CHAPTER THREE

War and Peace

1940–1950

There never was a good war or a bad peace.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
letter to Josiah Quincy
September 11, 1773
In June of 1939 the German consulate moved its office from State Street, in the heart of Boston's business district, to the residential heart of Beacon Hill. As the consulate staff began to set up shop at 39 Chestnut Street, the residents of Beacon Hill raised more than the proverbial eyebrow. They were not much comforted by the Germans' explanation that it was quite normal for an office to move from one place to another in a major city. One anxious resident, Susan Evans, wrote the Beacon Hill Association: "I consider the German Consulate a detriment to the street. I still own 28 Chestnut Street, and am interested in keeping the street on as high a level as is possible with the changing conditions." Emotions ran even deeper the following spring, when a swastika flag was unfurled at 39 Chestnut in observance of the fifty-first birthday of Adolf Hitler. The day the Third Reich's emblem was displayed, police and government agencies were swamped with phone calls from patriotic citizens asking why an American flag had not been unfurled alongside it. Officials at the Joy Street Police Station explained that there was no law preventing a foreign flag from being flown alone. Police were visibly nervous, however, about the explosiveness of the situation. The night passed in peace, and the police vigil relaxed when the swastika was removed the next day.

No less than the rest of America, Beacon Hill was growing exceedingly uneasy about German aggression in Europe as well as Japanese campaigns in Asia. American neutrality finally became an impossibility on Sunday, December 7, 1941, when at approximately 8:00 in the morning the imperial air force of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor—the day that would "live in infamy," as President Franklin D. Roosevelt told Congress the next morning. Within four hours of the president's address, America had declared war, and the country moved rapidly toward war readiness. Approximately thirty-one million Americans registered with draft boards, and about fifteen million of them eventually served in combat overseas. As resources were devoted to wartime production, a nation that had been struggling for years with economic depression and unemployment suddenly found itself hard-pressed to maintain essential institutions. The threat of enemy attacks on the American mainland seemed very real, even though combat was quite far from home. Civilian defense organizations were established throughout the country, with air raid wardens and civilian patrols in every neighborhood.
Beacon Hill, often a microcosm of dynamics in the nation at large, also redirected its energies toward war readiness and prepared for the worst. In March 1942 the gold dome of the State House, once dubbed “the hub of the solar system” by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., was painted a dull war-gray so that the gleaming gold would not attract the attention of enemy aircraft. Activities of the Beacon Hill Association were much curtailed, though, as John Codman wrote, the association was determined to keep intact and ready to function if the need arose.

But in June 1943 the association decided that a neighborhood, even in time of world war, needed to remember its local responsibilities. Officers circu-
lated a pamphlet reminding residents and businesses of their responsibilities to the Hill. “We can’t call a special meeting, as many of you are too busy attending to the important job of winning the war,” it began, “so we ask you to give five minutes to reading our suggestions and then to write us how you will help in our cooperative effort.” There continued to be significant commercial value, the pamphlet explained, in the simple beauty of their Beacon Hill houses, shops, and streets. Even in wartime, visitors were coming from all over the United States to wander through the historic streets and browse the shops. People came, the association said, precisely because residents had maintained the spirit and tradition of old New England. “For our mutual protection, let’s join in a pact to preserve the Colonial atmosphere of our Hill.” The new pact involved putting up signs and other fixtures designed in keeping with the neighborhood’s traditional architecture, while resisting the temptation to modernize inappropriately. The pact also involved a commitment to maintain the traditional exterior of buildings even when interior renovations were made. Beacon Hill’s atmosphere, the pamphlet pointed out.

Air raid wardens, February 3, 1943. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. Before graduating, Boston’s first women wardens received final instruction on the use of the fire-pump extinguisher from Lt. Ethyl Clancy (left) of the MWDC, director of Training for the Boston Committee on Public Safety. The wardens are (from left) Lydia Evans, Jean Stowell Cullen, and Mrs. F. Van A. Wilmarth.
The State House dome, March 1942. Courtesy of the State Library of Massachusetts. The golden dome of the State House, once dubbed "the hub of the solar system" by Oliver Wendell Holmes, was painted a dull gray so that the gleaming gold would not serve as beacon to enemy aircraft.

out, had a fragile quality that "is at the mercy of us all." Beacon Hill must remain essentially Beacon Hill, come what may in the world beyond.

JAPANESE AND OTHER "STRANGERS"

Try as the association did, it was less than easy to maintain normalcy under wartime conditions—or even civility in some circumstances. Across America, distrust and hatred for Americans of Japanese descent were running high. At times, wild stories of sabotage circulated. In February 1942, under public pressure, President Roosevelt ordered the army to remove all persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. Approximately 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of them American citizens, were abruptly herded behind barbed wire and then shipped to relocation centers. Most of them lost their businesses and other possessions and were detained in prisonlike facilities. By the war's end, they found themselves without homes or means of livelihood.
During the peak of controversy several organizations, both religious and secular, launched major efforts to help these uprooted Americans relocate and find employment. Relocation hostels were opened up in New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Illinois, Ohio, and other states to provide temporary lodging. In Boston an initiative was spearheaded by the Unitarian Service Committee and backed by a coalition of Christian denominations that included the Baptist Home Mission Society and the Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. Under the direction of the Reverend Edward A. Cahill, a native of Brockton, Massachusetts, and associate director of the Unitarian Service Committee, the effort established the first Relocation Hostel in New England at 6 Walnut Street, Beacon Hill. Some eighty Japanese-Americans were resettled. The efforts were sponsored by, among other groups, Labor's Educational Center, Inc., which owned 6 Walnut Street. The hostel would be entirely nonsectarian, explained the Reverend Cahill. There would be Buddhists, and, in fact, everything but Unitarians.

