

# The Omni Parker House: A Brief History

by Susan Wilson, House Historian © 2022

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## Introduction to the historic Parker House

Mention the name “Omni Parker House,” and a century and a half of rich and varied history comes to mind. Founded by Harvey D. Parker in 1855, the Omni Parker House is the oldest of Boston’s elegant inns and the longest continuously operating hotel in the United States. It was here where the brightest lights of America’s Golden Age of Literature—writers like Emerson, Holmes, Hawthorne, and Longfellow—regularly met for conversation and conviviality in the legendary nineteenth-century Saturday Club. It was here where baseball greats like Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, and David Ortiz wine, dined, and unwound. And it was here, too, where generations of local and national politicians—including Ulysses S. Grant, James Michael Curley, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Colin Powell, Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, William Jefferson Clinton, Barack Obama, Deval Patrick, and Charlie Baker—assembled for private meetings, press conferences, and power breakfasts.

With its close proximity to Boston’s Theater District, the Omni Parker House also played an important role for performers, from nineteenth century actors like Charlotte Cushman, Sarah Bernhardt, Edwin Booth, and the latter’s handsome, matinee-idol brother, John Wilkes, to Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, James Dean, Stevie Nicks, Kelsey Grammer, Ann-Margret, Cybill Shepherd, B. B. King, Yo-Yo Ma, Rachael Ray, Ben Affleck, and Kevin Bacon.

Equally impressive are the contributions made by venerable Parker House kitchens to American culinary culture. Talented bakers and cooks here invented the famed Parker House Roll, perfected Boston Cream Pie (now the official State Dessert of Massachusetts), coined the term “scrod,” and developed many of the dishes we now associate with Boston and New England cuisine. Parker’s has also been the training ground for internationally-known chefs and features a top-notch kitchen and wait- staff that once included Emeril Lagasse, Malcolm X, and Ho Chi Minh.

None of this, of course, has ever been a secret. The constantly clever Oliver Wendell Homes, Sr., for example—that self-avowed “Autocrat of the Breakfast Table”—waxed eloquent on the food and friends he encountered at this most favorite of haunts:

*Such feasts! The laughs of many a jocund hour  
That shook the mortar from King George’s tower;  
Such guests! What famous names its record boasts,  
Whose owners wander in the mob of ghosts!*

Located along Boston’s beloved Freedom Trail, today’s Omni Parker House is more than a museum of American myth and memory. It’s a compelling, contemporary, full-service hotel that has meticulously maintained its nineteenth-century charms and sense of history. Lobbies, bar-lounges, and restaurant alike are couched in the dark hues of yesteryear; doors and elevators gleam of freshly burnished decorative bronze, while the walls are

vintage American oak. Crystal chandeliers glow above, as guests sink into oversized chairs below, in little enclaves resembling private clubrooms.

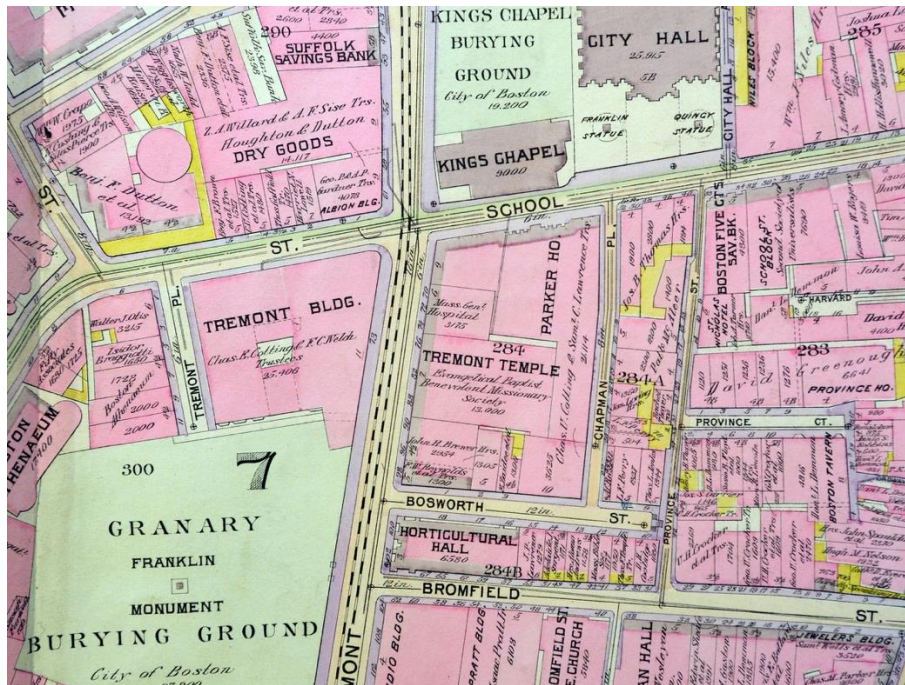
In sum, the Omni Parker House is not only a vibrant living landmark, but also a twenty-first century destination of choice. Indeed, the Parker House is still rightly called *the* Grand Dame of Boston hotels.

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## Welcome to the Neighborhood

The corner of Tremont and School streets, where the Omni Parker House has stood since 1855, is almost as old as Boston itself.

In 1630, when Englishman John Winthrop and the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony first settled here, they knew the peninsula as Trimountaine, named as such for the three hills (now remembered as Beacon, Pemberton, and Mount Vernon) that dominated the skyline. The young colony's first church, town house, freshwater spring, and stock and pillory were all located within two short blocks of where the Parker House stands today. Though the town was soon renamed Boston, to honor the Lincolnshire town that many had just departed, and though the three mountains were later leveled or substantially shortened to make new land, the early moniker lived on in the contraction, "Tremont." Tremont Street was laid out along the base of those three vintage hills and Boston Common.



The location and name of School Street also originated in Puritan times. During the years 1635-36, the British colonists established a college in nearby Cambridge (the world-renowned Harvard) and a college preparatory school in Boston. By 1645, that prep school—America's first public school—was housed in a 40-by-25-foot cabin on what came to be known as School Street. A folk-art engraving embedded in the sidewalk behind King's Chapel commemorates the institution's location from 1645 to 1748. That school, later known as Boston Latin, educated a host of Boston's brightest young males, including Sam Adams, John Hancock, Charles Bulfinch, and

Ralph Waldo Emerson. Its most illustrious dropout was surely Benjamin Franklin, whose statue hovers nearby, in front of Old City Hall (this was Boston's first public statue). The street name stayed, although Boston Latin moved on: first to the corner of School Street and Chapman Place (1748-1844), where Parker's Bar now stands, and eventually to the Fenway, where the prestigious school thrives to this day.

