

THE CHARLES RIVER BASIN

Remarks by H. Hobart Holly, Chairman of the History and Heritage Committee, Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section / ASCE, at the dedication of the Basin as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, November 5, 1981.

Boston — famed for the bean, the cod, and the Charles River Basin. The engineering profession has not yet claimed credit for numbers one and two; but we point with great pride to number three.

A most noteworthy feature of this National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark designation is that it is not for the dam, or any other element of the Charles River Basin, but for the project as a whole — the remarkable transformation of a serious liability into a major asset — Boston's centerpiece as it has been called.

The problem was a very serious and a very complex one, involving health, environment, social considerations, commercial considerations, politics, freshwater problems, saltwater problems. The engineering profession had a challenge from the medical and public health disciplines, and met it with distinction. To eliminate a large area of severely polluted waters and tidal mud flats in the heart of a city would have been a major engineering accomplishment in itself. Also, the creation of a large constant-level freshwater basin of outstanding beauty and recreational value would likewise have been a notable accomplishment. The combination represents the highest plane of achievement in any professional endeavor — not just correcting bad conditions that man has brought on himself, but also creating positively for the benefit of mankind.

Many elements of the Charles River Basin Project could be singled out for praise. Two were outstanding. The first was the contribution of John Ripley Freeman. It was he who conceived and design-engineered the Charles River Basin. The so-called Freeman Report of 1903 still stands as a model for engineering reports. It set a standard for soundness, thoroughness, and environmental considerations far ahead of its time. The second was the contribution of Frederic Pike Stearns, the Engineer in Charge of the construction. He was largely responsible for coordinating the engineering with the landscape architectural design to arrive at the spectacular result that we see today. Mr Stearns' subsequent engineering structures were notable for the way they were blended aesthetically into the environment. There is a legacy of his experience here.

It is to be noted that each of the distinguished gentlemen whom we honor today was a member and President of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers and also served as President of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

We hope that the designation of the Charles River Basin as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark will lead to greater appreciation of it, and proper recognition of the contributions of the engineers and others who created it.

Ed. Note: The ceremonies dedicating the Charles River Basin Project as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark were held at the Boston Museum of Science where the plaque is permanently located. The plaque was presented by Dr. James R. Sims, President of ASCE, to Dr. Terrance J. Geoghegan, Commissioner of the Metropolitan District Commission that has care of the Basin.

A feature of the occasion was the presence of descendants of John R. Freeman, and the announcement of the special Charles River Basin issue of the BSCE Section Journal by Mr. Lee M. G. Wolman, Chairman of the Section's Committee for the John R. Freeman Fund. Copies of the special issue, which includes the Freeman Report of 1903, may be obtained through the Section office.