

BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION
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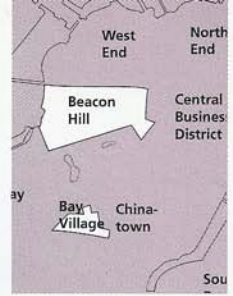


BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION
The Environment Department
1998

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Mayor

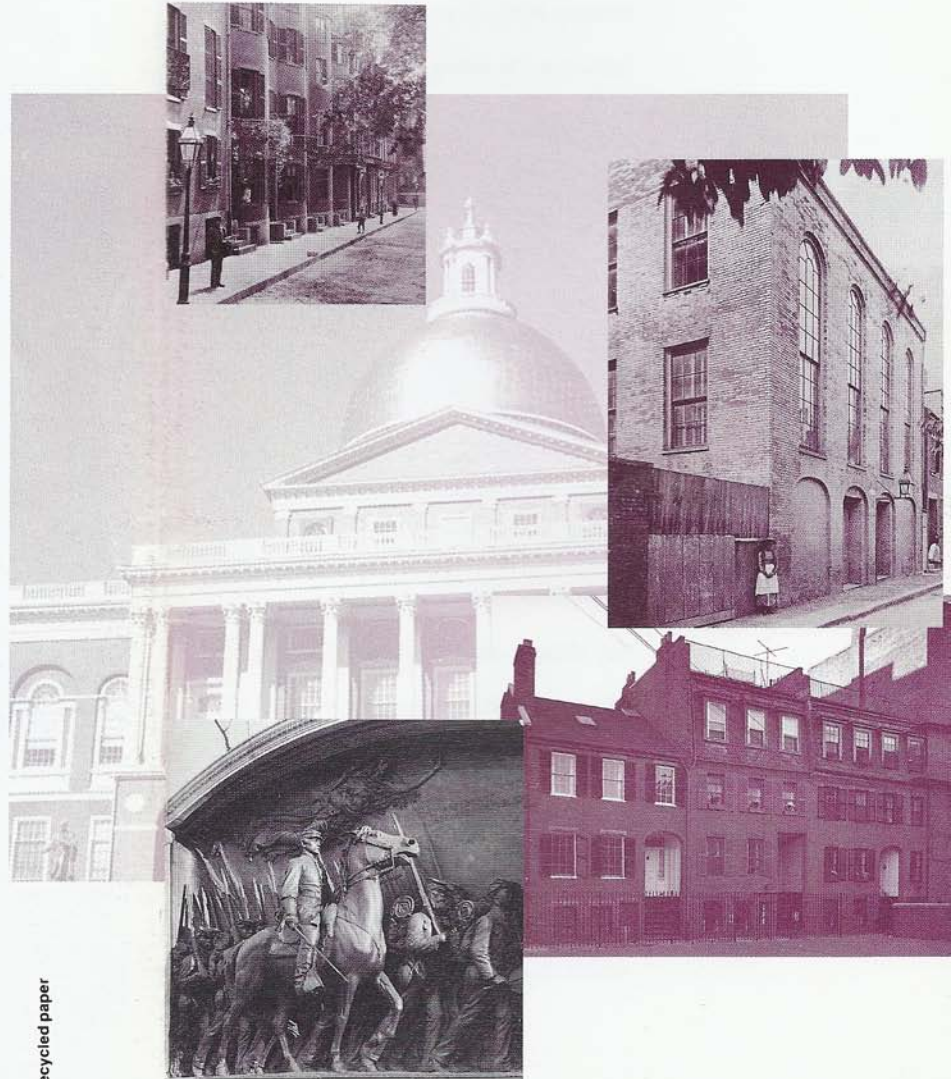
Text: Carolyn Hughes/History Interpretation Services
Design: Penny J. Sander
Historic Photographs: The Bostonian Society

