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Highland Park 1630-1977
by Roslyn Saunders
&
Stewart E. Perry

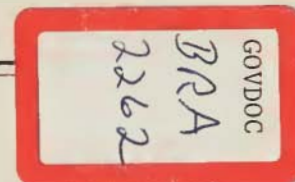
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Roxbury, Massachusetts

1977

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Dedication

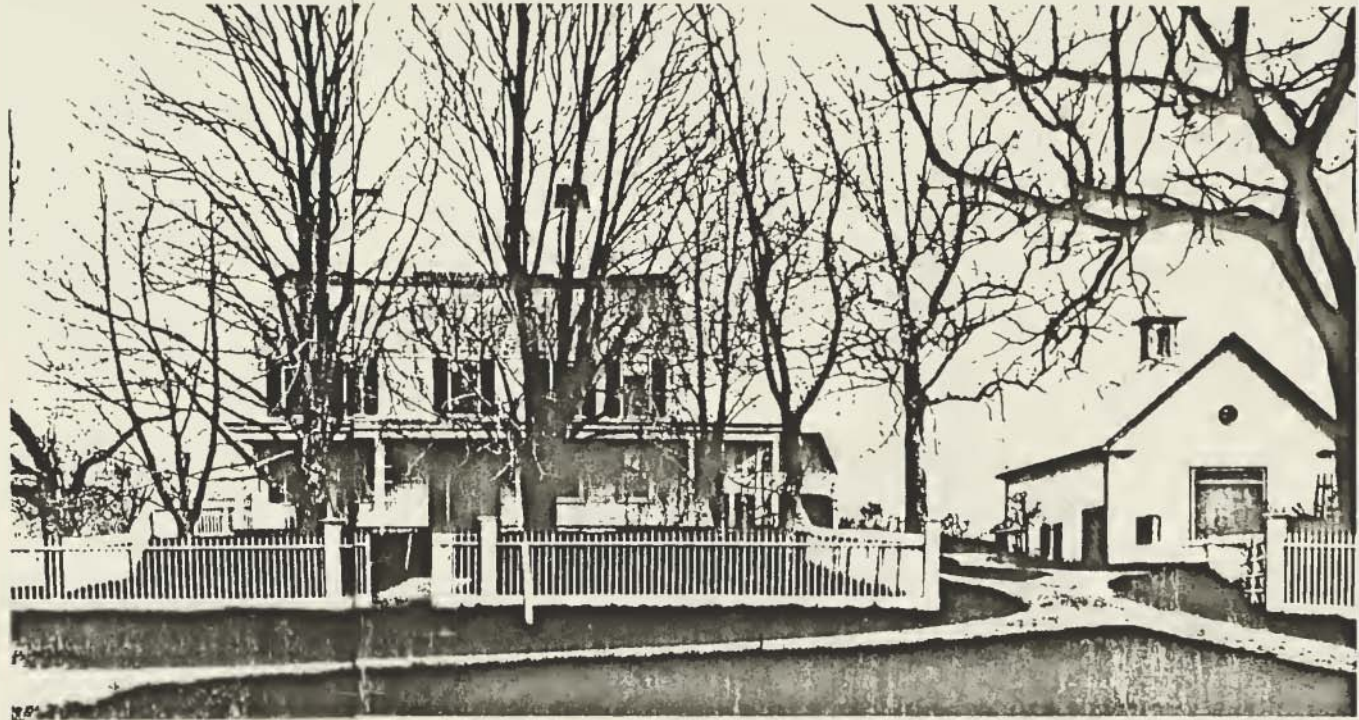
She always said her goal was to work herself out of a job: to set things up so that they could run without her.



Patricia Raynor

ROXBURY
S257
1977

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*Roxbury farm house and
barn, built circa 1830*

Roxbury was officially dated as settled on September 28, 1630; it was the sixth town incorporated in Massachusetts. The first Roxbury settlement was on the bay to the southeast of Boston. Roxbury was so named because of the natural surface which was rocky and hilly. Between 1630 and 1649 the town of Roxbury did not have a government. In 1649 the town voted to appoint five men to make and execute the laws for the good of the town. These "selectmen" served as the governing body until 1846 when Roxbury incorporated becoming a city. From 1630 to 1800 the lands adjacent to Meeting House Hill (John Eliot Square) were sparsely settled farms.

