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Recovering a Sordid Past: Public Memory of Scollay Square

Scollay Square stood at what is now Boston's Government Center and City Hall Plaza. As opposed to the stark, often deserted Government Center, in its prime, Scollay Square housed dime museums, theaters, and risqué burlesque attractions. It attracted a wide audience of families, thespians and sailors in addition to its residents. Scollay Square found its last hurrah during World War II and eventually the area was targeted for urban renewal. Beyond the plaque dedicated to the Howard Athenaeum and the attempt to recontextualize the area with the 1987 Scollay Square renaming ceremony, a strong vernacular memory of Scollay Square is not evident in Boston. The entertainment district has been purged both from the physical landscape and the public's memory, despite its historical ties to early Boston theater, 19th century scientific experimentation and the abolitionist movement. The lack of a public memory can be attributed to the rhetoric used during urban renewal to paint the area as a dangerous dive in order to both facilitate its destruction and support the creation of Government Center. While the physical destruction of Scollay Square renders historic landscape interpretation difficult, the area's historic ties should serve as a base to reclaim the history wiped out by urban renewal in Boston. Looking at what sources are available about Scollay Square, predominantly published memoirs and comparing those to the voices of the West End Museum provide suggestions of how public historians could recover Scollay Square.

Today, Scollay Square is ultimately remembered for its reputation at the time of its destruction. It had been painted as a dangerous part of town, a dive with burlesque dancers and drunken sailors.

According to David Kruh's *Always Something Doing*, Scollay Square was not always so low class:

Despite the bustle and commotion caused by its location, Scollay Square still managed, during the first few decades of the 1800s, an erudite air. There were at this time no theaters, tattoo parlors,

or hot dog stands in which to while away the time. The Square was far enough away from the docks to be considered residential, and some of Boston's most prominent citizens lived in and around the area.¹

Beyond being a posh neighborhood, Scollay Square once was home to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist press. Rumors are that his newspaper office was part of the Underground Railroad. Later, such innovators as Thomas Edison and Samuel Morse experimented with early telegraph technology in Scollay Square. Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Watson transmitted the human voice over wires for the first time in history in Bells' Sudbury Street laboratory.² Considering this wealth of significant history, one would expect scientific or abolitionist interpretation in the area. Instead, the memory of Scollay Square is tied to its showgirl reputation. While its burlesque past is the dominant interpretation of Scollay Square, in reality burlesque did not become a staple of the neighborhood until the 20th century. The Square's entertainment legacy actually began with highly praised theaters created in the mid 1800s.

The most iconic of the Scollay Square theaters was the *Howard Athenaeum*. Later known as the *Old Howard*, the rise and fall of this theater is synonymous with the rise and fall of Scollay Square. Within 100 years, the Square appeared to transform from an exclusive neighborhood to a risqué burlesque tenderloin. Kruh describes it as a shift from erudite to commonplace to bawdy and by the 1930s to tawdry.³

The *Howard Athenaeum* began as a Millerite Adventist Church. The Congregation built the structure believing the world would end in October 1844. When the world continued, the structure was sold and the *Howard Athenaeum* was born. The theater hosted Shakespearean plays and famous actors such as a young John Wilkes Booth. While the *Howard Athenaeum* reached its thespian prime as a in the late 1800s, it persisted on showing vaudeville or variety shows in addition to burlesque dancers through World War II. As the *Howard Athenaeum* transformed to match the times, its name transformed to the *Old Howard*, the moniker it colloquially maintains today.

¹ David Kruh, *Always Something Doing: Boston's Infamous Scollay Square* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 33, 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 51.

As a burlesque theater, the *Old Howard* featured girls performing strip tease acts. The shows drew crowds of sailors and Harvard students. It was this new iteration of the *Howard* that led to its demise. In 1953, Boston Police captured dancer *Irma the Body*'s striptease on tape, and "the city eventually ordered the theater closed."⁴ After its closure, the *Old Howard* languished until it was slated for destruction as part of Boston's Government Center project. Its supporters rallied to save it, but plans to revamp the theater as a performing-arts center were dashed when a mysterious fire broke out in June 1961. The city tore down the remaining structure after the fire was extinguished, and the *Old Howard* was erased from Boston's cultural landscape. After the Government Center project was finished, former patrons of the *Old Howard* dedicated a plaque to its memory, located where the stage had once been.