Not everyone on the Hill welcomed the resettlement initiative. “I have known several individual Japanese that I have liked,” wrote one resident to John Codman, secretary of the Beacon Hill Association. “But very definitely I do not want a Japanese Relocation Hostel next door to me.” Several reasons were listed, including potential negative impact on property values, sanitation, and security. “The selection of this location for the proposed hostel, so close to the Common, where so many U.S. service men congregate, seems unwise,” argued the writer.⁴

In a letter to the Beacon Hill Association two days later, the same writer revealed his deeper objections. “If Boston is too easy,” he said, “they will ship
Among the group of Japanese Americans, the Reverend Cahill tried to hold talks among representatives from both sides of the issue. He wanted opponents to understand that all the Japanese Americans in question had met security tests and were, in fact, loyal citizens. The coalition of sponsors, he said, was interested in seeing justice done “to this large group of our people who have been stigmatized because of ancestry.” The debate finally shifted in favor of relocation on the Hill. But these deliberations held things up for more than a year, so that Beacon Hill’s participation did not come into effect until several months before the atomic bomb officially brought Japan to its knees. At least for Cahill and his colleagues, the opening of 6 Walnut Street brought some measure of healing to an epidemic of national bitterness that even Beacon Hill could not avoid.

The problem of admitting Japanese was not the only issue of inclusiveness that dogged the association through the war years. The issue of membership recruitment raised its head now and again; it was a problem that had a long
history. From 1925 to 1946, the association's membership grew by only 38, from 410 to 448, reflecting what some members suspected to be an unspoken tradition of restricting the influence of lower classes and nonwhite residents. It took a Quaker by the name of Margaret P. Welch to take the association to task over the matter. Welch was a resident in good standing of 20 Louisburg Square. On January 29, 1945, she boldly wrote to the association's president, Edward A. Taft: "Mr. Codman tells me that the Beacon Hill Association has no policy regarding the inclusion in its membership of the merchants on Charles Street and Cambridge Street, and I am writing to beg the Executive Committee to make it a definite policy to include as members all owners and tenants ... and in the interest of the Association, as well as of our community, and of racial tolerance, we will do well to extend a welcoming hand and ask them to join us in a co-operative effort." The heretofore excluded groups to whom Welch alluded became more specific later in the letter. "I am confident that we shall fail in our purpose of maintaining our old traditions," she said, "until we sit down at the dinner table at annual and other meetings with the Jews and the Irish and the colored people, who are our neighbors, and make them feel that our Association is their Association, too."6

Apparently not all members felt so generous toward the merchants and North Slope neighbors as did Margaret Welch. Though no association member would ever openly advocate a policy of exclusiveness, subtle sentiments could sometimes be heard. Writing of the Margaret Welch initiative, a member told John Codman: "I think we are particularly fortunate in having so many new owners of the right sort on the Hill, and I would like to make sure that all of these are included in our members."7

RETURN OF THE GI

After American victories abroad, Beacon Hill was swept by many of the same social dislocations that affected the nation. As multitudes of veterans came home, many were so deeply affected by the traumas and abnormalities of war that the "American dream" would not prove easy to grasp.
Demobilization of American military forces began as soon as the war ended. In April 1945 President Truman began the demobilization with the release of about seven million people from the army. After the Japanese surrender in August of that year, the pace accelerated, with a release each month, from October 1945 through February 1946, of no fewer than three-quarters of a million veterans. By June 1946 American ground, naval, and air forces had returned some 13 million veterans of World War II to civilian life.

Voices on Beacon Hill registered the uncertainties and angst over ominous housing and employment shortages. "Housing today has reached a low never before seen on the Hill or anywhere in America," reported the *Beacon Hill News* in October 1946. "Today hundreds of ex-GIs are homeless. Former war-workers are searching for homes to replace what they gave up when they heeded the call for help from our nation." The newspaper urged readers to pressure local politicians to support passage of a new housing bill. Governor Robert F. Bradford, for his part, encouraged the owners of large houses in places like Beacon Hill and the Back Bay to remodel them into small apartments and do their part to relieve the shortage. "There are many fine large houses in Beacon Hill and the Back Bay," said the governor, "which are empty or being used very little that could be remodeled to house a large number of ex-servicemen and their families, thus helping out the present emergency."

Beacon Hillers were not particularly known for embracing calls for change from outsiders, the governor notwithstanding. As a longtime resident and real estate specialist, John Codman made it clear that remodeling was not likely to be an easy course. It might even be so costly, he warned, as to price the veteran out of the market, unless, he mused, the veteran in question was an admiral or had a rich wife. Things were equally slow on the Hill when it came to creating employment. One veteran, the twenty-seven-year-old publisher of the *Beacon Hill News*, Raymond Bearse, wrote: "I have interviewed and talked with dozens of veterans and many of them encountered difficulty in getting started or to stay in business once they started." Meanwhile, the prewar marriages of many veterans were proving untenable in the postwar period. One of every three ended in divorce. As public concern mounted, community organizations were roused to launch educational programs, trying to save the flagging family life of America. Without action, it was feared,
democracy itself might be threatened. If abroad Americans had made peace possible, it was not so at home in the lives of their own families.