The farms produced such crops as Spanish potato, Indian corn, squash and pumpkin; tobacco was raised and used as a remedy for sickness and also smoked for enjoyment. Several varieties of apples including the Williams apple were also native to the farms of Roxbury. In the summer of 1632 the first meeting house was built. The first structure was crude with a thatched roof and without a gallery, pew or spire.

The signatures of the principal slave-owners in Roxbury are attached to the following petition: —

Roxbury, Feb. 28, 1739. Whereas it hath been too much the unhappy practise of the negro servants of this town to be abroad in the night at unseasonable hours to y^e great prejudice of many persons or families as well as their respective masters, the petitioners pray that it may be prevented or punished.

“ EDWARD RUGGLES.
JOHN HOLBROOK.
JAMES JARVIS.
NOAH PERIN, JR.
EBENEZER DORR.
NATHANIEL BREWER.
JOHN WILLIAMS.
EBENEZER WELD.
EBENEZER GORE.
THOMAS BAKER.
JONATHAN SEAVER.
JOSEPH WILLIAMS.”

Slave petition

The second meeting house was built in 1674. In 1741 a third meeting house was built; a corner was assigned to African Americans to sit in. A petition dated February 28, 1739 listed the names of twelve heads of households as slave owners. Slavery had existed in Roxbury since about 1640. The fourth meeting house was completed in 1746. In 1802 a new wooden building along the lines of the Newburyport Meeting House was begun.



First Church Roxbury, fifth Meeting House structure, circa 1870

The fifth meeting house is the present structure in John Eliot Square. John Eliot (1604-1690) was the second pastor of the Meeting House following Rev. Thomas Welde. Located at the junction of Eliot Square and Centre Street stands the parting stone erected in 1744, one of the oldest landmarks remaining in Roxbury. On the northerly side of the stone were directions to Cambridge and to Watertown and on the southerly side were directions to Dedham and Rhode Island.



*Single cottage, Roxbury Highlands,
circa 1835*



Ionic Hall and Cram Chapel, circa 1905



*Elizianate Villa, Roxbury Highlands,
circa 1840*



*Boston and Providence Railroad view,
circa 1835*



Norfolk House, John F. Square, circa 1830



Norfolk House, circa 1875

Suburbia — development and disintegration

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, some of the farms in Roxbury were being sold to the wealthy and leisure classes of Boston for development into suburban estates, country houses and summer retreats. Roxbury was ideal for these estates, because it was on the only road from Boston. One of the first brick mansions built in Roxbury was Ionic Hall. The house was built about 1800 by Captain Stoddard of Hingham for his daughter. About 1880 the Hall became St. Luke's Home for Consumptives and the Chapel was built during this period as an addition to the home.

Both buildings are now a part of the Episcopal Church of St. John and St. James.

Transportation before 1825 for the estate owners and their families into and out of Boston was by private carriages, private chairs and horses. In 1826 the Boston and Providence Railroad Company opened a small station at Roxbury Crossing allowing the advantages of rural living to combine with year-round houses. This convenient and rapid method of transportation also allowed the upper middle class businessmen to purchase land in the isolated sections, imitating their wealthier predecessors; thereby escaping city living. This trend was accelerated by the introduction of the horse-drawn trolley in 1854.

In 1826 the former residence of David Simmons was opened as a public house by the Norfolk House Company. The large brick addition known first as Highland Hall and later as Norfolk Hall was built and opened about 1826 as a place for public assemblies. In 1853 the mansion-house was demolished and the brick addition moved to the rear on Bartlett Street and the present structure was then built in place of the original mansion house.

In 1914 the Norfolk House became a community center known as the South End Industrial School. This name was later dropped and the old name Norfolk House was used until recently when it was renamed the Marcus Garvey House by the Roxbury Action Program. Future plans are for Marcus Garvey House to be converted into commercial spaces. In 1832 there were two streets — Highland Street, which had four houses and Centre Street. By 1845 several mansions such as the Hale and Kittredge Houses had been built in the Highlands. Both these houses are examples of Greek revival architecture popular between 1820 and 1860. The Alvah Kittredge House was built in 1836 on the site

of the Low Fort. The house was originally facing Highland Street between Cedar and Linwood Streets. Today, Kittredge House faces Linwood Street and is the headquarters of the Roxbury Action Program.

The Edward Everett Hale House originally fronting on Highland Street is now around the corner at 12 Morley Street. The Hale House was built in 1841 by a carpenter named Benjamin Kent and Hale bought the house in 1869.

During the mid 19th century several municipal and commercial buildings were built in John Eliot Square to service the residents of Highland Park. The Dudley School was erected in 1873 as a grammar school for boys. The building, a two-story brick structure of Victorian Gothic architecture was destroyed by fire in 1976.

