury, connecting the center of the town with the rich farmlands and woods of the interior. It was originally called the “way to the great lotts and freshe meadows,” and was in existence before 1663, when all the roads in Roxbury were surveyed and measured. More than likely an old Indian trail, it was the

way for the landowners who kept their homes in the safety of the town center, to travel to their planting fields, grazing pastures and woodlots.<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of new alignments at Warren and Bower streets, Walnut Avenue meanders its way much like it did when Francis Drake wrote his book, but only two landmarks remain that he would remember: Eliot Congregational Church (only the 1873 chapel) and the A. D. Williams mansion at the elbow of Crawford Street. Most of Walnut Avenue west of Bower Street was thinly settled in 1878. The street wove its way around large estates, from six to 25 acres, dotted with big homes. After crossing Egleston Square (Columbus Avenue), it became a country lane as it wound around large craggy outcrops, skirted forest and field, and ended at a right angle to Forest Hills and Lotus Streets.

As Drake would say, let us begin our walk at the Warren Street corner of Walnut Avenue below the row of townhouses called Warren Gardens. In front of us on the edge of a wooded slope is a “hero square post” in honor of Lt. John F. Russo. First-Lieutenant Russo lived on Tolman Place, a tiny street of five homes that has been built over with Warren Gardens. Born in 1913, he was an officer in the 58<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion and was killed during the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Buried in France, his remains returned home and were reburied in 1948 at St Michael’s Cemetery, Roslindale.

The wooded hill is the remnant of Rev. John Eliot’s thirty-acre pasture which extended as far southwest as Bower Street. The hill, with its mottled boundary wall half buried in scrub along St. Richard Street, is most dramatic from Warren Street, where there is an angular grey wall of Roxbury conglomerate sheared off by an ancient earthquake. Along Walnut Avenue the former pasture slopes easily away from the ledge and was beginning to be cut up into streets and house lots even in Drake’s day (Pickering Avenue and Leslie Place, for example). John Eliot (1604-1690) is the most famous American Roxbury has produced. His fame hasn’t dimmed since Drake wrote about him, and he is still the subject of books and articles: Puritan saint, minister to the Elect at Roxbury First Church for half a century, and advocate, apostle, teacher and friend for over forty years to the Massachusetts Indians.<sup>3</sup> The land was given to Reverend Eliot as

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<sup>2</sup> Such as Robert Williams, one of the oldest names in Roxbury. He arrived in 1638 and his home was at 334 Dudley St., on the edge of salt marshes rich in hay for his cows. His family owned much of the land between Walnut and Warren and what is today Franklin Park’s golf course. Walnut Ave. connected all parts of this huge tract.

<sup>3</sup> For example: R. Todd Romero, “Totterswamp’s Lament: Christian Indian Fathers and Sons in early Massachusetts,” in *Journal of Family History*, 33: No. 1 (2008), pp. 5-12; Dane Morrison, *A Praying People: Massachusetts Acculturation and the Failure of the Puritan Mission, 1600- 1690* (New York, 1995); Richard Cogley, *John Eliot’s Mission to the Massachusetts Indians Before King Phillip’s War* (Harvard University Press, 1999). In 2003 the City of Boston erected a plaque dedicated to John Eliot at Eliot Square, as part of the reconstruction there. The plaque explains briefly who John Eliot was and contains a low relief of Eliot taken from an imaginary portrait of him painted by an unknown artist in the late 17<sup>th</sup> c. The painting has been owned since 1927 by the Huntington Gallery, San Marino, CA.

income after he was appointed as the first teaching elder at Roxbury First Church by Governor John Winthrop, on June 25, 1632. More acres from Roxbury common lands were given to him over time, including 75 acres along Jamaica Pond where Eliot Street is today. Eliot's home was at the corner of Washington and Dudley Streets, where the Bank of America is today, and extended back to Winslow Street, including the area of Dudley Station. This was planted with apple trees. His farmland would be worked by tenants and supplied the minister with food for his table and his livestock.

John Eliot's life spanned the entire tumultuous 17th century. An immigrant from Nazing, 25 miles north of London, he arrived at Roxbury at the age of 28. At the age of 46 he was the first and only Englishman in Puritan America to begin the study of the Massachusetts dialect, aided by a Pequot slave owned by Richard Callicott of Dorchester. With this rudimentary knowledge of Algonquin, John Eliot began his mission to the Massachusetts and later the Nipmuck communities.

Eliot established 16 Indian towns beginning with Natick, which contained 3000 acres, in 1651. These were to be the cherished Indian church-states made up of Americans (as the Puritans called them; they called themselves "the people") who through interrogation and confession became accepted into the First Church at Roxbury. John Eliot uncovered the embarrassment of ill-disguised opposition among his own church members to sharing seats and communion with the "Americans." Natick and the other Indian towns Eliot established are characterized by late-20<sup>th</sup> century revisionist historians as reservations, but they miss the real issue of land use. No Indians lived in Roxbury, but Roxbury didn't want Indian members living among them any more than Dedham and Marlborough. The Indians planted but did not keep livestock except pigs, but the English needed extensive pastureland for their cows. When the grassland was overgrazed, more was required, and that conflicted with the Indians' need for corn fields. English cattle often trampled these planting fields too. The hostile English farmers forced Eliot to seek allocations of land granted by the General Court for Christian Indians. These were well watered and away from the English. The first authorized Puritan Indian church was at Natick in 1654.

It is difficult to overestimate this achievement. During the Puritan era, which ended when Massachusetts Bay became a crown province in 1689, only church members could be elected to the General Court and only the General Court elected governors and lieutenant governors. Had King Philip's War of 1675 not occurred, the Massachusetts at Natick and the Nipmuck at Grafton (or Hassenamessett, the second church) could have quite easily been elected to the General Court representing these towns.

The crowning accomplishment of John Eliot's life – and the only way we have today of any transliteration of the Massachusetts dialect (the "Americans" had no written language) – was his translation of the Bible into the Algonquin language in 1663; it was also the first Bible published in North America.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This task took 12 years. Eliot was an outstanding student of languages. He learned to speak Algonquin, he explained quite simply, because it was a language of God. The backbone of Puritan ideology was direct communication through prayer with God. The Algonquians, like all native nations, had remarkable memories that compensated for their lack of writing.

Nesutan, a Masschuset, joined Eliot as an interpreter in 1646; without him and a 19-year old Nipmuck from Grafton named James the Printer, the Bible could not have been written or published. Eliot assigned a written word to a spoken sound and Nesutan was used to test that phonetic spelling. James was an apprentice to a skilled British printer, but the Nipmuck recognized the sounds of the words and was able to set type and correct galley proofs more accurately. Two Bibles dated 1663 are owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society, while the Congregational Library in Boston owns a copy of the 1685 edition. This writer estimated in 1990 that about 40 copies of the Indian Bible of both 1663 and 1685 (that is before and after King Philip's War) were extant in the United States. Nesutan was killed in that war fighting for the English. James fought for the Wampanoag chieftain and took advantage of the post-war amnesty to return to his printing press.

John Eliot died at his home on May 20, 1690 and was buried with his wife in the parish tomb at the town burial ground on Washington Street. In 1858 a sandstone table monument was placed over the grave in which five other Puritan pastors who preceded Eliot are also buried.

In March 1684 Waban Daniel Tokkottwampit, pastor of the Natick Church, explained best who John Eliot was and why he is remembered today: "God hath made you to us and our nation a spiritual father and we are inexpressively engaged to you for your faithful, constant, indefatigable labors, care and love to and for us, for forty years."<sup>5</sup>

Turning the corner of Walnut Avenue, we see a stone wall overgrown with saplings and shrubs along the edge of the hill; this is a remnant of the Isaac Fenno mansion. Fenno was a prosperous dry goods merchant who owned about a quarter of Eliot's pasture, on the crest of which he built a tall, French second-empire mansion with tower in 1878. He aptly named his home *Buena Vista* for the views it afforded in all directions. On the death of his wife Almira Fenno on May 29, 1925, the outcrop with one and a quarter acres was deeded to the city. "I earnestly request," she wrote in her will, "that the city of Boston guard and preserve this natural feature – a bit of old Roxbury used by the Apostle Eliot – as my former husband and I have done for many years." When the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) acquired the two tracts of the former Fenno property on March 23, 1964, it paid \$19,500 to the City Trust Fund for the rocky outcrop. It was the opinion of the City Law Department that the Fenno will was nullified by the eminent domain provisions of the urban renewal legislation that provided the authorization for Warren Gardens. As it turned out, a school proposed for the site was never built and at least a portion of the land still remains open and green as a bit of Old Roxbury.

