

Parsing historic parkways: a greenway typology

by Christopher M. Greene, MLA'72
Senior Associate
Halvorson Design Partnership, Inc.
Boston, Massachusetts

"It is doubtful that any single type of park area has been more widely misunderstood and misinterpreted as the parkway."

Norman Newton,
Design on the Land, 1971

1. The Historic Parkway Initiative¹

Massachusetts is blessed with a tremendous legacy of historic parkways that stretches across the Commonwealth and represents a broad spectrum of parkway types, from pleasure drives along riverfronts to intimate journeys through wooded parkland. Many of the parkways of the state are inextricably interwoven into the daily patterns of community life. They serve as commuter routes, recreational respites, and scenic alternatives to faster-paced and commercial transportation corridors. Others provide access to the state's rich forest and park system, and have historic significance that often reaches deep into their past, when they served different public and private functions before the park systems were created. They provide a period or respite and a little breathing room during a busy day, what Frederick Law Olmsted originally envisioned as "nature in the city."

Over the century that has passed since Massachusetts' first parkways were conceived, however, these valuable resources have become vulnerable and threatened.

In response, in 2001, the Commonwealth established the *Historic Parkway Initiative*—a coalition of public environmental, historic and highway agencies, together with an array of non-governmental interests—to protect, preserve and enhance historic parkways throughout the state.

The Historic Parkway Initiative proceeded on several fronts. Two important historic roads—Memorial Drive along the Charles River and the route to the summit of Mt. Greylock, the state's highest peak—were selected as preservation demonstration projects. The system of metropolitan parkways around greater Boston were listed on the National Register. A public education and outreach program was carried out, built around the slogan: *A parkway is not a road. It's a park with a road in it.*

2. The Historic Parkway Inventory.

One of the most ambitious efforts involved developing preservation guidelines for the variety of historic parkways across the State. In recent years, several individual historic roads have received focussed planning attention, such as the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut and the Carriage Road network at Acadia National Park. But the task of generating a preservation approach to an assortment of historic roads as broad and varied as those in Massachusetts was unprecedented. For assistance with this task, the Commonwealth contracted with a multi-

disciplinary team² led by Halvorson Design Partnership, Inc., landscape architects of Boston to survey forty separate historic parkways and park roads across Massachusetts, and based on this representative inventory to recommend treatment guidelines.

The team's first challenge was to analyze the form and function of the many parkways and park roads across the State, in order to define a meaningful list of project types. To use the old grammarian's term, our task was to *parse* the historic parkways. It is this work, the essential basis for the planning task, that I will present in this paper.

3. Historic type and current function — a two pronged typology

The Massachusetts Historic Parkway Initiative defined "parkway" as an area of public open space that contains a roadway. Parkway link or provide access to natural, scenic and recreational spaces. They extend and reinforce the amenities of the park experience, and are characterized by verdant surroundings, alignments that conform to adjacent topography, non-commercial traffic, and limited access. They include a range of resources as different as the boulevard landscape of Memorial Drive along the Charles River and the one-way, one-lane Berry Pond Loop Road in Pittsfield State Forest.

We first focussed on what we called the historic type of each road—what was its original purpose and how did its design characteristics support those purposes. Following the inventory phase of the Massachusetts Historic Parkway Initiative, a total eight significant classes of historic type were identified:

- Connecting Pleasure Roads
- River Parkway
- Ocean Parkway
- Border Roads
- Internal Park Roads
- Summit Roads
- Estate Roads
- Vernacular Roads



Connecting Pleasure Road



Internal Park Road



River Parkway



Summit Road



Ocean Parkway



Estate Road



Border Road



Vernacular Road

Historic type can influence the character and issues of parkways in many ways. For instance, Ocean Parkway follow the undulating shoreline, while Border Roads, which form the edge between public and private land, exhibit a distinctly different character on either side of the road. In some cases, the historic type reflects the function of parkways and roads in a category, such as Estate Roads and Vernacular Roads, that existed before the public acquired the

land for park use. Some of these latter parkways retain many features from their pre-park existence, while others were modified to serve their new functions as they were incorporated into their associated parks, reservations and forests.

