A New Vision for an Old Hill

1630–1900

There have been books on the slope of Beacon Hill when the wolves still howled on the summit.

VAN WYCK BROOKS
The Flowering of New England
THE SHAWMUT PENINSULA

William Blackstone liked the Shawmut peninsula because it was a place where he could finally be alone with his books. Or so he thought. He had first laid eyes on the peninsula in 1623 as a member of British Captain Robert Gorges's expedition to settle the Massachusetts Bay area. At twenty-seven, Blackstone (or Blaxton) had signed up as assistant pastor to the expedition, freshly ordained out of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Unfortunately, the colonization he hoped to promote soon went awry, and most of the settlers hightailed it back to England after only a year.

William Blackstone, however, was not on board. He, for one, found the peninsula a most congenial place. Shawmut, an Indian name meaning living fountains, seemed very safe to Blackstone. It was virtually defended by its own geography, surrounded by water on all sides but one, with only a narrow neck or causeway linking peninsula to mainland. At high tide, the peninsula became an island. Shawmut's hills peaked at about 150 feet, forming what would later be called Beacon Hill or Sentry Hill. There any incoming and outgoing traffic could easily be seen. West of Beacon, toward the Charles River, was Mount Vernon. To the east was Pemberton Hill, or Cotton Hill, names that would later all be subsumed by “Beacon Hill.” The south side of the hills was specially blessed with gentle sea breezes and full exposure to the sun. Here the pastor rejoiced to discover springs of sweet water. Shawmut was, for him, the perfect place to call home. Here he would put down roots and start to enjoy his own company amid a library of two hundred books imported from the motherland.

Blackstone's coveted solitude was short-lived. By the spring of 1630, a new group of colonists was heading his way—an eleven-ship fleet launched out of England. Many on board were leading Puritans of the day, ready to start an experimental community in the newly chartered Massachusetts Bay Colony. On the high seas, aboard the flagship Arbella, the new governor, John Winthrop, tried to articulate his sense of the moment in a prophetic sermon. “We shall be as a City upon a Hill,” he announced. “The eyes of all people are upon us.” The sense of biblical destiny was conscious and deliberate. After braving the stormy Atlantic for more than three months, with few naviga-
tional aids, the travelers found a place for their new home—the hill without a city, and a population of one lonesome expatriate pastor.

Actually, Winthrop and his colonists had no intention, at first, of disturbing Blackstone or his paradise. Their original destination, Salem Plantation, where they had dispatched an advance team the year before, faltered through its first long New England winter. Charlestown, where they turned next, had inadequate water supplies. When news of the colonists’ plight reached him, Blackstone’s Christian charity overcame his preference for solitude. He extended an invitation to the colonists to come share the sweet spring and other natural resources that had been his alone. Governor Winthrop gladly accepted the invitation, bringing with him a hundred friends who, after the initial party, decided to move in. Before long, there came more settlers. And more. By 1633 the “guests” had taken over the entire peninsula, graciously assigning the Reverend some fifty acres of what he originally thought was his own land. After only a year, Blackstone’s neighbors proved too much for him altogether. He sold his land back to the town for thirty pounds, explaining that originally he had left England because of his dislike for the “Lord Bishops.” Now, he said, he was losing his liking for his Puritan “Lord Brethren.” Blackstone packed up for good and left Shawmut for quieter pastures in Rhode Island.

The new citizens of Shawmut, for their part, wasted no time hunkering down for the long haul. They broke ground, built, fenced, and planted. They had “all things to do,” wrote Winthrop, “as in the beginning of the world.” They also renamed the peninsula “Boston” after the hometown of many of the settlers from Lincolnshire, England.
A growing population brought the need for regulation. A town government soon evolved in Boston, operating through town meetings and selectmen. The town arbitrated who was given land and how much. When the flow of springwater could not meet the rising demand, the town organized the digging of new wells. The town also saw to it that individual landowners upheld their responsibility to maintain communal fences. Fines were levied on offenders. The town even decided how many cows and sheep a household should have, and where and how the cows should be herded and fed, given the limitations of pastureland on the peninsula.

The running of the town meetings and government in Boston was far from democratic during the days of Winthrop. By convention, the freemen

who were granted the right to voice opinions and vote for selectmen were male inhabitants who had taken an oath to the Bay Colony. Social stratification was strongly influenced by the degree of wealth one could claim back in the old country. Wealth led to firmer control of power, on the one hand, and a loosening of wallets on the other. Contributions to community undertakings, such as the upkeep of free schools, were proportional to the wealth claimed. In 1636, of the 124 office and committee positions in the town, 109 were occupied by the “richer inhabitants.”

Under the new government, the town developed and its population steadily grew. After the first year of settlement, about two hundred people lived on the peninsula; by 1635 the number had climbed to about six hundred. These new inhabitants, in a short period of time, transformed the physical appearance of the peninsula by fencing pastureland and building new houses on its periphery. The hills, however, were left largely unchanged. Between the time Winthrop first received Blackstone’s invitation in 1630 and the end of the American Revolution, Shawmut remained predominantly a
pasture for cows, horses, and sheep. Pasturelands were drawn and redrawn. Fences were erected and torn down. Land was bought and sold, or passed in and out of various families. Little attempt was made in that century and a half to develop systematic plans for housing, though sporadic dwellings could be spotted on the South Slope, amid sprawling orchards and patches of wild blueberries.

WHEN PATRIOTS GATHERED

In the mid-1700s Beacon Hill still had the look of unspoiled country, covered with trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. Only a few houses dotted the area. Three were owned by John Singleton Copley, the self-taught portrait artist. Copley lived in one or all of them until his departure for England shortly before the War of Independence. A watercolor by one of his amateur contemporaries, Christian Remick, shows three Copley houses on what is today's Beacon Street, just west of the imposing mansion where Governor John Hancock lived.

