

BOSTON

A Topographical History

Walter Muir Whitehill

and

Lawrence W. Kennedy

Third edition, enlarged

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Preface to the Third Edition

IN THE PREFACE TO THE first edition of this book, Walter Muir Whitehill wrote about how one could best view Boston from the Mystic River Bridge; he beautifully described how the marvelous panorama of the city unfolds itself, particularly in the morning. Coincidentally, my first memorable view of Boston was from this same bridge in the mid-1960s on a family vacation. After several days in Lexington and Concord, we decided to visit Boston. Thwarted by construction barriers, detours, and the intricacies of the ramps and exits in Charlestown, we traveled back and forth over the bridge in a fruitless attempt to visit the Bunker Hill Monument. By the time we finally got there, the monument was closed. Frustrated by Boston traffic, we drove across the Mystic River Bridge one final time, heading north to Maine. Thus, I missed my chance to see more of the birth of the New Boston in the 1960s.

In the fall of 1970 I returned to Boston as a freshman at Boston College. The city had long attracted me by its history and character and the fact that it was not New York, in whose orbit I had resided since I was two months old. I was eager to leave the sprawling metropolitan area for school in a city built on a more human scale. During my first few years in Boston I delighted in walking around and tasting the city. I still do.

Kevin Lynch, the late MIT urban guru, pointed out in *The*

Image of the City (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960, p. v) that “the urban landscape, among its many roles, is also something to be seen, to be remembered, and to delight in.” I have many memories from those college years in the early 1970s, when so much was changing in Boston. Luckily I had friends who also wanted to explore Boston’s historic sites and sights along the Freedom Trail, and we spent many hours walking the streets, studying the old and observing the new. We began our trips downtown by taking the old trolleys from Lake Street down Commonwealth Avenue, often getting off above-ground at Kenmore Square to avoid the additional twenty-five-cent fare as the cars descended into Boston’s subway system. We would walk down Commonwealth Avenue or over to Boylston Street and investigate the then relatively new Prudential Center. We would walk through the Public Garden, across the Common, down to Quincy Market, and eventually back to Kenmore, exploring and delighting in much along the way.

I recall walking through the dark and dirty Quincy Market of those days as we found our way to Durgin-Park (which Whitehill had already written off as filled with tourists in *Boston in the Age of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* [Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966, pp. 68–69]). The old-world charm of the North End was a new world for me. I was drawn by the historic associations and returned often for the food. I also wandered past South Station and across Fort Point Channel to an area of warehouses that seemed caught in a time warp and perfect for shooting gangster films. Similarly Province Street, off School Street, always delighted me with its feel of the first half of the twentieth century. As the New Boston was being built I found charm and fascination in the remnants of the old. Going up School Street past the Parker House, I still can recall vividly the naked light bulbs strung up in the steel skeleton of One Beacon Street. This overpowering skyscraper of the New Boston was just rising across from King’s Chapel, a portent of a new skyline for the city.

Often as a student I would walk around the Common and

through the Public Garden. I enjoyed the trees and statues along Comm. Ave. on fall afternoons. My love of baseball was rekindled by trips to Fenway Park, where good seats could be had cheaply for that night's game without the assistance of scalpers. And finally, I always marveled at the fact that the trolleys shut down so early that we had to be back at Kenmore no later than 12:25 A.M. for the last train back to BC.

While Whitehill came to know the streets of Beacon Hill "as a kind of fringe benefit of Anglican piety" (p. xxiv), my background and beliefs led me along other paths. In November 1970 I departed from my usual treks through downtown and traveled to the South End to view the body of Richard Cardinal Cushing, lying in repose in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. The Orange Line was still an elevated system in those days, and the walk down the stairs to Washington Street and through the dark to the cathedral was like a walk back in time.