In colonial times, School Street was little more than a glorified dirt path to Boston Common. Boston Latin shared the street with barns, gardens, orchards, small shops, churches, livery stables, and wooden homes—and neighbors like James Otis, John Winthrop, John Winslow, Mary Chilton, Anne Hutchinson, and the alleged “witch,” Ann Hibbins. The street's gentle slope made it a favorite sledding hill; its taverns made it a favorite drinking spot, which Lieutenant Colonel George Washington was known to frequent when visiting Boston on military and surveying jobs. As time passed, the dirt road was paved with cobblestones, and the buildings replaced with more elaborate structures. Despite such changes, two distinctive colonial-era buildings remain on School Street to this day: King's Chapel, a rough-hewn granite church completed in 1754, and the Old Corner Bookstore building—the latter constructed in 1718 as an apothecary shop and private residence.

In 1704, a mansion was built on the future site of the Omni Parker House by a wealthy Boston merchant named John Mico. After Mico's death in 1718, that elegant, three-story brick home passed on to his friend and colleague, Jacob Wendell. Wendell was the grandfather of physician and writer, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., a member of the famed Saturday Club. After Jacob Wendell's death, Nicholas Boylston—a cousin of statesman John Adams—took possession of the aging Mico mansion. But by the early 1800s, the home was an eyesore: no longer a wealthy, well-maintained private residence, it instead became a boarding house, rechristened the Boylston Hotel in 1829.

It was during those years of decline that Harvey Parker came along. With him came the start of a new era: for School Street, for the city of Boston—and for the world of fine public accommodations.

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## Wild About Harvey



As these precursors to the modern hotel developed beyond simple taprooms, they began to be known as “houses”—a gentler nomenclature for a far gentler environment. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, more and more travelers arrived in Boston by coach or ship. Lodging and dining houses proliferated throughout town, many bearing patriotic names, like the American House, the Shawmut, the Adams, and the Revere House. Boston’s resident “houses” became so genteel—and sometimes, so luxurious—that even ladies were ably accommodated.

In the midst of this period of expansion and change, a twenty-year-old farm boy named Harvey D. Parker arrived in Boston Harbor on a packet boat from Maine. The year was 1825, and his dilemma was real: with less than one dollar in his satchel, young Parker was in immediate need of employment. His first job, as a caretaker for a horse and cow, brought him eight dollars per month. Subsequent work as a coachman for a wealthy Watertown woman garnered somewhat more respectable earnings— and set him on a whole new career path.

Whenever Parker trotted the horse-drawn coach into Boston, the young man ate his noonday meal at a dark cellar cafe on Court Square, owned by one John E. Hunt. By 1832, the ambitious young Parker bought Hunt’s cafe for \$432 and renamed it Parker’s Restaurant. A combination of excellent food and perfect service immediately began attracting a regular clientele of businessmen, lawyers, and newspapermen. By 1847, he took on a partner, John F. Mills. And by 1854, he was ready to embark on a much grander enterprise.

Parker’s plan was to build a new, first-class hotel and restaurant at the School Street base of Beacon Hill, just down the road from the domed Massachusetts State House. Despite the competition—especially the popular, modern Tremont House directly across the street—Parker bought the former Mico Mansion on April 22, 1854 and razed the decrepit boarding house. In its place, Parker built an ornate, five-story, Italianate-style stone and brick hotel, faced in gleaming white marble. The first and second floors featured gracefully arched windows,

while marble steps led from the sidewalk to the marble foyer within. Once inside, thick carpets and fashionable horse-hair divans completed an air of sumptuous elegance. Above the front door, an engraved sign read simply, "PARKER'S."

Visiting British author Charles Dickens marveled at the splendors of Boston's finest new hotel, in a letter to his daughter:

*This is an immense hotel, with all manner of white marble public passages and public rooms. I live in a corner, high up, and have a hot and cold bath in my bedroom (connecting with the sitting room) and comforts not in existence when I was here before. The cost of living is enormous, but happily we can afford it.*

Boston's media was also awed by what Parker wrought. A reporter for the *Boston Transcript* fairly raved about the establishment in an October 1855, review:

*This elegant new hotel, on School Street, was opened on Saturday for the inspection of the public. Several thousands of our citizens, ladies as well as gentlemen, availed themselves of the invitation, and for many hours the splendid building was literally thronged. All were surprised and delighted at the convenient arrangement of the whole establishment—the gorgeous furniture of the parlors, the extent and beauty of the dining hall, the number and different styles of the lodging rooms—and, in fact, the richness, lavish expenditure and excellent taste which abounded in every department. The house was universally judged to be a model one.*

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## Food for Thought





Harvey Parker's earlier experience with Parker's Restaurant had taught him that catering to the local crowd—providing Bostonians with a fine and flexible dining experience—was equally important to his business as offering visitors architecturally elegant lodgings. Hence, in a day when a good Boston cook could be hired for eight dollars per week, or \$416 a year, Parker hired the gourmet French chef Augustine François Anezin for an astonishing annual salary of \$5,000.

Anezin's versatile menu drew large crowds and ongoing accolades. A typical Parker's banquet of the 1860s or '70s might include green turtle soup, ham in champagne sauce, *vol au vent* of oysters, filet of beef with mushrooms, roast mongrel goose, black-breast plover, charlotte russe, *soufflés au ris*, mince pie, and a variety of fruits, nuts, and ice creams. Among Anezin's specialities were tomato soup, venison-chop sauce, and delicate mayonnaise, plus a distinctive method of roasting beef and fowl using a revolving spit over well-stoked coals.

From a creative point of view, Parker's was not only the best; it was frequently the first as well. Boston Cream Pie and lemon meringue pie, for example, were perfected and popularized in nineteenth-century Parker House kitchens. The Boston Cream Pie story in particular is an interesting one.

When the Parker House opened in 1855, chocolate was mainly consumed at home as a beverage or in puddings. (There was no lack of chocolate in Boston, since America's first chocolate mill had opened in neighboring Dorchester back in 1765.) Since colonial times, New Englanders had enjoyed desserts called "American Pudding-cake Pie" or "Washington Pie"—cakes sliced into two layers with a filling spread between—from which Boston Cream Pie is directly descended. But when Anezin's bake staff drizzled chocolate icing onto sponge cake filled with vanilla custard, something new and sensational was born. Originally dubbed "Cream Pie," "Chocolate Cream Pie," and eventually, "Parker House Chocolate Cream Pie," Boston Cream Pie became an immediate and perennial hit.

The original Parker House recipe for the pie (which is technically a cake) was so popular that in 1958 it became a Betty Crocker boxed mix. On December 12, 1996, thanks in part to a Norton High School civics class that sponsored the bill, Boston Cream Pie was proclaimed the official Massachusetts State Dessert. The bill was signed into law, of course, in the Omni Parker House Press Room. Among the pie's stiff competitors were the Toll House Cookie, the Fig Newton, and Indian Pudding.

In the fall of 2005, during the Omni Parker House's gala 150th anniversary celebrations, the World's Largest Boston Cream Pie was displayed at historic Faneuil Hall Marketplace. Sixteen feet in diameter and topped with another Boston Cream Pie resembling the Parker House in 1886, the monstrous dessert included 1,300 pounds of cake, 800 pounds of filling, and 500 pounds of chocolate frosting. Though the total caloric value was more than two million calories, those calories were divided among an estimated 6,750 people.

