Remembering “A Splendid Block of Houses”

BY STEPHEN JEROME

In anticipation of our 42nd Annual House Tour, we are reprinting this article, originally published in 1859 by the Boston Saturday Evening Gazette, which features one of the houses that will be on the tour, 529 Massachusetts Avenue, at the time identified as 72 Chester Square.

THE RECENT DISCOVERY and republication here of the accompanying articles and illustration from the Boston Saturday Evening Gazette chronicle the development of Chester Square and West Chester Park in startling detail. They provide considerable supplementary information to the existing body of documentation for what is regarded as the first and, in its original configuration, the grandest of the South End squares.

The original oval-shaped park flanked by predominantly bow, or swell-fronted, row houses follows in the well-established pattern conceived in the late eighteenth century by Charles Bulfinch and seen in such early projects as the Tontine Crescent (1793), Louisburg Square (1826) and Pemberton Square (1835). Yet, the creation of treelined malls at the east and west ends, between Washington Street and Harrison Avenue, and Tremont Street and Columbus Avenue, respectively, is an innovative feature in this development and anticipates the later development of Commonwealth Avenue in the Back Bay. The engraving of West Chester Park by Kilburn & Mallory and based on a photograph by John L. Whipple portrays the width and grandeur of the new urban residential landscape in marked contrast to the narrow streets and lanes of old Boston. Mansard roofs with boldly projecting dormers add an up-to-date architectural touch to the traditional bow-fronted row houses.

This engraving of West Chester Park by Kilburn & Mallory was based on a photograph by John L. Whipple. Image Courtesy of The Boston Athenaeum

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Chester Square was laid out and sold at public auction by the city of Boston, October 30, 1850, the city guaranteeing to build fences, lay out walks, and plant some shrubbery and forest trees as would make the same ornamental, previous to 1852. Very little building was done for the first few years, some two or three houses only, but during the last four years the improvements have gone on rapidly, so much so that out of the original forty lots fronting on the square, there are but three or four left vacant, and these are held by those who will soon commence building; and to show still further how the square has improved, lots that sold 8 years ago for eighty-five cents per foot, are now sold for three dollars per foot. The fifty lots not facing the square, but the mall leading from Washington Street, have fine houses erected upon them, and are nearly all occupied. Among the many improvements here, there are none more striking and pleasing to the eye than the new block designed by John R. Hall, architect, and built under his personal supervision, situated on the left hand of the square passing from Washington Street. The houses are four stories high. The house immediately in the bend, and commanding an entire view of the square, was built to order for Charles O. Rogers, Esquire, under his daily inspection. The basement story contains a large dining room sixteen by twenty-two feet, with circular ends, and two closets attached; in the rear is the wash-room, fitted up with soapstone, etc., in the best manner; and connected with this in the ell building is a beautiful kitchen fifteen by twenty-two feet, with all the conveniences that can be put into the same. The woodwork of this story is of chestnut, and finished with an extra surface. The parlor story is reached by ascending eleven stone steps, into a vestibule three by ten feet, finished with an Italian marble floor and plinth. The drawing room is sixteen by forty-two feet, and thirteen feet high, with circular ends. Adjoining this room is the parlor, oval in form, size fifteen by twenty-two feet, the passage connecting these rooms has nitches (sic) on each

A Splendid Block of Houses
In 2008, the Church of Scientology purchased the Hotel Alexandra at the corner of Washington Street and Massachusetts Avenue and the Ivory Bean building next door. After rehabilitation, the Church plans to use the property as their headquarters in Boston. Church officials have participated in several public hearings at the South End Landmark District Commission and have cooperated in revising their designs with advice and input from the Commission and the neighboring South End community. The uncertainty about the fate of these two historic buildings is finally reaching an end.

New Construction at 97 West Springfield Street

A lot at the corner of Shawmut Avenue and West Springfield Street, which has long been vacant, is slated for development. Originally, the buildings on the block formed by Newland Street, Shawmut Avenue, West Springfield Street, and Worcester Street were laid out in a symmetrical fashion, with the houses from 32 to 40 Worcester Street mirroring the houses on the opposite side of the block from 97 to 105 West Springfield Street.

The original Shawmut Avenue façade of 97 West Springfield Street would most likely have been identical to the Shawmut Avenue façade of 32 Worcester Street.

On July 8, 2010, the new project’s architect included designs in his official application to the Landmark Commission that will restore this former symmetry. The designs feature a gabled end-wall and two faux chimneys.

The developers have been asked to submit a field mock-up for review.

South End Landmark District Commission holds public hearings on the first Tuesday of each month. For more information, call the Environment Department at City Hall at (617) 635-3850.
**Upcoming Events**

**42nd Annual South End House Tour**

Join us on Saturday, October 16 for our 42nd Annual House Tour. The tour runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., rain or shine. Advance tickets are $25 each and are available for purchase by calling or emailing Hope at (617) 536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org or by visiting our website at www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/programs.htm. Tickets can also be purchased on the day of the tour for $30 each at the Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont Street, or A.E. Rondeau Real Estate, 69 Appleton Street. Additional opportunities for Sponsorship are also available.

