My passage to Beacon Hill began in the late 1970s with a journey to America—from China. I had been studying at Beijing Foreign Studies University when an American professor approached me with an offer to further my education in the United States. At the time I had a rather confused vision of that remote place across the sea. For decades, the “land of the free” came across in our official media as a kind of “evil empire.” It was not until Secretary of State Henry Kissinger began his clandestine meetings with Premier Zhou En Lai in the 1970s that positive publicity about the United States started to emerge. The normalization of relations between the two countries in 1979 signaled, for me, a green light to go West. Armed with a generous scholarship and a plane ticket from Swarthmore College, I left China on August 6, 1980, for Philadelphia, the “city of brotherly love.”

But who were these Americans, I wondered. What forces had made them who they were—and what they aspired to be? The search for answers launched me on a journey that would prove much longer than I could have imagined, including graduate studies in American history. But it wasn’t until I encountered a place called Beacon Hill in Boston that I began to see America from a deeper, more personal perspective. It was in Beacon Hill, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the nation, where my husband and I found the house we both love and came to call home. Walking through the streets of Beacon Hill, getting to know the neighbors day by day, I felt my questions surfacing once more: How many of the popular stories and myths of Beacon Hill were well-founded? How much had been a later embellishment? How important in the formative years were links with the peoples and markets of remote lands like China? And why has this particular neighborhood continued to grow, preserving so many of its historic buildings and traditions, when relatively little has survived in other American communities that date back to the early years?

The opportunity to explore Beacon Hill’s story emerged on Christmas Eve of 1996 when Tanya Holton, then the Executive Director of the Beacon
Hill Civic Association, asked if I would be interested in writing a contemporary historical account for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Association. In the past books had been written on the early history of Beacon Hill, she said, but few of these books have bridged the past with the present. This was the beginning of a commitment that took me onto a rather unpredictable path, which, in retrospect, is the biggest gift this neighborhood has given me.

Following the streets of Beacon Hill, looking behind the redbrick walls that whisper stories of bygone eras, and chatting with old-timers who’ve called this place home all their lives, I found myself engaged in an intimate dialogue, sharing the laughter and sorrows of this special place, its victories and failures, its foibles and grandeur, its complexities and, sometimes, confusions. Here on Beacon Hill, history has come to life for me.

After several years of such “intimate dialogues” with the neighborhood, I have come to the realization that if there is a myth about Beacon Hill, it is that the Hill’s residents, generation after generation, continue to create their own history. Indeed, Beacon Hill’s history might be seen as “myths in the making”—a dynamic process for over three hundred years, whereby Beacon Hillers have never ceased to write their own stories while integrating the past into plans for the future. With each generation, Beacon Hill is reinvented.

The people of Beacon Hill have encouraged me along my journey, and many have become companions in this search for answers. My hope is that “the old” and “the new” of Beacon Hill, seen in a fresh, personal light, will not just benefit those of us who live on the Hill, but also help others to have a glimpse of a piece of Americana.