This podcast transcript was created for accessibility purposes using an automated transcription service. It has been reviewed for general accuracy but may contain minor discrepancies. It should not be considered a definitive record of the conversation. If you have any questions, please contact us at podcast@masshist.org.

Bonus Episode: A Walk Through The Back Bay

Peter Drummey 00:00

I know I'm keeping you, but let me tell you just one more thing.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:03

[Intro music fades in] I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai and this is a bonus episode of The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. We recommend that before listening to this bonus episode. You listen to the first episode from our fourth season. We briefly discussed the filling in of the Back Bay when we introduced listeners to the Historical Society's building at 1154 Boylston Street. On this bonus episode of The Object of History, we invited one of our 2025 Dean W. Eastman, undergraduate library residence Vivienne Charpentier to dive deeper into the history of the Back Bay. Vivienne tells us more about this neighborhood and then joins Chief Historian Peter Drummey on a walking tour of the Back Bay.

Vivienne Charpentier 00:56

Myself and Jolli [Shevitz], who's the other undergraduate resident, both had to make a like a collection guide, a subject guide for a neighborhood of Boston. And I chose Back Bay, in part because I realized, somewhat foolishly that I didn't think about the fact that it used to be a bay, which was kind of like the central thing that made me want to do a subject guide about it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:19

Why did you select the Back Bay?

Vivienne Charpentier 01:21

I selected Back Bay because I realized I didn't know much about the landfill process of it, and kind of took for granted that it's called Back Bay because it used to be the back of the bay of Boston. I had simply, like, never thought about that. And then once I realized that I was like, oh, I wonder what the story is there of, you know, like, when did they fill it in? Why did they fill it in? Was it, you know, like a really rapid change, or was it a really gradual because some parts of Boston were filled in really, really slowly, and some things were

a little more like concentrated efforts. So, I wanted to understand a bit more about the process, and also the reason that Back Bay was filled in.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:09
Because filling in the Back Bay was an engineering would you say it's a marvel?

Vivienne Charpentier 02:14
I would say so. And you know, obviously, like landfill projects in Boston, had been happening for long before that, but the the timing of when Back Bay was filled coincided with a lot of mechanical innovation. So, things like the steam train and technology to make those sort of like massive projects easier were just becoming readily available right at the time when Back Bay was getting filled in. So, whereas it might have taken 100 people to dig up the gravel that you need to fill in an area, you now had like mechanical options steam powered machinery or steam powered trains to get all of this, like ground, gravel, dirt, everything to fill in the swamp could now be accessed a lot easier. So not only was the landfill process an engineering marvel, the technology that allowed it to happen was also groundbreaking.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:19
So, we have a lot of collections here related to the Back Bay.

Vivienne Charpentier 03:22
Yes!

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:22
Do you want to give us just a broad overview of what sorts of material we have?

Vivienne Charpentier 03:28
So, there were a few different things that I looked at a lot. There's a lot of kind of, like one off pieces of, you know, like the proposal to the city say we'd like to establish this, or there were like calls to vote on the proposal once it went through to the city. So, there's a lot of individual pieces, especially on that kind of legislature side, or proposals to the legislature. We also have the collections of the Boston Roxbury Mill Corporation, which I looked at some of that. We have some of that on microfilm, I believe, so that goes kind of early history. And you know, if you want to get into the nitty gritty of how everything rose and fell

for them, that is one of the major collections. Also, we had, we have a lot of maps, a lot of maps and pictures of Back Bay. I looked at this, you know, really awesome collection of atlases. They're atlases of the whole city, but they were dated about a decade apart, each kind of interspersed variously in 1888, 1902, 1912 and 1928 and it's an atlas of the whole city. And the development of Back Bay is really interesting because it gets kind of consistent around 1912 1928 but there's like, some major changes, honestly, between like 1888 and 1902 towards when they're at the, generally, the very end of developing, versus when they're pretty much established in what's considered Back Bay at that point. And those are, like, works of art honestly. I was looking looking at those. I was like, geeking out like crazy. They were really, really interesting. So, there's a lot of maps, for sure, maps, photographs, a lot of visual material of the area, for sure. Like I said, there's not as much by way of details about the nitty gritty of like that day-to-day kind of process of the filling, not as much contemporary materials on that. But we do also have quite a few reference books that are either dedicated to the filling of the Back Bay or by focusing on the landfill process of Boston in general, or the environmental history of Boston, end up talking a lot about Back Bay. Those I was very deeply invested in. I read a lot about landfill in general and how that kind of impacts the natural environment and everything that was very interesting.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:04

So, give us the timeline. When does it start? When does it end?

