It Happened on East Newton Street

By Alison Barnet

Boston University had no room in its dorms for transfer students like me. Acting in loco parentis, it mailed me a list of approved housing. The last on the list and by far the cheapest was the Franklin Square House. I'm not good with numbers, but how could I ever forget paying $16 a week, two meals a day included? Two large meals, large enough to make three.

I came to live at the Franklin Square House in September 1964. I was almost 19 and not yet collecting things. As a result, I never kept the brochure, circa 1950, claiming the Franklin Square House was located “close to the heart of Boston.” It showed a smiling driver on the Copley Square bus welcoming aboard thoroughly respectable young ladies from the thoroughly respectable Franklin Square House.

I’d only been to Boston once before, to visit my aunt and uncle, and
From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Spring has arrived! After multiple nor’easters in March alone, warm weather is (hopefully) right around the corner.

Our feature article is about the Franklin Square House by Alison Barnet. Alison lived at the Franklin Square House in the 1960s while studying at Boston University. Built in 1867, the Franklin Square House was originally the St. James Hotel. It was a hotel for a brief period, afterwards housing the New England Conservatory of Music. Reverend George Perin, pastor of the Shawmut Universalist Church, recognized the need to provide affordable housing for women in the early 20th century. Perin was not a wealthy man, but he worked tirelessly to raise funds to purchase the former hotel from the New England Conservatory of Music in 1902.

In our second article, I talk about my journey to publish Boston’s South End. I wrote the book in 2017, splitting my time between scouring the SEHS archive for postcards and images, and conducting as much research as possible. Published several months ago in January, the book not only highlights the historical society’s collections, but is a way to raise money for the organization.

Lauren Prescott
Executive Director

Trees in bloom outside the South End Historical Society
they certainly had not taken me to the notorious section called the South End. So how was I to know that the Franklin Square House was not only not close to the heart of Boston, but in an area considered by middle-class whites as completely off limits, to be avoided at all costs? It didn’t take me long, though, to find out that the Franklin Square House was closer than “close to the heart of Boston.” For me, it was right in the heart of Boston. How else can I explain spending the last 50+ years within a few blocks of it?

My first room at the Franklin Square House didn’t face the park. Those rooms cost extra. My room faced “The Pit,” a well down which fun-loving residents liked to fling objects of intimate apparel.

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My parents were horrified. My father said Franklin Square itself looked like the final scene from On the Beach. It did have that desolation about it: yesterday’s newspapers blowing across the park, drunks sleeping on benches, and a yellow brick public housing project looming up on the other side. I liked it immediately.

You had to be at least 18 to get into the Franklin Square House. Although the upper age limit was 40, they didn’t throw you out on your fortieth birthday, and many elderly women lived there. Early each morning, maids went down the halls, unlocking doors and calling out, “Just checkin’.” I could never sleep in on mornings when I didn’t have an early class, because they woke me up, clicking their keys, poking their heads in every room. “Just checkin’, just checkin’.” “Checkin’ what?” I wanted to cry out from my bed—and probably did. The checkin’ paid off, though, because every once in a while a body was found. The maids also checked for forbidden electrical devices, such as coils for boiling water for tea. I kept mine in a drawer under my underwear. I also hid a tiny bottle of sake in a sock.
Each room had an antiquated phone with a bell on top. When an outside call came in, the front desk rang you in your room and you went out into the hall to talk. During my first

year at FSqH (as I liked to abbreviate it in those days), there was a hall phone right outside my door, and I had to step over scantily clad young women in relaxed postures holding intimate conversations with their boyfriends, especially as the 11:00 p.m. curfew approached.

The room phone was a primitive precursor to the answering machine: if you placed a penny on top of the bell, and found the penny on the floor when you returned, you could tell if it rang in your absence.

“Porters” made their rounds every night. My friends and I called them eunuchs, because they seemed like such ancient, sexless blobs, looking neither to the right nor the left as they marched past our rooms. They occasionally requested someone turn her radio down, but their eyes never strayed from her face no matter what she was or wasn’t wearing.

The rules were easy to break. Students had to be in earlier than “business girls” and the over-40 crowd. When “business girls” came in after an evening out, they signed B for Business after their names in the ledger. So if a student left the building early without signing out, it was possible to come back late and sign B after a fictitious name. I often used the name Muriel Damon. A eunuch sat napping at the desk and paid no attention; still, it was always a good policy to extend him a friendly “goodnight.” It was also easy for students to stay out all night, because we weren’t required to sign in in the morning if we hadn’t signed out at night. We could officially stay out all night if we applied for permission to stay with a relative. Quite a few boyfriends were listed as uncles.

I walked to Boston University and back every day, taking different routes through the South End. That in itself was an education and made Commonwealth Avenue seem
deadly dull as a result. Needless to say, the Sixties at BU were an altogether different kettle of fish from the Sixties in the South End. The South End was real in a way I’d never experienced before, having grown up mostly in the suburbs. I liked it when people talked to me, and I found what they said witty, unpredictable, offbeat, profound, poetic, right on target and NEVER BORING.