In 1875 the Hotel Eliot was built. The brick apartment buildings of today were originally called hotels. The trend began with the Hotel Eliot. The apartment house was the forerunner of multi-family dwellings.

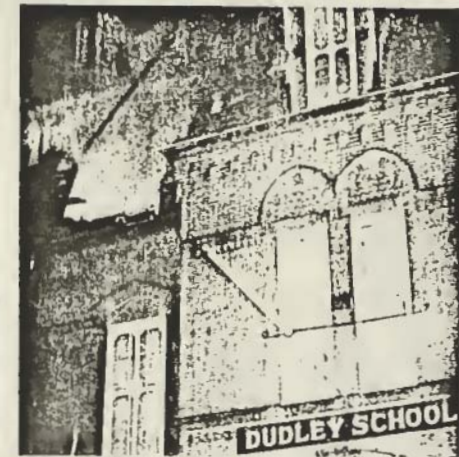
In 1870 George Cox built the Cox building, an unusual curved block which combined residential and retail spaces with townhouses on the Dudley and Bartlett Streets sides.

By 1870, Boston's middle class (the upper income half of its population which could afford to build or rent new houses) could commute easily to Boston from most of Roxbury. In 1889 electric streetcars began to serve the towns. By 1900 all of Roxbury was within commuting distance of downtown Boston. The building of the town reflected the successive improvements in street railway transportation. The upper middle class railroad commuters built their houses on the outer edge of the settlement, always farthest from the city. As transportation to these distant areas improved, other groups with less income, and less landed styles of building, pressed upon the upper middle class.

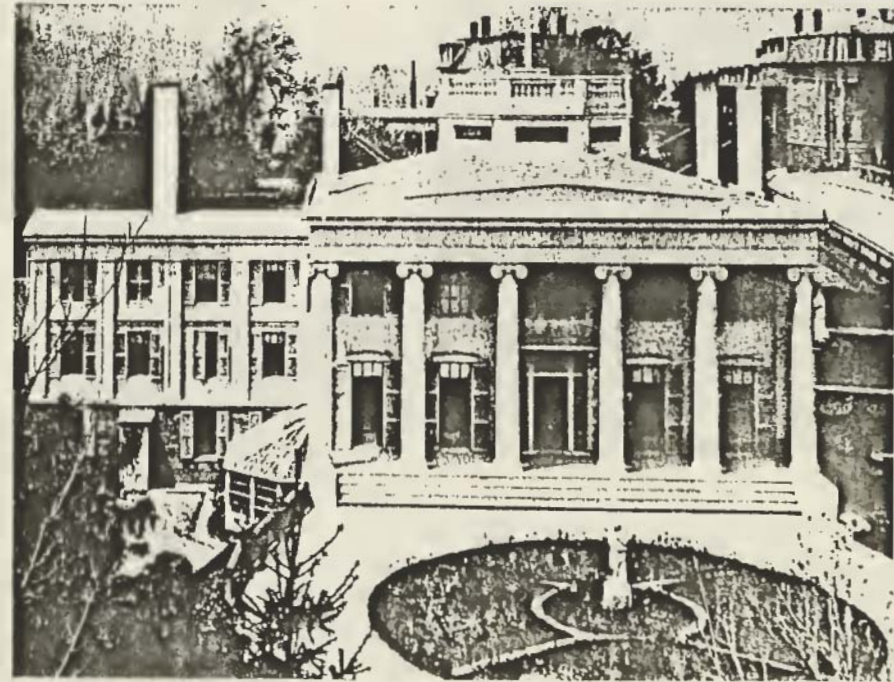
As the first builders and their children abandoned the old suburbs, their places were taken by those who could not afford new housing. This lower income group inherited an environment that no longer satisfied the middle class, and was unsuited to the newcomers' needs and capabilities. The structures often had to be divided to keep each family's rent bill small. The high densities created by this process of conversion destroyed the land plans and facilities of the old suburb.