The “Hancock Manor” was built in 1737 by Thomas Hancock, an uncle of John who later willed the property to his politically astute nephew. In its time the Manor was considered the finest house in all of Massachusetts Bay Colony. The three-story mansion, built in stone, overlooked the pastureland of Boston Common. The house itself was surrounded by a family estate that extended all the way from today’s Joy Street on the west to Park Street on the east and from Beacon Street on the south to near Derne Street on the north.

In 1795, two years after John Hancock died, the town of Boston bought most of his family estate for four thousand pounds, designating it the site of the state’s future capitol. Seven decades later, during the Civil War, the Massachusetts House of Representatives voted to demolish the once-imposing mansion, making room for expansion of the State House. The only indication of the mansion’s earlier existence is an eighteen-by-twenty-one-inch bronze plaque on the capitol building wall, a rather sad reminder of a once-glorious past.

Purchase of the Hancock pastureland opened the way for development of
what became some of the choicest real estate in all of Boston, as well as construction of the Commonwealth’s State House. The legislature had appointed a committee to consider a more convenient place for holding the General Court. But it was not a foregone conclusion that Boston, let alone Beacon Hill, should be that “convenient place.” Other cities vied for the honor, including Worcester and Plymouth. In 1787 a precocious twenty-four-year-old architect named Charles Bulfinch submitted a bold design in favor of Boston’s Beacon Hill, a plan that finally passed the legislature after eight years of deliberation.

Bulfinch’s Bostonian pedigree, as well as his rising reputation as an architect, helped to sway Massachusetts lawmakers. He had grown up in Boston and graduated from Harvard College. After graduation, he drew on his family inheritance to visit architectural landmarks in France, Italy, and England. In London he became infatuated with Georgian architecture, the symmetrical, neoclassic style whose features he incorporated again and again into his American creations.

As Bulfinch patiently awaited approval of his proposal from the Massachusetts legislature, he decided to take on a new job designing the State House in neighboring Connecticut. Apparently it was a tour de force, as statehouses go. Acclaim of the Connecticut project reached Massachusetts, and the legislature finally gave the go-ahead for construction of its own State House on Beacon Hill in 1795. On July 4 of that year, the cornerstone of the new State House was solemnly placed on a carriage drawn by fifteen white horses, representing the fifteen states of the Union. Once atop Beacon Hill, the cornerstone was laid by the governor and patriot Sam Adams. Standing at his side was Paul Revere, who brought not only the air of legend, but also a promise to devote his skills as a silversmith to adorn the building’s dome with a copper cladding.

Whether by fate or design, the construction of the State House on Beacon Hill brought into realization, both physically and politically, the vision John Winthrop had articulated some 165 years before. The place where the Puritans first settled had, in fact, become a “city upon a hill” for all to see. In 1790, the city replaced the old harbor beacon with an elegant column, designed and erected by Bulfinch and located just behind what would soon become the official seat of state government.
THE MOUNT VERNON PROPRIETORS

The construction of the State House on Shawmut became the catalyst for a fifty-year boom in real estate development, led by properties on the South Slope of Beacon Hill. On August 3, 1796, an explosive little advertisement appeared in the *Columbian Centinel*:

The public are invited to turn their attention to these lands, which afford the best situations in town... the varied fall of these lands is adapted to the circumstances of those who wish merely for genteel and airy situations, and of those who would unite to their advantages the convenience of boarding houses, and accommodations for business. Their proximity to the new State House renders it convenient for those who are desirous of accommodating the Members of the General Court.

It was a new vision for Beacon Hill, a vision to transform Shawmut from town to metropolis. Those who conceived the advertisement were members of an investment syndicate that came to be known as the “Mount Vernon Proprietors.” The five originators were Jonathan Mason, Jr., Harrison Gray Otis, Charles Bulfinch, Joseph Woodword, and William Scollay. All were persons of distinction.

Jonathan Mason, Jr., a graduate of Princeton, was a prominent lawyer and served in both the United States Senate and House. As one of the two largest shareholders among the Proprietors, Mason lived to see much of his investment come to fruition before passing away at the age of seventy-five in 1831.

The other largest shareholder was Harrison Gray Otis. After graduating from Harvard at age eighteen, Otis practiced law, then served as United States District Attorney and in 1829 as the third mayor of Boston. Otis lived to the age of eighty-three, long enough to build and enjoy three mansions on Beacon Hill.

Charles Bulfinch, perhaps by virtue of his architectural reputation, also joined the Mount Vernon Proprietors. Among his Beacon Hill creations was the three-story brick house he designed for a relative in 1792, one of the oldest houses still standing on the North Slope, between Temple and Bowdoin Streets. Soon there followed another mansion between Cambridge and Lynde Streets, the first of three Harrison Gray Otis houses.

A few years later, Hepzibah Swan also bought into the syndicate. Much of her wealth had come as a gift from a friend of her father. Her husband, Colonel James Swan, had a reputation for fighting bravely against the British at Bunker Hill. He spent much of his time in France, however, making and

losing their collective fortunes. In 1815, on the verge of returning to Boston, Colonel Swan was arrested for indebtedness and sent to Saint-Pélagie prison, where he remained for fifteen years. Shortly after his release, he passed away. In the meantime, Hepzibah Swan was raising their three daughters and managing family interests in Boston—including dealings on Beacon Hill.