Vivienne Charpentier 06:10

The landfill process started in earnest late 1850s and continued through to the 1880s. So that was when the bulk of it was done. So that's about 20 years, actually. So it was, you know, not the quickest process in the world, but it also wasn't really a majorly drawn-out process, either. And there were some additions, things that they were still adding or changing up until about the 1910s. That was kind of when the bulk of land filling, or the last little projects, kind of came to a conclusion on adding more to the area. Obviously, some areas still continued to change after the fact, but the bulk of landfill took place in about 20 years, around 1860 to 1880 with some minor changes going on afterwards. And around the end of that process is when that sort of beautification process started being considered of you know, extending the park system into the Back Bay, and that was the work of the Boston Parks Commission. The Public Garden was a major aspect of that, and then the Fenway. So, we actually are kind of bordered on either end by one of the major parks of Boston. Either side of Back Bay has has one of these major parks.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:35

So, were there any engineers of note? Without them I'm sure that the people who were doing this ran into certain difficulties or challenges at points. What sorts of issues did they face over the course of 20 years?

Vivienne Charpentier 07:49

A lot of it, of course, was just unpleasant working conditions was a major aspect. And then it was honestly kind of a process where they'd start filling something in and then whatever they finished would start to get developed. So, they were kind of not necessarily playing catch up, but people saw the opportunity that was being developed. So the process of filling everything in was almost immediately followed by people developing land, which, you know, I can't say if that made it more or less stressful for people to do that work, but it definitely would have been a kind of process where you might have felt the pressure a little bit to get it done. And then, of course, you know, any sort of issues again, with like the companies that worked there, there was once they kind of accepted it they had to accept it. But definitely at the start of the process, there was a lot of back and forth about whether or not it was going to happen. So, I would say, like the start of the landfill process was more more tricky than anything else of getting everybody on board whether they necessarily wanted to or not.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:59

And when does Frederick Law Olmsted get involved?

Vivienne Charpentier 09:02

He gets involved around 1875.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:05

Near the end of it.

Vivienne Charpentier 09:05

Yes. 1875 is when the Boston Park Commission makes its proposal or initiates the creation of the Emerald Necklace, which is the Charles River. Not 100% sure if the Esplanade gets counted in that or not, but the Emerald Necklace is the Fens and everything we're trying to connect or draw a path of nature, kind of, through some parts of the city. And that's when Frederick Law Olmsted gets involved. And he was one of the major designers for areas of that and those areas, those green spaces were essential, really, for designing

it. Like the Boston Public Garden was actually one of the things that was proposed really early on in the filling of the Back Bay. So even from the start, people had the idea and the intention that there would be you know, green spaces. I don't know how they necessarily, might have defined them at the time. When I think about it, I think about it as like pockets of nature in this extremely bustling city. And back then, it would be about the same though the scale would be different. There was kind of always the intention that there would be these, like pockets of natural beauty throughout the area, which I think is one of the things that kind of sets Back Bay apart, in a way, is that those things were allowed to be intentionally planned and remained a focus even, you know, even now they're still constantly working on and maintaining these areas. They're, you know, like a point of interest, maybe even a point of pride. Most people who come to Boston and are like, oh, I'd love to visit the Public Garden, the Common, even the Fens. They're essential to what I think of when I think of Boston, and they all came out of this whole landfill project honestly.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:00
We then explored the Back Bay neighborhood with Vivienne and Peter Drummey, Chief Historian at the MHS. Peter, told us more about the changes made to the landscape during the 19th and 20th centuries as we walked through what was once a bay of the Charles River.

Vivienne Charpentier 11:15
Peter, could you tell us a little bit about where we are.