Hotel Eliot, circa 1880



Dudley School being consumed by fire, 1976



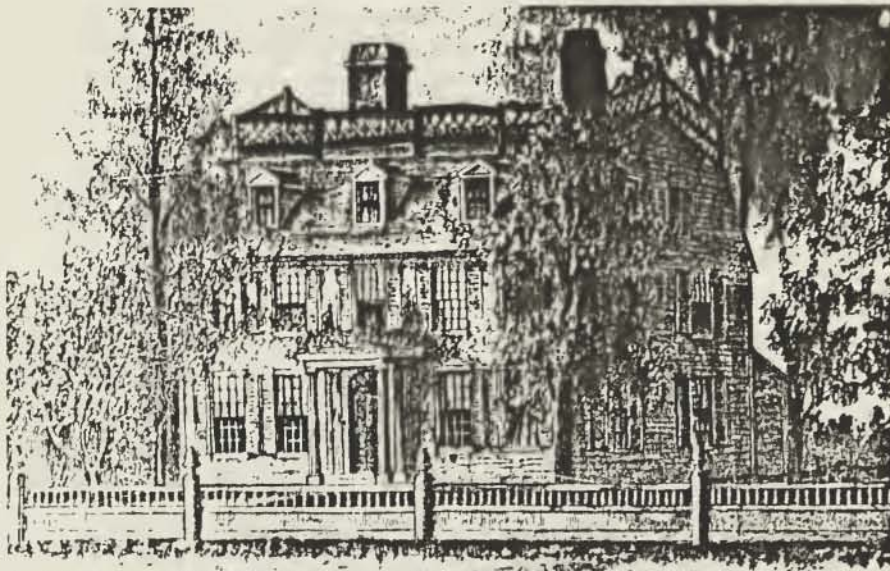
Alvah Kittredge House, circa 1890

The Revolutionary Period

The first defense work constructed on May 22, 1775 by the Americans was a redoubt. The "Burial Ground Redoubt" was built across the highway (Washington Street) leading into Boston where the road to Dorchester (Eustis Street) began. The redoubt and training field were part of a network of fortifications which included Lamb's Dam Battery at Yeoman and Albany Streets, the High and Low Forts, and the Roxbury Headquarters at Eliot Square.

Between 1750 and 1754 the Manse (parsonage) for the Meeting House was built. The building became the Roxbury Headquarters for General John Thomas, General George Washington's Roxbury Division Commander. General Thomas directed his troops from the Manse during the Revolution.

In the summer of 1775 both forts were built in Roxbury Highlands. Roxbury High Fort was located on the second highest hill in Roxbury and overlooked the land route to Dedham and the road from Boston. This location was crucial because it prevented the British from receiving supplies or reinforcements by land.



Roxbury Headquarters (Dillaway-Thomas House), circa 1850

In 1869 the fort was destroyed during the construction of the Cochituate Standpipe which provided pressure for Roxbury's water supply. After 1895, the standpipe was converted into an observatory and the surrounding area became a park.



Cochituate Standpipe, circa 1870



Roxbury Low Fort, built at what is now Highland, Linwood, and Cedar Streets, followed the configuration of the natural puddingstone wall. The Low Fort controlled Washington Street which at that time was the only land road into and out of Boston.

After the American Revolution Roxbury began rebuilding the homes and businesses damaged or destroyed during the war. The Spooner-Lambert House, one of five 18th century structures left in Roxbury, was a mansion built at the end of the American Revolution, about 1780, by Major John Spooner. In 1788 the property was sold to Captain William Lambert, a Boston merchant whose name was given to the avenue that crossed the thirteen-acre lot.

ROXBURY ACTION PROGRAM IN HIGHLAND PARK 1969-1977

For several years Roxbury Action Program has struggled to reverse a downward spiral of deterioration in Highland Park that had been set off by national and local economic processes before blacks had moved here. Similar deterioration had occurred in other cities, but in Highland Park, the process is being reversed by the local efforts of black citizens. Without the direct federal assistance that others have sought and found for such tasks, R.A.P. began a new stage in the history of its neighborhood.

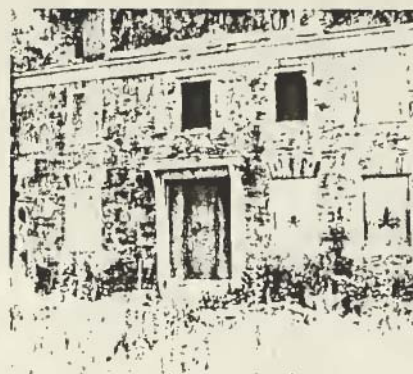
Highland Park includes about one-quarter square mile of Boston. In 1960, it had a population of about 10,000; in 1970 about 4,000. The 1970 census has shown one-third of Highland Park incomes were less than \$4,000. Only 25% of the families made more than \$10,000, and that was probably because of more than one wage-earner in the family. About 65% of the residents are black, and regarding the black population, two further statistics are basic to understanding RAP's special task. While 50% of the non-black population of Highland Park have incomes of \$8,000 or more, only 35% of the black families do. And while 53% of the non-black families under the poverty line are receiving public assistance of some kind, only 25% of the impoverished blacks are getting that kind of help.