I have spent most of the years since in Boston and a great deal of time observing and studying the city's history and chronicling its change. My doctoral dissertation in history centered on Boston politics, and it seemed natural to follow this with work in the Policy Development and Research Department of the Boston Redevelopment Authority. There I undertook a history of city planning in Boston. The inspiring support of Sam Bass Warner, Jr., led to the 1992 publication of that work. Since then I have lived in northeastern Pennsylvania and taught at the University of Scranton, but frequent trips to Boston to visit my sons at Boston College have helped me to keep abreast of changes in the Hub.

During a sabbatical leave in the fall of 1998 I enjoyed an extended sojourn in Massachusetts to write the enlarged edition of this book. Each day of my sabbatical I had the appealing choice of either walking along the beach before sitting down to write or traveling by train to South Station and heading to the stimulating environment of the Boston Athenæum.

It was long ago at the Athenæum, while writing a term paper on the early years of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, that I

discovered the joy of research. That was in 1973, which happened to be the year that Whitehill ended his long tenure as director of that splendid institution. Coming back to the Athenæum twenty-five years later, I could not help feeling his presence as I updated this classic account of Boston. The original edition of this book was published in 1959. Whitehill added Chapter IX to the second edition in 1968 and planned to write another chapter but died in 1978. The job of updating the book came to me two decades later.

I have not gone back and changed Whitehill's nine chapters. I let Whitehill's judgments stand with all their virtues and whatever faults there may be. My account of urban design, architecture, and historic preservation in Boston from the late 1960s to the last years of the twentieth century is surely an extension of Whitehill's work, but it is not an echo of his views. As I approached the task of enlarging the book it was clear that I would not attempt to put myself in Whitehill's head and project what he might have thought about the city's development over the last thirty years. Nor would I attempt to fill his shoes. Rather, I would tread along my own chosen paths.

Whereas Whitehill arrived in Boston from Andover at North Station, over the years I have approached the city from West Roxbury or the Cape via South Station. In this and innumerable other ways our paths were different, but we share an abiding love of the city, an enchantment with the story of how it grew, and a sense of excitement at how it continues to be shaped. Whitehill wrote that he was not interested in portraying some past Golden Age in Boston; rather, he found the city to be more agreeable and exciting each year (p. xiv). I can say the same thing.

In his 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888, p. 52) Edward Bellamy imagined an awesome view of Boston at the end of the twentieth century. Bellamy's protagonist, time traveling to Boston in the year 2000, stared out at an unfamiliar and breath-taking sight: "At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded by

trees and lined with fine buildings . . . stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day, raised their stately piles on every side."

Bellamy's concerns in the novel and in life were the economic and social inequalities that plagued American society, but his topographical description of Boston was not far off the mark either. Buildings today are of "colossal size" and not a few display "architectural grandeur." Bellamy's time traveler recognized the city only because the Charles River on one side and Boston Harbor on the other side oriented him, but in reality the Boston of the year 2000 would be very recognizable to a time traveler from the late nineteenth century. This is because the city has preserved so much of the intimacy of place along many of its downtown streets. Beacon Hill and Back Bay also would be recognizable because, even more than downtown, they have maintained the historic streetscape. For our time traveler the Boston skyline, however, would be unrecognizable and disorienting. In fact this skyline may be confounding for those who remember back only a few decades in the twentieth century, before skyscrapers rose above the Custom House Tower.

I hope that this updated edition of the book advances Whitehill's goal of making the evolution of the city understandable to its people and visitors. Chapter X considers the period from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. Chapter XI considers subsequent developments of the 1980s and 1990s and the plans for reshaping the city as a result of both the expansion of downtown Boston across Fort Point Channel toward South Boston and the Central Artery/Tunnel Project.

When I write about Boston my perspective is occasionally from a skyscraper or high perch but more often from the level of the street. I have profited from reading the architecture criticism of others, but this book offers something different. It is an account of change over time. My description and understand-

ing are rooted in my personal and professional experience as a historian who has walked the streets and explored the history of the natural and human-made features of the city I love so well.