The formation of the Mount Vernon Proprietors could not have been
better timed. In the post-Revolutionary period, Boston's economy began to flourish, fanned by the maritime success of Yankee clippers. The Boston-based fleet shipped New England codfish, agricultural produce, and fur to the West Indies in exchange for molasses and cocoa, and eventually created shipping aisles down the coast of South America, through the Strait of Magellan, extending all the way across the Pacific in search of the famed silk and tea of China. With Boston's new prosperity, there also came a rise in population. Records show a population of eighteen thousand in Boston right after the War of Independence; by 1810 it had grown to thirty thousand, almost doubling in just two decades.

This burgeoning population would need housing. And the Mount Vernon Proprietors saw their opportunity, placing their fateful advertisement offering land to the public. Their offerings comprised some forty acres on the South Slope of Beacon Hill. The area stretched from the Charles River on the west to the original site of the State House on the east, and from Beacon Street on the south to approximately today's Pinckney Street on the north. The portrait artist Copley provided half of this land, for which he was paid fourteen thousand dollars. Living in London ever since the American Revolution, Copley directed the sale from a distance through agents. Before the transaction was consummated, however, Copley changed his mind, believing that his agent was selling the property for less than its value. He would never have parted with that land, he claimed, if he had been in Boston. After much frustration and negotiation on both sides, including the involvement of Boston courts, Copley sent to Boston his son, John Singleton Copley, Jr., an English lawyer who later became Baron Lyndhurst, Lord Chancellor. Judging that the Mount Vernon Proprietors had not dealt with the issue so badly after all, the future lord chancellor settled in favor of the original agreement.

With land secured, the Mount Vernon Proprietors began in 1796 to draw up their street plans. The Proprietors believed that if persons of means (like themselves) set an example of buying and building responsibly, they would influence the quality of land development well into the future. The architect Charles Bulfinch again played the role of mastermind in the street layouts, though he worked with the land surveyor Mather Withington. Bulfinch, in
traditional European style, preferred mansion houses with ample room for
gardens and stables. Withington’s vision for the layout was more modest. The result was a compromise. The majority of the now famous streets on the South Slope were laid out between 1799 and 1803.\textsuperscript{10}

Most of the Proprietors purchased adjacent properties on today’s Mount Vernon Street, their families remaining neighbors for generations to come. The Proprietors reached an important “gentlemen’s agreement” in 1801, by which they set aside a thirty-foot lawn between the buildings and the street, with an understanding that nothing would be built on it. The agreement carried such weight that even by the late 1800s, when a new building was proposed, the neighbors spontaneously rejected it, preserving the original 1801 agreement.\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{Moving Mountains—Literally}

In their efforts to carve out space for public housing, the Proprietors did some rather radical surgery. In 1803 they decided to cut off the crest of Mount Vernon. A great deal of ingenuity was required to take sixty feet off the top of the massive hill, and the engineering feat created significant local excitement. In 1805 a short railroad, believed to be the first of its kind in America, was installed between the top of the hill and the Charles River in order to transport gravel and dirt. The days of iron and steel as popular construction materials were still a half century away, and the Beacon Hill railroad was made of timber and plank, appropriately tied together. Two sets of carts were fastened to a large pulley at the top of the hill. While one went up, the other went down, and men with handcarts ran up and down the hill alongside the vehicles. Gravel and dirt carted down from the top of the hill were used as material for landfill in what later became Charles Street. The operation was one of the most ambitious undertakings of its day. Harrison Gray Otis claimed that the Beacon Hill project “excited as much attention as Bonaparte’s road over the Alps.”\textsuperscript{12}

After two years, Mount Vernon Hill finally came down to its current level. The Proprietors, meanwhile, wasted no time planning and building their
own mansions. Fifteen were built between 1806 and 1812 on what was the old Copley land. One of the first Bulfinch “classics” had been built for Otis in 1802 on Mount Vernon Street; by 1806 Bulfinch had erected another one for Otis on Beacon Street. A house had also been built for Jonathan Mason, Jr., in 1801 on Mount Vernon Street.13

Soon after, the building boom on Beacon Hill suffered a temporary setback. Political tensions once again were mounting between the young American Republic and old England, with maritime rights and other issues coming to the forefront. Jefferson’s embargoes of 1807 and 1808, as well as the outbreak of war between the two countries in 1812, brought down many Bostonian fortunes built on foreign commerce. As economic depression set in, a number of those who had invested in Beacon Hill real estate were forced to sell at a loss.
Fortunately for the Hill, the economy turned upward by the late 1820s, as did interest in neighborhood development. Most notable among the later additions was the creation of Louisburg Square, destined to charm visitors for generations to come. A visitor from western Massachusetts called Louisburg Square “the one unspoiled, undefiled section of Boston which has withstood the march of progress and still clings to its age-old quaintness and charm.” An observer from China found that “the tranquil air there never tried to hurry me on. This brought me a refreshing stillness of mind from the midst of the life of a modern city.”

The Mount Vernon Proprietors began to lay out plans for Louisburg Square as early as 1826, though the area was not completed until the early 1840s. John Clark, the president of Equitable Safety Marine & Fire Insurance Company, built the first house on the square, now Number 19. The vision of a tree-lined garden square, originated by Charles Bulfinch, never left...
the mind of the Proprietors. In the spirit of Bulfinch, the Proprietors designed the center of the square with open space, and decided that it would remain that way forever. Caught in the spirit of proprietorship, the new resident owners gathered in the summer of 1844 at the house of John Clark, forming one of the first neighborhood civic groups in America, the Louisburg Square Proprietors’ Committee.

