Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston

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This volume is an examination of a subject particularly relevant to urban archaeologists: the creation of new ground to accommodate a growing city. Here the city is Boston, and researchers who live or work there are those who will benefit most from this book. Gaining Ground will also be of interest to a larger audience of historians, readers interested in landscape development, and even urban planners.

Seasholes, a research fellow in the Department of Archaeology at Boston University, has provided a thorough account of the physical development of Boston, focusing on how and why landmaking transformed Boston from several small peninsulas and islands into an important port city through the process of filling marshes and shallow bays surrounding the city, which began in the 17th century and continues today.

Gaining Ground is divided into 14 chapters, starting with an introduction and a chapter on landmaking technology. The bulk of the volume consists of 12 chapters arranged geographically, taking the reader on a tour of how many of Boston’s neighborhoods were created. The organization of these chapters by location rather than chronology makes sense, given that much of the landmaking took place at the same time in different parts of the city. An excellent timeline given in the introduction provides an overall framework for understanding the degree to which landmaking affected the development of Boston over time and space.

The introduction provides a brief overview of Boston’s natural environment and sets the stage for many of the “why” issues discussed throughout the remainder of the volume. The reasons behind the origins and development of landmaking in Boston include “wharfing out” (filling between wharfs), the China trade beginning in 1790, the coming of the railroad, Irish immigration, attempts to cover up polluted swamp land, the public park movement, 19th-century port improvements, and 20th-century transportation innovations (p. 11). Exploration of these and other themes supplies the theoretical underpinning to the detailed neighborhood histories in later chapters.

Chapter 2, “Landmaking Technology,” addresses how new ground was created. This section is particularly relevant for field archaeologists working in urban settings where ground was made by filling wetlands and waterfront areas, as Seasholes presents a chronological review of construction techniques employed in Boston. Though the discussion is tightly focused on this one city, the approach and much of the data is useful elsewhere. Topics covered consist of the evolution of fill-retaining structures (wharves, seawalls, bulkheads, and dikes); the types of fill used (household trash, coal ashes, dirt excavated from cellars, gravel, and dredged material); and methods of excavating, transporting, and depositing fill. The author refers readers to figures placed throughout the volume to illustrate some of her points, but the discussion regarding the types of retaining structures would have benefited from drawings highlighting design features described in the text.

Each of the neighborhood chapters begins with a modern bird’s-eye view or street map showing the extent of landmaking since 1630. Much of the text is richly illustrated with hundreds of historical and modern maps, photographs, engravings, and other figures. The narrative is a virtual walking tour, taking readers from the earliest Euroamerican settlement on the central waterfront (and the city’s famous Long Wharf, constructed 1711–1715) to the largest landmaking project of all, filling in East Boston for construction of Logan International Airport in the 20th century. The separate neighborhood chapters of Gaining Ground could stand alone as complete articles, where the documentary and archaeological records are finely woven together to chronicle when, and explain why, the people of Boston radically altered their landscape.

A short afterword touches upon some of the modern consequences of extensive landmaking in Boston, including flooding and structural damage associated with rotting foundation piles as groundwater levels drop with increasing development. Another serious concern is the threat posed by earthquakes to buildings, both historic and modern, located on top of the relatively unstable fill. Seasholes also introduces some topics for further research in her closing remarks, notably proposing a comparative study among different port cities to assess the hypothesis that the presence of shallow tidal flats and/or location on a constricted land form as seen in Boston are conducive to major landmaking activities elsewhere throughout North America (p. 420). While environment certainly played an important role in historical landmaking, the omission of even a brief review of other economic, social, and political factors is somewhat puzzling, given that Seasholes does a very good job addressing such issues elsewhere in Gaining Ground.

Appendices (a table, comparing the size of original versus made land for different sections of Boston, and notes on documentary sources), endnotes, and references for figures complete the text.

Archaeologists often regard “fill” as disturbed overburden and attempt to remove it as quickly (and with as little study) as possible. In Gaining Ground, Seasholes compiles evidence from a variety of sources, including archaeological excavations, landscape architecture, and documentary and oral history to explain the evolution of Boston’s geography. The result is a comprehensive account of this often-overlooked aspect of urban archaeology that will serve as an invaluable reference for those working in Boston and provide all researchers with the insight to take a second closer look at made land.

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History Beneath the Sea: Nautical Archaeology in the Classroom
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History Beneath the Sea is the product of an ambitious initiative to increase public awareness and understanding.