But it was clear that knowing the original design intent of an historic road does not say enough about how to treat it. It is also necessary to understand its current transportation function — does it still carry vehicles, and if so, with what intensity? Or is its use primarily as a footpath? four classes of current function. A parkway that figures importantly into a regional road network has widely different issues and challenges from a park road that no longer carries any vehicular traffic. The current function typology was developed for specific use on Massachusetts historic parkways, although it is likely to be adaptable to other situations. The four current function categories are:

- Parkway Arterial Road
- Parkway Local Road
- Facility Circulation Road
- Facility Trail/Path



Parkway Arterial Road



Park Circulation Road

This “current function” classification is similar, but not identical, to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) functional classification.



Parkway Local Road



Path Road

Conventional engineering practice for assessing road functions follows the AASHTO “Green Book” (Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets, 2001). The Green Book lays out a system for “functional classification” of roads, which distinguishes between roads of different purpose, function and form to group them according to the character of service they provide. These classifications are used to guide appropriate design and safety measures for each road type. It is a classification based on access and mobility—the driver’s ease of moving onto the road, and how easily a vehicle can be moved along the road. While these factors are considerations for parkways, the function of parkways as respites within the city, pleasure drives, and scenic recreational routes are more often the essential determining factors for making decisions about their appropriate treatment.

While AASHTO provides a general framework for classifying the Commonwealth’s parkways, it provides limited guidance for many of them. At one end of the AASHTO spectrum, most metropolitan parkways could be considered Urban Minor Arterials, whereas AASHTO classification does not at all address, for instance, those State Park roads that only provide access within a single park, nor does it apply to parkways that now function only as trails or paths. The definitions of current function laid out herein, therefore, were written to reflect the specific functions and characteristics of Massachusetts parkways.

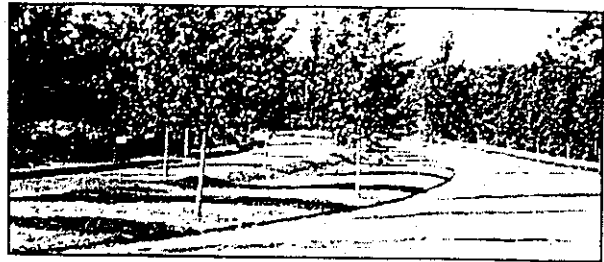
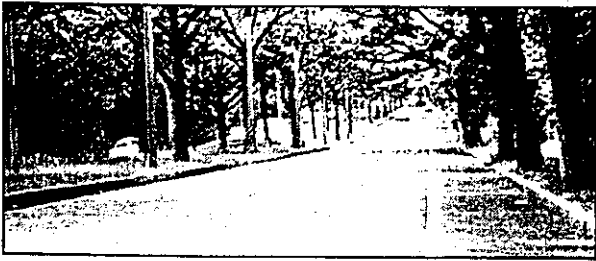
Historic Type

The following are definitions of the historic type categories. Some of the text is adapted from the National Register nomination for the Metropolitan Parkway system.

Connecting pleasure roads

Connecting pleasure roads are parkways that are external to and connect parks by means of a road that provides a park-like experience. In most cases, the park experience along this road type is attenuated. Rather than a road enclosed within a park, or a road with parkland extending out along one side of it, the parkway character is established with vegetation in medians, and trees or trees and lower story vegetation on either side of the road

to create a vegetative canopy. The earliest Connecting Pleasure Roads were designed to accommodate multiple modes of travel including pedestrians, bicyclists, carriages and electric trolleys.