The committee developed a simple but effective set of democratic procedures, with committee meetings called through written notice by three proprietors, and decisions made by a majority vote. One of the first rulings was to enlarge the center by eight square feet and fence it in with iron railings. Grass and trees were then planted and a fountain, which no longer exists, was built in the center. Two finishing touches added particular charm. One was

Louisburg Square from Mount Vernon Street. Courtesy of the Bostonian Society/Old State House.
a marble statue of Aristides the Just at one end of the square, a gift from Joseph Iasigi, a new resident who was a successful merchant and the Turkish consul. At the opposite end of the square was a marble statue of Columbus, shipped from Italy in 1850.

It remains a mystery why the name Louisburg was chosen for the square. In one tradition, the name commemorates the capture of Louisburg of Cape Breton, Canada, in 1745 by a New England militia led by William Pepperrell. It is not obvious, however, how a battle from the 1700s could have had a bearing on the founding of the square. Nor is it clear why a celebrated locale in the center of a town named by settlers from Boston, England, should acquire a French name, via Canada. Was it because New Englanders fought and fell during those campaigns? Or because a direct descendant of Beacon Hill’s first resident, William Blackstone, was also believed to have fallen at the Battle of Louisburg, making the two distant locations somewhat relevant to one another? We may never know.

What we do know today is that many renowned residents have graced the square over the years. Louisa May Alcott moved to Number 10 after the success of her book Little Women. Mayor Frederick Lincoln lived at Number 19. William Dean Howells, an author and the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, lived at Number 4—to name just a few. Movie scenes from Vanity Fair by William Thackeray were taken in front of Number 20, allegedly with the help of two amateur actors, both residents of the square.

“BRAHMINS” ON THE SOUTH SLOPE

The sunny South Slope attracted some of the wealthiest Bostonians of the nineteenth century, who soon became known as the Beacon Hill “Brahmins,” a Sanskrit word for members of the priestly Hindu caste, the highest in the Hindu social hierarchy. The credit for applying this label in an American context is sometimes given to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., the physician, writer, and social observer, himself a resident of Beacon Street. Unlike the Old World aristocrats, whose titles and status were the results of bloodlines, remarked Holmes, the Boston Brahmins were a caste of untitled
aristocracy with houses by Bulfinch, who acquired a monopoly of Beacon Street, possessed ancestral portraits and Chinese porcelains, and espoused humanitarianism, Unitarian faith in the march of the mind, Yankee shrewdness, and New England exclusiveness.16

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809–1894), photogravure by A. W. Elson & Co. A poet and writer, Holmes coined the term “Boston Brahmin.”
Indeed, on Holmes’s own street, there had lived many a Yankee Brahmin. Harrison Gray Otis presided, for forty-two years, in his mansion at 45 Beacon, adjacent to the house he later built for his daughter, Sophia Ritchie. To the left of Sophia, in Number 42, lived Colonel David Sears, a son-in-law of Jonathan Mason. Further to the left, the textile king Nathan Appleton built Number 39 after selling Number 54 to his cousin William Appleton.

Over time, Mount Vernon and Chestnut Streets also held the “sifted few.” Senator Henry Cabot Lodge lived at 65 Mt. Vernon Street. A house at Number 26 was built for his daughter by the king of seafaring captains and shipping magnates, Colonel Thomas H. Perkins. Perkins, as the story goes, turned down an offer to become George Washington’s secretary of the
navy because he had to attend to his own collection of vessels, a fleet larger than that of the U.S. Navy.

On Chestnut Street, Hepzibah Swan, the only woman among the Mount Vernon Proprietors, built Numbers 13 through 17 for her three daughters, Christina, Sarah, and Hepzibah. These “daughter houses,” pointed out Mrs. Swan, were commissioned for the advancement of her daughters, free and exempt from the control of husbands. Further down the street, Charles R. Codman, another successful sea captain, purchased Number 29A. The captain allegedly adorned his house entrance with a pair of white marble urns that once graced Malmaison, the château of the French empress Josephine.

Many of the Beacon Hill Brahmins had humble beginnings associated with sea trade; they gradually built fortunes through connections with the West Indies and China. On the sea, observed Cleveland Amory, everything

David Sears House, 1819. Courtesy of the Bostonian Society/Old State House. Designed by Alexander Parris, the Sears House at 42 Beacon Street became the Somerset Club in 1872.
turned to gold, or at least silver, for the benefit of Boston merchants. This was certainly true for Colonel Perkins of Mount Vernon Street and Captain Codman of Chestnut Street. The nouveaux-riches traders were joined on the South Slope by rising industrialists, as neighbors or by marriage, or both. Nathan Appleton, for example, made his fortune investing in the cotton mills built by Francis Lowell north of Boston. Together Appleton and Lowell founded a new industrial city named after Lowell.

During their heyday in the nineteenth century, the Beacon Hill Brahmins enjoyed a celebrated social life. In 1824, for instance, they wined and dined General Lafayette, loyal supporter of the American Revolution. In 1829 Harrison Gray Otis moved his mayoral inauguration from City Hall to his mansion on the Hill, where President James Monroe and Secretary of State Henry Clay were subsequently entertained. At 32 Mount Vernon Street, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, founder of the Perkins Institute for the Blind, and his wife, Julia Ward Howe, welcomed President Ulysses S. Grant. At 19 Louisburg Square, Mayor Frederick Lincoln honored the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII of England.

Leading literary lights also frequented the South Slope. The “daughter houses” were turned into highbrow literary salons. The house at 17 Chestnut Street, in particular, became a gathering place for the Transcendental philosophers Emerson and Whittier and the poets Longfellow and Holmes. Charles Dickens was also entertained by friends on the Hill, and he found Boston “a memorable and beloved spot.”