St. Richard's Street was originally Buena Vista Street, the approach drive to the Fenno house. The street takes its name from St. Richard's Church, which opened in 1946 on the crest of the present cul-de-sac, the first all-Black Catholic parish in Boston.<sup>6</sup> St. Richard's Church was the result of many years of advocacy by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. The order was founded in 1879 by the rich Philadelphia heiress Katherine Drexel, and was devoted to work among "Indians and colored [sic]." The Sisters arrived

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<sup>5</sup> Ford, ed., *Some Correspondence with the New England Company*, 1896.

<sup>6</sup> William J. Leonard, "A Parish for Black Catholics of Boston," in *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 33, Jan. 1997, pp. 44-69.

in Boston in August of 1914 and established a convent at Worcester Square. At that time Black Catholics in Boston numbered about 1000 out of a total Black population of 17,000, and preferred to attend St. Philip's Church on Harrison Avenue.

In 1935 following the Black migration southerly in Roxbury, the Sisters moved into a new convent on Vernon Street and continued to organize all-Black Catholics into their own church. They met their champion in Father – later Cardinal – Richard Cushing, who recognized more than anyone else in the archdiocese the need and value of a Black parish. After he became Cardinal he bought in 1945 the Roxbury Universalist Church, a stone Gothic church built in 1912 opposite the Fenno house, for \$30,000. An additional \$85,000 was spent to renovate the old church – very large sums in early post-war Boston. St. Richard's Church was dedicated on April 7, 1946. Although officially named in honor of St. Richard of Chichester, everyone in the parish knew it was in honor of their own patron saint Richard Cardinal Cushing.

But Cushing began to have second thoughts; after 1957 he began to realize that Black Catholics should be incorporated into a parish where they lived, especially since Roxbury's Black community was growing larger. In 1962, St. Richard's Church became a mission of St. Joseph's Church down the hill on Circuit Street, and St. Richard's was finally closed in 1964. The Boston Redevelopment Authority bought it almost the next day and used it for a year or so as a site office for the Washington Park Urban Renewal Program (WPUR).

As we turn down Walnut Avenue, all around us is Warren Gardens, consisting of 228 modestly-priced homes. Warren Gardens was the largest housing development planned and built by the Boston Redevelopment Authority in the Washington Park Urban Renewal Area. WPUR was designated in 1963, a 502-acre triangle with its apex at Dudley Square, its base on Seaver Street and two sides on Washington and Warren Streets.<sup>7</sup> Walnut and Humboldt Avenues divided the area into thirds like tuning forks. Walnut Avenue and Humboldt Avenue were in the center of the first of three clearance sites, 68 acres including Regent and Monroe Streets. In our walk down Walnut Avenue we will see Warren Gardens, Charlame Homes, and Martin Luther King Boulevard, all built in this tract. Seventy-three percent of all the homes in this area were destroyed in 1964 and 1965. Ninety two- and three-family homes and other buildings were razed to create Warren Gardens (including 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Russo's home).<sup>8</sup>

Warren Gardens was built in two phases between 1967 and 1969, and stretched over twelve acres from Regent to Dale Street. The architects were Hugh Stubbins Associates with Ashley Meyer as principle designer. They designed 226 attached

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<sup>7</sup> Enabling legislation that made WPUR possible was Title I of the Omnibus Housing Act of 1949 (63 Stat, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress Chap. 388. 1949), signed by President Truman on July 5, 1949, and amended in 1954 and 1961.

<sup>8</sup> The type of housing destroyed is illustrated by one survivor at 36 Regent St. at the corner of Dabney. This is a wood-frame, six-family house with a distinctive round-arch entrance that supports a four-column inset piazza on the second floor. This was designed by MacKay and Dunham and completed in Dec. 1905. Two large parcels of land between Fountain and Regent streets have been vacant since 1965 and there are no signs in 2008 (as this is written) of replacing the homes torn down.

townhouses in four clusters of from four to twelve homes, built largely of prefabricated concrete and wood forms. A retail block, one of three planned for businesses displaced by renewal, was planned but never built on the apron of Walnut and Warren, and has been a delightful community garden lovingly built and tended by Warren Gardens residents for decades. (Some things even a mighty urban planning agency can't do.)

On September 30, 1965 Warren Gardens Inc. was formed as a cooperative under 221(d)(3) of the urban renewal code, to develop the land that was sold by the BRA – which was responsible for site clearance – for \$25, 000 on March 31, 1967. The same day the Provident Institute for Savings agreed to a \$4.4 million mortgage. The BRA accepted the development as complete on March 13, 1969.

Warren Gardens is a rambling and complex pattern of row houses reminiscent of London Council house communities, with prominent party walls, repetitive unit styles and tiny private yard space. Warren Gardens occupies two self-contained domestic villages with virtually no contact with the public street. (Indeed, 46 row houses on Warren Street are set apart by a high masonry wall like a cloister.) At Fountain and Circuit Streets the housing is built of cement blocks and wood in attached rows of two to two-and-a-half stories high in four concentric circles around Dabney Street, with commanding views of the city skyline. These homes (like all the others) are painted in pastel hues and have distinctive steep end walls.

The second village – Kensington Park – was built along Warren, Walnut, Rockland and Dale Streets, largely invisible except for a few houses on Walnut and St. Richard Streets. They turn their backs on Rockland Street. This sprawling maze of attached homes on separate grades and cul-de-sacs is the heart of Warren Gardens.

The triangle of Humboldt and Warren and the area around Laurel and Catawba Streets have been changed beyond recognition from 1963; old streets have been ripped up and new ones put in place to create the second development in the urban renewal area: two housing clusters known as Charlame Homes, the name taken from the Charles Street AME Church, 551 Warren Street, which developed the parcel.<sup>9</sup> In late September, 1963, Rev. Walter C. Davis of Charles Street AME presented to Mayor John Collins the plans of architects Rudolph Beders and Phineas Alpers for 92 row houses set in clusters on a 4.9-acre parcel of land. Twenty-five houses were razed for 52 two- and three-story attached homes built on eight private ways at right angles off a new street called Charlame. Three flat-roofed barrack-type blocks were arranged in six pairs. At the corner of Laurel Street were two three-story duplexes. The old weave of tight streets with closely-knit houses flush to the curb spreading through Eliot's pasture that was familiar even to Drake, was not the new Roxbury of the WPUR planners. Instead, they built isolated, self-conscious hamlets.

Our walk down Walnut Street past the Lewis School and the wall of Washington Park playground – both of which we will look at later – is halted by a four-lane highway that we will have to navigate to get to the rest of Walnut Avenue. This is Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard, the cross-town highway in WPUR that originally was built as a connector to the planned Interstate 95 interchange at Jackson Square from Columbia

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<sup>9</sup> Drake, as it turned out, was unnecessarily concerned that the name Roxbury would be forgotten after annexation. However, urban renewal planners obliterated places and streets and covered them with artificially-coined names, like “Charlame.”

Road. It was completed in 1968, but construction of the interstate highway was stopped dead by Governor Francis Sargent in 1970. Roxbury was stuck with a superfluous four-lane divided highway that was renamed after the great civil rights leader. The southwest side of the Boulevard is a crude jagged edge of awkward motley trees growing out from barren shadeless ground, indicating all too clearly that the BRA quickly lost interest in this roadway the minute it was built.

The triangle created by the cross-town Humboldt and Walnut Avenues, was tucked in with phase II of Charlame Homes, completed in 1967. Forty homes were built in clusters within the space. The largest is a zigzag group which faces a shared common area with other clusters, but turns its back on Walnut and Humboldt. It was also designed by Beders and Alpers – who were apparently embarrassed by phase I, because they chose a more interesting, if out-of-context, style resembling ski lodges, with thick overhanging eaves and cut-in dormers.<sup>10</sup>

We retrace our steps at Charlame Homes and walk back to stand outside no. 81 Walnut Avenue. This is the Church of Christ, whose bold lawn sign proclaims that it was founded in AD 33. The low, one-story building was built in 1968 on the site of the Messinger House, whose granite boundary wall still stands around the property, a place familiar to Drake. But what draws our interest is the big yellow-brick apartment house across the street called the WalRoc, after its location on Walnut and Rockland. The apartment building was a new way of living that was slowly gaining acceptance by 1878 when Drake wrote his history, and at the time of his death in 1885 the house of flats was a legitimate living style and as ‘trendy’ as the condominium has been since 1985.