Revitalization requires much more than fixing up the old houses, RAP also seeks innovative social services to get people jobs, education, and other resources. There are also other physical development activities, including new construction, commercial development and parks.

The Beginnings

How had RAP come to Highland Park, trying to do what looked impossible? The Roxbury Action Program has a history both similar and quite dissimilar to other black community organizations. But it did not spring initially from Highland Park itself. The neighborhood had been too bereft to grow its own hope, until RAP moved in with new energy.

In 1968 when RAP was formally incorporated and in 1969 moved to its first offices in Highland Park — at 63 Lambert Avenue, a few blocks away from 10 Linwood — almost no one else was moving into the neighborhood. It was a place to get away from. Poor blacks came only because they had no other choice. Some elderly people (black and white) preferred to stay on because it was where they had lived so long.



Puddingstone house, Dorr Street



1881 drawing of Queen Ann house, off Thwing Street



A waste of housing stock

Urban land use

Some middle-class whites had been attracted to the big old houses they picked up cheap. Sooner or later other white middle-class people would undoubtedly discover the old houses of Highland Park and begin its reverse transformation from poor black to affluent white. But it was still a Victorian ghost town, deserted yet set in the very middle of a metropolis.

In 1969, the neighborhood did not attract new residents nor did it attract the reformers, the social workers, or the storefront community organizers and the political hustlers that clustered and competed along Roxbury's Blue Hill Avenue, perhaps ten or twelve blocks outside Highland Park. And that is one reason why RAP moved in: No one else cared.

The Roxbury Action Program was also once located on Roxbury's political and social action artery, Blue Hill Avenue. In its earliest form as a Quaker-sponsored project, 'Metropolitan Low Income Housing Program,' it was started (in August, 1964) by dedicated workers from the New England Regional and National Office of the American Friends Service Committee. But the first director, James Reeb, was murdered in the spring of 1965 — on a civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. He was succeeded by one of his staff members, Robert Gustafson. The other staff member then was a young black, Dan Richardson. In late 1966, Gustafson had had to hire someone as Richardson's replacement (who had left earlier that year) and from all the applicants he chose Goerge J. Morrison, despite objections from other AFSC officials who had interviewed him and found him "militant and abrasive."

George Morrison was a civil engineer, a black, and what he was as a person made all the difference in what the program was to become. Under Reeb and Gustafson, the program had struggled to discover an effective approach to the overwhelming housing problems of low-income residents of Roxbury (and the rest of metropolitan Boston). Because of the horror of a particularly tragic tenement fire in 1964, the program initially focussed attention on code enforcement, and this had led to the creation of Boston's Housing Inspection Department. Other advocacy activities, especially in collaboration with the American Jewish Congress, led to the passage of state laws protective of tenants' rights. These seemed impressive enough accomplishments, but to Morrison, there was something missing: Black people doing the job in their own community.



Workmen fixing up day care center

Boston was only one of the New England scenes for AFSC activity in black neighborhoods, but it was the most advanced. On November 1, 1968, then, the Roxbury Community Committee was spun off as an independent organization, later to be separately incorporated as the Roxbury Action Program on November 29, 1968. The New England Regional Office of AFSC provided a no-strings grant of \$92,000, which the Roxbury group elected to take in two annual installments. Suddenly, the problem of what was really the most effective attack on inner-city deteriorated housing came home to be resolved. From then on, out of the influence of a wide spectrum of pressures and encouragements and of disappointments and opportunities, RAP's program and philosophy began to emerge in full form.

The Programs

Basic to everything was black self-determination. The Roxbury Committee had begun there. Next, it seemed reasonable to carry on the momentum of the preceding emphasis on housing problems and issues, and so they planned "to use the skills we brought with us," as Morrison told an interviewer in 1971 — rather than choose some completely new field of special action. Also, despite the inalterable premise of black self-determination, they would not cut themselves off from the advice, the skills, the ideas, and of course the funds that could come from the more affluent white community — so long as their independence was not compromised. So the consultation of men like Gustafson was valued, and AFSC volunteers provided significant help.

The critical choice, however, was not made in a mechanical laying out of options. It arose out of the human and even accidental conditions and history of RAP on Blue Hill Avenue. The settlement on Highland Park was the result of many influences, in addition to the economic and social analysis of the predicament of black people.