In my earlier work, *Planning the City upon a Hill: Boston since 1630*, I thanked many people who helped me learn about Boston and I remain grateful to them. At Harvard University Press I thank Aïda Donald for asking me to take on this challenge and Elizabeth Suttell and Andrea Dodge for their editorial work guiding and improving the manuscript. Thomas H. O'Connor's interest in my work is, as always, appreciated. I am grateful to the University of Scranton for supporting my work through a sabbatical and a research grant, and especially to Joseph H. Dreisbach, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Richard H. Passon, Provost, for their encouragement and assistance. A special thanks goes to Rosemarie Payle, secretary of the History Department, for all her cheerful help.

Lynn Wehnes again proved to be a helpful critic and good friend, and I thank her. I want to thank my parents for taking my brothers and me to Boston and so many other historic places when we were growing up. In addition to their general interest and support, my two sons read this work and improved it with their comments and questions. Patrick's reading of an early draft encouraged me at a crucial stage and Paul's review near the end was the final test. Patrick also provided crucial assistance securing illustrations for the book. I am grateful to and proud of both my sons. My greatest debt is to my wife, Judy, for editing numerous drafts, but more important for being my partner. Her love sustains me and makes our family my greatest joy.

LAWRENCE W. KENNEDY

The University of Scranton
Scranton, Pennsylvania
June 1999

Preface to the Second Edition

WHEN I GAVE THESE LECTURES at the Lowell Institute in 1958, "urban history" had not yet become a fashionable academic subject. The subsequent decade having been one of extraordinary change in Boston, far more readers than I had anticipated were attracted by a book that tried to outline some of the transformations of the previous three and a third centuries. As those who were rebuilding the city and those who were simply observing the process found the book of interest, it was reprinted in 1963. That printing now being exhausted, the Harvard University Press has suggested a new edition, with a ninth chapter describing the decade of renewal that has passed since the lectures were given. This is largely concerned with the activities of the Boston Redevelopment Authority from the fortunate day in 1960 when Mayor Collins chose Edward J. Logue as its administrator, and with the simultaneous efforts in new private construction and historic preservation that have evolved alongside this official pump-priming. It is a chapter that needs to be added, for the work of this decade has brought about conspicuous changes in the city, many of which are for the better. The first eight chapters are reprinted with only very minor changes; the ninth attempts to describe what has occurred between 1958 and the summer of 1968.

This book has been the record of constant topographical change, brought about by changes in numbers and habits of the people.

Although a historian by trade and a historic preservationist by temperament, I am delighted by many of the changes summarized in this new chapter, for they represent a remarkable blending of public and private effort, guided by a higher concept of urban design and a keener awareness of historical continuity than is normal in American cities in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Indeed I find Boston a more agreeable and exciting place to live in each year. When the University of Oklahoma Press a few years ago asked me to do a volume on Boston for their Centers of Civilization series I made it clear that I had no desire to rewarm any supposed "Golden Age" of the past, for I felt that present-day Boston then possessed more of the elements that make a city a center of civilization than it had at any earlier time. Thus I wrote *Boston in the Age of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, published in 1966, which contains a brief historical sketch of the city and an account of some of the institutions that make it a center of civilization. Chapter IX of this new edition of *Boston: A Topographical History* attempts to show how this city has recently dealt, in civilized manner, with large problems of urban design and architecture.

The 1958 preface is unchanged, for most of what it says about Boston is still substantially true. The view from the Mystic River Bridge is as fine as ever, although the Legislature has officially renamed the bridge to honor the memory of Maurice J. Tobin, sometime Mayor of Boston, Governor of Massachusetts, and Secretary of Labor. But most people still call it the Mystic River Bridge, for familiar names have a way of outliving official change everywhere. Indeed in Spain one sometimes sees, for popular convenience, the old name posted below the new one, as in the case of a street where, during the Republic, Karl Marx supplanted the Emperor Charles V, producing the euphonious sign: CALLE CARLOS MARX, ANTES CARLOS QUINTO. The illusion of a miniature Manhattan, seen from the bridge, is today enhanced by the increased number of tall buildings that have sprung up, not only in the region of State Street but in the West End and at the Prudential Center beyond Copley Square.