Peter Drummey 11:20
We're at where the Fenway the Olmsted Park, which was designed as a water control measure, but to look naturalistic and as a park essentially where it flows into the Charles River. And there is a gatehouse here at the corner, well just beyond the corner of Beacon Street, which was the original border of the Back Bay and the bunker overpass that comes down here, and it's being renovated now. It's still going to be a very busy industrial site. So, we're just off the street, so it's quieter here, but the gatehouse itself is now hundreds of yards inland from the edge of the Charles River because the kind of mechanics of this water flow has been so changed. When this was a when the Back Bay was originally filled in, the Charles was a tidal river with a dramatic change in the level of water caused by the tide coming in and out, and the water flowing up into the Fenway was, in fact, brackish, a mixture of fresh water and salt water. So, when the Fenway was complete, it was all planted out with shrubs and trees, but those trees were trees that could live in a brackish water environment. So almost immediately upon the completion when the Charles River was originally

dammed at the beginning of the 20th century, they had to replant everything along the Fenway, or many things along the Fenway because they weren't the it was now entirely fresh water, instead of flowing into the Charles River, in fact, it's essentially pumped into the Charles River, but there's no longer a tidal flow through the Charles River, which is a dramatic difference that we'll see later on.

Vivienne Charpentier 13:17

And you said that we're a couple 100 yards kind of inland from the Charles River now. So, at the point that the pump house was built, obviously that was the end of the of the land of the Muddy River. How did that change or why did that change?

Peter Drummey 13:36

That changed essentially because there was this idea that there should be designed, manmade park land along the border of the Charles River that also the seawall they had built to protect buildings in the Back Bay, in fact, made it the water in the Charles River very turbulent. It created waves, essentially the water hitting this seawall. So early in the 20th century, it was redesigned so the land was filled in to slope down to the river and create not actually a beach, although other places people did swim along the Charles River at that time. But in any case, they just wanted to make a an area you could walk along a park land along the river, you could walk along which was between the seawall and the buildings that overlooked the Charles River on the Boston side and the edge of the water. So they widened this land quite a bit then and then later on in the 20th century, they built a roadway along that, and the idea is building the roadway Storrow Drive, as we call it, along the edge of the Esplanade, which is what we call the park land on on the river there was the idea that all the land that was taken from the park by building the roadway had to be replaced by new filled in land. So, they shifted the park further out into the river when they built Storrow Drive. And that's part of the story of the Back Bay too, because when they first proposed this roadway along the river, people living in the Back Bay had the sort of, perhaps not political power, but the cultural power, to stop them from interfering with a park that was very pleasing, sort of right in their backyard.

Vivienne Charpentier 15:39

Peter, could you describe where we are again?

Peter Drummey 15:41

Yes, we're on the bank of the Charles River. We're on land that was created in the 1940s and '50s to replace a previous park, which was closer to the building of the Back Bay, and when they built Storrow Drive a roadway along the edge of the built up Back Bay in the 1950s the decision was made that all of the previous parkland, the Esplanade along the river, would be replaced by another park on the outside of Storrow Drive. So, where we're standing looking, we can see infilling behind a seawall from the 1860s. Infilling to make a park along the riverbank. At the end of the 19th century, then that land being taken for a roadway and a new park being made again along the riverbank, but this new park, designed by Arthur Shurcliff, a landscape architect and designer for the city of Boston, filled the space with a more gradual decline to the river and also a series of essentially lagoons, artificial lagoons, protected by artificial islands or peninsulas, so that the water right at the water's edge would be calm. So, we have encroached three times on the Charles River in the 19th century, early in the 20th century, and then again in mid-20th century.

Vivienne Charpentier 17:18

So, you were describing the seawall that we were looking at for people listening who obviously can't see what we're describing to the land side of Storrow Drive, there's a seawall that rises up somewhere between six and maybe eight or nine feet above the ground. And originally that was the end of the filled land. Of course now there's the several lanes of Storrow Drive and then the park. When they had that original seawall, obviously there was filled land. When they started building past that towards the Charles River again, how did they go about that?

Peter Drummey 17:54

In an interesting way, there was trouble in rowing, and there were people swimming in the river. The water was so choppy that often be there'd be like wooden cages that there are protections that swim within, so that'd be buffered from the waves. So what happened is the seawall, which was, we only see the top of it, it was very tall, 10 or 12 feet tall, at least, because that's when, before the Charles River was dammed, the tidal flow in and out of the Charles River would be maybe 10 feet, so had to be taller than that for especially high tides. That was completely covered the the original seawall was completely covered when they built the first park along it. It's large granite blocks on wooden pilings, like the buildings they're built here to Back Bay, but to form essentially both a protection against waves, but also a wall as a containing wall for the fill on the other side of it. So, they covered that over to make a more pleasing aspect, and then sloped. Instead of having this abrupt change of the seawall, sloped it down to the riverbank. And what happened is, when they