The moist, fluffy, and internationally known Parker House Roll was the inspired creation of an in-house German baker named Ward (or "Vard"), who worked under Chef Augustine Anezin. For many decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the famed rolls were packaged and shipped from the kitchens here to hotels, restaurants, and stores across the U.S. Today, they are still served to Omni Parker House guests—and imitated everywhere. The rolls' precise ingredients, incidentally, remained a well-kept secret until 1933, when, according to legend, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt requested the recipe be forwarded to them in Washington.

Tradition has it that the term scrod also originated at Parker's. Though many disagree over its precise definition, the word is generally used for cod or other white-fleshed fish that are the youngest, freshest, smallest, or best of the day's catch. Unlike cod, had- dock, or halibut, scrod is not a type of fish. It's been claimed that when scrod is spelled with a "c," it means that the white fish of the day is cod, and when spelled with an "h" (schrod), the fish is haddock; in reality, restaurants rarely alter their menus to adapt to the day's catch.

As plentiful and interesting as the food found in Parker's restaurant were the spirits served in its bars. Early menus list such interesting concoctions as Sherry Cobbler, Timber Doodle, Mint Julep, Gin Sling, Sangaree, and the "Cocktail." More conventional draughts of rum, whiskey, and gin were also always available, as were fine wines. As might be expected, single men were regulars in the barroom. And though all bars attract the occasional rowdy, Parker's hosted a hefty dose of merchants, businessmen, writers, politicians, and philosophers. Harvard students readily found their way across the Charles River or wandered in from the nearby medical school, inspiring humorist Artemus Ward to note, "[Harvard College], this celebrated institootion of learnin' is pleasantly situated in the Bar-room of Parker's, in Scool street..."

Another culinary innovation initiated under Harvey Parker, known as the "European Plan," separated the charges for food and lodging. Before the mid-nineteenth century, American inns and hotels generally lumped room and board together in a single fee; this so-called "American Plan" was a thrifty meal service that often resulted in rigid dining schedules and uninspired, mass-produced, and quite ordinary meals. When Parker's became the first hotel in Boston to employ the European Plan, they made *à la carte* food available to guests any time of the day or evening. While the system allowed lodgers more flexibility, it also gave Parker's staff the time to select, perfect, and personalize their varied dishes—a deliciously radical departure from hotel dining convention.

To this day, the Omni Parker House offers guests superb culinary creations and exceptional personal service. Parker's menus, meanwhile, continue to balance what we now consider traditional New England fare—from Parker House Rolls, Boston Cream Pie, and Baked Boston Scrod to New England Clam Chowder and Pan Seared Jonah Crab Cakes—with eclectic continental cuisine.

In the nineteenth century, Harvey Parker and his successors ensured the excellence of the Parker's dining experience by hiring European *chefs de cuisine* like Augustine Anezin and his successor, M.J.M Brochen. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, that tradition continued with talents such as longtime Parker's chefs John Bonello, Joseph Ribas, and Gerard Tice and a slew of rising restaurant stars—including Jasper White, Lydia Shire, Emeril Lagasse, and Paul O'Connell—who directed or creatively cooked in Parker's kitchens while sharpening their culinary crafts.

It's interesting to note that talent and fame were not restricted to the European and American chefs who graced the Parker House kitchens. Two cultural icons and notable revolutionaries spent time on the Parker House staff: Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh served as a baker in the bakeshop from 1912 to 1913, and Malcolm Little—remembered as black activist, Malcolm X—was a busboy in the early 1940s, during the period of the Pearl Harbor invasion. In the mid-1980s, a student at the New England Conservatory of Music was also employed at the Omni Parker House, as a night-shift telephone operator. Today, she is best known as mezzo-soprano opera star, Denyce Graves.

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## Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?



Harvey Parker's commitment to superior service, fair prices, fine food and drink, and handsome surroundings drew legions of guests into his hotel's restaurants and bars. Equally vital to his bustling restaurant business, however, was the hotel's ideal downtown location—which all but guaranteed Parker's a clientele that included poets, philosophers, politicians, and performers.

The Tremont Theatre, which hosted literary, musical, and political events, made its debut around the corner from the future Parker House site in 1828. Horticultural Hall, home of the powerful Massachusetts Horticultural Society, was built next door to Parker's site in 1844. The Boston Athenaeum, a prestigious, well-stocked, membership library, opened its fine new home one block away, on Beacon Street, in 1849. Meanwhile, King's Chapel—Boston's first Anglican Church and, later, America's first Unitarian church—remained a popular and perennial draw to worshippers and visitors alike. And two of the town's most historic burying grounds, King's Chapel and the Granary, were located but a heartbeat away. (These old graveyards regularly attracted friends and families of the deceased, as well as pilgrims fascinated by funerary art and the final resting places of celebrities like John Winthrop, Paul Revere, John Hancock, "Mother Goose," and the parents of Ben Franklin.)



There were two Boston buildings in particular, however, that proved most vital to the international fame and ongoing success of the 1855 Parker House. One was Boston's French Empire-style City Hall, which opened its doors across the street from Parker's in 1865. A second was the Old Corner Bookstore. Built as the apothecary shop of Thomas Crease in 1718, the quaint brick structure gained international renown from 1829 to 1903, when it housed a series of ten bookselling and publishing firms—and created a matching “bookend” with the Athenaeum up the street.

## Literary Liaisons

The most illustrious group to call the Parker House home was certainly that nineteenth-century men's social gathering known as the Saturday Club. A hint at the caliber of the club's membership is alluded to in an 1867 letter from visiting British author, Charles Dickens:

*I dine today with Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, and Agassiz. Longfellow was here yesterday. Perfectly white in hair and beard, but a remarkably handsome and notable-looking man.*

Why did some of the finest minds in nineteenth-century Boston choose to hold their monthly meetings at Parker's? Location was not the only factor—though it certainly was an essential one.

Up the street, as noted earlier, was the Boston Athenaeum. Incorporated in 1807 as a private reading room, library, and art museum, the Athenaeum became a haven for artists, writers, and their well-bred Brahmin backers. In 1811 its founders also created the *North American Review*, which is published to this day. One of the oldest cultural institutions and the largest membership library in North America, the Athenaeum moved to its current home here in 1849. By 1851, it was one of the five largest libraries in America, boasting 50,000 volumes—the same number as the Library of Congress. Feminist journalist Margaret Fuller studied here, as did transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Statesman Daniel Webster whiled away the hours in Athenaeum stacks, as did essayists, authors, and poets like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Lydia Maria Child, Amy Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote about meeting a ghost in the Boston Athenaeum reading room. (Hawthorne often wandered the neighborhood here; a fan of graveyards and tombstone inscriptions, young Hawthorne may—or may not—have gotten inspiration for the Hester Prynne character of *The Scarlet Letter* from a headstone in the nearby King's Chapel Burying Ground.)

