This book should be issued to every new resident of Beacon Hill. A lovingly written history, it combines the local’s pride with the outsider’s appreciation of what makes it wonderful. But it is much more than a recitation of the achievements of its most notable inhabitants. Do not look here for a new account of the life of Harrison Gray Otis, Louisa May Alcott, or Lewis Hayden, though they all have their moments on the stage. This is a different kind of history, one that has room for mention of the North Slope Average Neighbors Group and Arthur D. Hill, notable here less for his role as defense attorney for Sacco and Vanzetti than as the first president of the Beacon Hill Civic Association. It is, as its title advertises, a story of a neighborhood, and how to create and sustain community through historic preservation, social activism, and getting organized.

Like Allen Chamberlain and the other antiquarians who preceded her in writing histories of the hill, Moying Li-Marcus has an affection for charming stories of its most accomplished inhabitants. Unlike them, she is more interested in how those people have come together to form a cohesive community. Her history continues, therefore, into the modern era, to include the demographic shifts that reshaped the neighborhood in the 1960s and the reestablishment of low-income housing at the Beacon Chambers to ensure that the hill did not become an island of homogenous privilege. More than the history of its origins, fascinating though they are, she is interested in how its residents have built and sustained social bonds in the face of persistent challenges across the generations.

The heroes of her account, therefore, are not Harrison Gray Otis and Jonathan Mason but figures like Marian Nichols and John Codman. Marian Nichols’s house at 55 Mount Vernon Street is a fine piece of urban architecture—well built, well finished, and, for a certain kind of scholar, important principally as the work of either Charles Bulfinch or Asher Benjamin. But with respect to the development of community on Beacon Hill, its real significance is as the home of a woman whose persistent advocacy on behalf of her neighborhood led to the 1922
establishment of the Beacon Hill Civic Association, one of the oldest such organizations in the United States.

Thirty years later, John Codman had the foresight to recognize that the Nichols house and much of the fabric of the neighborhood might be lost without legal measures to ensure its preservation, so he led the drive to establish a historic district for Beacon Hill in 1955, over a decade before the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act encouraged the creation of hundreds of such designations across the United States. The district, with its strict architectural controls, permitted the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission to stop Eduard Bullerjahn’s 1963 proposal to demolish a pair of 1846 rowhouses for a large apartment complex. The arguments in favor of the project insisted that the design was in character with the hill’s historic building stock, while opponents countered that it would destroy a significant part of that building stock and, thereby, do grave injury to that very character.

Like so many debates about historic preservation, the Bullerjahn controversy centered on the identity of a place. The preservation of a pair of buildings was a tactic deployed in the service of a larger goal, which has been the creation and preservation of a living neighborhood. As students of both Beacon Hill and Williamsburg know, preservation is not something that happens once and for all but must happen over and over, in generation after generation. The maintenance of community—its buildings, its social cohesion, its evolving culture—takes persistence, organization, and inter-generational commitment. Without that work, a neighborhood is just a spot on a map. This book shows how one of North America’s most exceptional places is not only the result of the work of its creators around 1800 but is due equally to the continuing efforts of diligent, energetic stewards of the community that it houses.

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