

# Back In Boston

Photography by Patrick Walsh

By Claudia Newcorn

**B**oston. Over nearly 400 years ago, this city was established in 1630 on a hill-topped peninsula by English Puritan colonists. Ever since, this capital city has been a seat of history. From the famed Boston Tea Party, to the battle of Bunker Hill, to the “shot heard round the world” at the battle of Lexington and Concord, to Paul Revere’s ride, children have read about the American Revolution events that transformed our nation.

Massachusetts is the seat of academia, with more colleges and universities per square mile than any other state, and Boston is very much a university city, playing host to such institutions as Harvard, MIT, and Boston University, among others. It has earned the nickname “Athens of America” because of the importance of learning. More than 250,000 students live in Boston and neighboring Cambridge.

I grew up in Boston, spending my post-college years in the Back Bay, created in the 1800s when the city underwent a huge land-reclamation project that filled in the old Charles River Bay. Much of the dirt for the project was literally scalped from the three hills of the original town.

Today, Boston is a bustling city, proud and determined to preserve its history and heritage, yet at the forefront of academia, technology and medicine.

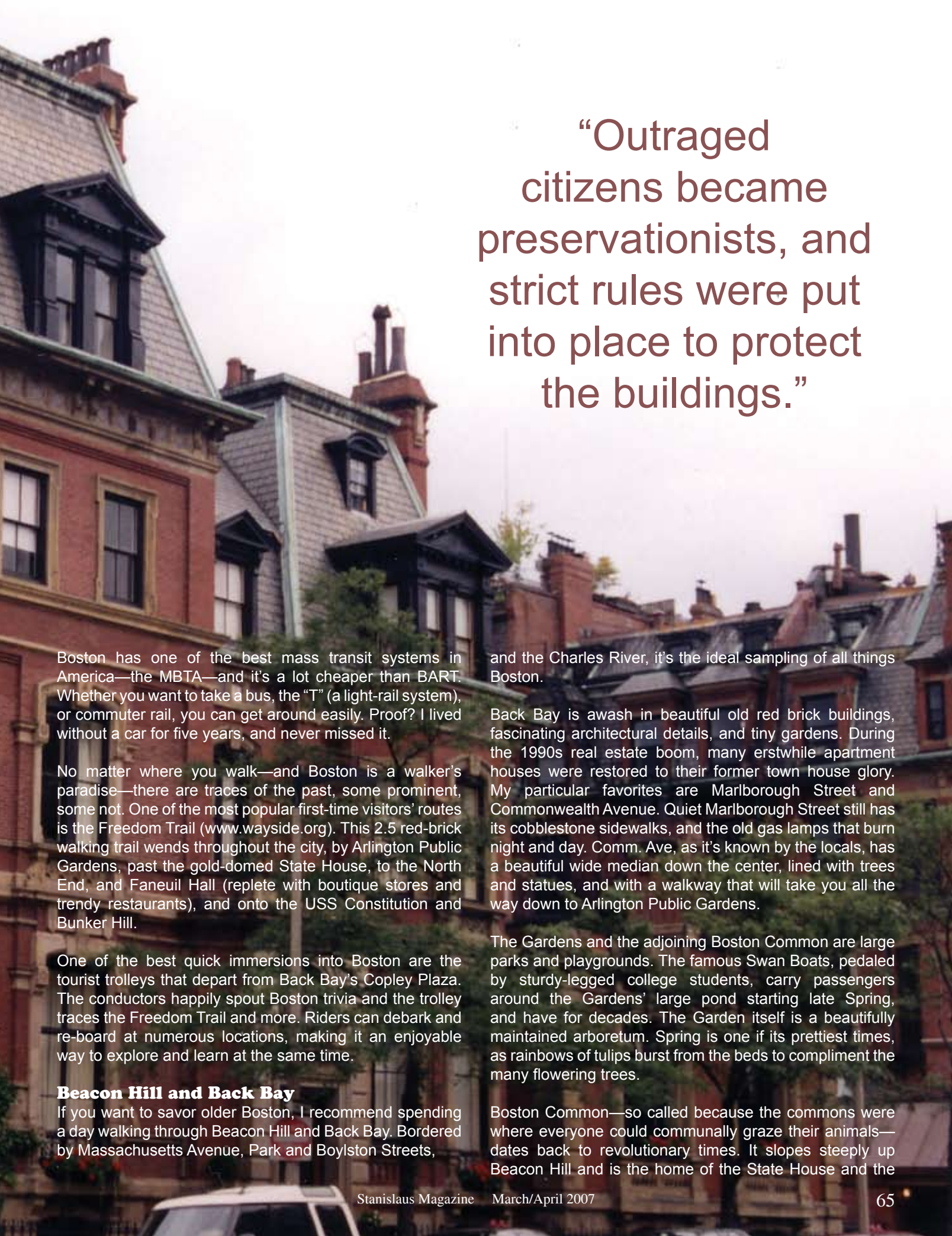
## **Renaissance**

Boston suffered a severe economic slump for nearly 30 years in the mid-1900s, but it saved the city’s history. Unlike New York and other cities that underwent the “demolish-rebuild” phase of that era, the city’s old townhouses became a student ghetto.

The turning point came with the arrival of the expressway that sliced through the city’s eastern side, and demolished many historic homes. Outraged citizens became preservationists, and strict rules were put into place to protect the buildings. Boston even put into place an investment tax credit for companies, encouraging them to buy and restore old buildings—a highly successful concept that promoted industry while protecting history.