Number 80-84 Walnut Avenue at the corner of Rockland was built in 1897. It was unusually large for a suburban (i.e. outside the downtown core) apartment building and unusually bright, constructed in yellow brick with light sandstone trim. These only increased the building’s scale as well as its visibility, and no doubt helped as marketing points for the developers Finkelstein and Goldstein. Edward P. Morse was architect; he had a large lot to work with – one half-acre of the former Parker estate – and he used every square inch. Morse piled up the yellow brick into five rhythmic barrel bays and inserted ox-eye windows at the edge of each shallow porch.

Drake could see that his old Roxbury was changing. A year before his death, Melville Grant built in 1884 one of the first suburban apartment houses in Roxbury, at 101 Dale Street. Called “The Dale,” it was an eight-suite “Family Hotel,” as early apartment houses were then called. Louis Weisbein designed The Dale facing Washington Park in a subdued panel-brick style of four stories and eight suites.<sup>11</sup> Weisbein seemed to understand the intricacies of multifamily housing; in 1877 he designed the white marble-clad Hotel Comfort at 2129 Washington Street, nearly

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<sup>10</sup> For some reason the BRA planners retained three 1928 apartment houses on the Walnut Ave. side of the phase II triangle, nos. 150-154 and 158. Barney Levy designed nos. 150 and 154, and Max Kalman designed no. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Building permit, 19 July 1884. See also the *American Architect & Building News*, 9 Aug. 1885, p. 71. Weisbein was a German Jew and one of Boston’s first Jewish architects; he opened his practice in 1858 and worked through 1912. In 1884 he also designed Congregation Adath Israel which is today the Columbus Avenue AME Church.



opposite the Eustis Street Burial Ground. Although more of a real hotel for short-term stays, it did offer year-round rental and so could be considered an apartment house. It catered mainly to the business class who took the horse-cars into downtown Boston.

In 1875, J. H. Besarick designed Roxbury's first family hotel, the Eliot, at 68 Bartlett Street at Eliot Square. This was a tall, elegant panel-brick building of careful ornamentation, planned to make this new type of living appealing to the middle-class mind. But the suburbs had what the downtown core did not – land. There were large lots, the remnants of old 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century estates whose third- and fourth-generation owners were willing to sell as the railroad made commuting from outside the city limits more convenient. These large lots were suited for the development of large apartment buildings.

In time the family hotel was seen by the upper and upper-middle classes as another new fashion of living. The grandest of all in Roxbury was the huge six-story Hotel Warren that Carl Fehmer designed at the prominent corner of Warren, Regent and St. James Streets in 1886, sadly lost to the urban renewal bulldozer. It is today a church parking lot. The *American Architect and Building News* of 15 Nov. 1886 printed two pages of illustrations of this apartment house.

At the time the WalRoc was under construction, the *Boston Daily Globe* of 14 Oct. 1897 (p. 10) reported that the apartment house was here to stay: “The apartment house is becoming more popular every day. More people are giving up the care of a big house than they are of flats for the reason that the trouble in caring for a flat is comparatively light as to the work in a whole house. Many of these improved houses are being erected in Roxbury either on the sites of old structures or on vacant land.”

The apartment house was the greatest change in the look of Walnut Avenue and we will see many more types of this new housing as we walk along past the Horatio Harris estate, and as we get to Townsend Street.

Old buildings took on new lives along Walnut Avenue, too. We stand at the doorway of no. 84 and look over to the Davis Funeral Home. Drake knew this house as the residence of C. P. Townsend. It was converted into a funeral parlor for Norris and Davis in 1946 by architect Saul Moffie, a well-known designer of apartment houses. New uses for old buildings would not surprise Drake; he could see old mansions take on new lives in his own day. For instance, the Kirk Boott House, designed by Charles Bulfinch in 1804 at Bowdoin Square, was converted in part to the Revere House Hotel in 1849.

Dale Street is the first cross-street of Walnut Avenue (the second being Townsend) that connects Warren with Washington Street. Dale was built from Walnut to Warren in 1844 and extended to Washington Street in 1867-68, after annexation. (Townsend Street was also completed at that same time.) At the corner is the large stone Eliot Congregational Church, first gathered in 1870. Drake knew it as the Walnut Congregational Society, and he mentions the chapel, an English Gothic building of Roxbury conglomerate, the only part of the present church with which he was familiar. The Walnut Congregational Church was built at the end of a lot owned by church member Arthur W Tufts; Pastor Albert H. Plumb was the guiding force of that effort. A well-proportioned building, no architect is recorded, but a strong candidate is Harris M. Stephenson (1845-1909). Born and raised in Jamaica Plain, he practiced with the notable Roxbury architect Nathaniel J. Bradlee, who knew how to work with stone. Stephenson

opened his own practice in 1870, and the chapel was dedicated in 1873.<sup>12</sup> The cornerstone for the main church was laid on 10 Sep. 1887, and dedicated on 27 Feb. 1889. Church and chapel fit together well in large part because of the materials and massing. It was built of Roxbury conglomerate with a three-story crenelated corner belltower, with conical roof facing Walnut and Dale Streets. J. Williams Beal (1855-1910) was the architect as reported in the *Boston Daily Globe* of 20 Feb. 1888. Beal did not begin to practice until after his graduation from MIT in 1877, so he could not have been the architect of the chapel.

After World War I, the Walnut Congregational Society merged with the Eliot Congregational Church (formed in 1835); together with the Immanuel Congregational Church on Moreland Street, with which it had merged about a decade earlier, the church became the Eliot Congregational Church. On 30 Nov. 1929 a fire gutted the 1889 church. It was rebuilt in 1931 as a gymnasium, and the 1873 chapel became the sanctuary.<sup>13</sup>

The George Lewis School sits opposite the Eliot Congregational Church, and Drake would have known the original school on Dale Street opposite Sherman Street (today a vacant lot). Drake would have known George Lewis, too, the last mayor of Roxbury. Drake also would have been familiar with the Morse and Nichols houses that were taken for the new school around 1911. Harrison H. Atwood designed the Lewis in 1912. Atwood also designed the sprawling Roxbury Memorial High School on Townsend Street in 1926 (today the Boston Latin Academy). The Lewis was a middle school in 2007 with an enrollment of 260 students, with 40 teachers and administrative staff.

The Lewis School is the first of three schools that we will see on our Walnut Avenue walk. The other two schools, the Higginson and the Ellis, are further down the avenue near Crawford Street. The Lewis School was built next to the 9.9-acre Washington Park, or Honeysuckle Hill in Drake's day, one of the first public parks in Roxbury, laid out in 1867 after annexation. It was doubled in size by urban renewal at the expense of many homes (and families) and two streets; the park's boundaries were extended to Washington Street and the MLK Boulevard. On April 16, 1970, plans were approved for softball and football fields, basketball courts and a children's playground nestled among rocks and ledge not far from the school. All of this was completed in 1972 – among the last parts of the Washington Park Urban Renewal plan completed before the Nixon administration froze funding for all urban renewal programs in 1973.<sup>14</sup>

If Mr. Drake took Paulding Street around the edge of the park and then turned right onto Dale Street, he would walk past no. 72 Dale Street, a modest, wood-frame,

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<sup>12</sup> Another contender is Alexander Rice Esty, who died in 1881.

<sup>13</sup> The Moreland St Church was formed in 1876. It was sold to Congregational Mishkan Tefila in 1907. Information on the 1929 fire is from the Eliot Congregational Church National Register Nomination Form, Boston Landmarks Commission, Carol Chirico, 22 Dec. 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Jerry Spencer, landscape architect, and Fay Spofford and Thorndike, engineers. The construction cost \$975,000.

“end house” built in 1874 by the Roxbury housewright William Runnel, who lived next door at no. 74. His shop was at Warren and Walnut where the gardens are today. The “end house” was a common building style in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston. As the Boston Landmarks historian wrote, these were gable-fronted houses with the usual street-side front built perpendicular to the street, which made for maximum use of the lot.