During the mid 20th century, Scollay Square emerged as a contradiction to Bostonians. According to Thomas O'Connor, Scollay Square "was such a distinctive and identifiable part of Boston that it had become one of those historic areas ...that should never be changed."⁵ On the other hand, younger Bostonians believed "Scollay Square had become an outworn anachronism, an embarrassment—something out of the Gay Nineties or the days of prohibition speakeasies—that should be done away with as soon as possible."⁶ This sentiment played into the use of Scollay Square's risqué reputation to justify its destruction.

Reference to its reputation manifested in several ways. Popular representations of Scollay Square "from guide books to popular culture, characterized the Square as a site of moral decay and social deviance."⁷ Its reputation also disparaged those who visited Scollay Square as immoral although in reality Scollay Square had various commercial and residential uses beyond its risqué entertainment enterprises. Despite family friendly attractions like Joe and Nemo's Hotdogs and a multitude of movie theaters, Scollay Square's notoriety dwarfed its complex identity as a sordid entertainment spot as well as a

⁴ Thomas H. O'Connor, *Building a New Boston: Politics and Urban Renewal 1950-1970* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993) 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶ O'Connor., 141.

⁷ Daniel A. Gilbert "Why Dwell on a Lurid Memory?: Deviance and Redevelopment in Boston's Scollay Square," *Massachusetts Historical Review*, 9 (2007): 104.

residential neighborhood. According to Daniel Gilbert, flaunting Scollay Square's infamy "made use of the rhetoric power of Scollay Square in at least two crucial ways: it mobilized the symbolic meaning of Scollay Square as a deviant landscape in service of the larger renewal program and it allowed the renewal coalition to frame the process as one of moral redemption and cleansing."⁸ While there was some truth to the deviancy of the neighborhood, especially considering its tattoo parlors and burlesque shows, according to Kruh "the consensus of those who were there is that the Square was not what we would today call dangerous. Trouble, most agreed, did not find you; you had to look for it."⁹ This interpretation is also reflected by Paul Chivanne, he explains "the bottom line is that [Scollay Square] wasn't as people say it was back then, and it wasn't as good as we say it was now. It was, however, a lot of fun."¹⁰

Further complicating its singular reputation as an entertainment district and residential area, Scollay Square also became a new home for many evicted West Enders. The West End fell prey to Boston's urban renewal movement in the late 1950s. Its destruction was incredibly controversial. Bostonians came to lament the eviction of families from the West End and the destruction of a vibrant neighborhood and community. By focusing on the moral issues with maintaining Scollay Square, attention was diverted from the fact that Boston was going to level another neighborhood. Kruh explains that "because of significant popular sentiment against earlier renewal projects in the West End and the South End, city planners, politicians, and business leaders found it crucial that Boston's next major renewal undertakings be seen in as positive a light as possible."¹¹ Thus city planners used rhetoric of rebirth and sacrifice to convince people of the necessity of destroying Scollay Square so that a new, better Government Center could rise from its dilapidated ashes. Urban renewal projects described a new city, "with a clean shining face,"¹² and explained that Scollay Square was "rumpled, tattered, time-worn, with the weary, resigned, haunted look of the friendless down-and-outer who shambles along in his old age

⁸ Gilbert, 130.

⁹ Kruh, 118.

¹⁰ Kruh, 104.

¹¹ Ibid., 127.

¹² Globe 1962 burlesque north end article

watching the shadow of life grow smaller and smaller and smaller.”¹³ By utilizing imagery showing the neighborhood was dying, Scollay Square was demolished for the greater good.

With the demolition of Scollay Square, West Enders once again found themselves evicted. Comments of former West Enders “remind us that Scollay Square was much more than an outdated entertainment zone or red light district.”¹⁴ In order to stop citizens from reminiscing about Scollay Square, a new name was christened for the area. By deciding to rename the neighborhood, city planners were able to “invoke the district’s notorious, deviant reputation as a rhetorical justification for redevelopment.”¹⁵ With both the creation of the physical Government Center and the renaming of Scollay Square, city planners were able to effectively destroy most evidence of what Government Center used to be. Removing the name from Scollay Square seemed to stem any other attempts to renew the original area, it took almost 30 years after its demise to simply bring the name back.

