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Inside SPNEA

Boston Streetscapes a Century Ago

Probably photographed to document the future route of the Boston Elevated Railway, these streetscape views captured the everyday landscape of Boston at the turn of the century.

In 1997, the SPNEA Library and Archives purchased 533 cyanotypes made from large (eleven by fourteen inches) glass-plate negatives. These images, dating from between 1899 and 1901, show streetscapes from Sullivan Square in Charlestown to Dudley Street in Roxbury. In between these points, they document the buildings, outdoor advertising, vehicles, and everyday activity at Boston's North Union Station, along the waterfront's Atlantic Avenue, through what is now Chinatown, the area around South Station, and the length of

Washington Street through the South End and into Roxbury.

Although their purpose is not definitively known, the images were probably taken to show the buildings along the proposed route of the main line of the Boston Elevated Railway, constructed in 1901 between Sullivan Square and Dudley Street, as well as a branch line running along Atlantic Avenue between North Station and Dover Street Station. Each cyanotype includes a description of the location of the shot—which side of the street is shown and often the nearest cross streets. While many images of Boston's

famous historic buildings exist, few collections document the ordinary urban landscape and capture slices of daily life—women window shopping, fishermen standing on street corners near the waterfront, men painting outdoor signs, and the then-ubiquitous Chinese laundries, taverns, and liquor stores. No other group of images in SPNEA's collection documents so many different buildings throughout so much of the city at a particular time.

If the views were compiled by the Boston Elevated Railway, the photographer may have been Paul Rowell, who worked for the company's engineering department and took photographs of construction scenes. The negatives have not survived; a source familiar with the collection has indi-

cated that the Elevated Railway probably disposed of them in 1911 because all claims along the existing railway had been settled, thus obviating the company's need for this visual evidence.

The Boston Elevated Railway's main elevated line ran through the Tremont Street subway station until 1908, when it was relocated to its current path underneath Washington Street. The Atlantic Avenue branch was abandoned in 1938 and torn down in 1942. SPNEA had earlier acquired photographs and negatives documenting its destruction; this acquisition permits a direct comparison of 1898 and 1938 streetscapes and is a rare, precise, and startlingly detailed view of Boston a century ago. ❀



East Side of Atlantic Avenue between Rowe's and Central Wharf, November 7, 1900.

When this view of the city's lower inner harbor was taken, most of the waterborne freight passing into and out of Boston was handled at landings near the rail terminals in East and South Boston and in Charlestown. After Atlantic Avenue had cut through their middle in the 1860s, Rowe's, India (not shown), and Central Wharves had largely been left to coast-wise passenger and freight service. By 1900 India Wharf was the home of the Portland Steamship Company, subsumed within the year into the Eastern Steamship Company. As its sign indicates, it capitalized not only upon regular passenger traffic Down East but upon the seasonal traffic of vacationers seeking