One factor that complicated postwar adjustments was the fact that the country’s psychological orientation to war still seemed to grip public consciousness. In the spring of 1947 one of the stranger events in Boston history occurred on the Boston Common, as the historic green was turned into a virtual peacetime army camp. An army band was playing one evening when crowds started to gather; children began running excitedly behind the band, and army units arrived to shore up the whole occasion. Looking on in disbelief was a veteran of foreign wars who had survived what he called “the blood-splattered hedgerows of Normandy” and the final march deep into the Third
Reich. “This spring,” he wrote anonymously in the Beacon Hill News, “swan boats and the ack-ack guns arrived simultaneously.” It was a kind of “mass hypnosis,” he said, reflecting what he considered a kind of “inherent militarism in Man.” Only when people ceased tapping their feet to martial music and came to prefer a Strauss waltz, he wrote, might wars become a thing of the past.12

“What exactly is the miracle of war?” demanded another veteran, Allan Forbes, Jr., of 70 Beacon Street. Forbes was provoked by the euphoric tones of an article in the “Poetry Forum” of the Beacon Hill News, where a neighbor hailed the “miracle of war,” praising the quiet courage and sacrifice of “insignificant boys who proved themselves heroes,” and claimed that only in war were people able to see “the true magnificence of man.” Allen Forbes fought back: “Does the Guernica depict a miracle? The 53 men who burned to death on a torpedoed tanker in less than three minutes during a winter night’s storm in mid-Atlantic? He went on: “Watching the flames pillaring high into the night but unable in any way to aid, I did not think it was a miracle. . . . The disemboweled youth that carpeted the long road from Normandie to the Elbe were not, to my way of thinking, miracles.” In Forbes’s view, the “quiet courage” was more a matter of resignation and self-preservation on the part of youth who wanted desperately to survive, with some pinch of duty thrown in. Should there be another war, concluded Forbes, “I relinquish to Miss Jackson my right to participation in it.”13

The veterans who had once looked death in the eye came back with a heightened awareness of the world around them and refused to let sentiments of genteel insularity go unquestioned, least of all on America’s original “Hill genteel.” If GIs like Alan Forbes could never be the same, neither could the communities they had long called home. Time would be needed for normalcy to be redefined.
THE BRICK SAVERS RIDE AGAIN

Residents of West Cedar Street were awakened one spring morning in 1947 by commotion under their windows. Looking out, they found work crews tearing up their redbrick sidewalks with picks and shovels, planning to replace the bricks with cement. Enraged, many ran out of their houses trying to stop the workmen. Some housewives, children, and grandmothers tried tactics of nonviolent resistance, bringing chairs and rugs to sit down and “guard their time-honored bricks from vandalism.” A woman by the name of Mrs. George Smith got down on her hands and knees and began replacing in her sidewalk all the dislocated bricks she could find. A sympathetic milkman lay across the remaining bricks and said to Mrs. Smith, “I am on your side.”

The city’s action, a resident of West Cedar Street later commented, “was not only an insult in view of the petition of 300 residents, requesting that the bricks be kept, but injury because, since the street had already been torn up, residents now had no place to walk.” The Boston Herald warned in an editorial that the “sound wave zooming into Beacon Street is no traffic roar or hurricane. It is the rising protest of Beacon Hillites. Mr. Curley had better beware.” With the mayor now openly named and blamed, Beacon Hill’s Second Battle of the Bricks had officially begun.

Since the First Battle of the Bricks twenty-seven years before, there had been several other skirmishes with the city over the cherished bricks. Each time the neighborhood won. The street commissioners, however, kept coming back. Visitors to Beacon Hill, said the Boston Herald, often complained about the uneven brick sidewalks on this most famous slope. Hill residents, however, “have become as nimble as antelopes with the years and hardly ever notice the imperfections under their feet. But take those away, and there’d be trouble.” The city warned of the potential costs of having to pay damages to persons suing over injury caused by the bricks and won sympathy from some Hill residents. But the majority of Beacon Hillers loved their bricks and wanted them to stay.

On April 29, 1947, the women of West Cedar Street planned another sit-down strike to prevent, as the Post described it, “the construction of a grano-
lithic sidewalk in place of the traditional red bricks over which generations
of Beacon Hill residents have trod and tripped."¹²⁰ West Cedar Street, ac­
cording to an article in the Boston Herald, looked like something the army left
behind in France. A small group of women sunned themselves on the side­
walk and quietly stated that when the workmen crossed Revere Street they
were going to move into action. As the watchful women chatted among
themselves on the sidewalk, two workmen with picks on their shoulders sud­
denly appeared and began digging up the bricks on the opposite side of the
street. Immediately, the women moved their chairs across the street, and re­
inforcements of both women and men poured out of historic houses on both
West Cedar and Pinckney Streets to join the “dignified resistance.”²¹