added on the roadway and then built another park, they continued to have this sort of sloping ground to it. But altogether, they've taken a substantial portion of the width of the Charles River and this part of the city for made land, so to speak. In fact, there are old plans that are really quite wonderful for the Back Bay that have go both ways. There are plans that include artificial islands built out in the Charles River for no functional purpose, but just to be pleasing to look out upon. Never happened. There's a wonderful book Unbuilt Boston where all these extravagant plans that never came into being, but even perhaps more wonderful after filling in the Back Bay one of the ideas was where the main thoroughfare, the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, is they were going to have a large an artificially made reflecting pool. So, they're going to fill in the land and then return part of at least to water in a reflecting pool, because that would be pleasing for the houses that looked out upon it. If your house didn't look out upon the river, and looking out upon the river in the 19th century might have been a less attractive and less appealing, because there were all these concerns about not just health, which really were important, but also concerns about just having a stench and having all sorts it was being used, essentially as an open sewer, so so people would be able to look at an artificial lagoon within the Back Bay, rather than have to gaze out on the river bank.

Vivienne Charpentier 17:54

We talked a little bit on our walk about Commonwealth Ave, and I'm sure we'll talk a bit more about it. But that idea of making the area as pleasing to look at, as beautiful to look at for sort of the new wealthy inhabitants of the area is really interesting. And even though the current park is obviously accessible to a lot more people, I think you can sort of see how that idea of making green spaces for the upper class trickled down a little bit to having this green space for all the residents of Boston who live around here, anybody who's visiting.

Peter Drummey 19:47

Exactly right because the original Park along the river that Charles bank was interesting because there were carriage houses and small buildings behind the very handsome houses that face onto Beacon Street. But on the riverside there was a fairly narrow the width of the highway park. And it's hard to think it was public, but it was kind of people's backyard. And I think the people who lived along in this part of the Back Bay sort of treated it as their domain. And so that was the reason, when it came to making a roadway along the bank, the first attempt to do that failed. The people here were politically well connected and socially important, and their resistance to having essentially a highway, even a highway from early in the 20th century, which would be suspect more pleasing parkway, was too much, so they built the extended the park,

but not build at that time the highway. The highway came in essentially 20 years later, when it was automobiles had simply gained an access to downtown and your car had become important. And the irony is, the highway is named Storrow Drive after James Storrow, who was really the advocate of the park, and so he ended up with the highway through the park named for him.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:54
As we wandered through the neighborhood, we also stopped to examine some of the monuments along Commonwealth Avenue.

Vivienne Charpentier 23:01
So right now we're standing on Commonwealth Ave at the site of the Firefighters Memorial.

Peter Drummey 23:09
This is an important memorial in Boston, but it also has a symbolic importance beyond its essentially salute to nine firefighters killed in nearby at the Vendome Hotel and a wall collapse after a fire in this hotel, now apartments along Commonwealth Avenue. A very large, elegant building that was built in the 19th century. There was a fire at the end of the afternoon, multiple alarm fire that there was control over it essentially put out two fire companies. That is engines from two firehouses here in Boston remain to make sure the fire was put out, and the one of the walls of the hotel had been destabilized and collapsed on them, essentially annihilating two fire companies. And this happened in 1972 and it was an event, a shocking event, in the scale of it, especially in firefighting community, which is kind of a well, then a brotherhood, but, but essentially a community. And there was a movement, essentially right away, to have a memorial to them. And they were right along this happened right along Commonwealth Avenue. And in fact, Commonwealth Avenue is more than simply a roadway and a park, but in fact, a neighborhood. The local community that is people living along here, resisted this monument being put here. And it wasn't until 1995 that the time and the character of the neighborhood changed somewhat, that it was unveiled. And this is a long time for something a tragedy in city life, and shows that people can sort of, I'm not judging, but people can think of their neighborhood concerns as being essentially more important than the larger community the city they live in. So, I think it's as a modern monument, names on black, smooth granite wall and a place to sit. I think it's very successful, but it's sort of like it's a bigger story than simply its design or but its placement is essentially what's going. It's not that I think anybody thought there shouldn't be a monument, but in this

ground of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, that was essentially what was being objected to. I may be oversimplifying that argument, but that's how it's I think, I think, rightly remembered.