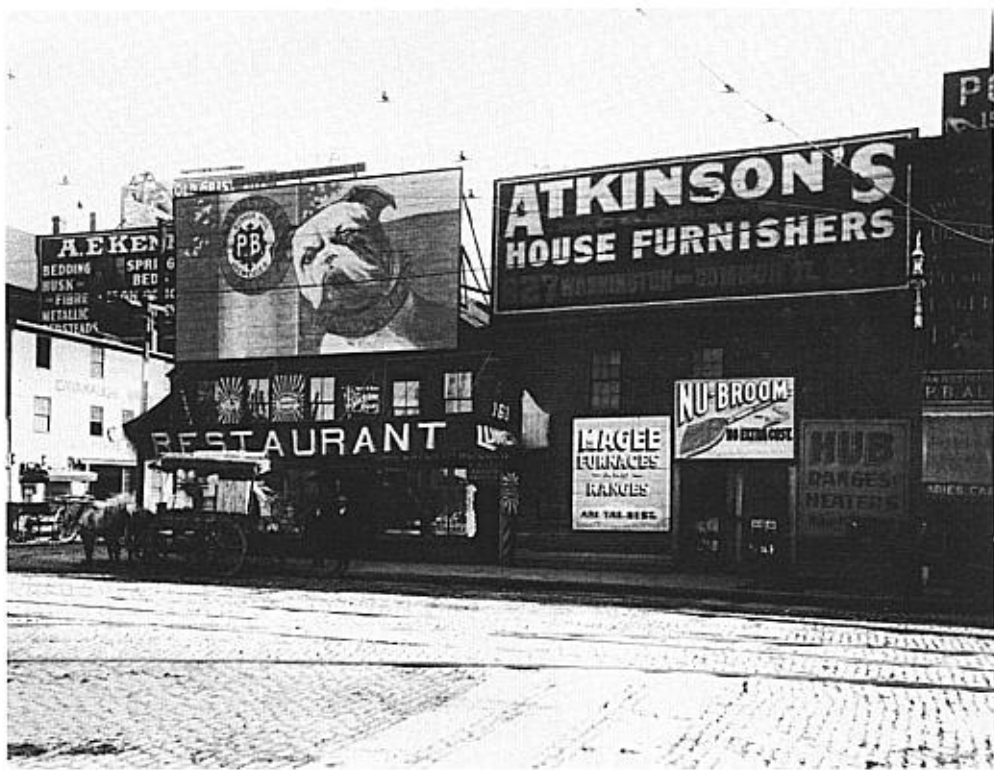
passage to such northern resorts as Crawford's famed hotel in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Just to the right of India Wharf was Rowe's Wharf, which also catered to excursionists: it was home to the Nantasket Beach Steamship Company, a popular line owned by the wharf's proprietors. By this time, too, most of the warehouses along India and Central Wharves (at extreme left) no longer housed shipping concerns but shoreside businesses such as John Binney and Son at 326 Atlantic Avenue. Next door was a substantially humbler concern—a dining room offering lobster and oysters by the plate.



East Side of Atlantic Avenue opposite Clinton Market, November 23, 1900.

This two-story wooden block was owned by the Mercantile Wharf Corporation and was sandwiched between the T Wharf on the south (at right) and Commercial Wharf on the north. Though merchants trading with the Indies, South America, northern Europe, and the Mediterranean originally had their quarters at Commercial Wharf—one wag wrote, “It was a high-toned wharf in those days, and if a fishing smack, or a lobster boat, stuck its nose into the dock, it would have been fired out instanter”—by 1900 it had become the major wharf for fishing vessels. T Wharf, actually part of Long Wharf, had housed fish dealers since at least 1870. On this block, 138 to 154 Atlantic Avenue, fish dealers and restaurants were the main businesses. The Atwoods and J.

A. Stubbs were among the city’s twenty-two oyster dealers, eight of them doing business on Atlantic Avenue. Schooners from Chesapeake and Buzzard’s Bay brought oysters to Boston of varieties restauranteurs and consumers probably well knew—Warren River, Norfolk, Crisfield, Stamford. Clams came in from Ipswich, Scarborough in Maine, and Cape Cod. T Wharf Dining Room (at center) regularly offered fresh boiled lobsters and its “famous T Wharf Fish Dinners”; on this day its blackboard specials were baked bluefish for twenty cents, chicken wings on toast for twenty cents, and, in homage to Thanksgiving, roast turkey and cranberry sauce for thirty cents. “This Way, the Nearest to a Nice Home Dinner to be found in Boston,” one of its signs promised.



South Side of Causeway Street, West Corner of Beverly Street, October 26, 1900.

Just northwest of North Union (now simply North) Station was the intersection of Causeway and Beverly Streets, dominated in 1900 by a huge billboard for Bunker Hill Breweries' Van Nostrand Ale. The collar of the brewery's somewhat menacing signature bull dog reads, incongruously, "Oh Be Jolly." When this photograph was taken Bunker Hill Breweries was nearly eighty years old and among the oldest in Boston; according to a 1906 commercial history of Boston, most of the city's 150 breweries had been established only within the 1890s with "the advent of our German fellow citizens in large numbers."