Land control became the other major concept under which RAP built its philosophy and program. It was second only to black self-determination. RAP made the deliberate choice, while still on Blue Hill Avenue, that it must move away from the intangibles of housing services to the tangibles of developing housing. That was a first critical choice. The choice was not either/or; rather it was a matter of emphasis and priority. The exact fit of the priorities were adjusted and readjusted as RAP's program grew and changed. But it was always clear that however much housing and other services would be needed to support, supplement, and strengthen a pattern of local black control of the land, the first place to begin was the land itself.



RAP Renovated apartment block Highland Avenue.



'Rockledge,' William Lloyd Garrison's house, circa 1870. Since 1900 the house has been a nursing home run by an Anglican order of nuns. The house is a National Historic landmark.



Brick double house on Highland Street



Privately rehabilitated property, Highland Avenue

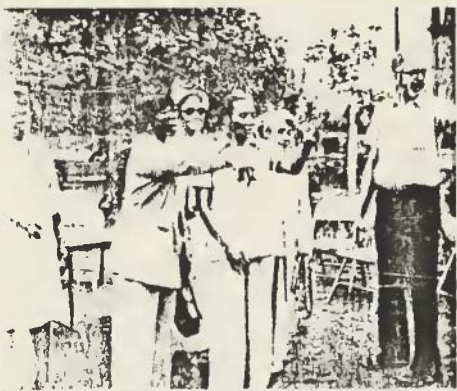
Highland Park seemed to beckon. No one else cared about it. It was definitely a black neighborhood, about 65% black. It was a very desirable area on some counts. True, there were a lot of abandoned houses, but there were also lots of basic good housing structures. Attractive low-priced housing could be made possible. It was a "soft market."

The topography was especially interesting, the hills, the views. The parks and playgrounds were unbelievably deteriorated, but they did exist as public, renewable, and accessible space for all ages. There were also historically and architecturally significant buildings, and the scale and layout of streets and structures seemed really designed for people.

Human Needs and Cultural Identification

Another main category of activity in RAP's program deals with the human side of life in Highland Park. People need more than houses and convenient access to retail outlets. In fact, if a broader view of human needs does not infuse a housing and business development program, the program cannot succeed.

Community-building activities and services to the people of Highland Park have, thus, always accompanied RAP's other activities. Even though RAP does not see itself as an important service agency, five specific community and human concerns have continued to engage staff attention: counseling, with special emphasis on youth problems; continuing education, again with emphasis on the young; senior citizen activities; crime prevention; and general community celebrations. These are in addition to the protection and promotion of the community vis a vis the outside world.



Residents selecting garden plots with Edward Cooper, Director of Elderly Affairs at RAP



Allan Crite, 1976 RAP awardee, at dedication ceremony

Early on, also in line with the general practice in community action then, RAP placed a high emphasis upon "Community organizing," with the aim of getting residents to act together to hold on to Highland Park and to build black solidarity. RAP moved into Lambert Avenue with four full-time organizers. Yet as its program evolved, instead of community organizing in the usual door to door fashion, emphasis began to be placed more and more on building black cultural traditions (an emphasis that was present from the first but not as high in priority as it became).

RAP as an organization (through staff and board decisions) chose and continues to choose to observe black commemorative holidays (such as Marcus Garvey's Birthday, in honor of the first broadly appealing black nationalist), instead of the conventional holidays of the environing society.

The counter-cultural effort to establish a strong black identification through community commemorations is an ambitious and psychologically sophisticated part of the RAP program, but it can only be successful in stages. For example, certain conventional holidays (like Christmas) will probably also continue to be celebrated by many staff and other RAP members. And certainly Highland Park residents generally do not see the annual Garvey Day celebrations (the speeches, picnic, booths, and so on, that RAP successfully promotes) as any reason not to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July. But RAP recalls that the original passage in the Declaration of Independence that rejected slavery was excised by the Philadelphia convention in 1776. So the RAP office remains open for business on the Fourth, and the people are working there.

The institutionalization of a new tradition may be ambitious and difficult, but it is probably no more difficult than the other tasks RAP has taken up, no more so than the physical reconstruction of the whole neighborhood.



Dedication of Jeep Jones Park, 1977

Mobilizing Resources

A final set of program activities is included in the broad label of mobilizing resources — human and financial, within Highland Park and outside it. These comprise a wide range of liaison and promotional activities, fund-raising, and civic concerns.