The social doings on the South Slope during this period endowed Beacon Hill with a reputation of being the most affluent enclave in Boston. In the seventeenth century Governor Winthrop had promised that his social experiment was one on which the eyes of all people would fall. By the nineteenth century, Beacon Hill had indeed become the envy of many in America.
SLIDING FORTUNES

Beacon Hill's prominence suffered a severe blow when the landfill project of greater Boston led to the creation of high-end residences in the Back Bay and the South End. These projects were precipitated partly by Boston's rapid population growth between 1840 and the Civil War. In 1840 only 93,000 people lived in Boston; by 1860 the population almost doubled, reaching 178,000. In addition to the challenges of population growth, retail stores now encroached on residential districts, causing many urbanites to pack up and relocate to the country. Since Boston was limited in landmass and surrounded by water, it needed to find some way to add living space. The landfill project was the answer.

The first of these expansions began with the South Cove Corporation, founded in 1833. It took two decades to fill in seventy acres of marshland to create what is today's South End district. This opened a new era of investment, housing construction, and prosperity for the area and attracted affluent families to the newly built "brownstones" there. Success in the South End also encouraged planners to upgrade another marshland adjacent to Beacon Hill, the so-called Back Bay. The city commissioners approved the ambitious Back Bay development plan in 1857. Some of the city's best-known Brahmin families—with names like Lawrence, Forbes, Cabot, Saltonstall, and Standish—shared the city's new vision, offering to purchase lots for their new homes. They bargained with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, hoping to acquire the land at prices below the minimum, arguing that they bore substantial risks in making the investment. The commissioners finally gave in. Bolstered by the investments of the leading Brahmins, public confidence in the Back Bay development soared. Land was sold as quickly as it was filled. Shortly thereafter, grand streets were laid out, and on them were erected hundreds of magnificent brownstones. As if overnight, a new city had arisen atop the marshland of Boston's Back Bay, rivaling, it was said, "the most sumptuous quarters of the cities of the Old World."9

As these "sumptuous quarters" and broad avenues enhanced the Back Bay, they also made the once-magnificent Beacon Hill look outmoded by comparison. At the time the Civil War broke out, Beacon Hill was still consid-
ered the most prestigious residential neighborhood in Boston. By the war's end, Beacon Hill was overshadowed by the South End and soon would be by the Back Bay. Construction in the Back Bay also benefited from the advances in domestic technology—from central heating systems and gas lighting to modern plumbing and sewage. In 1875 there began a migration, leading to the rise of Back Bay and the decline of Beacon Hill for the next thirty years.

The low point on Beacon Hill came in 1905, when real estate values plummeted. Attracted by lowered rents and higher vacancy rates, retail shops and clubs began to invade the Hill. The first floors of many houses on Beacon Street were converted into shops. Samuel Eliot Morison, the Harvard professor and historian, recalls growing up on Brimmer Street in this period, and how family maids used to say, “Master Sammy, do persuade your grandpa to move to a swell neighborhood, like Commonwealt’ Avenue.”

THE NORTH SLOPE

Beacon Hill’s North Slope, an area between Pinckney and Cambridge Streets, was a poor cousin of the South Slope. The Hill’s north side was much steeper, sloped toward the waterfront, and had no full exposure to the sun. Dubbed the “dark” side of the Hill, the North Slope developed sporadically and independently from the South. Many of the streets were unnumbered, lined by makeshift wooden sheds, even though some lots had been laid out on paper earlier than their counterparts on the South Slope.

On what is today’s Myrtle Street, a small rope-making industry flourished in the early nineteenth century. The workmen, twisting the hemp around their waists, would walk backward a good distance along the street, creating “ropewalks” between Revere and Myrtle Streets. Hot pitch was then applied to the rope to preserve the yarn, sending pungent smells wafting through the neighborhood. The low rents of the North Slope attracted a transient population of sailors and laborers. It also won a reputation as “Mount Whoredom,” the first “Combat Zone” in Boston, until Mayor Josiah Quincy forcibly cleansed the area. To separate the South Slope from the “corruption” of the
North Slope, the Mount Vernon Proprietors created a barrier with Pinckney Street, which had only two connecting streets between the north and south sides.

Houses that remained on the North Slope from the earlier times of settlement included homes of craftsmen such as bakers, shoemakers, and carpenters. Louis Glapion, a mulatto barber from the West Indies, and George Middleton, a black coachman who served in the American War of Independence, co-owned what became Numbers 5 and 7 Pinckney Street, built in the early 1790s, a decade before Pinckney Street was even laid out. The “little wooden house” changed hands many times, providing shelter to a succession of shoemakers until the end of the nineteenth century.

Halfway down the North Slope, from Pinckney Street to the foot of the Hill, there lived a community of African Americans. It was a community that would eventually bring international attention to the North Slope as the nation wrestled with the issue of slavery, first through political debate, then with arms.
The first known record of African Americans in Boston dates back to 1638, just eight years after Winthrop and his people moved to the Shawmut Peninsula. The population was small, with only four hundred people of African heritage living in Boston by 1708, half of them born in America. By the time the colonies emerged victorious in the War of Independence, the population of African Americans in Boston approached fifteen hundred.

Many of the earlier African Americans settled not on the North Slope of Beacon Hill, but in the North End of Boston, sometimes pejoratively dubbed “New Guinea.” Many were buried there, separate from their white neighbors, in Copp's Hill Burying Ground, one of the oldest cemeteries in Boston. But population growth in the North End, along with deteriorating living conditions there in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, forced many African Americans to relocate on the farmland of Beacon Hill’s North Slope, already the home to a few black families, dating back to 1760. At first, Joy Street attracted the majority of the new settlers. Some thirty years later many spread out to what are today Charles Street, Myrtle Street, and the so-called West End. By the mid-nineteenth century, 80 percent of Boston’s African American population had moved to the North Slope of Beacon Hill and adjacent areas of the West End.