There were two bars up Massachusetts Avenue on the rise after Columbus: Wally’s and Mr. Kelly’s. Prostitutes in outlandish outfits paraded outside, even in the early morning. The same men were hanging out there every day as I passed; they said “good morning,” and I said “good morning” back. One day, one of them stepped into my path and asked if he could ask me a question: “Do you walk that fast because you’re in a hurry or is it from nervous tension?” Pretty soon “Palmer” was giving me daily insights into my life, predicting my future, and warning me against involvement with a “bad-foot boy.” I began to look for him every morning—a crazy guy in a kind of zoot suit who made me laugh.

On Friday and Saturday nights, I used to come home on the last Forest Hills elevated train or the last Harvard-Dudley bus, get off at Northampton Station, and walk the five blocks to the Franklin Square House. That stretch of Washington Street flaunted no less than nine bars, two pool rooms, two liquor stores, several vacant buildings and a cemetery. I would walk past the bars and the corner guys, speaking politely when spoken to. Many times, a gentlemanly drunk accompanied me the rest of the way—insurance that nothing worse would happen. I thought that, if I wrote a book, I’d borrow a title from Dr. Seuss: “And to Think that it Happened on East Newton Street!”

I liked to call the Franklin Square House “the Barbizon of Boston” and, while studying biology, “the Follicle Stimulating Hormone.” It was a big place with more than 700 guest rooms—many the size of large closets—and a lot of interesting nooks and crannies. There was a coffee shop called the Gray Goose Gift Shop and Tea Room, a fudge room, bowling alley, interfaith chapel and a dark-paneled library run by a librarian in her late eighties. The librarian liked Mozart and asked me to leave her a note whenever WHRB held its 24-hour Mozart “orgy” - a word she always had a
hard time pronouncing.

Grandin Hall, the ballroom, had tiny alcoves around its edges, in which residents could entertain male guests (men were NEVER allowed upstairs). These “beau parlors” were furnished with two straight-backed chairs, a table, a lamp and a curtain that didn’t quite make it across the door opening. Despite strict supervision, there were rumors that couples “did it” on top of the beau parlor radiators.

On Saturday afternoons, I always walked downtown on Washington Street, a mile or two, checking into anything that looked interesting along the way. And everything did. I loved the named of the businesses: Uncle Ned’s Money to Loan, Big Jim’s Shanty Lounge, Baby Tiger’s School of Boxing, Checker Smoker, Turf Tavern, Dr. Rosemowicz, and “The Drs. Grover, Dentists.” At tiny Buy-Rite grocery, people pushed shopping carts down narrow aisles of shelves piled high with bashed-in cans and boxes; Brown’s Bakery did a brisk business in big round cans of Boston brown bread, and I loved to watch the big puffs of Syrian bread roll to the end of the Lebanese bakery’s conveyor belt, deflating on the way. I always made a stop at the Old French Trader with its three rooms of fascinating junk. I bought an art deco ashtray, a little brass Buddha, and a bizarre portrait of a goatherd that I’ve still got up on my bookshelf. I loved that place so much that when I saw a man slip a wooden statue under his shirt one day, I went to the man who sat at the door—the Old French Trader himself?—and turned him in.

My friends and I made pests of ourselves—by 1960s standards, anyway—as often as
possible. FSqH sometimes held socials on Wednesday evenings and hired ancient swing bands. Chairs were lined up against the walls, “business girls” and older residents on one side, sailors and students from technical schools on the other. We wouldn’t have been caught dead there. Instead, we crept down the back stairs to beg punch and cookies from the eunuchs and, throughout the evening, phoned the front desk to complain that we couldn’t concentrate on our studies because of the “inexcusable” noise in the ballroom.

The Franklin Square House had its own chef, and we ate well. Tired from the trek to BU and back and starved from a lunch of bread and a hard-boiled egg filched from breakfast, I always ate the maximum allowed. Mulligatawny soup and baked cod were often on the menu together, in which case we always sneaked down to the dining room early and changed the menu board to

Mullicatawny Soup
Baked Cod

Alison Barnet originally submitted this article to Glue magazine and it was featured in the June 1997 issue. The Franklin Square House was built in 1868 as the St. James Hotel. It became the New England Conservatory of Music in 1882. Its longest use—1902 until 1970—was as the Franklin Square House, “a clean, safe place for self-respecting girls,” but its most famous use was as the façade of TV’s Saint Elsewhere. The “new building” was added in 1914, and both buildings were renovated into apartments for the elderly in 1976, becoming “The Franklin.”
**The Everett Family Web Exhibit**

Corinne Bermon has created a web exhibit for the South End Historical Society, titled *The Everett Family: Middle Class Life in Boston’s South End, 1851-1859.* This digital exhibit follows the Everett family’s experience living in the South End, a unique Boston neighborhood, during the 1850s. Please visit [theeverettfamilyletters.com](http://theeverettfamilyletters.com) to learn more.