On April 30 Mayor Curley entered his office in downtown Boston only to
find himself faced with seventy-five Hillers who were well prepared to de­
fend their beloved brick sidewalks. The ever-vigilant man of real estate, John
Codman, explained that Hillers paid the city more in taxes than the Hill
received in services; so it would be only right for the city to do well by the
Hill in this instance. Pushing a “technical argument,” the architect Dana
Somes insisted that concrete actually had little advantage over brick, winter
or summer. Trying to pull the mayor’s heartstrings over matters sentimental
and aesthetic, Margaret Welch reminded him that Beacon
Hill antiquities
were a national attraction. Cement, she said, “is as inappropriate on Beacon
Hill as elevators in St. Kevin’s Cave in Limerick.” Williamsburg, she added,
was a mere reproduction. “We, on Beacon Hill inherited the original, and we
had the obligation to pass it on intact to coming generations.”²²

Mr. Curley, no stranger to reading the political winds, decided it was time
to bow to those he’d come to call the “royal purple.” In view of the tide of citi­
zens sweeping down from Beacon Hill, he said, “I don’t think the Public
Works Commissioner is justified in taking a position like that of Dame Part­
ington, who tried to sweep the ocean back with a broom.” Echoing the rhet­
oric of the protestors, Curley told his intense audience, “Beacon Hill is in the
same category as Williamsburg. People from all over the world go to see the
restoration there. It is known for its historical, sentimental and aesthetic val­
ues. I think that’s true of Beacon Hill also, and the hill is not a restoration—
it’s real.”²³ The “tide” gave him two minutes of applause while the mayor
beamed at news cameras. Triumphantly, the “ocean” receded on its own.
The unfolding of this drama was attracting more than local interest, according to commentary in the *Beacon Hill News*. A group of private citizens, battling in the face of what appeared overwhelming odds, had scored a major victory. Apparently, however, it was an assessment shared well beyond the camp of the winning party. Letters of support poured in from all over the country. Wrote Minnie Jensen of New York: “My husband and I are so glad you will not allow them to destroy those beautiful old streets. We stop each year on our way back from Maine at the Bellevue Hotel in Boston, and we just love to walk up and down those beautiful old streets and admire your beautiful old homes on Beacon Hill.” Another writer observed that in an
age of wars, there were few bloodless victories like the Battle of the Bricks. So rousing was the acclaim that Francis W. Hatch, an author, poet, and composer, leaped into action, creating the now famous song entitled “God Save the Bricks on Beacon Hill”:

God save the bricks on Beacon Hill, Hallelujah
Those walks we love so well on Beacon Hill
The vandals who'd replace 'em, we'll drive right out of town
You can't down the folks on Beacon Hill.

So that is our position, we hope we've made it clear
We'll fight you by petition, day by day and year by year.

Keep modern hands from Beacon Hill, Hallelujah
Drive them out like termites from the sill
Our battlefield of Bulfinch we'll fight for to the grave
Oh God save the soul of Beacon Hill, we implore you—
God save the whole of Beacon Hill.25

MOTHERS AGAINST STORROW DRIVE

Not all the evils facing postwar Boston were legacies of war. For decades the city had been wrestling with mounting problems brought about by the automobile. By the late 1940s, Boston was considered one of the worst traffic areas in the country, with nearly half the streets virtually blocked by parked cars and the average driving speed falling to 8.5 miles an hour. Traffic congestion was causing economic losses to seaports, the airport, and to other businesses. For years the state and city legislature and the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) wrestled with the daunting problem. One solution, strongly supported by Governor Dever in 1946, started a public uproar on Beacon Hill.

Designed by the MDC, this solution called for a new parkway to be constructed to allow traffic a route west out of the city. The proposed six-lane highway would run from Charles Street through the Storrow Memorial Embankment along the Charles River to Soldiers Field Road on the western
outskirts of the metropolitan area. Construction would strip seventy feet of land from the embankment, including one of the two million square feet in the Esplanade, and come within 110 feet of the Hatch Memorial Shell. The cost was initially estimated at six million dollars. Such a parkway, claimed the MDC commissioner, was a most important factor in the elimination of traffic congestion in downtown Boston.\(^\text{26}\)

As soon as the proposal was announced, a public outcry went up in the neighborhoods of Beacon Hill, Back Bay, and the West End. Some claimed that to build a highway across the heart of the parkland violated the fundamental principle of the philanthropist James Jackson Storrow.\(^\text{27}\) In 1903 Storrow had worked tirelessly to get the legislature to dam up the sides of the Charles River, which would transform its surrounding lands from mud flats into a park. Later his widow had donated one million dollars to the Commonwealth in memory of her husband and made the park a reality. For her generosity, the state named the park Storrow Memorial Embankment. To construct a highway through the park would destroy the “restful, suburban-like quiet so amazing here in the midst of the noisy city.”\(^\text{28}\)

In essence residents of areas surrounding the embankment, or the Esplanade, as it was known, had grown to love it for its natural beauty. Arthur Fiedler, director of the Boston Pops Orchestra and conductor of a renowned concert series along the Esplanade, publicly joined the opposition in the summer of 1946. “It would be a shame,” he said, “to have a six-lane highway through the esplanade, especially so near the shell where we give our concerts.” Claiming that he was opposed to the highway from an aesthetic point of view, Mr. Fiedler called himself a “fan” of the Esplanade. While living in downtown Boston, he walked at least four miles daily along the Esplanade for exercise and contemplation.\(^\text{29}\) Personages like Fiedler were joined by many others in the area, from Blair Gamble, a retired employee of Massachusetts General Hospital and resident of Grove Street who loved his daily stroll through the park, to Inda Kaufman of Newbury Street, who saw the Esplanade as a peaceful and beautiful place that should be left alone.