In this decade the railroads have redoubled their efforts to dis-

courage passenger traffic. There is in 1968 but one passenger train a day from Andover, arriving at the unseemly hour of eight ten. Moreover, the Boston and Maine Railroad has transformed much of the area behind the North Station into a parking lot for automobiles, eliminating a number of tracks and ending halfway to the Charles River those that remain. In 1958 the North Station of an evening seemed a veritable gateway to the north and east, with somber trains of sleeping cars on adjacent tracks, awaiting passengers bound for Montreal, St. John, New Brunswick, and Halifax. Today there is no passenger service to Maine, New Hampshire, or Vermont, let alone the province of Quebec and the Maritimes. As a destination, Reading is an inadequate substitute. All that the station now offers is un-shiny aluminum Budd cars that continue to bring commuters in from certain Massachusetts towns. These continue only because of subsidies from the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, which, to keep needless automobiles out of the city, is making valiant efforts to improve public rapid transit. But because of the MBTA subsidies, many people still make their normal daily entry into Boston from the North Station in the manner that I described a decade ago.

In the late fifties and early sixties, walkers from the North Station frequently had to chart new courses from week to week. So many buildings were being demolished that for a time it was difficult to find a route free from the danger of falling bricks. That perilous moment has passed. Although some beloved (though smelly) alleyways have disappeared forever, there is now the daily excitement of watching the evolution of the new Government Center. Eventually, when projects now under way are completed, walkers will have greater freedom and pleasanter routes than formerly.

Destinations have changed relatively little in the past ten years, although sometimes, because of new construction, long-established firms are found in quite unfamiliar settings, with a startling change of decor. Shortly before the law firm of Ropes & Gray moved to such glittering quarters in the State Street Bank Building, Charles A. Coolidge, a partner in the firm, was told by a New York friend

of the following exchange between two New York lawyers. "I hear Ropes & Gray are expanding." "No, they're not. They can't." "Why can't they?" "Because there's no more secondhand office furniture left in Boston." Nevertheless, Ropes & Gray, and other Boston firms, today have both new quarters and new furniture, without having mislaid any of their essential qualities during the change. Moreover, constant association with the views from some of these new tall buildings has given a sense of the sea and an awareness of the shape of the city to many who would never have dreamed of climbing Bunker Hill Monument or going up the Custom House Tower.

I have been able to follow some of the projects of the Boston Redevelopment Authority since 1960 through the kindness of the Right Reverend Monsignor Francis J. Lally, Chairman, Edward J. Logue, Development Administrator (1960-1967), John P. McMorrow, Director of Administrative Services, and other ever helpful members of its staff. Arnold Savrann, project architect for Government Center, greatly assisted me by furnishing several of the illustrations needed for Chapter IX. Other photographs I owe to the kindness of Dr. Walter Gropius of The Architects Collaborative, Inc.; Daniel G. Becker of the Prudential Insurance Company; Erwin D. Canham and Carl B. Rechner of The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston; Professor Robert E. Moody of Boston University; Philip J. McNiff, Director of the Boston Public Library; Philip A. Stack of *The Pilot*; and my old friend and ally, George M. Cushing, Jr. Individual acknowledgments are given in the list of illustrations, but I wish here to express my collective thanks for permission to reproduce the illustrations that are so essential to any understanding of the complicated changes described.

To the acknowledgments of the first edition, I must add my gratitude to William Bradford Osgood of the State Street Bank and Trust Company, who has been of unfailing help in many matters of Boston history and preservation over the past decade, and reiterate my thanks to the staffs of the Boston Athenæum, especially the late Susan Parsons (1933-1967) and Miss Jane A. Ramsay, and of the Harvard University Press.