Down the street from Parker's stood the Old Corner Bookstore, which was a magnet for poets, authors, and philosophers, especially from the years 1845 to 1864, when entrepreneurs William D. Ticknor and James T. Fields revolutionized the world of American book publishing. Ticknor and Fields' Old Corner Bookstore was more than a well-stocked bookshop and a prominent publishing house. It was also a mecca for the literary world, where renowned authors would often be seen visiting and socializing with one another and basking in the light of “Jamie” Fields. To attract and endear authors to his firm, Fields devised the first known system of royalties and secured ownership of prestigious magazines like the *North American Review* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, in which his writers regularly appeared. He was also a friend, confidante, publicist, and tour promoter for his authors. Along with his wife, author Annie Adams Fields, Jamie held cozy, creative salons for writers, thinkers, and artists in the couple's Charles Street home. (The Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Company, still based in Boston, is a direct descendant of Ticknor & Fields publishing house.)

Originating in the Literary Club and the Magazine Club, two private associations of the mid-1850s, the Saturday Club began as a small group of friends who chose the Parker House to host their festive roundtables on the last Saturday afternoon of every month. Typical among its nineteenth-century members was poet, essayist, and preeminent transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson would take the train from his home in Concord,

then visit the Old Corner Bookstore and the Athenaeum before dining at the Parker House. Alongside Emerson might be poet and *The Atlantic Monthly* editor James Russell Lowell, scientist Louis Agassiz, novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, poets John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, diplomat Charles Francis Adams, historian Francis Parkman, sage-about-town Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, and many others.

The Saturday Club's afternoons were often taken up with poetry readings, impassioned discussions, and book critiques. Indeed, according to enduring urban legends, some great moments in literary history transpired in these Parker House meetings. Here, in the folds of the Saturday Club, Longfellow drafted portions of "Paul Revere's Ride," the idea for *The Atlantic Monthly* was born, and Dickens gave his first American reading of "A Christmas Carol" (All of these claims have been contested, but none definitively proven one way or the other). As important to the group as intellectual pursuit, however, was camaraderie—and a hefty dose of mirth, gossip, revelry, and seven-course meals, all washed down with endless elixirs.

Literary superstar Charles Dickens, who resided at the Parker House during his 1867-68 American lecture tour, joined club members for one particularly memorable meeting, on November 30, 1867. Among the author's noted contributions was a favorite gin punch—concocted on site, after Dickens dispatched his assistant George Dolby to pull a stash of fine gin off a Cunard liner docked nearby.

Dickens' presence in Boston always created a stir. When staying at the Parker House, he took lengthy walks almost every afternoon, dressed flamboyantly in a brightly colored coat and shiny boots, accessorized with striped cravat, fine hat, and gloves.

Guards were regularly assigned to his hotel room door, since curious fans were eager to catch a glimpse of their favorite writer rehearsing the exaggerated gestures and odd facial expressions he used to create characters in his public readings. The colorful Dickens preened and practiced his animated talks in front of a large mirror that now rests in the mezzanine-level hall by the Press Room. Artifacts from his stay were long kept on display in the Dickens Room. Today, that room is used for meeting and dining, but it still holds the marble fireplace mantle Dickens used.

Animation got the better of Dickens one festive night at the Saturday Club, incidentally. Annie Adams Fields, in *Memories of a Hostess* (1922), remembered the evening well:

*After the dinner (at the Parker) the other night, Mr. Dickens thought he would take a warm bath; but, the water being drawn, he began playing the clown in pantomime on the edge of the bath (with his clothes on)... [I]n a moment, and before he knew where he was, he had tumbled in head over heels, clothes and all.*

Literary luminaries still gather at the Omni Parker House today. Beginning in 2016, a group of local poets, writers, and historians inaugurated a series of free public programs in the spirit of the nineteenth century Saturday Club called "The School Street Sessions." The topics presented, in prose and poetry, have ranged from the Mill Girls of Lowell and African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail to Ho Chi Minh's sojourn in Boston and the development of the first atomic bomb. Both the literary guests and audience members of School Street Sessions delight in the art of conversation and are deliberately more diverse than the original Saturday Club, which was—as were so many private clubs of the era—all-white and all-male.

## Party Politics

Boston's City Hall was built facing the Parker House School Street entrance in 1865—only a decade after the hotel's opening. Since the seat of Massachusetts government was just up the road, on the crest of Beacon Hill, the

Parker House was directly on the “hot line” between City Hall and the State House—a fortuitous situation that ensured regular political clientele for more than a century. State and local politicians dined and drank at Parker's, hunkering down daily for pleasure, politicking, or clandestine *tête-a-têtes*. Moreover, the Parker House attracted pols of national stature as well: it is claimed that every U.S. Chief of State from Ulysses S. Grant through Barack Obama passed through the hotel's portals, stayed in its suites, lobbied in its Press Room, imbibed in its bars, or dined in its restaurants.

The twentieth-century president most closely associated with Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, had an earlier start than most at the Parker House. Legendary politician Clement Norton often recalled the day in 1923 when former Boston mayor John (“Honey Fitz”) Fitzgerald was being celebrated with a Parker House party. “I saw this little boy sitting outside the hall, and I said to him, who are you waiting for, kid?” The boy, the six-year-old JFK, responded simply, “Grandpa.” Norton reportedly took the youngster inside, then coached him to point at the former mayor and say, “This is the best grandfather a child ever had.” (Other versions of the story have James Michael Curley lifting the boy on the table and urging him to speak.) Whatever the impetus, the crowd loved the boy's words, heralded as “Jack Kennedy's first public speech.”

Twenty-three years later, Kennedy announced his candidacy for the U.S. Congress from the same site. By that time, he was a World War II hero whose valiant rescues on PT-109 were regularly recounted to the charmed voting public. Despite rumors to the contrary, Kennedy did not declare his candidacy for the U.S. Presidency at the Parker House in 1960. He did, however, propose marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier at Table 40 in Parker's Restaurant. JFK also held his subsequent bachelor party in the Press Room; that evening, JFK's friends presented him with an oil painting of the July 1953 cover of *Life* magazine, depicting Jack sailing the *Victura* near Hyannis with his fiancée.

The most colorful of all the Parker House's regular political patrons was surely James Michael Curley (1874-1958), the charismatic, Irish-American “Mayor of the Poor” who dominated Boston politics for the first half of the twentieth century. A mover, shaker, and spellbinding speaker, Curley became a cultural hero to underdogs in general—and to Boston's Irish in particular—while alternately serving as common councilor, alderman, state representative, congressman, Massachusetts governor, four-time Boston mayor, and two-time prison inmate. The roguish politician was also an inside dealer who frequently alienated old-time Yankee Brahmins and almost bankrupted the city of Boston with his welfare and city improvement programs.

Curley held court at daily luncheons in Parker's main dining room, delighting curious onlookers and impressing the waitstaff by tipping silver dollars. As a result of his endless politicking, valiant efforts, and dubious escapades, James Michael Curley became the stuff of legend: his life, thinly disguised in a character named Frank Skeffington, was retold in Edwin O'Connor's 1956 novel, *The Last Hurrah*. Despite O'Connor's insistence that Skeffington was not modeled after the former mayor, it was rumored that Curley might sue the author for libel. As it became clear that *The Last Hurrah* was enhancing rather than tainting Curley's image, Curley began praising the book, and endorsing it as his own story. In a chance meeting with O'Connor outside the Parker House in 1956, Curley thanked O'Connor for the novel, adding that he particularly liked “the part where I die.”