As forces against the highway grew, some groups launched studies to show that the highway would not really ease the traffic bottleneck in downtown Boston. One such group, comprising concerned citizens from Beacon Hill
and the surrounding communities, took the name “Storrow Memorial Embankment Protective Association,” and called on its thousand members to protest passage of the highway bill at the State House.30 Other opponents challenged the legal right of the city to build a highway on public land.31 Eventually, no fewer than thirty civic groups and several thousand residents of the West, South, and North Ends of Boston, in addition to those from Beacon Hill and Back Bay, signed the “Save the Esplanade” petitions addressed to Governor Dever as part of the community-based drive against the highway.

But perhaps the most dogged fighting force behind the resistance emerged among a passionate group of Beacon Hill and Back Bay residents—mothers of the fledgling baby boom generation. “I used to take Tim out on the Esplanade,” recalled Rosemary Whiting of Brimmer Street, a war bride from England who settled on Beacon Hill after World War II with her physician husband. “It was at the time one of the few long, uninterrupted city riverside parks that had greenery all the way and no traffic.” What Rosemary did daily to “escape the city” was to walk with her baby carriage on the Esplanade and then sit on the grass while her son, Tim, played in the playground.32 Many mothers from the low-income residential blocks of the West End also shared Rosemary’s experience. To them and their children, the Charles River Basin, with its restful river park, baseball diamond, community garden, and tennis courts, was a place of beauty available to all—very much in the spirit of James Storrow. A highway, to these mothers, would replace the restful greenery with gassy, grinding automobiles.

When Beacon Hill residents Rosemary Whiting and Elizabeth Forbes discovered that West End residents were planning to send a group to the State House that included some mothers and babies, they took their own baby carriages out to the streets and stopped every mother with a baby on Charles Street, rousing passionate concerns about the looming prospect of losing the playgrounds and walk zones. “If we gave you notice,” they asked each mother, “would you bring your babies and come to the State House with us and say we don’t want to have this road?” The response was overwhelming. Planning moved ahead spontaneously, complete with volunteers making signs for a march on the State House.
On March 2, 1949, the mothers of Boston set out for the State House, seeking their day before the governor’s staff. As Rosemary Whiting and Elizabeth Forbes walked up Beacon Street, they were excited to find mothers with babies pouring out of the side streets to join the march, some with banners saying, “We don’t want the Esplanade Road” and “What about our playground?” By the time the mothers joined other protestors at the State House, the delegation was so large that the hearing had to be moved to a larger hall. During the course of the hearing, about twenty mothers decided to try to see the governor in person, only to be told he was too busy to see them. “We’re just going to stay here and wait,” said the determined mothers. The door finally opened to Governor Dever’s office and in went the mothers and the babies—many of the babies were now cranky and wailing, and the older kids strewed cookie crumbs all over the place. Mary Thornton of the West End directly approached the governor’s desk. Pregnant with her second child and holding her two-year-old by the hand, she told Governor Dever of a letter she had received from city government before she had moved to Boston. The letter promised that she would be bringing her children into a city where everyone had the best possible chance to live a happy, productive life. “And now you are going to take my children’s playground away from them?” she asked. Dever assured her that one of his staff would be contacting the mothers over the issue.

The media relished the “Mothers against Storrow Drive” story. The next day, headlines in the Christian Science Monitor heralded the convergence of hundreds of women and children on the State House protesting the multi-million-dollar highway bill. A tug-of-war ensued between the governor’s office, the city, and the MDC on the one hand, and the coalition of opponents on the other. A compromise bill was finally reached. “If everybody will just keep his shirt on,” claimed an editorial in the Boston Traveler, “we think a perfectly palatable solution can be worked out.” The compromise bill recommended filling in an equivalent portion of the Charles River Basin for all the parkland taken for the highway. Recreational areas would also be restored and improved. Moreover, the parkway would be depressed from Clarendon Street to Massachusetts Avenue with four lanes instead of six, and overpasses would be built at intervals for pedestrians.
Governor Dever’s aides proceeded to “ram” the parkway bill through the house, as the Christian Science Monitor reported it. An eight-million-dollar bond, as part of the hundred-million-dollar bond to be issued by the legislature, was released to finance the construction. Calling it “a happy ending of a rugged fight,” the governor signed the Embankment Bill on May 6, 1949. Dever personally made it a point to be on hand for the ribbon cutting that marked the opening of the highway on June 14, 1951. Even though the highway represented a loss to the fighting mothers, many believed they had at least moved the politicians toward a more acceptable outcome. “When I walk along the esplanade I pass the children’s playground,” reflected Rosemary Whiting in her autobiography. “It makes me feel happy to think what, in a rather humbling way, we helped to build.”

NOWHERE TO GO BUT DOWN

The fight against Storrow Drive, as residents of Beacon Hill soon realized, was only the first in a series of battles against encroachments of the modern age. By mid-century, increased federal aid for urban improvements gave Boston the hope of launching an all-out attack on traffic snarls. The goal of the Boston Public Works Commission, said its commissioner, William Callahan, was to iron out the wrinkles in its postwar highway pattern. The designs of Callahan, later famous for lending his name to one of Boston’s main underwater tunnels, were just one part of a series of public works initiatives across the city. Among these initiatives was the construction of a garage below the Common, which Beacon Hill residents and many others considered sacred ground.