In March 1987, the name Scollay Square was returned to the area on some signage. Evidently radio broadcaster Jerry Williams had promised to bring back the name and came through with his promise. According to a Boston Globe article, “no one expects a few street signs to do more than tease some memories of a bygone era perhaps overly frosted with nostalgia. So be it, say those who knew and worked the neighborhood.”¹⁶ Ann Curio, the former queen of burlesque in Boston was quoted as “loving” the idea, rhetorically asking “What’s in a name? Everything.”¹⁷ Reinstating the historic name of the district spurs some recollection and questioning of what came become Government Center, but does not restore the character of the old Square. Bringing the name back is the only the first step one could take to putting the neighborhood back on the historic map.

In addition to contending with providing interpretation of what no longer exists, one must consider where the people of Scollay Square fit into its public memory. It is difficult to measure the

¹³ Globe 1961 “Scollay Square must be crying in its beard”

¹⁴ Gilbert, 124.

¹⁵ Ibid., 130.

¹⁶ David Arnold, “Scollay Square Plays and Encore,” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), March 12, 1987.

¹⁷ Arnold, “Scollay Square Plays and Encore.”

experience of transient visitors to the area, but other, more permanent people provide context of what once was. Voices of West Enders saddened to be forced out of a second neighborhood provide context of the displaced in urban renewal. The Harvard alumni who dedicated the *Old Howard* plaque show remorse for urban renewal and desire of bygone times. Ann Curio's 1968 book *This was Burlesque* provides insight into the life of the showgirl while Fred Allen's 1956 *Much Ado About Me* shows the actor's perspective on the area. Descriptions of visiting sailors during World War II suggest Scollay Square was used as an urban playground while *Improper Bostonians* says it was a place for "butch straight men" to meet other men. All of these snippets of life in Scollay Square show that experiences of patrons, workers and residents were greatly varied, some sordid, some theatrical, some ordinary. By utilizing these impressions, there is the potential to rechristen the human element of Scollay Square in addition to rechristening its name. The West End Museum, for example, has kept the human element of the West End alive despite the destruction of the old neighborhood.

The West End Museum works to interpret and preserve the history of the West End neighborhood of Boston. The West End was demolished earlier than Scollay Square and its residents were forced out of a close knit community. Stories about the destruction of the West End emphasize the trauma and depression residents suffered from the experience. Some of these residents relocated to Scollay Square just to be forced out yet again. Many participants of the 1987 Scollay Square renaming ceremony were former West Enders, "making the event something of a reunion."¹⁸ West Enders recollections of Scollay Square collected by David Kruh suggest that there is a bond between the neighborhoods, both bred out of the shock of urban renewal as well as the physical proximity at which both were once located. This connection leads one to believe that perhaps the fate of remembering Scollay Square is also tied up in how the West End has been remembered.

Following urban renewal, West Enders continued to stay in touch with one another despite the destruction of their world. By keeping in touch, reminiscing and writing down the memories and feeling

¹⁸ Kruh, XXI.

of the West End in the *West Ender newsletter*, former neighbors were able to keep their neighborhood alive despite its demolition. The *West Ender* publication eventually led to the creation of the West End Museum that exists to interpret the history of the old neighborhood. The lesson here is that the power of talking and remembering can be enough to spur an official memory institution of an area that no longer exists. As of yet, no constituency of Scollay Square denizens has stepped forward to reclaim the area, yet little reminders of what once was suggest that the possibility exists. Memories written in memoirs, images of the neighborhood, and academic interest in reclaiming a neighborhood that did not die despite the repudiation of its name show that with the proper public history and community involvement, Scollay Square could be remembered for more than its name. Tracking down transient visitors and viewers may be the next step to reclaiming Scollay Square, but returning its name was the first step, as Ann Curio said, “What’s in a name? Everything.”