Curley did die two years later, in 1958. Needless to say, his legend lived on. In 1980, two life-like bronze statues of Curley—a folksy, seated version and a powerful, standing one—were created by sculptor Lloyd Lillie and installed near Faneuil Hall Marketplace, only a few blocks away from Old City Hall and the Parker House. In 1992, author Jack Beatty reinvented Curley's oft-told tale in *The Rascal King*. In 1999, Boston University's

prestigious Huntington Theatre Company hosted the world premiere of O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*, adapted for the stage by Eric Simonson.

Since 1971, "The Last Hurrah" has also been the name of one of the Parker House's popular bars. The pub's original location was in the Parker House basement; it reopened in 1999 in its current street-level site, on the corner of School and Tremont. The newest incarnation of the Last Hurrah, incidentally, is a perfect place to meet friends and colleagues, to eat and drink (recent accolades include *Whiskey Magazine's* "Great Whiskey Bar of the World" award), and to watch America walk by on Boston's historic Freedom Trail, which passes right outside.

In a "Saloon of the Week" column, *Boston Globe* veteran journalist Mike Barnicle observed, "The Last Hurrah is a saloon, a clubhouse, a meetinghouse. It is as much a part of Boston as the Freedom Trail." More than just an inviting, prize-winning pub in a great location, The Last Hurrah is also a mini-museum of the first seven decades of twentieth-century Boston: framed and captioned photos of Curley and friends in their heyday, plus images of a host of celebrated individuals associated with Boston and the Parker House, line the walls.

Boston's City Hall moved to the newly constructed Government Center in 1969. Happily, the old City Hall building was spared demolition and reincarnated as office and restaurant space. Though the Omni Parker House is no longer on the path from City Hall to the State House, the hotel maintains its political appeal. Some of the more recent visits by high-profile politicians have been joyous events—like Bill Clinton's successful fundraiser of 1991, Rudy Giuliani's keynote speech to Republican colleagues here during the 2004 Democratic National Convention, gubernatorial campaigns by Mitt Romney, Kerry Healey, and Deval Patrick, and Bay State Governor Charlie Baker's 2019 inauguration breakfast. Others have signaled sadder times: Massachusetts governor and Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, for example, announced the end of his political career at the Parker House, and Senator Paul Tsongas dropped out of the presidential race here, both in the early 1990s.

An interesting footnote to presidential politics at Parker's involves America's two best-known Chiefs of State, who—though they never set foot in the Parker House—surely trod on the ground where it stands today. George Washington attended services at King's Chapel, directly across the street; but his visit came eighty years before the hotel was built. Though Abraham Lincoln lectured at Tremont Temple, just around the corner, his Boston sojourn predated Parker's construction by several years. However, his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, did stay here during a visit to Boston in 1862.

## Theatrical Pursuits

Many nineteenth-century actors and opera stars were familiar with this neighborhood well before the Parker House was built. As previously noted, the popular Tremont Theatre (1828-1843) was located around the corner (after its reincarnation as a church, Tremont Temple continued to host theatrical productions). Meanwhile, several other significant stages of the nineteenth century—including the Boston Museum, the Boston Theatre, and the Howard Athenaeum—were situated close to the Parker House as well.

Because of its proximity, as well as its enduring appeal, Parker House guests included such world-class entertainers as Sarah Bernhardt, Adelina Patti, Ellen Terry, Edwin Booth, Richard Mansfield, Henry Irving, Augustin Daly, and Charlotte Cushman. Cushman (1816-1876) was the first of America's great ladies of the stage, remembered as much for her powerful presence as for her ability to play male and female roles with equal flair. Born in Boston's North End, Cushman was one of the numerous celebrities who actually lived in the Parker House; following eighteen years of "farewell performances," Cushman also died there.

One of the theater-world guests Harvey Parker rarely discussed was actor Edwin Booth's brother, John Wilkes Booth. Edwin Booth (1833-1893) was a world-class tragedian who made his theatrical debut at the Boston

Museum on Tremont Street in 1849. Eight years later, at the age of twenty-three, Edwin headlined at the Boston Theatre on Washington Street as Sir Giles Overreach. That victorious performance proved the turning point of his career and officially began his thirty-year reign as *the* American actor of note. Meanwhile, as Edwin was conquering audiences in the Northeast, another brother, Junius, Jr., was impressing the Midwest with his acting skills.

Younger brother John Wilkes, ten years Edwin's junior, was arguably the least talented actor in this theatrical family. While Edwin came to specialize in difficult dramatic roles like Hamlet and Richelieu, John tended towards fluffier stuff, enamoring female fans with his dashing swordplay, daring leaps, flashing eyes, and impassioned gestures. He was a charming matinee idol, an unabashed ladies' man—and an ardent Confederate sympathizer. Though his primary stages were in the South, John Wilkes played elsewhere as well. In 1864, for example, all three Booth brothers collaborated in a New York production of *Julius Caesar*, and John played the romantic hero of *The Marble Heart* at the Boston Museum.

During the 1860s, the Booths' stage careers grew as the Civil War ravaged America. Edwin believed in the Union cause and proudly cast his first vote ever for Abraham Lincoln in the mid-war elections of 1863. Southern-based John Wilkes fervently disagreed. "When I told him I had voted for Lincoln's re-election, he expressed deep regret, and declared his belief that Lincoln would be made king of America," wrote Edwin in an 1881 letter. "This, I believe, drove him beyond the limits of reason."

On April 5 and 6, 1865, John Wilkes was registered at the Parker House and was seen eating in its restaurant. It's possible that he went to visit brother Edwin, who was playing a successful three-week engagement at the 3,000-seat Boston Theatre. It was reported in the *Boston Evening Transcript* of April 15 that he was practicing his aim: "[A man named] Borland...saw Booth at Edwards' shooting gallery [near Parker's], where Booth practiced pistol firing in various difficult ways such as between his legs, over his shoulder and under his arms."

Eight days after leaving Boston, on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.

The worlds of drama and literature have happily collided at the Parker House over the decades—most notably in the person of Charles Dickens. As mentioned earlier, the popular British author made the Parker House home base during his 1867-68 American lecture tour and was known for performing his readings with theatrical flair. In 1999, actor Gerald Charles Dickens, the novelist's great-great grandson, reminisced at the Omni Parker House while appearing in a critically acclaimed one-man rendition of "A Christmas Carol" at Tremont Temple. Tremont Temple was the same stage where great-great granddad played his classic tale to an audience that included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

October 8, 2005 was officially declared "Omni Parker House 150th Anniversary Day" by the city of Boston. On November 29, 2005, as part of ongoing Omni Parker House sesquicentennial celebrations, yet another great-great grandson—Mark Dickens—gave a special reading of "A Christmas Carol" to several hundred VIP clients and select press, in the midst of a festive reception in the Rooftop Ballroom. With an exclusive menu, samplings of past and present New England fare, a specialty bar featuring the Boston Cream Pie martini, and a demonstration of how to make Boston Cream Pie, the gala was the talk of the town.