Directly across Causeway Street was the stone depot of the Fitchburg Railroad Company, whose trains crossed the Charles River near this point. At left in the view, at 105 Beverly Street, was the "sale stables" of Michael A., Thomas F., and James F. Cavanaugh. The Cavanaugh's ran one of some two hundred stables in the city in 1900, when only four automobile dealers were in business. The building below the Bunker Hill billboard may be the oldest in the view and housed a restaurant, a hairdressing parlor, and a carpenter's office.



North Union Station, October 30, 1900.

The man with the valise at his feet, standing near policemen and a newsboy, had probably just come in by rail from the north and was waiting for the city trolley, which made a turnaround across Causeway Street from North Union Station. In 1900 North Union Station was only six years old and one of Boston's two new consolidated stations (the other being South Station). Railroad depots had occupied this site since 1854, when the Eastern Railroad built a wooden terminal here. By 1872, four of the seven railroads entering Boston—the Boston and Lowell, the Eastern, the Fitchburg, and the Boston and Maine—had depots on or near this

spot. After the Boston and Maine subsumed the Eastern and Boston and Lowell, Massachusetts legislators ordered the corporation to build a “union station” for its operations, and just months before this photograph the Boston and Maine had begun leasing the Fitchburg Railroad. The massive, granite-faced brick depot opened in 1894. The columns framing its arched grand entrance were more than thirty-four feet high. But the structure did not last long: it was torn down in 1926 to make way for a new North Station topped by a “coliseum” seating fourteen to eighteen thousand people—the Boston Garden, opened in 1928.



North Side of Beach Street, West Corner of Oxford Street, March 1, 1901.

Now the heart of Chinatown, the Beach-Kneeland Streets neighborhood was created on made land in the 1840s and almost instantly became a low-rent area when the extension of railroad tracks to the east and south blocked its expansion. In 1901 German and Chinese immigrants seem to have shared this South Cove neighborhood. In the curved, three-story brick building in the foreground was a German boardinghouse with a fish market on its first floor; further down Beach Street are Quong Sing

Laundry and, at the far corner, Look Sen Low Company Chinese restaurant. Boston's first Chinese residents had lived in tents lining what some called "Ping On Alley" (off Beach Street) by 1880. Chinese laundries and restaurants employed most Chinese Bostonians. There were at least fourteen Chinese-run laundries in Boston in 1876 and well more than three hundred by 1900. The city directory that year listed them by street and street number because, it stated, "Chinese names are not reliable."



West Side of Washington Street, Second Building South of West Concord Street, October 26, 1899

Because indoor plumbing was not universal, public baths were a fixture in Boston throughout the nineteenth century. This one, the second storefront from left, was just northeast of Worcester Square and not far from Boston City Hospital. It stood within a one-story wooden block that also contained the outfitting firm of Thomas J. Griffin, a fruit store, a news depot, a lunchroom, a laundry, and an entrance to Deacon Halls, the brick building just behind the block. The elegant brick Edward Preble Deacon house, built in 1848 when the South End was just developing, originally occupied the site but was sold at auction in 1871. In 1959 Boston historian Walter

Muir Whitehill noted that part of the original Deacon mansion was “reputed to be standing—at the point where one sees from the Forest Hills elevated train the sign ‘Deacon Halls.’” Griffin’s store windows feature men’s hats, ties, and shirts, and above the baths were barber signs offering “artistic hair cutting” as well as shaving, shampooing, boot blacking, and “singeing” to both men and women. The barber sign with its radiating, thickening lines was standard, just as the long, narrow signs with the proprietor’s name in small letters at the top and the word “laundry” spelled out vertically beneath were standard among basement-level Chinese-run laundries.



East Side of Washington Street opposite Guild Street, Roxbury, December 22, 1899.