Drake would have walked right past the house, and so would we except our curiosity is caught by a plaque on a boulder. This was placed by the Bostonian Society on October 17, 1998, and it explains that this modest house was the home of Ella Little Collins (1912-1996), the step-sister of black nationalist and Muslim leader Malcolm X (Malcolm Little). Ella Little moved to Boston from Butler, Georgia in the early 1930s and bought 72 Dale Street in 1941. She became the legal guardian of Malcolm about 1940, and he graduated from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the Ellis School. He seldom stayed at 72 Dale, but he stayed in the hearts and minds of Ella Little and her family throughout his personal transformation and his rise as spokesman for Black American pride and independence. In 1964 she underwrote his life-changing pilgrimage to Mecca.

Drake, like almost every Bostonian of his class in his day, encountered few Blacks in Boston; their numbers were small and they lived their lives invisibly in white, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston on the north slope of Beacon Hill. But Roxbury in 1940 was undergoing a dramatic demographic change, as Black families moved into the district largely from the row-house tenements of the South End, and later on escaping the Jim Crow South.<sup>15</sup>

In his 1964 *Autobiography* Malcolm X left an indelible picture of the Humboldt Avenue-Elm Hill Avenue section of Roxbury on the edge of WWII:

“That summer of 1940, I caught the Greyhound bus to Boston. From my seat in – you guessed it – the back of the bus – I gawked out the window at the white man’s world. They didn’t have turnpikes then. [I was going to see] my father’s grown daughter by his first marriage, Ella. She was the first really proud black woman I had ever seen in my life. She was plainly proud of her very dark skin. She was in her second marriage; her first husband had been a doctor.

“Ella met me at the terminal and she took me home [to] Waumbeck Street in the Sugar Hill section of Roxbury, the Harlem of Boston. I didn’t know the world contained as many Negroes as I saw thronging downtown Roxbury at night. I went gawking around the neighborhood – the Waumbeck and Humboldt Avenue section of Roxbury...I saw those Roxbury Negroes acting and living differently from any black people I’d ever dreamed of in my life. This was the snooty black neighborhood; they called themselves the ‘Four Hundred’ and looked down their noses on the Negroes of the black ghetto, the so-called “town” section where May, my other half-sister, lived. They prided themselves on being incomparably more ‘cultured, cultivated and dignified’...these Hill Negroes were breaking their backs trying to imitate whites.

“Any black family that had been around Boston long enough to own the home they lived in was considered among the Hill elite. Their quiet homes sat back on tier-

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<sup>15</sup> Lower Roxbury – between Mass. Ave. and Melnea Cass Blvd. – was the community of Black Boston beginning in the 1920s, centered around Madison Park, all destroyed for urban renewal. Malcolm’s half-sister Mary owned a meat market where Ella worked at Washington and Lenox streets.

mowed yards. It didn't make any difference that they had to rent out rooms to make ends meet. The native-born New Englanders among them looked down upon the recently-migrated Southerners who lived next door, like Ella. And a big percentage of the Hill dwellers were in Ella's category: Southern strivers and scramblers and West Indian Negroes whom both the New Englanders and Southern blacks called 'black Jews.'

"In those days on the Hill any who could claim 'professional' status – teachers and preachers, practical nurses, Pullman car porters and dining car waiters, janitors, maids and cooks for whites, also considered themselves superior...all striding around wearing top hats and cutaways. 'I'm with an old family' was the euphemism for the white folks' cooks and maids, or 'he's in banking or he's in securities,' describing the dignified, posturing black janitor or bond-house messenger. I don't know how many 40- and 50-year-old errand boys went down the Hill dressed like ambassadors in black coats and white collars to downtown jobs 'in government' or 'in finance.'"<sup>16</sup>

Humboldt Avenue juts off at an angle just past the Eliot Church and continues in a ruler-straight line over the hills to Seaver Street and the entrance to Franklin Park. Humboldt Avenue was completed on September 15, 1886 as a connection to Franklin Park, but more importantly as a broad public way that opened up huge tracts of widely spaced estates to residential subdivision. "Magnificent new Humboldt Avenue diverges from Walnut and runs up to Franklin Park," the popular *Kings Handbook of Boston* explained in 1889.<sup>17</sup>

Track was laid down the center to connect with the streetcar line from Dudley terminal. Residents and park users alike took the Franklin Park-Humboldt horse cars, which became electrified about 1898, down Walnut and Humboldt. For many years this was called the Seaver Street Loop to Egleston Square, one of the most patronized car lines in Boston. Today it is the busy bus # 44 which has a stop at Warren Gardens.

One of the first housing sites built on the new Humboldt Avenue was at no. 2-12 Humboldt, called Lanesborough Gables, six attached three-family houses designed by Charles E. Park in 1895. Park took the awkward triangular lot owned by Arthur Tufts

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<sup>16</sup> *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, Grove Press edition, 1964), pp. 39-41.

<sup>17</sup> Origins of street names are an inexact science; when and why did Oriole St. change to Crawford, for example, and who is Harold? Yet it's safe to say that Humboldt takes its name from the great German geographer, explorer and scientist Alexander Von Humboldt (1769-1859). From the time he spent six weeks in Washington DC in May, 1804 talking with Thomas Jefferson, he left an indelible impression on American natural scientists and intellectuals. (Until WWI, German science, literature and historical methodology was considered the best in the world and many American historians and scientists took advanced degrees from German universities.) Humboldt explored South America for the King of Spain and Russia for Czar Nicholas I. He spent thirty years in writing *The American Journey*, 33 volumes of the natural history of the Americas, 16 volumes devoted to botany alone. Many natural features, towns and counties throughout America were named after him. It is logical then for Roxbury to name this great new avenue that led to Boston's largest park – that preserved so much of Roxbury's original topography – after the geographer.

(adjacent to Eliot Church, the land which was also owned by Tufts),<sup>18</sup> an interesting block of homes sadly scarred with aluminum siding.

#### Part IV

As we pause in our walk to let the midday traffic pass on MLK Boulevard, we look ahead and notice how Walnut Avenue becomes narrower and curves out of view as it passes by two brick apartment buildings, a view that would be familiar even for Drake. Walnut Avenue from here on becomes a far more residential suburban street; there are no streetcar tracks. The Avenue twists and turns as it follows the property lines of old estates whose stone walls and gate posts can still be seen, before it bursts out onto Seaver Street and then continues its meandering way until it disappears in Franklin Park. When Drake wrote his history, this part of Walnut Avenue was thinly settled and fronted with huge homes set in the middle of broad lawns dotted with stables and other outbuildings, and carefully planted with specimen trees and fruit trees. These estates ranged in size from three to 25 acres.

We take a rest on the wall of Horatio Harris Park, well known to Drake, who probably rested on the same wall (except without the bottled water). He would have known this as Fountain Square, a 2.5-acre green of turf and rock dominated by two huge fantastic outcrops of glacier-smooth Roxbury conglomerate cut through by footpaths. Alternate streaks of crags and jagged edges were created by ancient earthquakes.<sup>19</sup> The City of Roxbury set aside this park in January of 1852, and it was named for Horatio Harris in 1916 when the City of Boston hired the F. L. Olmsted firm to redesign the footpaths. Harris was a wealthy auctioneer who owned a large 25-acre estate between Monroe and Crawford Streets that included this parkland. His brick mansion has been all but destroyed; only the lower story and the porte-cochere stand today. The upper two floors were removed in 1941. In 1920 a two-story brick addition was tacked on facing Harrishof Street by the Hebrew Educational Alliance. Since 1971 the building has been shared by the Holy Mt. Sinai Church and Deliverance Temple.

The mansion has been hidden by a wall of eight apartment houses built between 1913 and 1916 on what was the front lawn of the mansion facing Townsend Street.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Building permit, 16 Sep. 1895. See also the *Boston Herald*, 12 Dec. 1896, p. 6, and *American Architect and Building News*, 25 Jan. 1896. Park also designed Wellington Court at 515 Warren St. in 1902, a handsome courtyard apartment house at Elm Hill Ave.

<sup>19</sup> “This park contains huge glacially scoured outcrops of Roxbury conglomerate. Evidence of glacial erosion, including polished surfaces, is well displayed in most upper surfaces. The combination of smooth upper surfaces and abrupt jagged glacially plucked faces form a classic *roche moutonnee* (sheep back) feature.” Skeeahan, James J., *Puddingstone, Drumlins and Ancient Volcanoes: A Geological Field Guide* (Wes Stone Press, 1979, p. 24).