A subset of these activities have focussed on city or state plans for development outside of Highland Park. Such plans can usually have a very direct effect upon the neighborhood. For example, by intensive lobbying and community action, RAP attracted a new state junior college, Roxbury Community College, to its very borders in the summer of 1974. RAP had hoped to get the college to select the Cox Building, the Hotel Eliot and the Garvey House for temporary quarters, while constructing a brand new campus outside Highland Park, north of John Eliot Square. RAP was unable to achieve the former goal, but it did get the college to locate just off the Square. This will increase the commercial attractiveness of the Square, as well as appreciate land values generally in Highland Park.

Along the western border of Highland Park is the so-called South West Corridor — a long broad swathe of vacant land which runs through the South End, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain sections of Boston. This area was left behind when community opposition throughout metropolitan Boston stopped construction of interstate highway 95 in 1972.

The Corridor (180 acres) is indeed a substantial economic resource, if properly developed. Moreover, of course, it is a resource that can be exploited for either local or outside beneficiaries. RAP joined with the Greater Roxbury Development Corporation (GRDC), the CDC of Boston (a community development corporation spun off as a resident-controlled organization by Boston's Model City Program) and the Lower Roxbury Community Corporation (a group much like RAP, mostly building new low-income and elderly housing), to make sure that the economic development of the disrupted territory benefitted local neighborhoods and residents.

RAP also makes it its business to attend public hearings for the whole gamut of city, metropolitan district, state or public institutional issues. In addition, RAP now specifically sets out to find and make use of all possible opportunities for media or other public attention.

Energetic and sophisticated money-raising techniques leverage funds for RAP through such conventional business avenues as bank loans, limited partnership investments, government guarantee programs, and profitable contracts with municipal and other agencies.



Lloyd King (left), George Morrison (center), and Dan Richardson discuss a RAP project.



Senator Brooke (left), Dave Lee (center) and Ivan Ashley at presentation of Federal funds to RAP.

Future

A national recession lingers longest in the low-income areas. Even if the nation is finally on the way to recovery, the ebbing floods of economic disaster reveal the detritus of deteriorated homes and the hopelessly unemployed — in places like Highland Park. By that time, the long-term losers have been joined by those whose sturdy efforts have, for reasons far beyond their own control, failed — in business, in keeping a job, in keeping a family together when there was no money to live on.

Highland Park, despite RAP's progress, remains a depressed area and will remain so for some years. It is still possible that RAP itself will collapse under the strain of lifting hopes of the neighborhood.

RAP's financial crisis of mid-1976 lingers on as a background threat. The organization reeled under a number of blows in the midst of the national recession. One after another of proud and ambitious projects in the black or other low-income communities of Boston have struggled unsuccessfully for survival. A few have maintained themselves and grown in spite of the frustrations and uncertain resources. RAP has done more than most to rebuild "busted dreams." It has lifted hope by its outstanding successes, but its failures teach that even for RAP there is grave danger ahead.

