

## **RALPH HORNE'S HISTORY LESSONS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Thirty years ago, in 1975, our neighbor, Ralph Horne, wrote a history of the South End. Ralph, who is a long time resident of Wellington Street, never published his work, but has graciously allowed CNA to print excerpts of it on our Web site for the delight and education of our readers. The first installment was published in January, 2005. We will be publishing further installments over the coming months.

### **HISTORY OF THE SOUTH END (Part II)**

By Ralph A. Horne

Every urban neighborhood has its vicissitudes (fashionable Mount Vernon on "The Hill" used to be called "Mount Whoredom"), but the South End has had more than its share of misfortunes. While representing a triumph in exemplary urban planning, the South End has always been something of a social failure. The South End began auspiciously enough. No less a figure than Charles Bulfinch formulated grand and handsome plans for the neck. In 1801, he and the selectmen of Boston presented plans for the careful development of the South End "in which land was divided into streets and lots, the streets being regular and drawn at right angles; and to introduce variety a large circular place was left to be ornamented with trees which . . . would add to the beauty of the town at large and be particularly advantageous to the inhabitants of this part of the Neck."<sup>1</sup> In 1804, Front Street was laid out parallel to Washington Street, with a ten foot set-back restriction, and Albany Street was also laid out and the filling in of land between it and Washington Street began. Bulfinch sought to focus the whole design by a tree-lined oval at Columbia Square in an attempt to "endow the New England capital with the splendors of Georgian town planning."<sup>2</sup> But while we all admire the delicate grace of Bulfinch's buildings, we forget that all too often his business adventures were a disaster. Columbia Square, like his earlier Tontine Crescent, was a financial failure. The area attracted only a handful of substantial

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<sup>1</sup> N. Shurtleff, Topographical and Historical Description of Boston, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> H.Kirker and J. Kirker, Bulfinch's Boston, Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y., 1964

householders in mournful contrast to its grandiose intent, and only the faintest palimpsest<sup>3</sup> of Bulfinch's design is detectable today in shabby Blackstone and Franklin Squares.

From 1814 (when the Boston Water Power Company was granted the right to construct a system of tidal dams which could also be used as toll roads and to sell the power obtained therefrom) until the mid-century, the inner basin of Great Bay was filled in a haphazard manner. Then in 1850, the city fathers became aware of the opportunities for expansion and, wanting the fill work to continue in a more firm and coherent way, appointed a special committee to oversee the laying out and filling in of the area which now forms the South End. The committee raised the grade and E. S. Chesbrough and W.P. Parrott, engineers, laid out a grid of wide north and south thoroughfares – Tremont, Washington, Albany Streets and Shawmut and Harrison Avenues. The cross streets, named as Massachusetts cities and towns were, at the insistence of Committeeman Albert T. Minot, interspersed with residential squares. A very important and innovative amenity was the provision of rear service alleys. Another amenity was the provision of coal chute covers in slate collars on the sidewalks. These features, along with brick sidewalks and even our trees, are relentlessly disappearing and being replaced by the city with asphalt (as on Clarendon Street) and concrete. However, as a result of all the original careful consideration, the South End, according to Walter Kilham, Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, remains "one of the handsomest examples of urban city planning to be found in America."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Kilham further notes that the physical layout of the South End was "far in advance of its time," but that "few of the newer American cities chose to imitate it. New York, for example, continued to push its monotonous numbered streets northwards mile after mile, without alleys and with no relief like the shady little South End squares and ovals, and the new western cities merely imitated New York as they have been doing ever since."

But the excellence of the physical plan of the South End has never compensated for a certain ambiguity as to goals with respect to the social fabric of the neighborhood. We read accounts that the South End was envisioned as a new residential area to relieve the congestion created by the influx of industry and businesses into the Old South End (Summer, Franklin and High Streets) and as an attractive means of slowing the exodus of substantial families from the city. The houses of the South End have been described as "modest," but many of them clearly

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<sup>3</sup> To our CNA Readers: A "palimpsest" is writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been erased for reuse.

<sup>4</sup> W.H. Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1946

are not; the larger mansions along Columbus Avenue and Tremont Street, and Union Park and Chester and Worcester Squares are substantial to say the least. But who lived in these mansions? The upper middle class? New money like Silas Lapham? Although always happy to make a quick dollar in the South End, proper Bostonians were disinclined to live here. H. Hollis Hunnewell bought South End real estate from the city in 1846 for 80¢ a square foot, which he sold ten years later for \$2.15 a square foot. He also built and sold six row houses on Washington Street. But no Hunnewell ever lived in them. On a rainy day in 1830 Lucius Manlius Sargent, enroute to his country house, stopped at a poorly attended auction on Shawmut Avenue where, to his "great satisfaction," he picked up four acres for several hundred dollars. Much of the blame for the South End's failure has been placed on real estate speculators and absentee landlords. Certainly this was and continues to be true. The spoilers are still getting rich at the expense of our neighborhood. But these opportunists are a plague of other neighborhoods. There is considerable speculator-built property in Back Bay and even on Beacon Hill, and no paucity of absent owners. After all, Bulfinch himself was a building speculator, albeit not a very successful one.