<sup>20</sup> All designed by the Silverman Engineering Co., a major architect of apartment buildings. The first one built was #107 Townsend in 1913, a six-family building which was permitted on 11 Mar. 1913. Samuel Levy designed 250-256 Walnut Ave. at the corner of the Silverman block in 1928. David Frankel was the developer.

This line of buildings is an interesting contrast to Harriswood Crescent on the opposite corner at 68-82 Harold Street. It was the first subdivision of the Harris estate by its heirs. They broke off a 125 x 175-foot rectangle and on it the inspired architect J. Williams Beal, fresh off the Walnut Congregational Church commission, designed a gorgeous Queen-Anne -style row of brick, half-timber and stone-trim row houses. The end walls of the corner houses have a grand Syrian arch doorway of light stone. These were expensive homes built at a total cost of \$160,000 or \$10, 600 each, which was quite high for that time. The interiors were elaborate, carved in wood by experienced craftsmen. The homes were completed on Oct. 3, 1890. In 2000 one home in mid-block was listed for \$450,000.<sup>21</sup>

The Nichols estate at the corner of Elmore and Walnut Avenue continued the subdivision trend in 1909, when Joseph Lyons razed the Nichols house and built four high-shouldered wood-frame, two-family houses at 221-227 Walnut Avenue. These were designed by Murdock & Boyle and completed on March 18, 1910. Nearby the Elizabeth Powell House at 241 Walnut Avenue at the corner of Townsend Street was converted to the Elm Hill Private Hospital about 1915. Mayor John Collins was born there in 1919. The stone wall and entrance posts are still standing.

At the same time another hospital was dedicated, and we'll take a short diversion to look at the Jewish Memorial Hospital and Rehabilitation Center at 59 Townsend Street. The JMH was formed as a hospital and home for incurables in 1928 by the Roxbury Ladies Bikur Cholim Association. They bought a big stone mansion at the crown of the hill, perched on a vast ledge of conglomerate, built in 1880 by Henry C. Dennison, who owned a card-making factory in the valley below on Vale Street.<sup>22</sup> In 1898 Dennison bought the Para Rubber Company factory in South Framingham and removed his enterprise there, where for nearly 75 years it was the Dennison Manufacturing Company. Dennison's home had previously been converted into Beth Israel Hospital which was dedicated on October 22, 1916. When the grand new Beth Israel Hospital was opened on Longwood Avenue in September 1928, the Ladies Association bought the old 42-bed hospital.

The Ladies Association had a much different mission than Beth Israel Hospital. The Greater Boston Bikur Cholim Hospital took patients no one else could care for: the poor, the terminally ill, the elderly and the outcast immigrant were treated from the Mt Sinai Dispensary at 105 Chambers Street in the old West End. It changed its name to Jewish Memorial Hospital in 1932, and in 1936 a three-story wing was added that increased the number of beds to 87; it included a dental clinic and a larger, strictly-kosher

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<sup>21</sup> "The architectural unity ... is unequaled by any Queen Anne group anywhere in the city," as Douglas Shand Tucci wrote in his 1979 book *Built in Boston*, p. 87. See also the perspective drawings and floor plans in *American Architect and Building News*, Aug. 2, 1890. Beal also designed All Souls Unitarian Church at Warren and Elm Hill avenues in 1888 (the Charles St. AME Church since 1938). At Grove Hall, Beal designed a full-blown Colonial Revival home for Judge Albert Hayden, at 11 Wayne St. in 1899.

<sup>22</sup> 43-45 Vale Street was built in three stages from 1880 to 1884. The two-acre site has been vacant since about 1968.

kitchen. All this was made possible with donations and volunteers. Enlarged again by a 36-bed annex in 1947, it changed its focus to rehabilitation and in 1949 became affiliated with Tufts Medical School; in 1971 it became associated with Boston University Medical Center. A 1988 wing replaced the Dennison house and the 1947 building. In 2008 the Jewish Memorial Hospital and Rehabilitation Center had 207 beds, five doctors, three therapists, and sixty five nurses. This was a very long way from a West End tenement.

On the southern side of the hill at 160 Harrishof Street is the Henry Lee Higginson School, which peers down at us as we walk towards Crawford Street. The Higginson was designed by James H. Ritchie and built in 1922. Like many other buildings we've seen, this too was built on a large estate, and the stone boundary wall of the Haley House borders the schoolyard. The school was named for Henry Lee Higginson (1834-1919), a prosperous and generous Boston investment banker. He served in the Civil War, joining the Second Massachusetts Regiment, which fought at Bull Run, as a second lieutenant. Later he joined the Second Massachusetts Cavalry, where he was promoted to major and wounded in battle with a sabre gash across the forehead in 1863. A philanthropist of the arts and education, he founded and for forty years supported the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which gave its first concert in 1881. He was the chief benefactor of magnificent Symphony Hall that opened in 1900. A veteran of the Civil War, Higginson lived to see the armistice of the First World War. The school was built and named for the Major just three years after his death. In 2007 the Higginson School had a pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment of 152 with 13 teachers.

After a few steps, Walnut Avenue and Crawford Street split off, each following the high stone wall of Abbottsford, the huge Gothic mansion of Aaron Davis Williams, today the National Center for Afro-American Artists. A. D. Williams was well known to Drake, and he wrote about members of that illustrious family in his history. A. D. Williams' seven-acre manor adjoined the enormous demesne of Jeremiah Williams, which stretched back over Elm Hill to Warren Street. Alden Frink designed the 2 ½-story mansion built of cut Roxbury conglomerate in 1872. It had a four-story pedimented gable tower. A. D. called his home Oak Bend, and it was the grandest home in Roxbury. A. D. inherited the land from his father, and was a partner in a fuel, lumber, lime, and paint-supply company, as well as the founder of the Boston Lead Works. He lost his fortune in the 1873 depression (in addition to making some bad investments), but he paid his debts in full and removed to the old Williams farmhouse his grandfather had built in 1704, next door at the corner of Ruthven, where he lived out his life.

Oak Bend was sold to the Pfaff family, the well-known Roxbury brewers, and later in 1886 to James M. Smith, owner of the Suffolk Brewery in South Boston. Smith changed the name to Abbottsford.<sup>23</sup> The astonishing fact about Abbottsford is that it

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<sup>23</sup> Mid-century New England loved Sir Walter Scott (1771-1836) and his Highland romances. Abbottsford was the name of Scott's 1824 home on the River Tweed. Alden Frink lived on nearby Mayfair St. off Elmore St. He is best known as an architect of railroad stations. For the history of Abbottswood see the Boston Landmarks Commission Study Report, 1984. For a detailed description of the interior of Oak Bend, see the *Boston Daily Globe*, 25 June 1882, p. 9.

exists at all. It is the last survivor of a distinguished line of mansions and broad lawns which fronted Walnut Avenue from one end to the other. In 1923 the house and grounds was acquired by the City of Boston and the mansion was renovated as a boys' school. After 50 years as a school, Abbottsford began a new life and was renovated a second time when it was given by the City of Boston to the National Center of Afro-American Artists in 1976. The National Center was founded in 1970 and has a rich partnership with the Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1987 the bronze heroic-sized head called *Eternal Presence* by the sculptor John Wilson was installed on a ledge along the Crawford Street side. Gazing sphinx-like directly at the walker as he approaches the museum from Walnut Avenue at Dennison Street, he appears to be slowly rising out of the subterranean mass of Roxbury conglomerate ("puddingstone") like the *Dorchester Giant* who cast his pudding across the countryside in the 1836 poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894):

And if, some pleasant afternoon,  
You'll ask me out to ride,  
The whole of the story I will tell,  
And you shall see where the puddings fell,  
And pay for the punch beside.<sup>24</sup>

In 1932 the City of Boston took a rectangular parcel out of the Abbottswood grounds and built the David A. Ellis School. The building permit was issued on December 12, 1932, and the architects were Fay, Spofford and Thorndike and Ralph Temple Jackson. The Ellis School is a long, Art Deco building built of tapestry brick with attached abbreviated brick piers that make it appear taller than it is. It was built at a cost of \$226,000. When the school opened in 1933, the Abbottsford house remained as a school annex. In 2007 the K-5th grade school had 283 students and a teaching staff of 26. It has one of the largest school playgrounds in the city, the Crawford Playground.