**Self-Guided Audio Walking Tour**

Now when you visit the South End, you can learn more about its history with an audio tour created by the South End Historical Society and UniGuide. Starting at SEHS in Chester Square, the walking tour takes you through 12 points of interest in this historic neighborhood (such as the Porter House, Blackstone & Franklin Square, and Union Park). UniGuide is a free smartphone app that provides you with hundreds of audio tours across the United States. Access all tours in a single app, stream them or download ahead of time to save data.

Get the app for your phone and listen to a wonderfully curated tour of the South End. Visit [http://uniguide.me/](http://uniguide.me/) to download the app.

**Pictures from SEHS Collections Available for Reproduction**

Pictures from the South End Historical Society’s collections are available for reproduction. Fees vary depending on the photograph and the intended use.

Most reproduction requests ask for images from our popular 1972 South End Streets Survey. The Streets Survey includes over 3,000 images taken by the South End Historical Society in 1972 documenting every extant South End building. These images were used in the historical society’s application to place the South End on the National Register of Historic Places, which was successful. Image reproductions from the South End Streets Survey carry a fee of $30 each for a 300dpi digital copy.

If you are interested in reproducing a SEHS image for personal, commercial, or research purposes, please email us at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information about our image collection, fees and policies.
Reflections on Writing: *Boston’s South End*

*By Lauren Prescott*

I am excited to announce the recent publication of my new book, *Boston’s South End*, released on January 8th. The book highlights the South End Historical Society’s rich collection of postcards and images to bring the history of the neighborhood to life. Several of you may have attended our book release event in January or one of my other talks in the neighborhood.

When I became executive director in 2016, one of my goals was to make our collections more accessible to the public. In the past year I’ve worked with interns to achieve this goal, by organizing collections, cataloging them into our internal database, and creating finding aids. On SEHS’s website, you’ll now find several finding aids as well as a web exhibit created around our Everett Family Letters (theeverettfamilyletters.com).

While the historical society has many programs going on throughout the year, many do not realize that it is also an archive. SEHS’s archive consists of records, maps, correspondence, images, ephemera, artwork and other documents related to the history of the South End. Since SEHS does not have exhibit space like other historical organizations in Boston, a book was a great way to highlight the historical society’s images while also raising money.

I met a representative from Arcadia Publishing while attending a local history conference in June 2016 and began chatting about the work they did with our previous director Hope Shannon on *Legendary Locals of Boston’s*...
South End. They planted the idea of another book, and I soon embarked on an eight-month journey to write Boston’s South End. In preparation for this book, I spent several months in our archive, poring through our collections and choosing 180-200 postcards and images that could be scanned for the book. In my spare time I spent hours doing research, using both primary and secondary sources. I utilized old newspaper articles, historic maps, and city directories to uncover relevant information.

I met with several challenges when writing this book. Sometimes I couldn’t find the information I needed for a specific postcard, or I desperately wanted to include something in the book for which I had no images. While writing Boston’s South End, I had a page limit and word limit to work with. I was also constrained to using between 180-200 images for the book. The majority of images had to be postcards, but I was allowed to supplement that with other images. Adding images other than postcards was a necessity for this book because while SEHS’s collection of postcards may be rich, gaps still remained. I included 19th century stereoviews, trade cards, theater playbills, and a few other images in the SEHS collections in the book.

Why did I choose to highlight our postcard collections for a book? Firstly, SEHS has a large collection of postcards and up until now, not much has been done with them. Occasionally, a postcard may be posted on our social media accounts, but for the most part, they were stored in the archive. Secondly, I find postcards and the history of postcards fascinating.

Postcards became popular in the 19th century as a form of communication. Despite its increasing popularity, the US Post Office was the only institution allowed to print postcards.

Between 1898 and 1915, a postcard craze known as the Golden Age of Postcards captivated the world. In 1905 alone, people mailed over seven billion postcards worldwide, and this does not include those purchased for personal collections.
until Congress passed the Mailing Card Act on May 19, 1898. This allowed printers and publishers to create postcards, although they were called ‘souvenir cards’ until 1901.

Between 1898 and 1915, a postcard craze known as the Golden Age of Postcards captivated the world. In 1905 alone, people mailed over seven billion postcards worldwide, and this does not include those purchased for personal collections. The popularity of postcards encouraged more businesses, especially local family-run businesses, to get involved. Some of the South End Historical Society’s more interesting postcards are snapshots of family-run businesses, such as Sonnabend’s Loan Shop on Columbus Avenue, or the Frank Janes drugstore on the corner of Mass and Columbus avenues.

If you’re interested in purchasing Boston’s South End, drop by the historical society for a signed copy. The book is also available on Amazon.com and at Barnes & Noble.
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