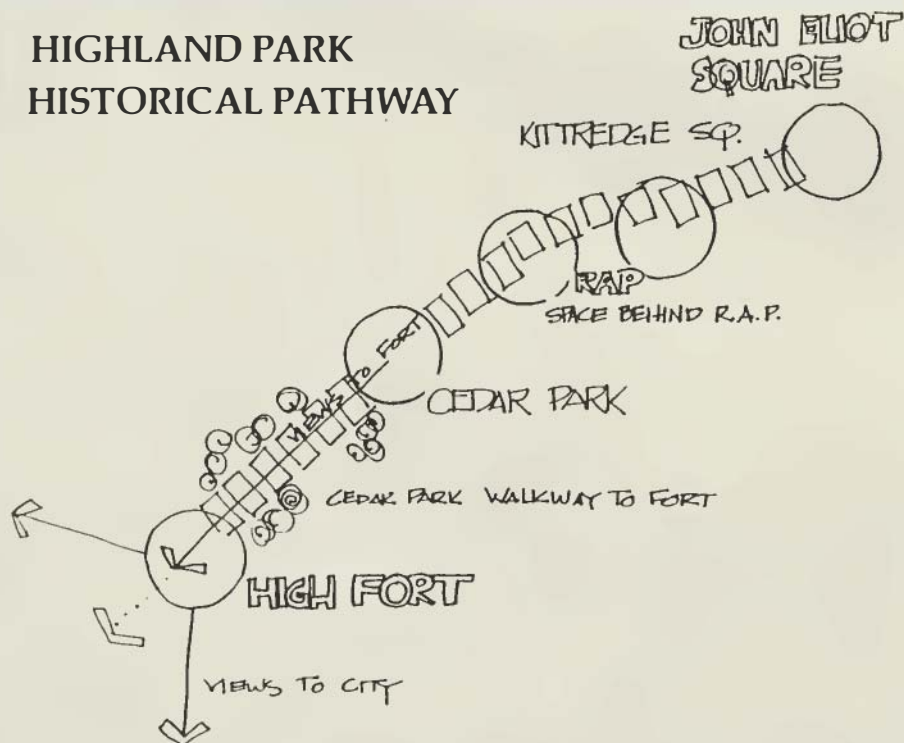


Just to keep up momentum now, RAP will need to shift to a more elaborate scale of financial procedures and investment monitoring. It has already shifted gears so far as promotion and public relations are concerned. Now it will need to enhance its capacities on the staff to juggle priorities and manage the follow-up of the increasingly demanding level of projects.

RAP will have to seek new funds for human programs. The leaders of RAP have always maintained that a model black community needs more than physical rehabilitation; it needs comprehensive multi-purpose programming, and while RAP has not been as active in the sphere of human services and social programs as it has in physical development, it seems probable that the future will include more of the former. Indeed if it does not, RAP's physical development program cannot survive, as it well knows.

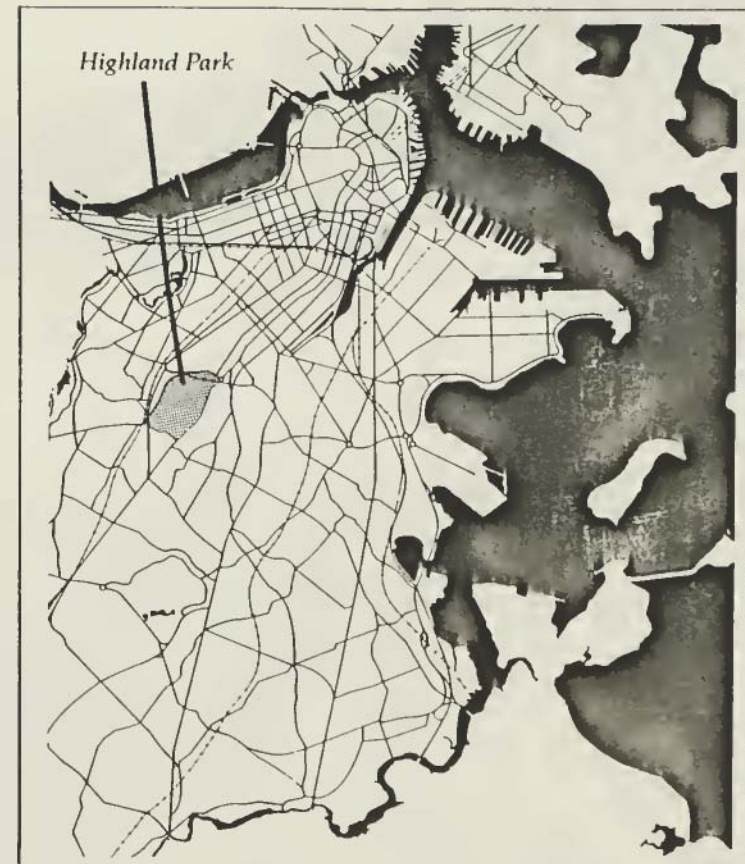
RAP may be "a rose patch in an onion grove," as a news article once said, a marvel of hope in the midst of the despair of Roxbury, but it will not survive if it remains an isolated achievement. RAP and Highland Park cannot grow in an environment of despair, poverty, and crime — and particularly it cannot survive unless the young people can expect a better life. This challenge will absorb much of RAP's attention in the future.

HIGHLAND PARK HISTORICAL PATHWAY



Highland Park Historical Pathway will highlight this community's unusually rich history and showcase its many architecturally and historically significant buildings. The Pathway will be an integral and permanent part of a larger (and nationally acclaimed) prospect of neighborhood revitalization and preservation being carried out by Roxbury Action Program.

The pathway will have as its main focus a spline from John Eliot Square, up through Kittredge Square to the High Fort. From that spline, which will receive the most intensive treatment, will run secondary branches, thus offering pedestrians a choice of tours ranging from a 15-minute walk to an hour tour.



credits

The Museum of Afro-American History for the early photographs of Roxbury.