Most African American settlers took on work close to their neighborhood, whether as barbers, shoemakers, rope makers, or domestic servants to families on the South Slope. Several of them made an impact on American history. John Rock of 83 Phillips Street, originally a dentist, found his new calling in the study of law, and in 1866 became the first African American lawyer to try cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. John De Grasse, of 31 Charles Street, received an M.D. degree from Bowdoin College in 1849, and became a member of the Massachusetts Medical Society in 1854. He served bravely during the Civil War as assistant surgeon to the Thirty-fifth Colored Troops, and subsequently became the first African American commissioned as a surgeon in the U.S. Army.

Lewis Hayden of 66 Phillips Street became a legend of the Underground Railroad movement. Hayden had been born into slavery in Kentucky. He and his wife escaped through the Underground Railroad and lived in Canada before moving to Beacon Hill in the 1850s. Once in Boston, Hayden turned his home into a haven for fugitive slaves. When Harriet Beecher

Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, visited the Hayden house, some thirteen newly escaped slaves were brought into one room for her to see. At the entrance of the house, Hayden had stored piles of hidden gunpowder, ready at all times to blow the house up, should slave hunters arrive—even if fugitives were still inside. “We’d rather die free than be captured,” claimed Hayden. An estimated seventy-five fugitives used Hayden’s “underground station” on their way to freedom.
AMERICA’S FIRST BLACK CHURCH

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, black churchgoers on the North Slope had been allowed to attend Baptist churches alongside whites. However, they were treated as second-class citizens, required to sit in church galleries where they could not see the preacher. In Boston slavery was
abolished in 1783, but even so, black Baptists were not given voting privileges in church. Over time, they envisioned establishing a church dedicated to African Americans. Encouraged by the African Society, a Boston organization formed in the early nineteenth century for the advancement of African Americans, blacks on the North Slope founded the First African Baptist Church on August 8, 1805.

The new church started with only twenty members and a pastor, the Reverend Thomas Paul. Initially the congregation made use of schoolhouses and other makeshift facilities for meetings and worship. A campaign to raise funds for a permanent meetinghouse was eventually launched, thanks to energetic leadership of the African Society and other community leaders. Donations began to pour in from supporters, black and white, all around the country. Finally, on December 6, 1806, the African Meeting House, the first black church in the nation, was dedicated at the corner of Smith Court and Joy Street and was immediately occupied by its first congregation, the First African Baptist.
For years the only facility available for educating black children was a room in the basement of the meetinghouse. In 1830, however, a white philanthropist named Abiel Smith left an endowment for black children's education. A school named after Abiel Smith was eventually founded in 1835 next to the meetinghouse, where parents paid 12½ cents per week for a child's education. The African Meeting House was first started to accommodate religious worship; eventually it would become a pivotal center in the political fight against slavery, earning itself the nickname "the colored people's Faneuil Hall."

THE FIGHT AGAINST SLAVERY

EarlY BOSTONIANS held mixed feelings about slavery. From the time of Winthrop there had been various initiatives to deal with the issue. "There shall never be any bond slaves or captive among us," stated the Massachusetts Body of Liberties in 1641, "unless it be lawful captive taken in just wars and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us."

Actually, the Puritans had Indians in mind at the time, not blacks. The statement, however, left the door open for various interpretations. Some early Puritans advocated the economic benefit of slaves. "I do not see how we can thrive until we get in a stock of slaves sufficient to do all our business," wrote Emanuel Downing to his brother-in-law, Governor John Winthrop, arguing the need for cheap labor in the colony. Other citizens, however, voiced opposition. Citing the Scriptures, Judge Samuel Sewall, in The Selling of Joseph, attacked the institution of slavery and its continuation in Massachusetts.

By the end of the Revolutionary War, the issue again came to the forefront in national consciousness and debate. The war provided ready-made rhetoric for the antislavery movement. If Americans felt they had been enslaved by British tyranny, how could they justify the bondage imposed on African slaves? It was a question the Worcester County slave Quock Walker used to challenge the Massachusetts Supreme Court to reexamine the state constitution's position on slavery. Chief Justice William Cushing, after much debate, stated that the constitution "by which the people of this commonwealth
have solemnly bonded themselves sets out with declaring that all men are
born free and equal.” He concluded, “this being the case, I think the idea of
slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and Constitution; and there
can be no such thing as perpetual servitude of a rational creature.” Cush­
ing’s judgment officially brought slavery to an end in Massachusetts in 1783.

Public opinion was, however, much divided. Not a few Bostonians sym­
pathized with southern proponents of slavery. Others, including many of the
older Beacon Hill Brahmins, were torn between their commercial interests,
which seemed to depend on perpetuating slavery, and a humanitarian con­
science, which called for abolition.

By the 1820s, economic interests between North and South were becom­
ing increasingly intertwined, especially as seafaring trade receded and textile
mills were established in Massachusetts. The more efficient the textile mills
of Lawrence and Lowell became, the more dependent became their founders
on the raw materials and markets provided by the South. There was an “un­
hallowed union,” charged Charles Sumner, between the lords of the lash and
the lords of the loom.

Abolitionism was an unpopular position among some Brahmin families
of the South Slope. Harrison Gray Otis, for instance, was mayor of Boston
when the abolitionist journal The Liberator was published. When urged to
investigate its background, Otis predicted that the journal had not made, nor
was it likely to make, converts among the respectable class. Many of his Bea­
con Hill neighbors shared his view. Nathan Appleton, for one, believed that
slavery was a local problem for other parts of the country, and he would have
nothing to do with abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, seen by
many as a “fanatical megalomaniac.”