Back in 1634 Beacon Hill’s legendary “first resident,” William Blackstone, had conveyed forty-eight acres of land to the fledgling Boston community. The town, in turn, set aside that land, in good English tradition, as “commonage,” or common land shared by the general public. Thus originated America’s oldest park. Since then, the Boston Common had seen formative national events, including the mustering of an army by George Washington, the stationing of British Redcoats, and the training of Union soldiers during
the Civil War. It had also witnessed some of the more ignominious events, such as the beheading of the Quaker martyr Mary Dyer. During colonial days the Common had sustained the community by providing fodder for its herds, and, in latter days, it had also enhanced leisure, as the Frog Pond in winter supported long hours of skating pleasure. To many Beacon Hill residents, the Common was, like the Esplanade, an oasis and an emerald expanse amid the close quarters of city living. It was not something to spoil with a garage.

The idea of an underground garage was, in fact, an old idea being revisited. In the earliest proposal, dating back to 1928, planners had envisioned twenty thousand cars under the Common. In the 1940s the legislature approved the construction of a garage for approximately thirty-five hundred cars. But World War II and the shortage of steel after the Korean War intervened to scuttle the effort. Now a new vision would not just open a massive space for parking, but make parking a business that was financially viable. The plan involved having the Foundation Company, a New York construction company, raise eleven million dollars for construction of the garage, operate it as a private company for forty years, and then give the garage back to Boston. The city, in the meantime, would receive 2 percent of the operating proceeds annually as a rental fee. The idea gained rapid support from both city and state governments. Mayor John Hynes appealed to President Truman for the necessary allocation of steel. Governor Foster Furcolo established the Massachusetts Parking Authority and empowered it to undertake the project.

Many of Boston’s citizenry disagreed with the governor and the mayor. And there ensued a ten-year battle between the mayor and his men on the one hand, and a variety of opponents with an array of charges and concerns on the other. The opponents’ concerns ranged from the potential for disfiguring the beauty of the Common and ruining a historical treasure, to possible violation of the Parkman Trust, which was dedicated to improving the Common. Many individuals and organizations charged the city with empowering a for-profit group to run a public facility under tax-exempt status, and emphasized the potential for cronyism and giving of special favors to friends of the legislature.
Despite massive efforts by community organizations and individuals to stop the project, Commissioner Callahan’s dream of building an underground garage in Boston’s historic center went forward. Neighbors still succeeded, however, in ensuring that the construction remained hidden from sight and kept a vigilant eye on business operations. They eventually struck back full force when it was revealed that corruption was infusing the whole operation. As John Codman had predicted in the early days, the construction of the underground garage opened a door to the “most incredibly involved case of grand larceny” in the history of the Commonwealth. This
included the subterfuge of fake engineering, legal, and finder’s fees, the wholesale falsification of official records, and the establishment of a fictitious corporation in order to receive kickbacks amounting to approximately eight hundred thousand dollars. A yearlong investigation and the trial that ensued led to the conviction of, among others, a judiciary court judge, several lawyers, engineers, and the chairman of the Massachusetts Parking Authority. The Common Garage scandal became such a landmark case in the legal history of the state that it led to the creation of the Massachusetts Crime Commission. A conflict-of-interest law was passed to prevent such abuse of public funds and trust from happening again. Throughout the “purification process,” a key prosecutor of the case was a Beacon Hill native and former president of the Beacon Hill Association—Gael Mahony.
WEST END STORY

By mid-century the West End of Boston, Beacon Hill’s neighboring community, had become a vibrant potpourri of ethnic groups. “On a Sunday just in my apartment building,” remembered one West Ender, “the smell of all different nations filled the hallways with the aromas of their ethnic cooking. We had Irish, Jewish, Italians, Yankees, Greeks, and Ukrainians.” Only a half-century before, the West End had been known as a transient stop for immigrants before they moved on to better places. Since then the neighborhood had quietly evolved into a stable community when many groups decided to stay and call it home. By the 1940s many residents had lived there among families and friends for more than a generation, and to some the West End was the only community they knew. By the end of World War II, the West End had become extremely diverse, claiming more than twenty different types of ethnic background. And while ethnic solidarity was affirmed, this diverse population had also found a way to weave its diversity into a common fabric of community life.

Unfortunately, not all onlookers deemed the community situation so viable. Mayor John Hynes and the Boston Housing Authority, for example, considered the area “substandard,” and, therefore, a perfect candidate for clearance, aided by federal dollars for urban renewal. The mayor officially launched his “West End Project” on April 11, 1953, hoping to relocate some 2,248 families from the West End to other parts of Boston. No fewer than 682 of the 739 residential buildings would be demolished in order to make way for new construction. City inspectors, for their part, estimated that 80 percent of the housing structures in the West End were “below standard,” 60 percent of them rat infested, and 80 percent with no outside fire escapes.

For many of those who actually lived in the West End, however, the neighborhood did not feel quite so “substandard.” Like its neighbor Beacon Hill, the area had a history of development and evolution that carried some considerable pride and a history that reached back to colonial days. From its earliest times the West End, or New Field as it was called, provided verdant pastureland and orchards. The value of the land dropped with the opening of one of Boston’s fourteen so-called “rope walk industries,” but rebounded in
the late eighteenth century with the opening of the West Boston Bridge, now the Longfellow Bridge, which links Boston with Cambridge. By 1820 the West End competed with Beacon Hill for well-to-do residents.