On several occasions in the last decade I have published elsewhere prints and photographs of early Boston buildings that supplement those that illustrate the text of this book. In *Destroyed Boston Buildings*, a Massachusetts Historical Society Picture Book that I prepared in 1965 from material in that institution's collection, views are reproduced of many structures that have disappeared. In a Bostonian Society picture book of 1967, *Back Bay Churches and Public Buildings*, Mrs. Ropes Cabot and I published early photographs of seventeen buildings, thirteen of which still grace the Back Bay. Mrs. Cabot had in 1966 prepared an earlier picture book entitled *Vanished Boston: An Album of Nineteenth-Century Photographs from the Collections of the Bostonian Society* in which old photographs of destroyed Boston buildings were matched by contemporary views of the sites taken especially for the purpose by Henry D. Childs. This melancholy commentary on the decline of architectural taste fully warranted the query "Who can claim that change is improvement?," which she placed on the title page. I included other illustrations of topographical and architectural interest in my *The Provident Institution for Savings in the Town of Boston, 1816-1966, a Historical Sketch*, that that bank published to commemorate its hundred and fiftieth anniversary.

The greatest treasure of supplementary illustrations is to be found in Professor Bainbridge Bunting's *Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History, 1840-1917*, published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in 1967. Professor Bunting rightly observes (page 6) that, because of the nature of the Back Bay filling and construction, "a pedestrian starting at the Public Garden and walking westward can review American architectural development of half a century within the confines of a single street. Nowhere else in America is this possible on so impressive a scale." If one cannot walk the length of Commonwealth Avenue, the illustrations of *Houses of Boston's Back Bay* furnish an excellent substitute. Two maps by Samuel H. Bryant that are used as Figs. 3-4 in this book are especially helpful. The former, representing Boston and vicinity, 1790-1820, shows the relation

of the town to the harbor and adjacent countryside; the latter reduces to a single drawing the relation of present-day Boston to the original shoreline.

The Joint Center for Urban Studies, a cooperative venture of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, since its establishment in 1959, has published a number of books and monographs that illuminate the history of Boston. Sam B. Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) can be read with particular profit in conjunction with this book, for it shows how through the introduction of horse-drawn and electric streetcars large elements of the population of Boston sprayed out of the original city and inundated the once rural Dorchester, Roxbury, West Roxbury and Brighton, which are now submerged in inelegant urban sprawl. Such centrifugal expansion of population eventually led to the extension of city boundaries far beyond the limits of the Boston peninsula, and to many of the problems of the city today. A more recent publication of the Joint Center, *Boston: the job ahead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), by Martin Meyerson, its former director, and Edward C. Banfield, Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Urban Government at Harvard, discusses the present scene without uttering shrill cries of an "urban crisis." Its final chapter, "Beauty in the City," is particularly relevant to the new final chapter of this book.

WALTER MUIR WHITEHILL

Boston Athenæum

15 July 1968

Preface to the First Edition

ONLY RESIDENTS of Essex County and Maine and New Hampshiremen, traveling by car, approach Boston with any decency. From the upper deck of the Mystic River Bridge, particularly in the early morning, a marvelous panorama of the city in Monet-like blues and grays unfolds itself. Great bridges are one of the few indisputable triumphs of twentieth-century America, yet their builders — so skilful in spans and stresses — seem to take a perverse delight in placing guard rails so exactly at eye level that the traveler is almost invariably denied even a glimpse of the river or bay that he is crossing. This is doubtless deliberate. Pedestrians are prohibited by numerous signs on many bridges; so is parking or even stopping, for the great bridge is part of a tacit conspiracy to get the motorist out of one state into another before he has a chance to determine the difference, if any, between them. The designers of the Mystic River Bridge did their best to conform to this new orthodoxy, yet somehow, in spite of their efforts, the individuality of Boston imposes itself. As one climbs above the unmitigated nastiness of Chelsea, one may have a fleeting glimpse of a tanker being nosed into a Mystic River berth by tugs, while the brief pause for change at the toll-bar allows a moment to enjoy the profile of Boston. On the right, the outsize obelisk of Bunker Hill Monument provides a great vertical accent. At nine of a sunny morning one of its granite faces is in brilliant light; another cloaked