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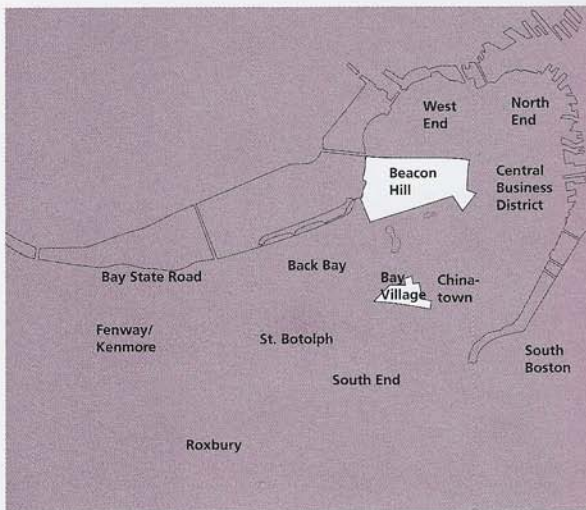
BEACON HILL & BAY VILLAGE

Exploring Boston's Neighborhoods

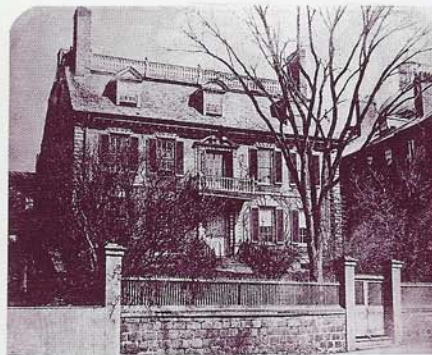


**BOSTON LANDMARKS
COMMISSION**

Conceived in 1795, Beacon Hill was the first of the elegant residential districts laid out by Boston's foremost Federal-era architect and planner, Charles Bulfinch. Throughout the early 19th century, Bulfinch's neoclassical vision influenced building across the city. In



Bay Village, created on landfill along the southwestern edge of the city in the 1820s, Federal and Greek Revival forms were replicated on a more modest scale. Such brick row house districts define the architectural character of Boston to this day.



The Bostonian Society

Built in 1737 for Thomas Hancock, the Georgian-style stone mansion of Gov. John Hancock was a Beacon Street landmark until it was razed in 1863.

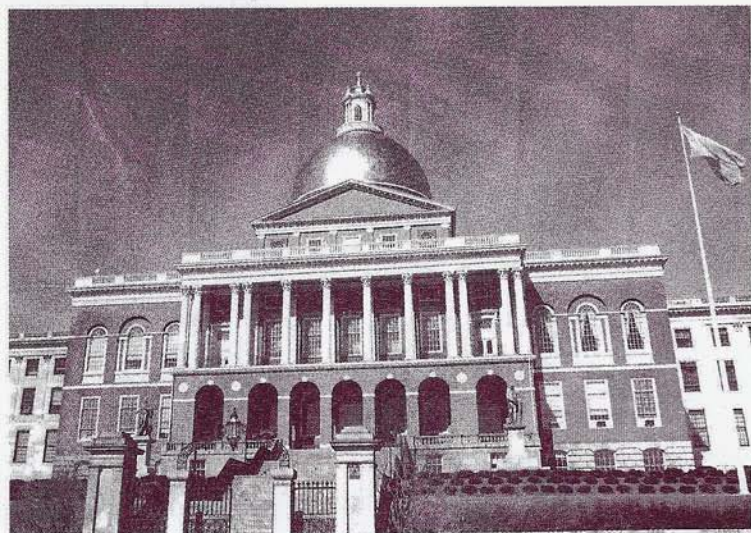
THE TRIMOUNTAIN

When Boston was founded in 1630, Beacon Hill was one of three peaks that loomed to the west of the settlement. About 45 acres on the remote grassy southwestern slope were set aside as a town common to be used for grazing and military drills. In 1708, the cow path over the hill to Boston Common was laid out as Beacon Street, named after the signal lantern placed atop the Trimountain in 1634.

By 1780, the colonial residential districts were crowded. A group organized as the Mount Vernon Proprietors looked to the undeveloped Trimountain rising above the city. In 1795, these gentlemen purchased 19 acres of pastureland at bargain prices, mostly from painter John Singleton Copley, who had returned

to England at the outbreak of the Revolution.

The Proprietors set about creating a prestigious residential district. In 1799, the top of the Trimount hills were leveled off. Mansions were built along the newly created Mount Vernon Street. The houses were set back 30 feet from the street with vistas to the Charles River. The Harrison Gray Otis House at 85 Mt. Vernon Street is a rare surviving structure from this early phase of development. Here Otis played host to the sophisticated society of Federal Boston. In 1809, the Otises moved to another house designed by Charles Bulfinch at 45 Beacon Street.