David A. Ellis (1873-1929) was the first Jewish member of the Boston School Committee to which he was first elected in 1901. Elected to two year-long terms, he was chosen chairman in 1909 and 1911. Born in Buffalo, New York, he moved with his family to Boston as a youngster and graduated from Roxbury Latin School and Harvard Law School. Admitted to the Boston Bar, he practiced law in the firm of Louis D. Brandeis. At the time of his first election to the school committee, he lived at 82 Harold Street in Harriswood Crescent. He died in 1929 and at that time was living at the Hotel Puritan at 390 Commonwealth Avenue, a residential hotel near Charlesgate and the Harvard Club. In his first years on the committee, he chaired the sub-committees on drawing and school buildings, which included school names. (He was chairman when the Lewis School was built.) As a Jew he was involved in the struggle with assimilation of Boston's growing Jewish population, which between 1905 and 1920 was moving into, and building up, the Grove Hall and Elm Hill sections of Roxbury in large numbers. Among the most important issues was that their children be allowed to take days off from school to observe Jewish holidays without penalty. In 1901 this was a very strange

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<sup>24</sup> Walk down Forest Hills St. from Green St., and as the hill drops towards Williams St., look into the forest of Franklin Park and you'll see where many pudding plums fell.



notion to Christian school teachers and principals who resisted such change. Ellis was a careful and deliberate referee in this question – which was often very emotional – and as a result the School Department began (reluctantly) to allow Jewish boys and girls time off from school for their holidays. Education was extremely important to David A. Ellis: he frequently wrote about its values in the daily newspaper. But in the opening years of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Boston, he was also a pioneer in educating the City itself to adapt to, and accept, non-Christian children into the public schools.

Walnut Avenue curves around Oak Bend on its way to Seaver Street, and retains its distinctive residential character, even with the addition of apartment buildings, as we get to Westminster Avenue. In fact, new homes are still being built. In 2006 Francisco de Pina built a triple-decker at 286 Walnut at the corner of Holworthy Street, a very rare housing style after 1930. Cesar de Silva was the architect. This three-family house sits between two apartment buildings. On the opposite corner of Holworthy, no. 163-165 Crawford was completed on February 11, 1911. It was a twelve-family brick building designed by the Silverman Engineering Company.

A row of seven large, rambling, high-shouldered Queen Anne-style homes with steep gables and wide verandas, built in the 1880s, line Walnut Avenue facing Abbottsford. The most interesting is the Leonard Ware House at 297 Walnut Avenue, designed by Sanford Phipps in 1885.<sup>25</sup> An interesting, Queen Anne shingle-style corner house, Ware had a working clock installed in its front gable as a good-will gesture to his neighbors who might not own a pocket watch. It remains to this day the only house in Boston with a clock, although its hands are gone.

The large estates nearby toward Seaver Street, such as the E. F. Howard and Charles Clapp properties, have long been subdivided into multifamily houses. Modest homes were being erected on somewhat smaller lots on a scale within the means of the new professional class moving into Roxbury in the post-Civil War years. Two of these can be seen at nos. 366 and 367 Walnut Avenue, almost to Seaver Street, and a third, the W. J. Carlin House designed in 1900 by Fehmer & Page, was built on the corner at 12 Seaver Street.

Mr. Drake was very familiar with the Aaron Davis Williams farmhouse that was built in 1704. An interesting transaction concerning this property comes down to us in the *Suffolk County Deeds*, volume 97, page 376: “April 26, 1762 in the second year in King George’s reign. Samuel Williams to John Foster Williams husbandman. 30 acres with dwelling house and barn bounded on the northeast on highway from Roxbury to Rocky Swamp. Southwest on School land [i.e. School Street]. Northwest on other lands...” This was the property Aaron Davis Williams of Oak Bend inherited from his father. The father established the Institute for Savings in Roxbury.<sup>26</sup> He also raised prize cattle on his land and left a fortune to his son. Abbottsford Street was laid out through the pasture in 1895. The gambrel-roofed farmhouse was built of hand-hewn planks two feet wide and stood until 1924 when Jacob Reznick acquired the land and buildings for

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<sup>25</sup> Building permit, May 5, 1883.

<sup>26</sup> The Institute for Savings built a grand bank at Dudley Square in 1901 that still stands, occupied by Citizens and One United Bank. For a brief history of the house and family see the *Boston Sunday Herald*, 5 Apr. 1905.

\$140,000. He built three apartment buildings of nine flats each designed by Samuel S. Levy on the site.

Forty years later a new multi-family development was built on the 2.75 acre Howard Hersey estate that sat behind a low stone wall at Walnut and Westminster Avenues. A carriage drive from Westminster to Walnut curved around large conglomerate ledges up to the house surrounded by fine trees. The property was bought on October 1, 1965 by the Development Corporation of America, which had just completed Academy Homes I on Columbus Avenue. The architect of Academy Homes I was Carl Koch (1912-1998), who used a revolutionary prefabricated concrete slab construction process which he and his firm invented. Koch was the architect for, and part developer of, the cluster blocks of 41 two- and three-story apartments that were named Westminster Court. It was completed on March 14, 1967 when it was advertised as a “totally planned community concept.” The cluster blocks were nestled around the large outcrop around which the old carriage drive was built. Koch used the same design and construction techniques he had pioneered at Academy Homes I in 1963. In 1996 the property was acquired by Urban Edge, a non-profit social/housing organization located in Egleston Square, that invested \$2.8 million in rehabilitating all apartments.

Opposite the Howard Hersey house between Westminster and Walnut Park was the large Charles M. Clapp estate, whose big house faced Walnut Park. The developer Simon Hurwitz bought the property on September 6, 1910 and between 1911 and 1912 built fourteen three-story brick apartment houses facing two parallel streets he built, Wardman and Waldren Roads. These were built as private ways until the City of Boston took jurisdiction and improved them in 1927-1928. Fred Norcross and Thomas M. James were the architects of these long blocks, the largest single development of apartment houses in Egleston Square. This entire development, the Wardman Apartments, was bought by Urban Edge on September 7, 2000, which then spent \$10.7 million in complete rehabilitation of all buildings and 100 apartments in 2001.

The handsome children’s playground at the head of Walnut Park was designed by Wallace Floyd Associates and completed on January 1, 1992. The metal fence around the playground is worth a closer look: it is decorated with panels impressed with little hands; school children pressed their hands into clay molds which were then cast into black plates welded around the top of the fence. The 1992 playground replaced an earlier urban renewal tot lot built in 1964 on the site of the Egleston Square Methodist Church. The Church had moved there in 1911, when it bought a large house that had been built on the site about 40 years earlier. The Egleston Square Methodist Episcopal Church dedicated its wooden Gothic-towered sanctuary on June 13, 1872 at Washington and Beethoven Streets. The rattling of the elevated trains after Egleston Station opened in 1909 forced the church to seek quieter quarters, and it moved up the hill to Walnut Avenue. The church was later replaced by the Egleston Square movie theater in 1926; which closed in 1961.

On Walnut Avenue the Egleston ME Church became the neighbor of St. Mary of the Angels Church, which had begun services in 1908. In 1906 the archdiocese of Boston created St. Mary of the Angels parish out of St. Joseph’s parish on Circuit Street (when St. Joseph’s was built in 1844 its boundaries extended to Dedham).



**ST. MARY OF THE ANGELS CHURCH**, FORMED IN 1906. SERVICES FIRST HELD IN THE OLD HOWARD MANSION BUILT BY 1865. IN 1908 THE BASEMENT OF THE PROPOSED NEW CHURCH DESIGNED BY EDWARD TP GRAHAM WAS OPENED FOR SERVICES. THE GABLE ROOF REPLACED FLAT ROOF IN 1987.

St. Mary's served the maids and coachmen, grooms and cooks, gardeners and mechanics who lived in attics, stable garrets, and outbuildings of the large homes we have passed and talked about along Walnut Avenue. It also served the families living in the small homes on Weld and School Streets, whose fathers worked for the West End Street Railway or at the huge Franklin Brewery.

The Archdiocese bought the hip-roofed house at the corner of Walnut and Seaver Streets, built about 1865 by Joseph Howard, whose land stretched down Columbus Avenue to Washington Street. He was no doubt one of the property owners who gave up a slice of their land when the Town of West Roxbury built Egleston Square – as that part of Columbus Avenue was known – in 1867.