In November of 2017, great-great grandson Gerald visited the Omni Parker House once again, this time to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of Charles Dickens' first American reading of "A Christmas Carol." After dining on a five-course meal designed by Executive Chef Gerry Tice and reminiscent of the Victorian era, guests in the Rooftop Ballroom were treated to a commemorative Dickens Christmas tree ornament and a reading from the beloved "Carol" by Gerald.



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## Building a Better Parker House



The Omni Parker House that visitors know today looks nothing like the hotel opened by Harvey Parker on October 8, 1855. The “House that Harvey Built” was instead designed and developed in stages, both during Parker’s lifetime and long thereafter. The original, ornate, five-story, Italianate-style, stone and brick hotel—faced in gleaming white marble and referred to as the “Marble Palace”—was designed by William Washburn (1808-1890), who was both a Boston architect and city councilor. Washburn’s first and second floors at the Parker House featured gracefully arched windows, while marble steps led from the sidewalk to the marble foyer within. Once inside, thick carpets and fashionable horse-hair divans completed an air of sumptuous elegance. Above the front door, the engraved sign read simply, “PARKER’S.”

A New Hampshire native who resided in Massachusetts for many years, William Washburn began as a builder, then evolved into a planner and superintendent. His greatest successes were in hotels, partly in New York (the Fifth Avenue and the Victoria) but primarily in Boston.

Washburn designed many of Boston’s best-known hostelries of the mid-nineteenth century, including the Revere House, the American House (rebuilt 1851), Young’s Hotel, and the Adams House. Other notable buildings in his portfolio for the downtown neighborhood near the Parker House included the National Theatre, the second

incarnation of Tremont Temple, a renovation of the Old State House in 1830 (with Isaiah Rogers), and a remodeling of the interior of the “new” State House in 1853.

Washburn presumably oversaw the architectural changes at the Parker House in the decade following its 1855 debut. In 1860, only five years after opening, Harvey Parker asked his architect to design a six-story east wing to the hotel, built on the lot formerly occupied by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society; three years later, another wing was added, set on a narrow parcel abutting Tremont Temple, that had been purchased from Dr. Walter Channing. In 1866, Parker also commissioned Washburn to add two more stories to the main building, which the architect artfully tucked under a stylish mansard roof, crowned by ornate iron grillwork and a flagpole.

On May 31, 1884, Parker died at the age of seventy-nine. Despite decades of negotiations, sales, and financial successes, the hotelier had not yet fulfilled his personal dream for the Parker House. Still, he had substantially enlarged his original structure, eventually expanding his landholding to over 41,400 square feet—the bulk of the city lot bordered by Tremont, School, and Bosworth streets and Chapman Place.

Harvey Parker was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, the “permanent home” of many of Boston’s most prestigious people. By the time of his death, he was the poster boy for success in America: the son of a Maine farmer who had arrived in Boston almost penniless in 1825 had a net worth of \$1,272,546.94 when he drew his last breath, six decades later. Though Parker was survived by his wife of forty-five years, Julia Ann, there was no heir-apparent to take the helm of his hotel. Parker’s original partner, John F. Mills, had already passed away, as had Parker’s two sons (one died at the age of seven, and the other was lost at sea at twenty-four). Hence, Parker’s will paid outstanding debts of the hotel, provided substantial income for his wife Julia, as well as for his nieces and nephews, and leased the Parker House to his later partners, his nephew Edward O. Punchard and his steward, Joseph H. Beckman.

The building was expanded soon after Parker’s death, when Punchard and Beckman retained architect Gridley James Fox Bryant (1816-1899) to complete Harvey Parker’s dream: adding yet another extension to the main building, this time in the form of a narrow, eight-story wing on the corner of Tremont and School streets—land which Harvey himself had acquired in 1883—adorned with elaborate exterior decorations.

The son of noted railway pioneer Gridley Bryant, Gridley James Fox Bryant studied in his father’s engineering office and that of Alexander Parris, a prominent architect-engineer whose most memorable work was Quincy Market. After opening his own architectural office at the corner of Court and Washington streets, Bryant- the-Younger began a prestigious six-decade career that ranged from designing custom-houses and government buildings to churches, schoolhouses, and private residences across the nation.

A leading proponent of the “Boston Granite Style,” Bryant frequently teamed up with other leading architects, including Arthur Gilman. Their projects together were the stuff of Boston history: the grid-iron street pattern of Boston’s Back Bay, the Arlington Street Church, and Old City Hall—the latter, diagonally across from the Parker House on School Street. Other of Bryant’s designs were Ballou Hall (the original building at Tufts College), Hathorn Hall (Bates College’s original building), the second addition to the Massachusetts State House, the Charlestown State Prison and Charles Street Jail, Horticultural Hall on Tremont Street, Boston’s Mercantile Wharf Building, and the Hub’s State Street Block.

G.J.F Bryant’s work on the 1886 Parker House was a spectacle to behold. The eight- story structure he added was compared to a French chateau of four hundred years earlier, a style (or at least a “notion”) fashionable in the homes of millionaires. The new Parker House sported a marble sheath on its exterior, a pavilion roof, paneled chimneys, peaked dormers, plus an iron balustrade overlooking the neighborhood. The building’s

fabulous new corner, on School and Tremont, featured a distinctive tier of three-quarter round bay windows, called oriels, rising from a graduated base at the second story and extending up to the sixth floor.

The opulent Bryant Parker House was formally dedicated on January 16, 1886. As it turned out, this work was G.J.F. Bryant's last major commission.

Roxbury grocer Joseph Reed Whipple, who had worked under the supervision of Parker's first partner, John F. Mills, took over the helm—and the lease—of the Parker House in 1891. And though the hotel was already a massive and strikingly magnificent building, the ambitious Whipple wanted more. Hence, during the same period that a huge swath of Tremont and Boylston streets was being drilled and excavated to build America's first working subway (opened in 1897), Whipple was busy razing Billy Parks' Chop House (a popular vintage brewhouse famous for its "musty ale and broiled live") on the corner of Bosworth Street and Chapman Place for the construction of yet another addition to the Parker House.

Whipple and the Trustees of the Parker Estate contracted the team of Winslow and Wetherell to oversee the newest section of the hotel, known as the Bosworth Building. The partnership of Walter Thacher Winslow (1843-1909) and George Homans Wetherell (1854-1930) boasted a number of prestigious Boston buildings that impressed the hotelier, including the Shreve, Crump & Low Building on Tremont (1890), the Edison Building on Atlantic Avenue (1891), the Castle Square Hotel and Theatre on Tremont (1894), and Steinert Hall (1896) on Boylston. (Winslow and Wetherell also are credited with designing many of the buildings of the Baker's Chocolate factory in Dorchester.) Whipple used the designing duo to oversee yet another new project, the Hotel Touraine, which made its debut in 1897 at what is now 62 Boylston Street.