This section of Washington Street had been strictly residential until only a few years before this photograph was taken. In 1890 just two large homes occupied a long stretch of this side of Washington Street, though a brick commercial block stood then at the corner of St. James and Washington Streets, out of view on the left. The facade of this Italianate dwelling has been altered by the addition of two one-story shop fronts topped with balustrades and housing a confectionery, a news depot, a Chinese laundry, and a

hairdresser. The newsstand offered then-popular periodicals, including *L'Art Mode*, *The Ladies Home Journal*, and *Harper's Bazar*, along with a lithographed portrait of Admiral George Dewey, instantly lionized after his May 1898 naval victory at Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War. The house itself has also become a commercial property at least in part; a sign next to its door advertises the services of Miss A. Blouin, "French dress and cloak maker."



East Side of Washington Street South of Grosvenor Place, Roxbury, December 14, 1899.

This photograph probably documents a business and residential block, of Eclectic Revival style with Flemish gables, just after its completion: several of its upper-story apartments and two of its ground-floor storefronts are empty and advertised for rent. In front of one of these vacant storefronts is an organ grinder with his painted cart. On the third story above South End Wallpaper (at far left) the photographer inadver-

tently captured a child wearing a white collar and the arm of an adult sitting by the window. The windows at Home Bakery display breads and cakes and advertise Quaker, cream, Vienna, whole wheat, and homemade breads as well as "hot baked beans," ready that day by 4:00 p.m. This was an election year, as broadsides announce the candidacy of Robert A. Jordan for alderman.



East Side of Washington Street North of Savoy Street, October 11, 1899.

Mechanics Row, whose entrance is pictured at the center of this photograph, was an alley lined with wooden buildings, among them possibly St. Stephens Wood and Coal Yard, which advertised “lowest wharf prices in large and small quantities.” Just left of the entrance is the South-End Book Store, and above it the offices of carpenter and builder T. Damrell. At 1274 Washington Street, harness and saddlemaker Herbert W. Fisk displayed a plaid horse blanket in front of his second-floor window for \$2.50 and a plain, dark blanket for \$1.50. Next door, the Public Storage and House Furnishing

Company showed some of its wares outside, including portraits of Admiral Dewey and other popular subjects ranging in price from five to seventy-five cents. The company carried washboards, mattresses, mops, pails, stoves, bed springs, picture frames, trunks, and commodes, both new and second-hand. A pool and billiard room shared space with the company. In front of the Charlie Lew Laundry stood a wagon advertising the patent medicines of W. L. Lord of Winthrop, who promised “a cure or no pay” with his “Cur-I-Can Remedies.”



West Side of Washington Street and North Corner of Massachusetts Avenue, October 30, 1899.

The two conjoined brick buildings at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue, probably built initially as single-family homes, no doubt housed apartments on their upper floors when this photograph was taken. The streetfront space at the corner appears to have been a drug store with a soda fountain offering ice cream sodas, lemonade, and egg phosphates. Next door to this formerly elegant block stood a small dwelling sheathed in tar paper and vertical battens. According to the 1900 city directory, this was the

home and place of business of photographer W. H. Wardwell. Wardwell attracted customers with a weight machine to the left of his door and a one-cent fortune telling machine, featuring a miniature Mademoiselle Zola, to the right. Between Wardwell's shop and the Smith Block (at right), posters advertised productions at four Boston theaters; a shoeshine chair stood just in front of the Park Theater poster.



West Side of Washington Street North of Vernon Street, Roxbury, December 11, 1899.

The dry goods store of Timothy Smith and Company spanned much of this block of Washington Street in 1899. It apparently catered to a middle- and upper middle-class clientele: a fancy carriage is parked in front, and five well-dressed women peer at its window displays. One part of Smith's business occupied a brick structure with dormers, also home to the White House Millinery Parlors; the other part was housed in a block with colonial revival details perhaps just recently added. Two women on the left look at mannequins wearing elabo-

rately feathered hats; the other women admire the dresses on pointed-head mannequins to the right. To judge from the signs, dresses at Smith's ranged in price from five to twelve dollars. The second-floor windows display women's night-gowns (or "wrappers"), dolls, stacked hat boxes, and perhaps dollhouse furniture or notions. The clothing stores of Alex T. Dunn and H. S. Lawrence also occupied a space in this block, along with a sewing machine dealer, an express company, and a tea importer.