**EGLESTON SQUARE** IN 2010. FROM WALNUT AVE. LOOKING TO WASHINGTON ST.

The fact that the house faces Walnut Avenue suggests it was built before 1867. The house was to be the rectory and until a new church was built mass was said at the West End Street Railway car barn on School Street, which was then unused. (Cars and machinery had moved out to the new Guild Street yards outside Dudley Square a few years earlier.) Architect Edward T. P. Graham designed an imposing Gothic church of grey stone next to the rectory, but only the lower church and basement was completed in 1908 and the congregation held their services there until funds could be raised for the full church. As it turned out, money could not be raised, and his plan was abandoned in the early 1930s. In 1987 a new truss-pitch roof was built to replace the flat housetop originally designed as the floor of the sanctuary. In 2004 the Archdiocese announced that St. Mary of the Angels would be closed, but the church members disagreed, proved their case and the church remained open to celebrate its centennial in September 2006.

As we walk across Columbus Avenue towards Franklin Park, we are passing from Roxbury to Jamaica Plain. In 1851 the westerly part of Roxbury became the separate town of West Roxbury (which included the present-day neighborhood of Jamaica Plain). This lasted until West Roxbury was annexed into the City of Boston in 1874. The boundary between the two halves was Egleston Square. On March 24, 1866, a group of abutting property owners – all citizens of West Roxbury – successfully petitioned the board of selectmen for a broad avenue that would connect Walnut Avenue with Washington Street. The new square was built 45 feet wide and named Egleston Square. Drake doesn't comment on the name and it seems to be lost in time, but one thought is that the name is in honor of William R. Egleston of Springfield, Massachusetts who served during the Civil War from 1862 until 1865 in the Fifth Cavalry (Colored). One of the petitioners may have been an officer in this Colored Cavalry. West Roxbury was the home of Robert Gould Shaw, and feelings were still very high about the "War of the Rebellion" in 1867. In 1895 when Columbus Avenue was extended from the Northampton Street to Seaver Street, it absorbed Egleston Square and it became the name of the neighborhood.

After we cross Columbus Avenue, a short flight of stone steps leads our eye up into the forest of Long Crouch Woods in Franklin Park. Walnut Avenue curves around the rocky edge of this great park and seems to vanish behind a rise. But before we walk into Franklin Park and tell its stories, we stop a moment at the Home for Aged Couples, three dignified brick buildings set behind a stone boundary wall with gateposts.



**HOME FOR AGED COUPLES** AT 409 WALUT AVE. WAS DESIGNED BY JOHN A FOX AND COMPLETED IN 1893. THE NEW ADDITION OF 46 APARTMENTS WAS OPENED IN 2007 AND DESIGNED BY CHIA MING SZE.

As we have seen so often in our walk, this too used to be a private estate residence. In 1876 Edward Rice had a large mansion house built in the prevailing French Second Empire style with imposing mansard cap and tall front windows on his three-acre grounds, once owned by Roxbury Latin School. Rice was a successful industrialist, the owner of a dyestuff factory, and when he died in 1887 he left a portion of his wealth to the Home for Aged Couples. The trustees bought the house and property for \$27,000. The Home was barely four years old. It was organized in 1883 as the New England Aid Society for the Aged and Friendless, with three couples in a row house at 431 Shawmut Avenue. In 1886 the name was changed to the Home for Aged Couples, and with a full house of six husbands and wives it needed larger quarters. Mr. Rice's generosity not only gave the Home large airy rooms with tall ceilings, but also spacious grounds shaded by handsome trees and orchards. The construction of Franklin Park was well under way across the street, when six couples moved into their new home in May, 1887, as reported by the *Boston Daily Globe* on May 30th. The proceeds from the sale of 431 Shawmut helped pay the mortgage of the Rice property. For operating expenses, each couple paid \$400 to enter the Home and assigned all other assets and property to the twenty trustees of the corporation. It was Roxbury's first assisted-living campus for seniors.

In 1892 John A. Fox designed the Walnut Building, which was built next to the Rice mansion. In 1910 the Rice house was razed for a second residence home built in 1911 and also designed by Fox. A third residence and administrative office building with distinctive Flemish gable-end walls was added in 1929. The architects were Coolidge Shepley Richardson and Abbott. This was the Elizabeth Carlton House, named for the founder of the New England Aid Society. On September 27, 2007 the new owners of the Home, Forward Inc., a subsidiary of the Council of Elders, opened the four-story Spencer House on the grounds behind the Walnut Building. Chia Ming Sze was the architect of the new \$6 million residence hall that is the new home of 46 seniors of very modest incomes, as well as those with mental illness. At the same time, substantial alterations and rehabilitation were done on the three original buildings, and the total occupancy in 2007 was 89 moderate-income senior couples and individuals. Work on the grounds and other final touches went on to mid 2008.

In 1887, a walker passing the new Home for Aged Couples would be in the countryside for the first time since leaving Warren Street. On his left he would see

laborers and teams and the new-fangled steam shovel deftly at work molding the land into Franklin Park. He might watch the Walnut Avenue entrance being cut out around a broad sheepsback formation of Roxbury conglomerate, that sits almost on Walnut Avenue. The woods and rocky ledges above the entrance are the highest elevations in Franklin Park. On his right he would look down the wooded hillside to Washington Street over the grounds of two huge estates with single large houses on them. The Parker and Thompson properties totaled 23 acres, land that is (today) stacked with triple-deckers up and down Iffley (laid out in 1895) and Montebello Roads as well as Peter Parley Road.

But our attention is drawn more to Franklin Park and the stories it has to tell us, as Walnut Avenue changes into a park drive and comes to an end at Forest Hills. Although the popular movement to create Franklin Park began in 1876, Drake never mentions it; he died the year that the preliminary plan was approved by Mayor Hugh O'Brien, Boston's first Irish-born chief executive. Soon after the Board of Park Commissioners was appointed by Mayor Samuel Cobb on July 6, 1875, they hired the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1823-1903), then living on Staten Island, to consult with them on locations for Boston parks. Born in Hartford Connecticut, F.L. Olmsted gained national acclaim for New York's Central Park, which he designed with his partner the British-born architect Calvert Vaux in 1858. As his Boston work took up more of his time, Olmsted moved his home and office to Brookline, Mass., in 1881, in the same neighborhood as his great friend and collaborator, the New Orleans architect H. H. Richardson.

In 1876 Olmsted proposed that a 475-acre site in Roxbury be considered for Boston's own "central park." This was a large tract of undeveloped farmland with wide copses of old wood and steep drumlins bounded by main city roads – Seaver Street, Blue Hill Avenue, Walnut Avenue, and a winding lane called Canterbury Street on the south which was rebuilt as the American Legion Highway in 1931. Land takings began in 1880. The first 138-acre parcel was purchased and a topographic map produced at the end of 1883 and the general plan approved on January 1, 1886. In that general plan "the road to the great lotts and great meadow" – Walnut Avenue – was proposed to be discontinued about 1000 feet west of School Street and incorporated almost intact as one of the two principal park drives.

As we walk up the hill past Montebello Road, a stone wall curves into Franklin Park, and as we follow that road to the left we are on old Walnut Avenue. It passes between rugged rock outcrops and the deep shade of big red oaks, and then emerges into the light and blends into the Circuit Drive, the main carriage road of the park. We follow the drive to the right and it will take us out to Morton Street. If we compare the land-taking map of 1880 with a 2007 aerial photograph, we can see that Olmsted retained every twist and turn of ancient Walnut Avenue – even after widening and some straightening in 1925 – on its journey to Forest Hills, or the Road to Rocky Swamp in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

But before we look into the old Park Department Reports that tell us how and when Franklin Park was built, we need to hear the story of Samuel Sawyer. No one welcomed the new Franklin Park more than Samuel Sawyer; no one had more hopes and dreams tied up in the success of Franklin Park than Samuel Sawyer, and no one hoped to make more money out of the new public park more than Samuel Sawyer.