The Bostonian Society

BULFINCH'S STATE HOUSE

The centerpiece of the proposed neighborhood was to be the new Massachusetts State House. It was designed in 1787 by Charles Bulfinch (1763-1844), a wealthy young Bostonian who was particularly inspired by the "new English style"—the neoclassical buildings of British architects Robert Adam and Sir William Chambers.

Modeled on Chambers' 1778 Somerset House in London, the classical design of the State House had its roots in ancient Rome. It was an inspired choice for a state building

**The gilded dome
of the State House,
originally white-
washed, sits atop
a central pavilion
featuring an im-
pressive second-
story colonnaded
portico.**

in the young republic. Builders across the new nation emulated the style, making Bulfinch the major influence on architecture in Federal America.

ELEGANT ATTACHED HOUSES

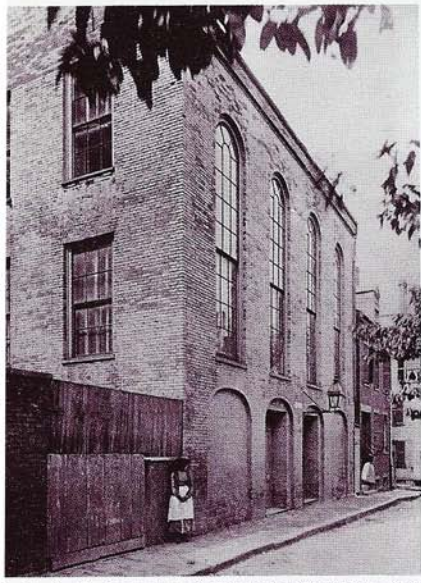
Beacon Hill quickly became established as the elite residential district of Boston. As house lots became more desirable, they were subdivided for attached dwellings. The first row houses on Beacon Hill were built for Stephen Higginson in 1803-5. Modeled after those of English cities, Boston's fashionable townhouses offered the Proprietors a greater return on their investment. In 1804, Hepzibah Swan, the only female Proprietor, commissioned Bulfinch to design three attached houses for her daughters on Chestnut Street.

AFRICAN COMMUNITY

By the early 1800s, Joy Street on the North Slope of Beacon Hill had become the principal African-American neighborhood of Boston. Most of the houses were modest wood and brick attached structures. Large older houses were converted into multi-family dwellings. Lewis Hayden, an escaped slave and one of Boston's first black legislators, lived in the Federal-style brick row house at 66 Phillips Street. It was a refuge for fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad and is now on the Black History Trail.



**The Swan houses
include Bulfinch's
characteristic neo-
classical details:
fluted columns
at the entrances,
arched openings
and wrought
iron balconies.**



Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston

The African Meeting House in Smith Court was the center of the community. Built in 1806, it is the oldest surviving black church in America. The Meeting House became the stage for black Bostonians' struggle for equality. In 1808, black parents established a grammar school and waged a fight for school integration. The African Meeting House was also at the center of Boston's abolition movement. William Lloyd Garrison's racially integrated New England Antislavery Society was formed here and Frederick Douglass was a frequent speaker.

Recessed arches
are the major
feature of the
African Meeting
House, built in
a simplified
Federal style.

HOUSEWRIGHTS

In addition to Charles Bulfinch, Asher Benjamin (1773-1845) was an influential proponent of the Federal style in Boston. Between 1797 and 1839, Benjamin published seven architectural pattern books. The majority of houses built on Beacon Hill from 1815-1829 were planned by housewrights, not trained architects. These talented builders fashioned their houses from designs in Benjamin's books. Houses were constructed on speculation and then sold to home buyers. Pattern-book inspired houses on Beacon Hill include the pair at 56-57 Beacon Street, built in

1819 by Ephraim Marsh. The decorative details mirror those of its elegant neighbors at 54-55, designed by Asher Benjamin himself in 1807.

GREEK REVIVAL AND BEYOND

The Sears House at 42 Beacon Street is the first

expression of the Greek Revival style on Beacon Hill. It was designed in 1816-19 by Alexander Parris (1780-1852) for industrialist David Sears. The severe granite-block facade with its commanding bowfront is a dramatic departure from the brick building tradition of Beacon Hill. Originally one bow wide, the mirror-image left bow was added by Colonel Sears in 1832.

