Epilogue

By 1796 John West’s Boston Directory proudly noted that the town had “nineteen edifices of public worship,” with most “ornamented with beautiful spires, with clocks and bells”; numbered eighty “wharves and quays”; and supported “Seven Free Schools” with almost one thousand “scholars.” More than twenty societies held their meetings in Boston, including the “American Academy of Arts and Sciences,” the “Massachusetts Historical Society,” a library society, an immigrant aid society, and the “Boston Mechanic Association,” in addition to “seven respectable Lodges of free and accepted Masons.” The town boasted the first of many elegant homes in the West End and the Tontine Crescent and Federal Street Theater in the South End, while the magnificent neoclassical Massachusetts State House would soon grace Beacon Hill.

Many elements contributed to making the final two decades of
the eighteenth century a watershed in Boston’s history. These years proved a pivotal period when Boston began its shift from an insular provincial town to a cosmopolitan community in the new nation. The forces shaping this transformation included the vicissitudes of war, the ensuing economic depression and recovery, population growth, and social and cultural upheaval. The American Revolution was the catalyst that set this process in motion, altering both individual lives and community institutions. During the twelve-month period from August 1787 to August 1788 “the expanding overseas shipments from Boston included fish valued at £66,000; rum, £50,000; whale and cod oil, £34,000; and furs, £10,000. Boards and staves, candles, leather and shoes, tea, coffee, and molasses were other commodities shipped in sizable quantities.” This growth was further fueled by the adoption of “financial and foreign policies” by Congress in 1789 that would serve to “make Boston the leading port of the United States.” The Massachusetts State legislature passed laws designed to protect domestic industry and open new trade markets. Shipyards once again rang with the noise of artisans and laborers. The influx of new faces and a growing population generated demand and a growth in the service industry. All of this translated into job opportunities and for many individuals an improvement in their economic lot. Many who had the good fortune, ability, or perseverance to weather the 1770s and 1780s would find their situation improved by these changes.

As the dawn of the new century approached, the rejuvenated seaport town looked forward in anticipation of a more prosperous future. And well it should have. The town’s economy was solid and growing. Boston’s two local banks had combined capital assets in excess of $1.5 million, a vast sum of money for those times. The town’s eighty or so wharves had in 1795 welcomed nearly eight hundred commercial vessels carrying cargoes bound for both local and distant merchants and traders. The town’s domestic industry was healthy and growing, with thirty distilleries and two breweries
producing spirits for an expanding market. Ebenezer Clough’s paper manufactory flourished as did the workshops of countless artisans. Former mariner Joseph Shed now ran a prospering grocery business with his father. The population was rapidly expanding, and the many local industries kept employment healthy and immigration attractive. These conditions were a far cry from twenty-five years earlier, when the town was demoralized by the siege and stripped of its vital workings, the economy in shambles, most of the people gone, many for good, and no road map for the future. Who that remained in Boston in late March 1776 would have envisioned that the war would go on another seven years? Who would have imagined that Boston’s population would rebound so quickly, and grow to almost 25,000 inhabitants by 1800?

Bostonians exhibited a steadfast determination to push ahead and rebuild their community despite the numerous crises faced in the wake of the siege and the difficult years that followed. During the final two decades of the eighteenth century, the “new” Boston began to emerge. Cultural, social, and economic transformations transpired, but tradition also continued: the majority of Bostonians refused to relinquish their unique form of local government, the town meeting, and numerous Bostonians expressed concern about repeal of the 1750 anti-theater legislation. While 1800 proved a time of hope for some, such as the mechanics who had paraded through the town’s streets more than a decade earlier, celebrating the state’s ratification of the United States Constitution, it was also a time of uncertainty. Boston’s poor—white, black, male, and female—struggled to make ends meet and even to survive. The elderly Mildred Byles waited out her declining years as a widow. After her husband Elisha’s death, did she still take boarders or run a school for young children in order to get by? As poor as she and Elisha had been, it is improbable that Mildred found much, if any, economic security.

Outside of marriage, opportunities for women still proved ex-
tremely limited, and after the American Revolution with the loss of so many young men, even that avenue to security proved more elusive than before. By the early nineteenth century the one new occupation that would increasingly open up to women, teaching, clearly became an avenue of employment for a number of Boston widows and spinsters. Women ran spelling and reading schools in their own homes for children under the age of seven, and those possessing sufficient knowledge opened private schools to educate young ladies on the genteel subjects of music, language, embroidery, and ornamental arts considered appropriate for a refined young lady. Women also continued in the trades of sempstress, mantua maker, and tailoress, but competition from factory-related out-work would increasingly undermine their private enterprises. Women found that tavern licenses were increasingly difficult to acquire. Tavern keeper Elizabeth Fadre, twice married and twice widowed, disappeared from the records by the mid-1790s. Despite searches through records for her whereabouts, her trail seems to disappear into the web of history.