Opening in late April of 1897, the Parker House's new Italian-Renaissance style Bosworth Building was ten stories high, the first three fabricated from "Borea stone" and the remainder built with a dark red brick laid in a Flemish bond. The wrought iron balustrades over the Bosworth Street entrance—set in an ornamental pattern that repeated in balconies on several stories above—are still visible today. The fireproof and soundproof building had two staircases, one spiraling up the interior corner, and a second wrapped around the central elevator, which featured rich ornamental grill work and took passengers all the way to the rooftop. The press release handed to local news reporters boasted of the Bosworth building's "100 handsomely furnished rooms; ... private glazed pottery baths made expressly and exclusively for and called the Parker House pattern, steam heat, ... open fireplaces, hot and cold water in every room, electric lights throughout, ... faultless beds"—and stressed the item coveted by every traveling lady: "electric appliances for heating curling irons in every bathroom"!

Though Whipple died in 1912, the J.R. Whipple Corporation continued to lease and operate the Parker House for another thirteen years; finally, in 1925, they purchased the hotel outright from the Trustees of the Parker Estate. Not long after that sale, Claude M. Hart, general manager of the corporation, ordered that the main structure of the Parker House shutter its doors on November 23, 1925. To the horror of some proper Bostonians, the wrecking crew arrived that December to begin the demolition of Harvey Parker's old marble palace. Hart envisioned a brand new Parker House built on the footprint of the old "French chateau"—and wanted it to be much more sedate, sleek, and modern than the nineteenth-century structure it was replacing. That "new" Parker House—essentially, the one we know today—opened on May 12, 1927. (The 1897 annex, called the Bosworth Building, remained open during construction, allowing Parker's to maintain its designation as America's "longest continuously operating hotel.")

On opening day in 1927, general manager Hart had his secretary, Miss Alice Mulligan, demonstrate the end of the old and dawn of the new. Miss Mulligan was flown over Boston Harbor by pilot Ralph T. Wickford, who guided the plane as Mulligan ceremoniously dumped the keys to the old Parker House into the water, from a height of some one thousand feet.

The man selected to design the contemporary Parker House was G. Henri Desmond of Desmond & Lord Architects. Born in Watertown on February 22, 1876, the son of Irish immigrants, Desmond was educated in the public schools, followed by architectural studies in what historic sources vaguely describe as “the office of a well-known firm.” In 1920, he and his wife, Vesti Hollis, and their young son were living in Brighton, in a house Desmond had designed.

Though Desmond had worked independently prior to this time—and was best known for his expansion and modernization of Charles Bulfinch’s 1829 Maine State Capitol—he took on the Parker House commission with his business partner, the younger Israel Pierre Lord (1881-1973). The team’s office was located just up the road from the Parker House, at 15 Beacon Street.

Desmond’s 1927 Parker House was believed by many contemporaries to be more beautiful than its predecessor. Built fourteen stories high, it featured polished black Quincy granite on the lower exterior facades, with limestone and buff-colored brick above. The very practical and fire-proofed structure had all the comforts of old, and then some: lush, ornamented public chambers with oak paneling, artfully plastered ceilings, crystal chandeliers, bronze-detailed doors, and eight hundred guest rooms. The lounge and library (today’s Parker’s Bar) included a row of casement windows with leaded glass panes portraying scenes from Boston history, from Paul Revere’s ride and the Parker coat of arms to iconic neighborhood structures like King’s Chapel and the Old State House. The basement lobby was designed in that era’s vision of “Early American,” with an oak-beamed ceiling. Off that lobby were a café, washroom, telephone area, and a barber shop, remembered for its distinctive black and white marble floors. Since this was the decade of Prohibition, the street level corner bar was reconfigured into an ice cream parlor

Was it all too newfangled for the very traditional Boston? Apparently not. For on May 15, only three days after its official opening, the *Boston Globe* reassured its readers that, “Despite the fact that the new hotel is modern in every way, the traditions, spirit, and general atmosphere of the old Parker House, beloved by countless Bostonians and visitors from other cities, have been retained.”

After their Parker House success, Desmond & Lord designed a variety of school buildings in the Greater Boston area as well as downtown Boston structures like the Boston Consolidated Gas Company Building and the Suffolk County Courthouse addition in Pemberton Square. They also created a number of bridges, including the Cottage Farm Bridge, the Dorchester Bay Bridge on Morrissey Boulevard, the Boston University Bridge in Cambridgeport, the Calvin Coolidge Bridge in Hadley, and Memorial Bridge in Attleboro.

Following the retirement of its original partners, the Desmond & Lord firm continued, undertaking large works in Boston through the end of the 1970s. Among their major projects were the Air Traffic Control Tower and the South Terminal Building at Logan Airport, the Mental Health Building at Boston University Medical Center, the Dock Square Parking Garage, Government Center, and the design, master planning, and construction of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Campus—the latter in collaboration with Paul Rudolph.

Glenwood Sherrard took the helm of the Parker House in 1933, during the height of the Great Depression. Content with the six-year-old building’s basic structure and appearance, he again hired Desmond & Lord, this time for embellishments and improvements. Within that first year, Sherrard opened a large mezzanine dining room, formerly a banquet hall, and renamed it the Hawthorne Room. That same year, the Dickens Room was formally dedicated on the mezzanine level as well. With the repeal of Prohibition at the end of 1933, Desmond & Lord reconfigured the lower-level grille room into a taproom. Meanwhile, Sherrard and his architects happily instructed the C. I. Brink Sign Company to install a huge electric sign on the rooftop—a move previously vetoed by Mr. Whipple. The words “Parker House” were illuminated with 15-foot high, green, neon letters, mounted on a 60-foot steel structure.

In April of 1935, the architects completed a new cocktail lounge on the top floor of the hotel, furnished with distinctive wood paneling and leather chairs—and open to both men and women. That September, Desmond & Lord added a final touch on that same floor: the spacious Rooftop Ballroom—the first of its kind in Boston.

In 1968, the historic hotel was acquired by the beloved Dunfey family, owners of nearly a dozen hotels. In 1975, the Dunfeys entered an agreement with Aer Lingus which enabled them to begin a multimillion-dollar renewal plan at the Parker House. When the Dunfeys purchased Omni Hotels in the 1980s—a chain of some forty properties—the Omni Parker House was designated the “flagship” of their upscale hotels. By 1996, Robert B. Rowling and his TRT Holdings, Inc., of Dallas, Texas, acquired Omni Hotels/North America, bringing an even greater budget for new facilities and restoration.

As might be expected, changes in ownership inevitably brought physical changes at the Parker House. The hotel’s basement area, once home to a billiard room, was supplanted by eateries like the English Grille Room and the first incarnation of The Last Hurrah, before it became the current fitness center (The Last Hurrah Bar is now located on street level off the main lobby). The mezzanine-level lobby lounge, landing, and reading library evolved into today’s cozy Parker’s Bar. An old banquet hall became today’s Press Room. The venerable Revere Room was updated into Café Tremont, which was later adapted into a lobby-level meeting space called the Kennedy Room. And the 1935 Rooftop Terrace and adjacent cocktail lounge, both closed in 1969, now host special functions. Bowing to modern needs for space, the eight hundred guest chambers of 1927 were eventually restructured into 551 larger, uniquely shaped rooms and suites.