In 1826, S. P. Fuller laid out the park-centered development dubbed Louisburg Square on the top of Mount Vernon Street, following an earlier plan by Charles Bulfinch. The Greek Revival-style houses on the Square, built between 1834 and 1850, feature bow fronts and brown-stone trim.

Although house lots were limited, building continued on the Hill. New houses were wedged into old garden plots. Examples include the diminutive brownstone-faced house built in 1855 at 53 Beacon Street. The earliest and most striking example of Victorian architecture on the Hill is the brownstone double



The Bostonian Society

The row at 54-55
Beacon Street
was designed in
1808 by Asher
Benjamin, one of
the most prolific
architects working
on the Hill.

BEACON HILL AND BAY VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICTS

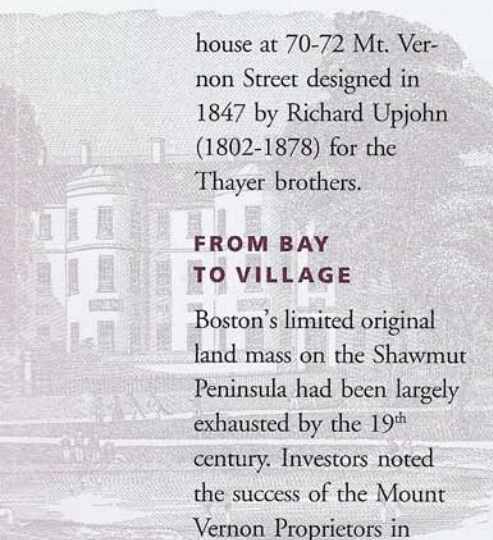


Beacon Hill is the oldest historic district in Massachusetts, established in 1955 to protect the neighborhood from large-scale urban renewal programs. Success in preserving one of Boston's most treasured architectural resources made this the model for subsequent historic districts across the city. Today, the district extends from Park Street to Cambridge Street and from the Charles River Esplanade to Beacon Street. The Bay Village Historic District was created in 1983. This district is bounded by Church, Tremont, Isabella and Piedmont streets.

Neighborhood street-scapes are important

community resources that need to be protected. Local designation promotes preservation of the architectural, aesthetic and historic character of these remarkably cohesive historic districts for the educational, cultural and economic welfare of the greater Boston community. To this end, each local district has an architectural review commission to ensure that changes made to buildings will be in keeping with the historic character of the neighborhood.

For information on designating local landmark buildings and districts, please contact the Boston Landmarks Commission at 635-3850.



house at 70-72 Mt. Vernon Street designed in 1847 by Richard Upjohn (1802-1878) for the Thayer brothers.

FROM BAY TO VILLAGE

Boston's limited original land mass on the Shawmut Peninsula had been largely exhausted by the 19th century. Investors noted the success of the Mount Vernon Proprietors in converting the Charles River marshes and the Mill Pond into profitable acreage. New landfill ventures were begun. Thus, Boston set on a course that would become a defining characteristic of the city—creating new neighborhoods via landfill.

One such venture was the Church Street District,

now known as Bay Village. With the creation of a mill dam across the Back Bay in 1825, the mud flats southeast of Boston Common became buildable. Landfill continued until 1838. Bay Village was laid out with narrow lots suited to modest row houses.

Stone gradually replaced wood as the preferred ornamentation for brick houses on exclusive Louisburg Square, built over two generations.

The Bostonian Society



Housewright Ephraim Marsh was the major speculator in the new district. Francis Cabot Lowell, whose father had built the Lowell textile mills, was a partner in the venture. Marsh sold many lots to fellow artisans, some of whom were also working on Beacon Hill. They included Presbury Coffin, the Bosworth brothers and James Marble.



The Bostonian Society

BAY VILLAGE HOUSES

Bay Village is a cohesive residential enclave of modest row houses, built primarily in the Greek Revival style. The weighty simplicity of the style found favor with housewrights and property owners. Bay Village's brick row houses are simplified versions of their Beacon Hill counterparts. As on the Hill, many were built in pairs or rows. The trio

at No. 9-13 Fayette Street is a noteworthy example. The last houses in Bay Village were built on Isabella Street in the 1870s-80s. They are decidedly Victorian in feeling. Although still constructed in red brick, most feature mansard roofs and bay windows or bow fronts. This section of Bay Village was developed by John Simmons, benefactor of Simmons College.