There was, perhaps, an inevitable shift in the 1840s with the rapid rise of industrialization and the rising popularity of the horse-drawn “omnibus.” It was then that migrant labor began to arrive in large numbers from outlying rural areas, attracted by new jobs in the city. The shift was further reinforced by the arrival of Irish immigrants escaping the potato famine of 1846. There followed a succession of immigrants: European Jews who were escaping the pogroms in Russia, and then other immigrants from Italy, Poland, Albania, and Lithuania. As more and more single-family homes were converted into rental apartments, upper- to middle-class families retreated to the suburbs, facilitated by the horse-drawn omnibuses on Cambridge Street. By the late 1850s, the West End had become primarily a diverse working-class community.

The feasibility of some kind of surgical removal of “urban blight” in the West End was made even more questionable by links that had grown over many years between West End neighborhoods and those of Beacon Hill. In fact, throughout the nineteenth century it was not clear to most area residents where the North Slope of Beacon Hill ended and the West End of Boston began. The African Meeting House on Joy Street, for instance, served the black population living both in the West End and on the North Slope of Beacon Hill. Vilna Shul, the only synagogue that was built to serve the Jewish population in the West End, was located on the Hill’s Phillips Street in 1919. Many Beacon Hill philanthropists also chose the West End as their beneficiary. Joseph Lee, a prominent Beacon Hiller whose father was credited with founding the public playground movement, remained a strong supporter of the West End. Elizabeth Peabody, who started one of the first kindergartens on Beacon Hill, also moved her social experiment into the West End by establishing the Elizabeth Peabody Settlement House, which provided social and educational assistance to generations of immigrants.

Still, by the 1950s much housing in the West End had surely deteriorated, with once-spacious mansions and gardens replaced by cramped boarding-houses, built with little consideration for open space or building regulations.
It was not totally without logic that Mayor Hynes classified the West End, together with other areas such as Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, Charlestown, and Dorchester, as “obsolete neighborhoods.” The West End Project was one piece in the larger postwar strategy for slums. Hynes was thinking in grand terms of dealing an “all-out blow against the accumulative slums of the last 100 years.”46 The city estimated that forty million dollars would be spent, with Boston riding the wave of two federal housing acts targeting blighted cities throughout America.47

In the 1950s public confidence in the federal government was high. The nation had recently emerged from the New Deal and World War II, and the government was considered a benevolent force that could be relied upon to do the right thing. Most Bostonians and institutions supported the slum clearance initiative, and Mayor Hynes hailed urban renewal as “the salvation of old cities like Boston.”48 In urban renewal there might be an impetus for the local economy, many felt, with private enterprises willing to invest in the rejuvenated cities.49 There were also the doubters uttering grim jeremiads. Gabriel F. Piemonte, an attorney who maintained an office in the neighboring North End, insisted that “the history of the West End Project will haunt the housing administration to eternity.”50 Joseph Lee echoed with this satire: “Blasted be the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of nothing, and blasted be the meek, for they shall be kicked off the earth.”51

Bucking residential opposition, the city, through its newly formed Boston Redevelopment Authority, decided to move forward with operations. On April 25, 1958, the residents of the West End received registered letters from City Hall informing them that the BRA had taken over their property by eminent domain in order to eliminate a substandard residential area. Even though they had previously heard promises that low-rent housing alternatives would be available, no such provision was included in the eviction notices distributed in 1958. Soon the federal bulldozers moved in, razing buildings that had been abandoned by their former occupants. It was like “a dragon waiting to eat the old house shells as soon as their occupants move out.”52 By the late 1950s the West End looked like a bombed-out wasteland. For close to a decade after that, the area was called the “biggest parking lot in Boston.”53
The impact on individuals was devastating. Uprooted from their close-knit community, they were scattered far and near, "from Alaska to Italy." Having little money and fewer choices, most of them searched desperately for accommodations, some moving to other working-class neighborhoods. The abrupt change brought about by the relocation put the stability, health, and well-being of many West Enders in jeopardy. Even several years after relocation, 72 percent of the women and 66 percent of the men who had moved wanted to go back. In interviews many of them revealed shared sentiments: "Something of me went with the West End"; "I felt as though I lost everything." Against the backdrop of these social dislocations, West End renovation was awarded to Charles River Park, Inc., which decided to build high-rise apartments primarily for middle- to upper-income individuals. Many saw it as a case of Robin Hood in reverse, "taking houses from the poor to provide housing for the rich." 

Beacon Hill residents looked on with concern. Though many supported urban renewal in theory, what was happening in the West End forced them to reexamine the validity of the city's approach. Outcry over the human cost of the West End Project triggered much rethinking and many public debates. The mood of the country about bulldozer-oriented urban renewal was also shifting in favor of more moderate rehabilitation. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the 1960s, ethnic community groups assumed greater involvement in the renewal process. The West End experience served, in its own sad way, as a major turning point in Boston. As the horrors of the West End story spread, resistance grew in other neighborhoods earmarked for destruction. Many were subsequently saved from a similar fate.