Connecting pleasure roads: left, VFW Parkway, 2002; right Fellsway East, 1903

River Parkways

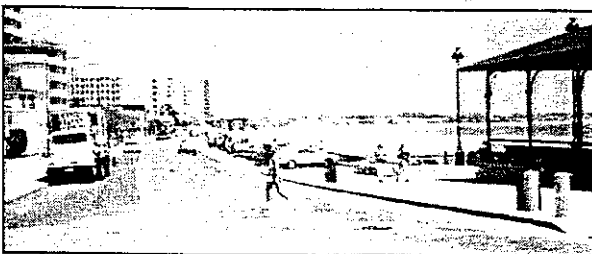
River Parkways conform to the curving alignment of an inland watercourse within narrow stretches of park or reservation land, which permit scenic water as well as park views along the route. Their design is similar to Connecting Pleasure Roads. Typically, River Parkways follow one side of the defining landscape element. The setting of the riverine side is characterized by a natural, sometimes wooded, landscape. Middle distance views are across and along the river. The side opposite the watercourse is often late 19th and 20th century single-family homes, with small commercial pockets. In most cases, there are few opportunities for long-distance views.



River parkways: left, Cambridge Parkway, 2002; right, Nonantum Road, 1920

Ocean Parkways

Ocean Parkways are aligned along ocean frontage within linear park or reservation land, which afford dramatic water views and long-distance views, and access to the beach. Their design is similar to Connecting Pleasure Roads, with the exception that there is usually no overstory vegetation between the road and the shore. The immediate setting is beach on the shore side, which may be separated from the road by parking, sidewalks and retaining walls. The inland side is characterized by residential neighborhoods, usually of late 19th and 20th century single-family homes, with small commercial pockets. The inland side may also include parks and reservation areas focused on tidal creeks and marshes that offer middle and long-distance vistas.



Ocean parkways: left, Revere Beach Boulevard, 2002; right, Quincy Shore Drive, 1916

Border Roads

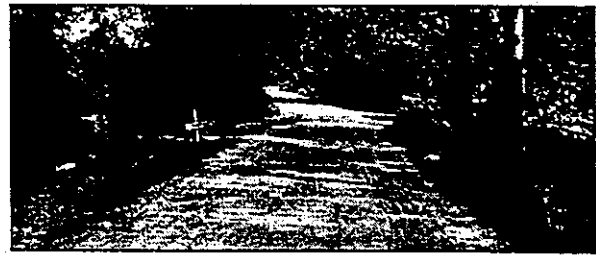
Border Roads were an important part of Eliot and Baxter's original concept of the MDC reservations. They are roads that form boundaries between reservations and nearby residential development, ensuring that private owners would not appropriate public land by owning adjacent property. Some MDC roads that began as Border Roads now function as Internal Park Roads because of land acquisition by the agency. The park setting is most often natural wooded landscape, or in some cases, open field, while the privately owned side is often residential, but can be commercial, industrial or institutional.



Border roads: left, Hillcrest Parkway, 2002; right, Mystic Valley Parkway, 1910

Internal Park Roads

Internal Park Roads provide circulation through parks and to various park service, recreational, scenic and historic destinations. Designed to serve park purposes, Internal Park Roads are often more low-volume and narrower routes than parkways that are external to park or reservation land. These parkways typically have low speed limits, which encourage the enjoyment of the enclosing landscape as well as the views of natural features, recreational amenities and long-distance vistas to which they connect the visitor. They do not have medians or rows of flanking trees, but use the adjacent park vegetation and setting to soften and integrate them into the park landscape. Internal Park Roads may also provide access through park property to destinations outside of the park or reservation.



Internal Park Roads: left, Pittsfield State Park, 2002; right, Middlesex Fells, 1898

Estate Roads

Estate roads were designed to serve estate grounds, and have become incorporated into the estate-turned-park. As roads that existed prior to the park's development, their alignments and design reflect the original site design, circulation patterns and use, and therefore may have an important interpretive potential.