These Fayette Street houses in Bay Village have simplified Federal-Greek Revival details: arched entries, stone lintels and splayed brick over windows.

ETHNIC TRADITIONS

Early Bay Village residents included blacksmiths, bakers, paperhangers, masons and tailors. Many of these 19th-century craftsmen worked out of their homes. The house of Windsor chairmaker John Hubbard was at 29 Fayette Street. Piano makers George and Gilman Davis operated at 18 Piedmont Street.

By the 1840s, German families began settling in Bay Village. Many were skilled craftsmen employed at South End furniture factories. In 1847, the community established the German Reformed Church on Shawmut Street. In 1918, the chapel became home to the Hairenik Association, publishers of a leading Armenian newspaper.

The Charles Playhouse on Warrenton Street is located just outside the historic district in a building with a most unusual history. Designed as a Universalist Church in 1838 by Asher Benjamin, it was converted into a synagogue by Temple Ohabei Shalom in 1864. Later, the church served Scotch Presbyterians. Converted to a club, it became one of Bay Village's well-known "speakeasies," which served illegal alcoholic drinks during Prohibition. In the 1940s, the building housed a jazz club. It was transformed into a theater in 1958.

BOSTON FILM CENTER

In the early 20th century, Bay Village filled a unique commercial niche as the center of Boston's film distribution industry. Major film studios, including Universal Studios and Columbia Pictures, had regional

Built in 1954 for Columbia Pictures, this Church Street building has modern or Bauhaus details: rounded entrance, plain strong facade and steel windows.



offices on Church Street. The impressive yellow-brick film exchange at 115 Broadway was designed in 1934 by Blackall, Clapp & Whittemore. It has the horizontal window treatments and concrete patterning typical of the Art Moderne style. No. 48-50 Melrose Street, built in 1915, is typical of the more modest buildings of independent studios.

ARTS AND LETTERS ON THE HILL

For two centuries, Beacon Hill has remained a mecca for intellectual Bostonians, from beloved novelist Louisa May Alcott to historian Samuel Eliot Morison. In the 19th century, publisher James Fields and his wife Annie reigned over a literary salon at their Charles Street home. Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett was often in residence. Their lively circle included Dr. Oliver Wendell Homes (1809-1894), a Charles Street neighbor, and sculptress Anne Whitney, who resided at 92 Mt. Vernon Street.

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, publisher of the African-American journal *The Woman's Era*, lived at 103 Charles Street.

Prominent painters who made their homes on Beacon Hill included 19th-century portrait artist Chester Harding, who lived at 16 Beacon Street. The stables at 50 Mt. Vernon Street were used as studios by impressionists Maurice and Charles Prendergast. Architect Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) called Chestnut Street home.



The Vilna Shul on Phillips Street was originally built with spires but was redesigned with the stained glass star of David as its major feature.

SHULS AND APARTMENT HOUSES

In the 1870s, the first Jewish families came to the North Slope, then called the West End. The Vilna Shul, now Vilna Center for Jewish Heritage, at 14 Phillips Street is the last surviving synagogue in this district. Formed by Lithuanian Jews in 1898, the shul's building dates from 1919. The L-shaped interior, designed by Max M. Kalman, is modeled after the 12th-century Worms Shul in Germany.

As they prospered, these immigrants reinvested in the community, becoming property owners and developers. By the turn of the century, Jewish families were building small apartment buildings on the North Slope. Many were built in the light-colored glazed brick popular in this era. Designs by Fred A. Norcross were the model for most West End tenements. No. 52 Irving Street, built in 1899 for developer Morris Greenstein, is one of his early commissions.

The Exploring Boston's Neighborhoods Series is published by the Boston Landmarks Commission.

Official Boston Landmarks are protected from changes that would adversely affect their historic character. For information on designating local landmark buildings and districts, please contact the Boston Landmarks Commission at 635-3850.

The Exploring Boston's Neighborhood Series has been funded in part by the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, through the Massachusetts Historical Commission, Secretary of State William Francis Galvin, Chairman. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives federal financial assistance for the identification and protection of historic properties. The U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, gender or handicap in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office for Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street NW, Room 1324, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C. 20240.