**Welcome to our newest Board Member**

The officers and board of directors recently elected Kelly Robbins as fundraising director-at-large. Kelly has been a tireless volunteer on our two most important fundraisers — the Annual House Tour and the Spring Ball, serving as chair for the ball this year. Kelly is chief operating officer at CityState LLC. A South Ender since 2006, Kelly and her husband Matt share their home with their dog Tulip. Kelly is an avid runner and is training for the New York City Marathon, which she will run in November.

**South End Historical Society Officers and Board of Directors**

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**Welcome to our New Members**

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SEHS Annual Meeting
Features
William M. Bulger

The 44th annual Meeting of the SEHS was held on June 10th at the Union United Methodist Church at 485 Columbus Avenue. Attendees were treated to a special talk given by William M. Bulger, former Massachusetts senate president and former chancellor of the University of Massachusetts. With characteristic charm and self-deprecating humor, Mr. Bulger delighted the audience with anecdotes of his encounters with former Boston Mayor James Michael Curley that are featured in his book, James Michael Curley: A Short Biography With Personal Reminiscences. Mr. Bulger signs copies of his book for SEHS members.

Cast Iron Questions?

Need help restoring, repairing or replacing your cast-iron fence? The South End Historical Society can help. Call or email the SEHS office at (617) 536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information.
side, and the communication is cut off by a sliding window, which conforms with the others. These rooms are finished richly, but not gaudily. The cornice is full Corinthian, the doors are of a new pattern, designed by the architect expressly for Mr. Rogers, and of solid black walnut with silver mountings. The doors in the oval room are made to conform to the circle; this story contains four closets and hot and cold water and iron safe. The front staircase is built of black walnut, and continues from basement to billiard room in attic story, with one continuous rail. The post, rail and balusters are of a new pattern, designed expressly for this house, and finished with rope moldings and rosettes; the black walnut is all filled and finished with an extra dead polish. The chamber story contains four rooms; the two principal chambers are sixteen by eighteen feet, with large closets and water-works connected. The bathing room connects with the family chamber, and is finished in walnut with all latest improvements. The chamber over parlor is fifteen by sixteen feet, and the ladies’ boudoir over the vestibule and hall is eight by fourteen feet, with bay window facing the square and looking down towards Washington Street; this room is finished in green and gold, and commands one of the finest views in the square. The second chamber story is similar to the first, and supplied with all the conveniences. The upper story contains a billiard room and three sleeping apartments. The house contains eighteen rooms and about thirty closets. The exterior is built of face-brick and freestone; the basement is laid off in rustics, with panel faces; the buttresses to entrance are of scroll pattern; the doorway is circular headed with double, three-quarter columns, with carved caps in recess to door; the cap over the door is supported by double carved tresses, and above this is a perforated stone balcony; the window caps are of stone; pediment heads supported by carved tresses. The cornice is of wood, with carved truss, double dentils and guilloche in frieze, sanded in imitation of stone. The roof is French, covered with imported slate. The bay window projection, looking down the square, is of wood, ornamented with rope pilasters and carved caps, with rope over the same. The base corresponds with the balcony and the cornice with that on the house—all sanded. The front is also ornamented with an iron verandah, the pattern being entirely new; the cornice corresponding with that of the bay window. This is a new feature for houses in Boston, with bowfronts, and is decidedly taking.

We understand that the two houses adjoining Mr. Cumston’s will be for sale when finished.

While a certain amount of hyperbole can be assumed in any newspaper article, the description of the house appears to support surviving evidence according to its present day owner, David Hocker, who has painstakingly restored the principal rooms of the house as much as possible to their original grandeur.

Stephen Jerome

EDITOR’S NOTE: BE SURE TO VISIT THIS WONDERFUL HOME ON THE HOUSE TOUR AND COMPARE THIS 150-YEAR-OLD ACCOUNT WITH WHAT YOU SEE TODAY.
44th Annual Spring Ball

The SEHS board of directors and Executive Director Hope Shannon would like to express their heartfelt thanks to all those who attended this year’s Annual Ball, with a special thanks to those generous private and corporate sponsors. We are particularly pleased to report that this year the Spring Ball raised $5,000 more than last year’s event. As one of the major revenue sources for the SEHS, a successful annual ball allows us to continue our mission to preserve the South End’s architectural legacy, collect and preserve historical materials and educate the public about its history.

1972 Prints Now Available

Pictures from the South End Historical Society’s 1972 survey of all extant buildings are available for purchase. The images are digitized and available in JPEG format at 300 dpi.

If you are interested in purchasing an image or if you require another format or resolution, please contact us at (617) 536-4445 or email us at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org.

Setting the Space made our venue beautiful and joined us afterward for some drinks and dancing.

Mercedes Ridao and Jeff Malcolm (above) and Jim Keeney and Dorothy Keeney (below) enjoy dancing at the Ball.

181 West Brookline Street, a part of our 2010 House Tour, photographed in 1972 as part of the South End Streets Survey.
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As a way of reducing the costs associated with printing and postage, we’d be happy to send our newsletter electronically. Let us know at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org or call (617) 536-4445.