But not all “respectable folks” on the Hill agreed with Otis and Appleton.
The South Slope was home to leading abolitionist sympathizers, such as the
Channings and the Adamses (of Mount Vernon Street), Joshua Dodge (of
Chestnut Street), John Parkman (of Walnut Street), and Dr. Henry I.
Bowditch (of Otis Place). Many of these Brahmin supporters, preferring a
moderate approach at first, were pushed toward more radical positions as
events unfolded.

The antislavery movement found its most effective advocate in the white
abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. On January 6, 1832, Garrison founded
the New-England Anti-Slavery Society at a rally held in the African Meeting House, after being denied the use of Faneuil Hall. Beacon Hill again became a focal point in the nation's consciousness, and the African Meeting House came to be called the "Abolitionist Church," in addition to its reputation as the colored people's Faneuil Hall.
William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879). Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. A fervent abolitionist, he was the founder of the abolitionist journal *The Liberator*.
View of the Boston Common, by Christian Remick, c. 1768. Engraving by Sidney Smith. Courtesy of the Concord Museum. Across from the Common were what are believed to be the three Copley properties (left) and the Hancock Manor (right).
Moving Mountains, chromolithograph by J. H. Bufford, from an 1811 watercolor by J. R. Smith. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. The view is from Mount Vernon Street, with William Thurson’s house in the background. Approximately sixty feet were removed from the top of the Hill.
Moving Mountains, chromolithograph by J. H. Bufford, from an 1811 watercolor by J. R. Smith. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. The view is from Hancock and Temple Streets. Beacon Hill was being cut down to make room for the construction of residential buildings on the South Slope.
Beacon Hill, chromolithograph by J. H. Bufford, from an 1811 watercolor by J. R. Smith. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. Beacon Hill is seen from Derne Street.
View of Beacon Street looking toward Charles Street, 1855, hand-colored wood engraving from Ballou’s Pictorial Boston.
Church of the Advent, 1880s, from King's Handbook of Boston.
Beacon Hill and the Common from Arlington Street Church, 1872, hand-tinted wood engraving from *Picturesque America*.
View of the State House from the Common, 1892. Courtesy of the Bostonian Society/Old State House.
Garrison, together with his fellow abolitionists, virtually turned the Meeting House into a forum for the antislavery movement. At a meeting on January 6, 1832, he told his audience: "We hold that man cannot, consistently with reason, religion, and the eternal and immutable principles of justice, be the property of man. We hold that whoever retains his fellow man in bondage is guilty of a grievous wrong. We hold that a mere difference of complexion is no reason why any man should be deprived of any of his natural rights, or subjected to any political disability." He concluded with words that echoed across the Hill: "We have met tonight in this obscure school house; our numbers are few and our influence limited; but, mark my prediction, Faneuil Hall shall ere long echo with the principles we have set forth. We shall shake the Nation by their mighty power." 25

William Lloyd Garrison did shake the nation. Even on the South Slope of Beacon Hill, he won over some of the most affluent families, especially the younger generations. Well endowed with education and inherited wealth, the children of these families bore the names of Phillips, Quincy, Loring, Chapman, Sewall, and Weston. Apparently the younger abolitionists discovered, in the antislavery movement, some of the same sense of fervor and purpose their forefathers mustered in the fight against British rule. Partly under the influence of Garrison, Edmund Quincy, a son of the second mayor of Boston, Josiah Quincy, shared and expanded on his father's apprehension about the impact of slavery on America's political consciousness. The American union, said Edmund, was "a confederacy with crime." Daughters of the Weston family saw in the abolitionist movement an opportunity for educated, upper-class women to participate in national politics, following in the footsteps of Abigail Adams from the previous generation. Wendell Phillips, a son of the first mayor of Boston and
perhaps the most eloquent of the young abolitionists, found support for the immediate emancipation of slaves in both the Puritan tradition and the Revolutionary experience of John Hancock, Thomas Paine, and Samuel Adams. He took to task Beacon Hill’s Brahmins, calling them “Old families run to respectable dullness. Snobbish sons of fathers lately rich, anxious to show themselves rotten before they are ripe.”

The Phillips House, c. 1890. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. Designed by Charles Bulfinch, the Phillips House was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century at the corner of Beacon and Walnut Streets by John Phillips, Boston’s first mayor. Wendell Phillips, his son, was born here.
especially on the North Slope, black activists conversed freely with white activists, now joined in a common purpose. For a moment in time, the color line on Beacon Hill blurred.

A decade after the Civil War ended, Beacon Hill witnessed an exodus of some wealthy families to the newly developed Back Bay. This was paralleled by an exodus of black families from the North Slope migrating to Roxbury, the South End, and other parts of Boston. Many ramshackle wood and brick houses that had sheltered the black population were torn down to make way for tenement housing. By the end of the nineteenth century, black families had virtually disappeared from the Hill, replaced by a succession of Euro-
But it was a catastrophic event in 1837 that finally united the more radical and the more conservative abolitionists—the murder of the Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy by a proslavery mob in Alton, Illinois. Led by the Unitarian churchman William Ellery Channing, the abolitionists petitioned the city to use Faneuil Hall for a rally to register protest against the crime. When the mayor declined, a public outcry followed that brought together radical and moderate abolitionists and public-minded nonabolitionists in a common cause against the mayor. The mayor finally gave in. On December 8 the doors of historic Faneuil Hall, renowned as “the cradle of liberty” during the American Revolution, were thrown open and not a seat was left unfilled. Perhaps more than any other single event, this forged the abolitionist alliance.