A HILL FOR HISTORY

For some years the experience of the West End sent shivers through Beacon Hill. Many residents wondered if the Hill could be subject to similar external tampering from government. Social engineering from the outside had never gone down well with Hillers, and once again their own historical heritage seemed in need of watchful protection. In the spring of
1953 an article by William Kinney in *National Geographic* caught the eye of John Codman. It explained how the residents of Georgetown had managed to get Congress to recognize their neighborhood as a historic district. Recognizing the obvious similarities between Georgetown and Beacon Hill, Codman was propelled into action. On April 14, 1953, he sent a letter to Kinney asking for more information. This was the beginning of a long correspondence between Codman and representatives of other historic neighborhoods in an effort to save the Hill for posterity.

As Codman soon learned, initiatives for historic-district preservation in America had been going on for quite some time. In 1931 the city of Charleston, South Carolina, was designated an "old and historic district" by enactment of a local ordinance. In 1937 the French Quarter of New Orleans was similarly protected through an amendment to the Louisiana Constitution. The start of World War II put a temporary stop to such initiatives, but they revived soon after the war. In 1946 Alexandria, Virginia, passed an ordinance, followed in 1947 by Winston-Salem, North Carolina. By 1953 eight old neighborhoods had achieved Historic District status. Under the law of Historic Districts, no changes were allowed to exterior architectural features of buildings without the permission of the respective architectural commissions. Through architectural control, as Codman and the Beacon Hill Association concluded, a neighborhood with valued historical roots could be deliberately and permanently protected from becoming a slum.

The association was, by now, a mature neighborhood organization with decades of public campaign experience. Drawing on that expertise, Codman and his associates embarked on a new crusade to designate the Hill a Historic District. A survey was made of the Hill. The result was two large-scale maps marking the architectural style of buildings and the current use of each structure. The association filed a bill with the state legislature in January 1955, asking that the South Slope be designated a Historic District. Selecting only the South Slope was a strategic decision, since many believed that including the North Slope and the Flat in the same bill could increase resistance and controversy and make the bill's passage impossible.

The association's campaign gained extensive media coverage—the largest ever on behalf of Beacon Hill. By June 23, less than six months into the
crusade, more than eleven thousand lines of newspaper print had been published in favor of the effort. Newspaper clippings reveal that stories were carried by newspapers of many states, including Kentucky, Michigan, Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, New York, and Pennsylvania. “Certain public-spirited citizens had now petitioned the legislature to set aside, as an historical area, this special section on Beacon Hill that comprises roughly the land bought by the Mt. Vernon proprietors in 1795,” reported the Catholic Archdiocese’s Boston newspaper, the Pilot.60 “Something solid in its architectural simplicity promises to endure for centuries if only given the chance to do so,” reported the Christian Science Monitor.61

In explaining what was at stake in the Beacon Hill situation, journalists took some pains to show the price of losing historical landmarks. Many a priceless landmark was gone, observed the Christian Science Monitor, a tragic example being the failure of Boston’s General Court (by only a single vote) to save the John Hancock house. The survival of Beacon Hill as a monument to American history up to the middle of the twentieth century was more a matter of chance than of planning, noted the Boston Herald: “It is being chipped away even now. Boston and the Commonwealth owe it to themselves to provide adequate protection for the area.” Editorials in the Boston Daily Record argued that Beacon Hill could reasonably be called a shrine “in which the present bows reverently to the past.”62 Destroying Beacon Hill, its writers argued, would be almost as much of a sacrilege as dismantling the White House. “A hundred years before,” the paper concluded, “we tore down John Hancock’s beautiful home near the State Capitol and have regretted the act ever since.”63

With the media stirring public passions, Beacon Hill’s request for legislative protection took on a certain urgency at the State House, and pressure mounted for passage of the legislation. The association complemented the media crusade with grassroots outreach in the community by staging public forums and distributing pamphlets. Helen Duprey Bullock of the National Trust for Historic Preservation was invited to speak on the subject in January 1955. The occasion was used not only to inform attendees about the issues, but also to mobilize their support for the new bill. When it came time for the Massachusetts Senate to review the legislation, more than five hun-
dred Beacon Hill supporters crowded into the hearing room. In addition, nineteen public and private groups went on record in favor of the association’s initiative, led by Mayor Hynes, with another seven state representatives and one senator also expressing their support. “If anything goes wrong with the current movement to formally make Beacon Hill a historical area and preserve its living essence for all time,” wrote a Beacon Hill resident, Rudolph Elie, “I shall renounce Boston forever and move to San Francisco.”

Elie did not have to move to San Francisco. On July 28, 1955, Senate Bill 605 passed the legislature and was signed into law by Governor Christian Herter, thus creating the Beacon Hill Historic District. Also created was the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission, a watchdog for the district. Newspapers appeared exultant with the result. The Boston Daily Globe exclaimed that the Hill had saved the Hill, working in the spirit of Bulfinch, the Mount Vernon Proprietors, and the greats of old; also at work were the vigilance of their successors in the modern Beacon Hill Association and the tearful tragedies of neighborhoods like the West End.

Winning the legal battle to preserve the Hill represented only the first step, pointed out Gael M. Mahony, the twenty-nine-year-old president of the Beacon Hill Civic Association and a new assistant U.S. attorney. Invoking the words of the first governor, John Winthrop, he called upon Hillers to set an example that would reach beyond its own back step. “The eyes of the public are upon us,” he said. “Let us all see to it that the Hill is not just the oldest district still intact in Boston, but the most progressive. Let us maintain our property and keep our sidewalks, streets and alleys clean. We should set an example to the whole of the City.” Mahoney’s was a large vision for a small hill. But perhaps this particular hill, of all in America, deserved to think historically large.
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