East Side of Washington Street, South Corner of Nawn Street, Roxbury, November 21, 1899.

The brick building in this view, formerly the Nawn factory, abutted the Eustis Street Burying Ground, one of the oldest in New England. Within the granite-capped stone wall enclosing it lay John Eliot, the early missionary among New England Indians, and former governors Thomas and Joseph Dudley. The cemetery, used since 1633, had been fenced with a stone wall since at least 1648 and largely ceased to be used in 1854. To the left in this view is Nawn Street, a narrow thoroughfare lined with wooden tene-

ments. The house in the far left-hand corner, probably the oldest in the view, dates to the eighteenth century. In 1899 the Nawn factory, in addition to being used as a billboard for numerous theaters, housed the rooms of locksmith and “bell hanger” Alexander Blackwood, the offices of carpentry and building firm Wilson Brothers, and the business of painter and decorator John S. Davidson. There were also stables to rent on the building’s ground floor.



East Side of Washington Street, about Halfway between Dover and Decatur Streets, July 28, 1899.

This busy section of Washington Street was just north of Boston's Grand Museum and Grand Opera House. Two men, one wearing a white jacket, unloaded delivery wagons on this block, which included a coffee house and "dairy lunch," a liquor store, a dining room and confectioner, a Chinese laundry, the rooms of Mrs. Wilson, "medium and card reader," a tailor, and a shoeshine and hat cleaning store. Tin Wah Laundry, Mrs. Wilson (not listed among the eight astrologers in the 1900 city directory), and the shoeshine/hat cleaning shop occupied one of the few remaining wooden structures on the street. The streetscape was further enlivened by advertisements painted on the side of the four-story Madison Block, the third brick structure from left, and mounted on the roof of the block's two wooden buildings. In an age of rapid business consolidation, the advertisement for Cupid Boquet cigars assured passers-by that the "ten little cigars in a tin box" were "not made by a trust."



West Side of Washington Street, South Corner of Adams Place, Roxbury, November 24, 1899.

This photograph, taken on Washington Street just past the Boston city line, captured two painters on a scaffold preparing a sign for the lobster special at Potter's Hotel. The hotel's five-bay facade appears to join two structures. At the left two bays of a brick structure remain. A bracketed cornice unifies the five bays. In his ground-floor windows proprietor G. M. Potter also advertised

chops (at left); a fern and several lobsters are visible in the window to the right of the entrance. On the sidewalk a woman kneels before a child, probably to button the child's coat. Potter's shared the block with a shoe store, a confectioner, and the provisioner Walter A. Clement, whose storefront displays some sort of hanging fowl.



East Side of Washington Street, North Corner of Thorndike Street, October 30, 1899.

The wooden buildings on this section of Washington Street, about five blocks south of Massachusetts Avenue, were among the only frame structures left on the busy artery. The one at right was built as a residence probably in the late 1700s or early 1800s; the one at center with the cupola, also built as a residence, was built early in the nineteenth century. By contrast, the six-bay building at left was built later in the 1800s, probably when the block became commercial; it was designed as commercial space on its ground floor. On the second floor of the building at left, above the G. Y. Lee Laundry, a man in shirtsleeves and a vest can be seen reading by the window; to

the right, above the New Columbia Furniture and Carpet Company, the photographer seems to have caught the eye of a woman looking out the window at far left and perhaps of the man wearing a bowler in the next window. In the building at center, tailor and clothes cleaner David Marcus, who lived above his business, displayed shirts, pants, and coats in his storefront windows. The furniture company displayed tables, an upholstered lounge, a few common chairs, a box spring, a wicker rocker, and a side table on the sidewalk; mattresses, cribs, fancy and upholstered chairs, and iron beds are visible in the windows.