in chiaroscuro that would have delighted Piranesi. Below on the left is the Boston Naval Shipyard, with flight decks of immobilized carriers, great machine shops, a destroyer perhaps backing into the stream, and, suddenly for one instant, the masts and spars of a full-rigged ship. For here in Boston the United States Navy, quietly and inexorably occupied, as it must be, with atomic submarines and guided missiles, preserves, cheek by jowl with its contemporary concerns, the frigate *Constitution*. Beyond, a variety of blue-gray buildings, tall for Boston, suggests the illusion of a miniature Manhattan. To the left, sunlight glitters on a great expanse of water, as one looks down the harbor toward the sea. To the right lies a more constricted body of water, the Charles River Basin, that was created of ugly and smelly mudflats half a century ago by judicious damming. The roadway dips and rises, and as it momentarily changes direction the prospect is altered. For a moment the white spire of Christ Church, Salem Street, dominates the North End. For another moment one catches sight of the gold dome of the State House. A stranger would hardly realize that this dome rises above the highest land in Boston, so closely have tall buildings ringed about and obscured the outline of Beacon Hill. *Non potest civitas abscondi supra montem posita*, yet Boston has by cutting down its chief hill and sprawling far beyond its traditional boundaries succeeded in hiding itself save to those who approach by sea or over the Mystic River Bridge. Even from the bridge one gets only a momentary hint of the shape and pattern of Boston, for with the pressure of fast-moving lines of traffic suddenly one is in the city. The brief happiness of the distant prospect is over. Unless one succumbs to the wiles of the traffic engineer and continues on out of town to the southward, one must come down from the heights and crawl through crowded streets.

David McCord has spoken of "the images which the walker in Boston remembers more clearly than the man behind the wheel." Furthermore he uses the word "walker" advisedly, remarking that "a pedestrian is a man in danger of his life; a walker is a man in possession of his soul." But even the pedestrian, who weaves his way through traffic with a lordly and individualistic disregard of

lights and paternalistic regulations, sees more of Boston than the motorist. Sensible people only bring cars into the city if obliged to transport heavier loads than they can comfortably carry in their hands. That is why, in spite of determined efforts by railroads to discourage passenger traffic, so many men and women debouch from the North and South Stations every weekday morning between eight and nine.

My own normal daily entry to Boston is from the North Station. Arriving, with luck, at eight forty from Andover, the obvious course to the Athenæum is on foot. Most commuters work on the same principle, save for students heading for Boston University or other tolerably distant colleges or schools. On rainy mornings stenographers and state employees huddle together in little groups hoping for a cab, but in general, rain or shine, a solid stream of walkers emerges from the North Station, following routes to their places of business that include, if possible, an alleyway. No right-minded Bostonian would dream of walking along a street if he could by any chance cut through an alley headed even approximately in the direction he is going.

There is not much to be said, scenically or architecturally, for the region between the North Station and the business district. Originally it was a mill pond. When the top of Beacon Hill was dumped into it in the first quarter of the last century, it built up into an area of melancholy dreariness that has not been alleviated by the random introduction of elevated tracks and overhead highways. Only when one crosses Hanover Street and comes within sight of Faneuil Hall does the neighborhood become in any way sympathetic.

Hanover Street, from the settlement of Boston until very recent years, was the road that linked the North End with the rest of the Boston peninsula. Now it is bisected by the artery leading from the Mystic River Bridge. Thus the North End has become almost an island, separated from the rest of the city, that concerns chiefly its numerous Italian residents and the visitors who go there in search of historic monuments. The streets of the North End do not lend themselves to through traffic, but they are admirably