Mr. Kilham writes "Columbus Avenue . . . finished in 1871 was the city's proudest thoroughfare, intended to be a second Beacon Street, the entrenched home of wealth and fashion and a model of what any avenue ought to be." Alas the grand intention became a mockery and the rapid decline of the South End appears to have begun with Columbus Avenue. Some of the buildings along this avenue were speculator built and heavily mortgaged. When the post Civil War recession and financial panic of 1873 struck, they were soon in foreclosure or abandoned (sounds all too familiar!). Anxious to recoup what they could of their losses, the banks unloaded these buildings for whatever they could bring and whomever would put the money down. To make matters worse, a nervous Mayor Smith directed the city to dump the remaining undeveloped lots for whatever they would bring. Real estate values on Columbus Avenue plummeted, dragging the rest of the South End with them.

Although the general decline of the neighborhood was precipitous, it is interesting to note that some isolated pockets of gentility did persist, as in the case of Chester Square, as late as the 1920's.

But while the panic of 1873 may have been the last straw, the South End was already doomed. In 1856 the first street railway line was laid out from Scollay Square (now, alas, gone) to the South End and the Roxbury line. The system grew rapidly, making it no longer necessary

to live in the city near one's place of business or employment. The flight to the suburbs began in earnest. Worse still for the future of the South end, only a year later, in 1857, the filling in of the smelly tidal marsh called Back Bay accelerated. Anyone who pretended to any fashion abandoned the South End and flocked to the new Back Bay where the "old rich," at last weaned from Beacon Hill, encamped along the extension of Beacon Street, the "old poor" along Marlborough Street, and the "new rich" deposited their architectural advertisements along Commonwealth Avenue. The exodus from the south End and the social nuances responsible for it have been accurately chronicled in The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dan Howells. Mr. Lapham, a new rich paint merchant from Vermont, never made it to Back Bay--his Beacon Street mansion went up in flames during construction. The exodus became a stampede.

"Thunderation," roared the grandfather of the late George Apley, "there is a man in his shirtsleeves on those steps," and the next day<sup>5</sup> he sold his house and hurried off to Beacon Street. Economically mixed neighborhoods in our highly mobile, highly status symbol oriented society usually fail. When the less well-to-do start moving in, those who can afford to simply move out.

In fact, recent historic scholarship has provided quite a different alternative explanation for the decline of the South end based upon considerations of economic mix. In Colonial and Federal New England, continuing a European tradition dating back perhaps to mediaeval times, the businessman's home, his shop or mill, and the homes of his dependencies and workers were all conveniently grouped together – in short an economically integrated neighborhood. But after the Civil War, American cities became class segregated. While Back Bay was being built for the rich, tenements were going up on the backside of Beacon Hill for the poor. Thus, rather than an elite neighborhood which never "made it," possibly the South End was an old fashioned integrated neighborhood constructed too late. This would explain the diversity in size and quality of South End houses and why many became so very unfashionable, especially inasmuch as their look-alikeness may have been reminiscent of mill houses. Which of these theories is historically correct, the old unsuccessful elite neighborhood explanation or the new tardy economically integrated neighborhood explanation? There is a great deal of truth in both.

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<sup>5</sup> To Our CNA Readers: Apley is *echt* Boston Brahmin. His uncle William prided himself on taking the trolley, bought one new suit a year, and donated a raft of Rembrandts to the art museum. His grandfather, who built a mansion in the South End, sees a man in shirtsleeves on the steps of his house across the street and is so shocked at this breach of dress that he sells his house the next day and moves to the Back Bay.

The swift economic demise of the South End architecturally was a godsend. Musing on the survival of Florence and Venice, the great connoisseur Bernard Berenson once observed that the worst enemies of art and architecture are war and prosperity. Poverty rent the social, but saved the physical fabric of the South End. The mansions became rooming houses. The owners were too poor to make expensive renovations and "improvements." They simply installed sinks in the corners of the parlors and occasionally added a flimsy wall. The South End became, as one sensitive observer has noted, America's most beautiful slum. But, most important of all, it was frozen in poverty and remained unchanged. In the roughly 70 year slumber of the neighborhood, the major destructive changes of the architectural fabric were the insertion of store fronts into many of the buildings, especially along Columbus Avenue and Tremont Street, and the removal of front steps. The latter was not always as deliberate mutilation. The brownstone<sup>6</sup> a soft sandstone, decayed, the steps collapsed, and the owners were too poor or indifferent to rebuild them.

**TO BE CONTINUED . . .**

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<sup>6</sup> A minority of South End houses, see 450-484 Massachusetts Avenue, have granite rather than brownstone steps and foundations.