The North Cove

Prior to the ambitious land-making endeavors of the nineteenth century, Boston was a 500-acre peninsula connected to the mainland by an isthmus, a narrow 40-yard wide strip of land, called the Boston Neck. Early maps illustrate that the road over the neck between Roxbury and Boston (current Washington Street) was the only existing way, other than by water, to travel to and from the town. Bad weather conditions or high tides would often flood the neck and cut off travel, turning Boston into an island.

On the north, the peninsula was bounded by the Charles River a tidal estuary which was later dammed (c.1910) and turned into a fresh water basin. A high ridge, the Tri-mountain (or Tremont), extended through the center of the peninsula with three peaks: Mt. Vernon, Beacon and Pemberton. Of these, only Beacon Hill survives, though reduced from its original 140 feet to 80 feet in elevation (c.1807-32). There were two other hills, Fort Hill (Oliver & High Streets) on the southeast leveled in the 1870’s and Copp’s Hill (Windmill or Snow Hill) on the north side of about the same size.

Numerous coves: Town (Great), North (Mill Pond), West, and South provided the town easy access to the sea and its early maritime commerce. Filling in these bodies of water during the 19th century extended Boston’s land area by nearly 150 percent, so that by 1912 Boston Proper had an area of over 1,900 acres.

It was surmised that the Reverend William Blaxton (or Blackstone), the first British settler of the Shawmut Peninsula (c.1625), had observed indigenous people using a natural causeway (Causeway Street), exposed at low tide in the North Cove, to get from the New Fields (West End) to the Mill Field (North End). Some five years later John Winthrop and the Puritans laid claim to the settlement, and by 1635 Blaxton moved on to become Rhode Island’s first settler and Boston the ‘City on a Hill’.