An urban neighborhood characterized by its diverse population and changing identity, Jamaica Plain is considered by many to be a microcosm of Boston, reflecting the city’s trends in growth and decay. Unlike the North and West Ends, Jamaica Plain was not a part of Boston from the city’s beginning. With its decision to join with Boston in the late nineteenth century, Jamaica Plain also distinguishes itself from autonomous streetcar suburbs like Cambridge and Somerville. Jamaica Plain therefore provides a case study of the history and development of an urban space that is geographically on the periphery and politically and economically part of the whole.

The story behind how Jamaica Plain got its name is up for debate, but the most commonly accepted version is that the original Puritan inhabitants gave the name to commemorate Oliver Cromwell’s seizure of the island of Jamaica and the subsequent influx of rum and sugar. Originally a part of the town of Roxbury, the area was already being labeled the “Jamaica” section in the last decades of the seventeenth century. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the land in the Jamaica Plain area of Roxbury was used primarily for farming, but in the mid 1700s it began to be settled by wealthy Boston residents building country estates. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, however, the composition of Jamaica Plain society began to change as commuting upper-middle class professionals moved to Jamaica Plain, followed by groups of artisans, laborers, and various immigrant groups, beginning with the influx of Irish in the mid-nineteenth century.