Thanks to ongoing renovations and restorations in the twenty-first century, the Omni Parker House continues to blend its unique historic charm with modern-day amenities and comforts. Soothing hues, richly colored fabrics, custom cherry furnishing, fascinating history displays (including the lower-level Historical Gallery), and well-polished heirlooms bring warm memories of the old into the 530 guestrooms and 21 deluxe suites. Extending its operations in its third new century, the Omni Parker House now provides a restaurant, two bars, complimentary wireless internet access in all common areas, and a professional concierge staff.

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## Spectral Evidence

Though room furnishings, decor, utilities, and services have always been upgraded and fitted to the tastes and needs of each era, gracious hospitality and an attentive manner—initiated by Harvey Parker in 1855—have remained a constant at the historic Omni Parker House.

In a way, Harvey Parker himself has remained a constant at his world-famous hotel and restaurant. He has, that is, if you believe in spectral evidence.

“I first heard about the ghost of Harvey Parker when I began working here in 1941,” explained a longtime bellman, the now-deceased John Brehm, in a 1992 *Boston Globe* interview. “They used to say he roamed the halls on the tenth-floor annex. There were many stories, but one in particular happened around 1950. An elderly woman guest insisted she saw an apparition outside room 1078 (that room number no longer exists, incidentally). At first it was a misty apparition in the air, then it turned toward her. She said it was a heavy-set older man with a black moustache. He just looked at her, then faded away. She came downstairs, a bit jittery, and security went up to the tenth floor. They checked it out but reported they could find nothing.”



To those who knew Harvey Parker, such sightings could hardly come as a shock. A perfectionist who kept his hands in every detail of his restaurant and hotel operations, he played the ultimate host to ordinary folks and world-famous guests. A host, it would seem, who could never really bring himself to leave.

Harvey wasn't the only ghost, either. There's the man, for example, who died in room 303 in 1949—and the inexplicable scent of whiskey that sometimes reappears in that chamber. Speaking of room 303, there's an apocryphal tale that's been making the rounds for many years that needs to be ghost-busted: the Stephen King Thing.

You can find the story pretty much anywhere—in articles both on the web and in print, in books and lectures, and in numerous ghost tours of Boston. The essence of the tale, with varied embellishments, is that master of the macabre Stephen King (1) stays at the Omni Parker House when he comes to Boston for his beloved Red Sox games and (2) that he based his short-story-turned-film called *1408* on ghostly tales of Parker House room 303. It's true that *1408* is King's own twist on the classic "Ghostly Room at the Inn" story. It's also true that in this horror tale, protagonist Mike Enslin is a writer who spends the night in a chamber where 42 deaths have occurred over 68 years, as research for his non-fiction book, *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Hotel Rooms*. And no one is denying that room 303 at the Parker House has a long history of alleged hauntings. But are they connected? We decided to go the source for the official answer. "It's just a rumor," explained King's then-assistant, Marsha DeFilippo. "And he doesn't stay at the Parker House when he's in Boston."

There's also the mystery of the Number One elevator in the main building. Over the years, that elevator has periodically been called to the third floor: the chime rings, the elevator car stops, the doors open, but no one is there. This allegedly has happened hundreds of times and has been checked—with no results—on dozens of occasions. Some suspect it is the ghost of Charles Dickens, who stayed on the third floor of the old Parker House in 1867 and 1868. Others think it might be Charlotte Cushman, who lived (and died) in the Dickens suite in the 1870s. Non-believers, of course, insist that it's simply an issue with the Otis Elevator Company. The fact is, it could have been any of a horde of legendary visitors. Remember, after all, the words of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his poem, "At the Saturday Club."

*Such guests! What famous names its record boasts,  
Whose owners wander in the mob of ghosts!*

Recent years have also seen curious experiences with what some interpret as the "new specters on the block." Longtime bellman Seamus Murphy—who retired as Manager of Guest Services in 2017, after 41 years of service—always delighted in the celebrities he encountered at work. Among them were Ed Asner, Henry Kissinger, Jesse Owens, Ricky Nelson, Vincent Price, Bill Clinton, and his personal favorite, Hollywood paramour Ann-Margret (the latter arrived with flowing scarf, big sunglasses, and a small dog, and promised him she'd "never forget the name Seamus!")

But consummate storyteller that he was, Seamus Murphy never imagined that he would meet one of the legendary Parker House ghosts. "I had heard stories about ghosts here, but in all my years as a bellman, never had an experience of my own. Around 2010, though, there was an event ...," he remembered, referring to the popular "Saturdays with Seamus" programs he used to offer on Parker House and Boston history.

"Well, we were in the Longfellow Room, and I usually spoke from a podium, but there was none there. I went to the storage room on the mezzanine level and heard a gruff voice yell out, 'What do you want??!!'

"I thought it was a houseman at first. But there was nobody on the floor. Nobody at all. And the voice sounded just like a bell captain that used to work here. He had been a drinker, and sometimes after work hours, he'd go off to some bar, then wander back into the hotel late at night, and hide out here in some sliding closet.

"So I thought it was probably him. Yeah, it really sounded exactly like him. Except for that fact that he was dead."

A few years later, Murphy experienced an event involving a prominent woman executive who was a regular guest at the Omni Parker House. "She was sweet," he recalled, "but not the kind of person that's gonna joke or juggle balls for you. She was very serious about her job and didn't want a suite, just a small room, 'cause she was coming in late, leaving early." In response to the frigid Boston night, the guest blasted her room with heat, tucked herself cozily under the bedcovers, and dozed off. But then, around 3:00 in the morning, she was awakened by a muffled boy's voice plaintively crying, "Mommy, Mommy!" Trying to find the source of the distress, she pressed her ear to one wall, then another. The cry kept coming, "Mommy, Mommy!," but there was no child in sight. "It can't be coming from the outside," Murphy remembered her saying, when she summoned him for help. "I'm on the fifth floor, room 555, it's freezing cold out, and it's three o'clock in the morning." Then all of a sudden, the spectral child appeared to be in her small room and moving towards her.

"She told me she freaked out, jumped into bed, didn't have the lights on, and it was standing right next to her ... 'Mommy, Mommy!' Then she turned on the light ... and nothing was there."

Were any of these episodes related to otherworldly beings? Probably not, though Seamus Murphy never knew for sure. But Parker House staff acknowledge that a certain number of visitors—and many tour guides—revel in sharing scary stories and believing that paranormal activity is alive and well in downtown Boston. As for Seamus ... perhaps someone simply mistook his title as Manager of *Ghost Services*?

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**Susan Wilson is the official House Historian of the Omni Parker House and the author of *Heaven, By Hotel Standards: The History of the Omni Parker House* (2019), available at the School Street Coffeehouse and on Amazon.com. Follow her stories about the Omni Parker House and a variety of other Boston history projects on "Susan Wilson's History Channel" (YouTube).**