## **The Freedom Trail and Beyond**

Let me start by saying don’t rent a car. I have listened to many first time visitors who have made the mistake of trying to drive Boston. Unlike the grid-like layout that characterizes comparatively young California cities, the roads of Boston—and the state—were created for people, cows, and carts. They curve around long-gone ponds and lakes, and for the uninitiated, seem to twist maddeningly to nowhere.



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Boston has one of the best mass transit systems in America—the MBTA—and it’s a lot cheaper than BART. Whether you want to take a bus, the “T” (a light-rail system), or commuter rail, you can get around easily. Proof? I lived without a car for five years, and never missed it.

No matter where you walk—and Boston is a walker’s paradise—there are traces of the past, some prominent, some not. One of the most popular first-time visitors’ routes is the Freedom Trail ([www.wayside.org](http://www.wayside.org)). This 2.5 red-brick walking trail winds throughout the city, by Arlington Public Gardens, past the gold-domed State House, to the North End, and Faneuil Hall (replete with boutique stores and trendy restaurants), and onto the USS Constitution and Bunker Hill.

One of the best quick immersions into Boston are the tourist trolleys that depart from Back Bay’s Copley Plaza. The conductors happily spout Boston trivia and the trolley traces the Freedom Trail and more. Riders can disembark and re-board at numerous locations, making it an enjoyable way to explore and learn at the same time.

### **Beacon Hill and Back Bay**

If you want to savor older Boston, I recommend spending a day walking through Beacon Hill and Back Bay. Bordered by Massachusetts Avenue, Park and Boylston Streets,

and the Charles River, it’s the ideal sampling of all things Boston.

Back Bay is awash in beautiful old red brick buildings, fascinating architectural details, and tiny gardens. During the 1990s real estate boom, many erstwhile apartment houses were restored to their former town house glory. My particular favorites are Marlborough Street and Commonwealth Avenue. Quiet Marlborough Street still has its cobblestone sidewalks, and the old gas lamps that burn night and day. Comm. Ave, as it’s known by the locals, has a beautiful wide median down the center, lined with trees and statues, and with a walkway that will take you all the way down to Arlington Public Gardens.

The Gardens and the adjoining Boston Common are large parks and playgrounds. The famous Swan Boats, pedaled by sturdy-legged college students, carry passengers around the Gardens’ large pond starting late Spring, and have for decades. The Garden itself is a beautifully maintained arboretum. Spring is one of its prettiest times, as rainbows of tulips burst from the beds to compliment the many flowering trees.

Boston Common—so called because the commons were where everyone could communally graze their animals—dates back to revolutionary times. It slopes steeply up Beacon Hill and is the home of the State House and the



former Frog Pond—where accused witches were tossed in. If they drowned, they were considered innocent of witchcraft; if they floated, they were witches, and were executed. Today the Frog Pond is a playground. Beacon Hill is the most expensive area in Boston, with multi-million dollar homes and Boston “blueblood” families. These homes are older than those in Back Bay, and some of the side alleys have the original rounded cobblestones, and are “two horned cows wide”—the width required when they were built nearly 200 years ago.

Amble back across the Gardens to Newbury Street, the original East coast Rodeo Drive. Both sides are replete with famous name boutiques, art galleries, and numerous ethnic restaurants to please every palate.

If you’re still in a shopping mood, swing up Dartmouth Street to Copley Plaza. There you’ll find Trinity Church, which is a lovely place to visit, and see the towering John Hancock building, which spent its initial years shedding windows onto passersby, due to failure to understand the wind dynamics of the area.

In the late 1980s, this area underwent a renewal as the nearby “Southie” area was gentrified, and the Copley Plaza indoor mall and linked Prudential Center malls are second to none for dining, shopping, and touring.



## Odds ‘n’ Ends

No visit to a city is complete without learning some of the insider’s bits.

If you walk across the Harvard Bridge that crosses the Charles River between Boston and Cambridge (it’s a part of Massachusetts Ave. and is a little over a mile; it’s also known by locals as the MIT bridge because it leads straight to that campus), you’ll notice brightly painted numbered lines of “smoots.” Stories have that at a MIT party, one Mr. Smoot became so inebriated that his fellows, as a freshman prank, “measured” the bridge in smoots, putting him end to end, and marking each point. It remains a tradition for each freshman class to repaint these markings.

Visit the very Italian North End (where the old North church from which the two lanterns were hung to warn Paul Revere were hung) and on warm humid days you may scent molasses, residue from the Great Molasses Flood. In 1919, a large vat of molasses burst, and came pouring down the narrow roadways, actually drowning 21 people. A portion of it sank into the dirt or was absorbed by the old homes, and humidity still releases the smell.

Best time to visit? Summer, because the colleges are out, and most of the students are gone. You’ll get the best taste of “real” Boston, and it’s a lot quieter. Boston is one of those cities that you can visit time and again — there’s always more to see, both new and old. ■





### **Serving Travelers Since 1686**

If you want real history, there's no place like the Longfellow Wayside Inn, located in Sudbury, about half an hour outside the city. It's been serving wayfarers since 1686, and offers quaint cozy rooms, excellent traditional New England fare, and a delightful insight into history.

Beautifully preserved, the Inn was old before California existed. You can see the hand-hewn beams in the original tavern, blackened by centuries of smoke, and the narrow twisty stairs up which servants would climb to take care of the guests. The still-operating gristmill grinds flour for use in the kitchen's cookery. The poet Henry Longfellow stayed at the Inn, and it was here that he came up with his famous poem, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere." [www.wayside.org](http://www.wayside.org).



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