While the town’s African-American men and women, forced by circumstance, forged a community within a community in Boston’s West End, they continued to experience the ugliness and pain of discrimination. Inequality was evident in restrictive legislation that appeared in 1786 attempting to govern relationships between whites and blacks. Proscriptive Massachusetts law prohibited the joining in marriage of “any white person with any Negro, Indian or Mulatto, under penalty of fifty pounds; and all such marriages” were “absolutely null and void.” Two years later, in 1788, the state legislature passed another law entitled “An act for supressing and punishing Rogues, Vagabonds, common Beggars, and other idle, disorderly, and lewd Persons.” This was not immediately enforced in Boston, but surfaced twelve years later. Specific provisions in the Act relating to “Africans and Negroes” were used by the Boston Selectmen in 1800 to direct those blacks not citizens of Massachu-
setts to depart “under penalty of being apprehended and whipped” or imprisoned in a house of correction. A notice to this effect, complete with a list of names, appeared in a September 16, 1800, edition of the *Massachusetts Mercury*. Along with 240 other individuals, the selectmen included Butterfield and Clarissa Scotland. After more than a decade of making Boston their home, in the face of much adversity, the Scotlands now found themselves driven away. Those Bostonians who remained would continue to build a strong and thriving black community in Boston that would be instrumental in leading the fight to abolish slavery in the United States and demand civil rights.

The increased geographic mobility of Americans as a result of the disruptions of war brought many new faces into Boston. One consequence of this was the merging of new blood into Boston’s elite. Another was the influx of large numbers of men and women down on their luck and faced with incredible hardships, as reflected by the expanding records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor. But the dynamic was more complex than the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Increased economic opportunities combined with a new spirit of individualism fostered a growing middle class of mechanics, tradesmen, and shopkeepers.

By the late eighteenth century Bostonians began to significantly reshape their built environment and physical landscape. Expansion into the South End brought improved main thoroughfares, tree-lined streets, and the building of many new homes. The once desolate southern tip of the peninsula extending into the Neck gradually offered more than the town gallows, collapsing fortifications, and a few taverns. During the late 1790s Trimountain, located on the west side of the Shawmut, fell prey to the pick, shovel, and wheelbarrow, and the decades-long process of leveling the area ensued. By 1806 a metamorphosis of the Boston waterfront transpired. India Wharf, designed by Bulfinch and consisting of warehouses, stores, and countinghouses, “was considered the foremost water-
front development in the United States." Not only was the area around Long Wharf transformed, but similar smaller projects had begun to appear in the North End by the close of the century. Those institutions and industries deemed "less desirable" were re-located at the fringes of the peninsula, such as the new almshouse built in 1795 at Barton's Point, one of the most desolate areas of town. As the community crawled across the small peninsula it would eventually claim fields, cow pastures, and the low-lying marshlands around a large portion of the town's perimeter.

Population growth, an influx of outsiders, economic development, and the desire on the part of some to shed the town's provincialism fueled these changes. But this expansion and development also brought urban problems that led citizens to call for reforms establishing stricter building codes, creating a modern police force, and establishing traffic regulations, among other demands. Practicality and necessity were the principal motivators behind this push. There was, however, concern on the part of Boston's new elite that their community not be a mere shadow to the sister cities of Philadelphia and New York. Pride of place was not new among Bostonians. In 1774, John Adams had written, "Philadelphia with all its Trade, and Wealth, and Regularity is not Boston." Likewise, he noted, "The Morals of our People are much better, their Manners are more polite, and agreeable . . . our Spirit is greater, our Laws are wiser, our Religion is superior, our Education is better." For Adams nothing, except perhaps his home in Braintree, came close to the superiority of Boston. Twenty years later John Adams's words rang true for the town's new boosters.

As the curtain closed on the stage of the eighteenth century many Bostonians faced an uncertain future. Many newcomers had no memories to enmesh them in the town's past. Others only begrudgingly let go of what Boston had been as they looked to what they believed Boston should become. By the late 1790s the commentaries filling the pages of Boston's newspapers reflected
widespread divergent opinions as to how the town should grow and what the best answers were to its increased urban problems. The complexity of the issue often weighed heavily as Boston entered a new era.

Rather than being a period of only political significance in the city's history, the first two decades after the American Revolution, a time filled with drama and dynamism, demonstrate a city expanding on many fronts with a definite, if cautious, eye toward the future. Boston's Puritan forefathers would scarcely have recognized their city as the dawn of a new century approached.