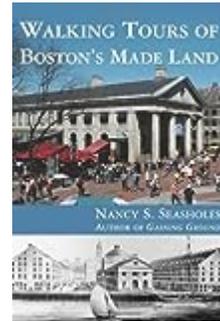




**Nancy S. Seasholes.** *Walking Tours of Boston's Made Land.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. xiii + 224 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-262-69339-4.



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## A New Way to Walk Boston

Nancy Seasholes wrote this book as a portable version of her handsome but hefty *Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston* (2003). Some readers of the latter found it too large and unwieldy to carry while tracing the changes to Boston's land that Seasholes so fastidiously reported. The far more compact *Walking Tours* is a manageable, scaled-down version aimed at non-scholars interested in Boston's topographical history and tourists interested in a different tour, one on which they learn about what the early land of Boston was (and was not) and how it has changed over time. Consequently, there are at least two ways to appreciate and use this book: as a stationary reader seeking information about Boston and as a moving reader using it to wend your way through one of America's most celebrated walking cities. For the armchair tourist, however, it is difficult (or at times impossible if you are new to or unfamiliar with Boston) to envision the places Seasholes describes, thus taking it on tour is the better option. Producing an abbreviated version of the larger book is a good idea in theory, while the marketplace, more than anything, will determine if it was truly necessary. In practice, though, the strengths of the book are to some degree marred by a layout that is

confusing, which detracts from the book's overall effectiveness.

What "differentiates this book from all the other tour books of Boston" is its "emphasis on landmaking" and its desire to show readers just how much of Boston is built on a specific type of man-made land (pp. vii-viii). Seasholes draws a fine distinction between landfill, reclaimed land, and what she calls "made land." Landfill, she contends, is exactly that—land that has been filled—while reclamation involves taking land back from the sea by "diking, pumping, or draining" (p. viii). The "made land" of Boston was the result of filling in tidal flats with land, most often after cordoning it off with small sea walls, a process that Seasholes sees as markedly different from other means of generating land. While she readily admits this distinction is not as important as the larger picture of Boston being built on massive amounts of fabricated land, one questions the appeal of this sort of tour to a general audience whose interest in landmaking may extend only to briefly noting where the initial land ended.

Readers are treated to twelve chapters, called "walks," that mainly cover the oldest and most historical places of

the city. The first four walks cover the northern half of Boston's original peninsula; the next two focus closely on the Back Bay; walks 7 and 8, which explore the Fenway and Brookline, are as far west as the book reaches; two more tours look at the Boston Neck and the northern edge of Roxbury; and the final pair of walks take readers through Charlestown, to the north of Boston proper. Absent are tours of Roxbury, Allston/Brighton, Dorchester, East Boston, and South Boston. Considering the amount of "made land" in these locations and Seasholes's admirable treatments of many of these areas in her 2003 book, their absence is curious. Perhaps they are less easy to tour on foot, but their omission is regrettable because it suggests there is little of significance topographically or historically in these areas, which residents and historians alike may find disconcerting.

For each carefully crafted tour, Seasholes provides a unified format and multiple methods of finding your way around Boston. For those good with maps, each tour begins with a detailed modern map that shows the tour route and stops, points of interest, and the original shoreline. Following a list of useful planning information including tour time, distance, accessibility, and convenient restroom locations, a brief overview supplies a general sense of the ensuing tour and its aims. All tours begin near a "T" station (of Boston's MBTA subway system), which makes getting to them relatively easy. Directions to each stop along any tour are printed in bold type and followed by a sometimes overly long description of what you will see. The bold font does not always add enough emphasis to differentiate directional text from narrative text, which can lead to confusion. Because history did not always neatly occur along the tour routes Seasholes has laid out, the tours sometimes bleed together as facts from one spill into others. Rather than re-write the same history for each new section, she has devised a system of cross-referencing that, while helpful in understanding more about a given topic, is difficult to use while keeping your bearings on the walks. Each tour is well illustrated in black and white, especially with original and recreated maps and bird's-eye views that span Boston's history. Other illustrations, which are fewer in number, include drawings and photographs of important buildings as they originally appeared or buildings of particular architectural styles.

On its own, *Walking Tours* is difficult to review strictly as a work of scholarship. Without looking at the monograph from which it came, readers would not be convinced of the scholarly merit of the book. It has no notes and no bibliography, although there is a section for

further research. Seasholes has clearly done her homework, though; readers can refer to her earlier book for further background.

Living close enough to Boston to try some of the *Walking Tours*, I invited a colleague along. Being good academics, we independently read the relevant chapters the night before, but were disappointed because they were hard to visualize and follow from home. In Boston, we spent an enjoyable day taking three of the tours—one in the Fenway and the two in Charlestown—but not always in the way the book instructed. Sometimes directions were not clear or hard to translate from page to street. At moments such as this, pictures of where we were supposed to go would have been welcome and would have saved us a lot of backtracking. For example, the second direction after exiting the T station on a Charlestown tour directs readers to go "toward the Bunker Hill Monument" without providing a picture for those who may not know it (p. 167). A few pages later, she informs readers of another "spectacular view of the Zakim Bridge" without providing pictures for those who do not know the bridge (p. 171). (To be sure, the Zakim Bridge is hard to miss, but there are a lot of bridges in the vicinity.)

Modifications may clear up some of the more confusing aspects of the book. First, in subsequent editions, the author and editors might place a quick-guide at the head of each tour across from the orienting map that lists the directions without the narrative. By doing this, readers would get a sense of what is required of them before they start. Second, while Boston is well known as a walking city, it is not known as one with good signage and easily navigated 90-degree street corners. Thus, pictures would be more useful than written directions for out-of-towners. Third, prominent text boxes that list the historic sites and contact information would be helpful. The day we toured Charlestown, both the U.S.S. *Constitution* and the Bunker Hill Monument were closed. This was certainly no fault of either Seasholes or the book, but in the industry of Boston tourism, readers appreciate handy reference information.

All that said, it is a fun book for its walking tour function. It is also a novel and surprising way to explore Boston because it takes readers to some un-trodden areas. Indeed, it was exciting to find more than a few new alleyways in a town I have researched for ten years. Academic libraries considering the book, on the other hand, might be well advised to purchase *Gaining Ground*. Public libraries may consider acquiring both.

Finally, in this age of information technology, one wonders if other types of media (or emerging media) would provide a better platform for Seasholes. The education and curatorial departments of American museums and historic sites are wrestling with a related set of questions that swirl around how to use technology in exhibitions and programs. Seasholes's content lends itself nicely to interactive digital maps and overlays, recorded narration, mountains of text files, and, perhaps GPS technology. All this would allow for users to break free of linear tours to explore their own interests. This may be an important if unintended contribution of this book: it is something of a call to arms for a different type of "tour book" in the marketplace. Meanwhile, *Walking Tours of Boston's Made Land* offers tours of an urban environment that appreciate the history of the land on which it is built.

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