Estate roads: Maudslay State Park, 2002

Summit Roads

Summit roads were designed to bring visitors to the summit of mountains, and experience the rugged progress up the steep topography as well as the drama of distant views. Most Summit Roads have vistas as they approach the top of the mountain. Segments of Summit Roads can include steep vertical alignments, hairpin turns or frequent switchbacks to navigate the high altitude of the mountain. Guardrails and other barriers appear at frequent points, particularly at the top of Summit Roads.



Summit roads: left, Mt. Sugarloaf State Reservation, 2002; right, road on Mt. Greylock, 1930s?

Vernacular Roads

Vernacular roads are roads that pre-date the creation of the park and served variable purposes for the pre-park site, including road patterns of now abandoned villages, access roads to industrial sites, and farm roads. As roads that existed prior to the park's development, their alignments and design reflect the original layout, circulation patterns and use, and therefore may have an important interpretive potential. Vernacular Roads are often important to park programs and operations (i.e. forestry).



Vernacular Road: Borderland State Park, 2002

Current Function

The following are definitions of the current function categories of parkways:

Parkway Arterial Roads

Parkway Arterial Roads include Connecting Pleasure Roads, Ocean Parkways, River Parkways and a few Border Roads. Parkway Arterial Roads provide a high degree of mobility for trips of moderate length with intracommunity continuity. They collect traffic from lesser type roadways and provide links between municipalities and commercial and industrial areas. They are often substantial roadways with greater traffic capacity and typically greater vehicle speed to facilitate mobility, although they may also serve



Jamaicaway, 2003

to provide access to abutting land or development. If a parkway carries traffic, and is classified by AASHTO as a major or minor Arterial, it is in this parkway current function category.

Parkway Local Roads

Parkway Local Roads include roads through and along the edge of parks which serve the local non-park area and roadway network adjacent to the park, in addition to serving the circulation needs of the park system itself. They are, by this definition, less substantial and provide less traffic capacity than Parkway Arterial Roads. If a parkway carries traffic, and is classified by AASHTO as a Collector or Local Road, it is a Parkway Local Road. This current function category includes roads not classified by AASHTO, those that carry traffic through a park and beyond.



Blue Hills Parkway, 2002

Facility Circulation Roads

Facility Circulation Roads serve only a park or reservation itself, and do not serve other adjacent transportation needs. They allow the public to access the inner portions of the park by vehicle. Facility Circulation Roads include roads such as park loop roads as well as Summit Roads.



Christopher Clark Road, Mt. Tom State Reservation, 2002

Facility Trails/Paths

Park trails and paths are not open to public vehicles, and are usually unpaved ways for multiple users, including hikers, bicyclists, and horseback riders. They may serve the park for service or emergency access. They vary in width depending on their use and setting.



Schermerhorn Drive, October Mountain State Park, 2002

4. Conclusion

These definitions make it clear that the character and function of historic parkways in Massachusetts—from their origins to their use today—are dynamic, and illustrate the importance of understanding the specific history and nature of each road in order to prepare a plan for treatment. Many roads in the inventory had multiple classifications because of a change in function or context along their length. Roads such as Fellsway East function variously as a Border Road, a Connecting Pleasure Road, and an Internal Park Road, depending on which part of the road is under consideration. Roads inside park facilities can be Facility Circulation Roads where public access is allowed, and then Facility Trails/Paths where vehicular access is prohibited or limited to park personnel.

As a dynamic resource, the historic origins of a parkway, its parkway type, needs to be understood as well as its current use or function, and its current condition, in order to make educated and balanced decisions about its treatment.

Notes:

1. The work described in this paper was performed for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, under the Massachusetts Historic Parkways Initiative, during 2001-2003.
2. The full consultant team consisted of
 - Halvorson Design partnership, landscape architects and prime consultant
 - Shary Page Berg, landscape historian
 - Judith Nitsch Engineering, Inc., civil engineers
 - Joel S. Lunger, structural engineer
 - Tree Specialists, Inc., arborists.