Samuel E. Sawyer was born in Gloucester, Mass. on Nov. 25, 1815 into a family of merchants and ship owners. About the year 1837 he entered the dry-goods trade with the big Boston firm of James Houghton. He became partner and the firm was called Houghton, Sawyer and Adams, located at Milk and Congress Streets. Around 1853 he and James Houghton bought two large tracts of land totaling 27 acres on both sides of Walnut Avenue. Today this land is occupied by the Playstead and White Stadium. This was the farm of Henry Cheney, who acquired it from Humphrey Johnson about 1648 (possibly as a dowry – Humphrey Johnson married Ellen Cheney in 1643). In the annals of Roxbury history, this land was most famous as the farm of Increase Sumner, and when Houghton bought it there was a farmhouse on the property facing Walnut Avenue nearly opposite present day Montebello Road. In 1853, Sawyer built a lane he called Glen Road from Walnut Avenue to the edge of his property and extended it 753 feet the next year – also at his own expense, on land he bought from George Bond – to Forest Hills Street. Glen Road was built 45 feet wide with sidewalks and shade trees. This connected the interior of his and Houghton’s property not only to Washington Street but to the railroad station at Green Street. Sawyer and Houghton were the earliest of venture capitalist land bankers. They saw before almost anyone else the value of suburban subdivision in the area around the railroad station and the parallel horse car tracks on Washington Street, especially with Jamaica Plain a separate town. In 1876 Sawyer and Houghton thought their dreams had come true when the city of Boston considered the old farmsteads west of Walnut Avenue for a large city park. They were soon to be disappointed because rather than the twelve-cents-a-foot they had expected to receive for their lands, the city offered only 3.75 cents. Sawyer spent from 1879 until 1887 – two years before his death – contesting these alleged unfair damages, and he published his arguments in a tedious 103-page book that he privately printed at Gloucester in 1887: *History of the West Roxbury Park, How Obtained, Disregard of Private Rights, Absolute Injustice*.

Sawyer and Houghton wanted the highest prices for their land on the easterly side of Walnut Avenue because their intention was to build fine homes on large lots opposite the new park. Sawyer repeatedly called his lands “precious gems [that] must command corresponding prices... I ask no favors.” When the City took their land by eminent domain, the two haberdashers saw their investment shrink, and Sawyer dug in his Yankee heels. After years of back-and-forth letters to the park commission he finally took the matter to court (Houghton had died earlier, apparently bitter over the loss of his speculation). Sawyer explained to the park commissioners that he proposed a residential subdivision called Newstead, that he had had surveyed by Alexander Wadsworth in 1853 into twenty-two house lots. He looked with undisguised envy at his neighboring landowners George Bond and George Richardson, who were constructing fine homes on Sigourney Street, a road Bond built through his land that connected Walnut Avenue with Glen Road and Robeson Street. The court did increase the amount of money Sawyer received for the land, but he wasn’t satisfied. (He even proposed to sell the land back to the park commissioners!)

Sawyer was able to sell one house lot on the edge of Franklin Park. In 1887 he sold to Helen B. Dole a small parcel with a steep jagged cliff of conglomerate rising abruptly behind. Architects Rand & Taylor designed a pleasant cottage for Ms. Dole, completed in May of 1888, that sits today next to the Glen Road gate. The house was long called Hedgecote because of the wall of tall privet shrubs planted in front.

Samuel Sawyer ranted until the end of his life. He died at his home on Freshwater Cove in Gloucester on December 15, 1889 at the age of 73. He never lived in Boston but stayed in rented rooms at the fashionable Tremont House located next to the Granary Burial Ground. Eager to exploit Boston, he was very generous to his home town. He funded and built the Sawyer Free Library that still flourishes today (whose research librarian was helpful to this story). On his death Sawyer gave 600 acres of land and the funds necessary to create roads and walks that he directed be built. Over the next twenty years, carriage drives were graded and rimmed with boulders not unlike those made in the Wilderness and Scarborough Hill sections of Franklin Park. Indeed this gorgeous park of rocky wood, swamp and pond that your guide has enjoyed many times is littered with Cape Ann granite boulders, and the drives curl up and around hilly outcrops of this hard stone, not unlike Franklin Park's puddingstone landscape. Sawyer requested in his will that the park be called Ravenswood, after the character Edward Ravenswood in the 1819 story the *Bride of Lammermoor* by Sir Walter Scott. Today the park is owned and managed by the Trustees of Reservations.



**WALNUT AVENUE ENDED AS A PUBLIC ROAD IN 1889 AT SIGOURNEY STREET WHEN IT WAS ABSORBED AND USED AS DRIVES FOR FRANKLIN PARK. ABUTTING LAND OWNERS BUILT SIGOURNEY STREET IN 1884 TO CONNECT WALNUT AVE. WITH GLENN RD.**

George Bond (1811-1892) also took advantage of the new Franklin Park. He sold three small parcels to the park commission to give the park a front on Sigourney Street, and also to allow foot access through a small entrance. The rest he developed over the remainder of the decade of the 1880s. Bond was a wealthy wool merchant who built a large Greek Revival/Italianate house on a hill overlooking Forest Hills Street in 1850. It still stands today, subdivided into condominiums, at 11 Rocky Nook Terrace. The first house he built was in 1884 at 22 Sigourney Street, for Sophia Wheelwright (who may have been his daughter). According to Sawyer in his book, the foundation stones were teamed across town from a Bond family home in Winthrop Square. This house was no longer standing in 1975 and has been replaced by an expensive condominium colony



completed in December 2003. Number 26 Sigourney was built in 1883-1884, and 32 Sigourney was built for Samuel Hastings in 1884.

Fine homes were built on the Bond and Richardson lands along Peter Parley, Robeson and Sigourney Streets, among the finest residential areas in Jamaica Plain. For the wage earner, apartment houses and three-family wood-frame homes were built on Iffley and Montebello Roads. Developer Morris Weinstein built two large brick apartment houses at 449-451 Walnut Avenue (at Iffley Road), a subdivision of the Parker estate. These homes were designed by Silverman Engineering for 22 families, completed in 1913. Weinstein called them “Forest Chambers” and “Walnut Chambers” because of their proximity to the Walnut Avenue entrance of Franklin Park. Number 435 Walnut Avenue was the last of the homes built on Walnut Avenue before large condominium complexes sprouted up at Sigourney and Glen Road at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Number 435 Walnut was built directly opposite the Walnut Avenue entrance to the park, and overlooks the 1996 lot named *Parquecito dela Hermanadad*. Number 435 Walnut was designed by Weinbaum and Wexler and completed in 1932. It was permitted on March 10, 1931 for twelve families, and was changed to sixteen families in 1964.

## Part V

Landscape architect Olmsted took Walnut Avenue as it bent into the lands acquired for Franklin Park and connected it to a new parkway he named Circuit Drive, designed to circle around most of the parkland. Sawyer’s Glen Road proved perfect to the landscape architect as a segregated through-road for cross-town commercial traffic such as he had designed with the transverse roads in Central Park. Olmsted improved and incorporated that road and extended it to Blue Hill Avenue.



**GLEN ROAD** WAS BUILT BY REAL ESATE SPECULATOR SAMUEL SAWYER IN 1853 AS PART OF A PROPOSED SUBDIVISION OF LAND HE OWNED THAT BECAME THE PLAYSTEAD. ACQUIRED BY THE PARKS DEPT, IT WAS EXTENDED TO BLUE HILL AVE. IN 1889.

Glen Road crossed old Walnut Avenue through two stone gatehouses he designed at a location he called the Valley Gates. The Circuit Drive and Glen Road were completed in 1889. To carry old Walnut Avenue over a natural ravine and brook, Olmsted's step-son John designed a fifteen-foot boulder overpass called Ellicott Arch, constructed from Roxbury conglomerate boulders dug up during the grading of the Ellicott Dale lawn tennis courts (a baseball diamond today). After crossing the arch, Olmsted shifted the old avenue due west where it was carried over a graceful granite-arch bridge designed to separate neighborhood traffic from interfering with the park use before it flowed into Morton Street and the Arborway. Originally Walnut Avenue ended at a right angle to Forest Hills Street opposite Lotus Street. Sawyer's Newstead became Olmsted's Playstead, a thirty-acre field graded and designed for playing active sports and dedicated in 1888. White Stadium was built over half of it in 1949.

We have now walked along all of Walnut Avenue, one of Roxbury's oldest public ways. We began at a wooded knoll that has been kept in trust as a "bit of old Roxbury." We end walking along old Walnut Avenue, now known as the Circuit Drive, through Franklin Park. Of all the parks designed by F. L. Olmsted in America, he seemed to take the greatest care to learn about and retain the old names and places that were once part of the land that would become Franklin Park. There is some evidence that he talked with Francis Drake about Roxbury's history in that landscape he was to alter. Thus, dotted throughout the park are old Roxbury names like Scarborough and Hagbourne, Wilderness, Long Crouch, Sargent's Field and Nazingdale, all of which evoke the days Drake wrote about with such care in his 1878 history. Franklin Park more than anything else preserves the landscape and the names of the town of Roxbury, including the road to the "great lotts and freshe meadows."

Richard Heath April 9, 2008

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