By 1851 the alliance succeeded in getting its members elected to national office. Beacon Hill’s Charles Sumner, an outspoken abolitionist and legal defender of several fugitive slaves, was elected to the U.S. Senate. To celebrate his victory, a hundred-gun salute was fired on the Boston Common. Throughout the city, churches of many denominations rang their bells. A spontaneous victory parade formed at the State House. Marchers, cheering and chanting, moved triumphantly through the streets of Beacon Hill, culminating their march at 20 Hancock Street, Sumner’s house.

In the years that followed, the African Meeting House resonated with the words of new advocates emboldened by Garrison and Sumner, most notably the escaped slave Frederick Douglass. “Four millions have bowed before this nation,” said Douglass on December 3, 1860, “and with lifted hands to Heaven and to you, have asked, in the name of God, and in the name of humanity, to break our chains.” By 1863, during the Civil War, the African Meeting House became a recruitment center for the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry, the first black regiment fighting for the Union, led by a native son of Beacon Hill, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Among Colonel Shaw’s black soldiers were the two sons of Frederick Douglass, Charles and Lewis. On July 19, 1863, Colonel Shaw led the brave but fatal charge on Fort Wagner in Charleston, South Carolina, and was among the first to fall, followed by hundreds of his black comrades-in-arms. The courage of Shaw and his men was memorialized by the handsome bas-relief monument created by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, opposite the State House. Across Beacon Hill, and
pean immigrants. The African Meeting House was sold in 1898 and served as a place of worship for the Jewish community for the next seventy-four years. In an odd way, the end of the nineteenth century culminated eras for Brahmins and blacks alike.

**BEACON HILL BOHEMIAN**

From quite early times, the North Slope, especially Pinckney Street, gained a reputation for being a “Bohemian” colony—populated by artists and writers, fond of its clear view of the Charles River, and blessed with low rents. The composer Lowell Mason lived at Number 9 in the 1830s. Edwin Whipple, an essayist and literary critic, lived at Number 11 for many years, followed by the novelist Alice Brown. Maturin Murray Ballou, an editor of several periodicals and newspapers, including *Gleason’s Pictorial* and the *Boston Globe*, lived at Number 17 in 1847.

The erosion of Brahmin presence in the late 1860s gave rise to a second wave of artistic types, made possible by affordable rooming houses in what had been single-family structures. Pinckney Street continued its tradition as a young and vibrant literary nerve center. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott all found Pinckney Street a congenial place to live. Also drawn to the street was Bronson Alcott, the devoted follower of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the father of Louisa May Alcott. The house at 66 Pinckney, it was said, “offered hospitality to the disillusioned of the Brook Farm Commune,” after the collapse of that Transcendental experiment. Also close by, at 3 Joy Street, lived Helen Clarke and Charlotte Potter, founders of the avant-garde journal *Poet Lore*, which claimed as one of its contributors a controversial figure of the time, Walt Whitman.

A third wave of “young Bohemians” settled on the North Slope during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Like their predecessors, they were energetic, searching, and artistically gifted. According to the novelist Anna Farquhar, “There are to be found musicians; newspaper people; painters; incipient authors and a few full-fledged; impecunious youths with high spirits and one ‘dress suit’ among several … here is the freedom of the Latin Quarter.
Ralph Adams Cram (1863–1942). Courtesy of David Scudder. An architect and writer, Cram was responsible for numerous gothic structures, some of which are at Princeton, Williams, Phillips Exeter, Rice, and West Point.

... In truth, this Boston Bohemia stands for good spirits and innocent unconventionality, and is several times more virtuous than Boston society.”

If anything separated this latter-day generation from their forebears, it was their air of optimistic innocence. Unlike the Beacon Hill Bohemians of the Civil War era, the new Bohemians lived in a period of postwar prosperity and relative peace. High hopes, definite ambitions, certainty of achieve-
ment, and lightness of heart created an atmosphere of which one could breathe deeply, Ralph Adams Cram, a leading Bohemian of Pinckney Street, reminisced forty years later. “There was no sign, no cloud, even the smallest, on the horizon of destiny; no indication (and fortunately) of the coming era of big business, mass production, and high finance, of labor wars, racketeering, gangsterism, and wholesale kidnapping. A war in which America would be involved—even a little one like that with Spain, then coming close—was unthinkable. As for a World War, exceeding in magnitude and devastation any of those in the past . . . the complete breakdown of our social, moral, and economic system . . . the maddest of us all would never have conceived anything of the kind.” 30 In this age of innocence, as brief as it was, Beacon Hill youth did not share the radicalism and activism of the previous generation. There were no experimental commune members, no runaway slaves, just high hopes and a newfound camaraderie among fellow residents of the Hill.

Many, though, grew to become respected professionals. The architect Ralph Adams Cram designed, among others, the high altar credence of the Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill, the All Saints Church in Ashmont, Massachusetts, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Fred Holland Day, Cram’s friend and Pinckney Street neighbor, became one of America’s avant-garde photographers, whose sensational Study of the Crucifixion was almost a century ahead of Robert Mapplethorpe in the use of provocative nude forms. Day also included in his circle the young Kahlil Gibran, whose book The Prophet brought him international recognition. “We were,” as Cram recalled later, “by instinct and inclination ‘Beacon Hillites.’ It was a closely-knit, intimately sympathetic community, with a real unity in tastes and ideas. The give-and-take social and intellectual traffic was in itself a true creative energy.”31

Before long, however, the optimism, youthful gentility, and peace would be shattered by two world wars. A fundamental change occurred as the nation became preoccupied with issues that couldn’t have been further from the minds of the young Boston idealists. Still, the past had left the Hill many legacies, from its Brahmins to its slave emancipators to its Bohemian “colonists”—a culturally rich and diverse foundation it would never lose.