Peter Drummey 25:47

We're standing before the statue of William Lloyd Garrison, which is interesting because Garrison a radical abolitionist, a person who burnt the Constitution at a Fourth of July abolitionist picnic as saying that, essentially, the American federal government was in league with enslavers. Outside society here in Boston, nevertheless, over the course of his life, became a person who's doubly celebrated here, one by a statue in the Back Bay. He's seated, and I think he has, if I remember correctly, he has his papers down there behind him. He's famously the editor of an abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. It's also the case that his name is inscribed in Copley Square on the Boston Public Library. So here he is celebrated twice in a and he's not from Boston, but lives here most of his life, and then in Roxbury, but it's where people are no longer who are celebrated through statues are no longer necessarily military or political leaders, and they're also, I think in most cases there's some interesting exceptions, people associated with Boston.

Peter Drummey 27:17

Along the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, there are some modern statues, including a really interesting monument to the American historian Samuel Eliot Morison, who's a Bostonian through and through and had a long career teaching at Harvard University, but is associated with the sea. Very famously, he wrote a biography of Christopher Columbus that won a Pulitzer Prize, and then on a sailing ship, sort of recreated and reenacted the Columbus voyages to the New World. Later on, he was not the official in the sense of working for the Navy, but the historian authorized historian of the US Navy in the Second World War in a multi-volume set which is both complete and wonderfully well written. I think he thought of himself as more like the romantic historians of the 19th century, as being both a historian and literary man, a writer history as a romantic art, to think of it. But what he's best known of people of a previous generation is wrote with Henry Steele Commager, essentially the standard high school textbook for generations, not a single generation, but a book in use over a very long period of time. So essentially told the story he and Commager design divided the historical epic of America and to Morrison did the first part Commager the latter part. But they kind of shaped how more than one generation of Americans understood the history of the United States. Is not a man without flaw. He was somebody who, I suspect, partly to accommodate textbooks having a national audience, was careful, maybe too, certainly too careful about what he had to say about race and slavery, simply so books would not be rejected in a whole arc of the United States. That

changed later on in his career and later editions, but certainly not in a way that's appropriate with how we understand the American story, but an interesting person, and the statue itself is wonderful because his figure is seated on a big almost like a piece of a ledge, wearing a sou'wester a kind of heavy duty of rain gear to wear at sea. So, he's captured as the sailor historian, as I think both people knew him to be, and he liked to be known as. He didn't actually live in this part of Boston. He lived not a long way away, but at the foot of Beacon Hill. But it's sort of like it's part of that having someone placed here as a recognition of their importance to both Boston history and the national story.

Vivienne Charpentier 30:27
We are now at the Boston Women's Memorial. Peter, could you tell us a little bit more about that? I know you said it's one of the more recent monuments along Commonwealth Ave.

Peter Drummey 30:36
I think this might be the most recent monument. It was unveiled in 2003. So, it's not a single figure, but three figures, Abigail Adams from the 18th century and Phillis Wheatley, both people who either lived in or were very close at hand to Boston. Lucy Stone from the 19th century, lived over the long course in 19th century, an advocate of abolition and especially of women's rights. They're all people who, through their writings, either explicitly 'Remember the ladies,' in the case of Abigail Adams, Phyllis Wheatley, an enslaved young woman celebrating her work through poetry and Lucy Stone, the editor of *The Woman's Journal*, an important advocate of feminist ideas and civil rights for women in the 19th century, but really interesting people. I'm also proud of the fact that the members of the Massachusetts Historical Society assisted in the historical research behind this monument, and I was here when it was unveiled, and it was a wonderful event. And it's sort of in a relatively short period of time, more than 20 years now, but nevertheless, it sort of fits very easily into this landscape. It has bronze figures in different poses of all three, and it also has blocks of granite with passages from their writings on them. But it's actually, it's one of those monuments that it's now so familiar to people that I'm I think people now walk by simply as a wayfaring rather than to sort of appreciate it. It does occasionally have confusion arises. I know there are tour books that have this address and the infill Back Bay of Boston as the birthplace or the residence of Phillis Wheatley, and this was a tidal lagoon when she was alive and living in Boston. But the statue being here gets confused with where she was herself, which is not uncommon I think.

Vivienne Charpentier 32:38

We are now standing at the briefly misplaced statue of Domingo Sarmiento. Peter, could you tell us a bit more?

Peter Drummey 32:58

Domingo Sarmiento is an educational reformer in Argentina, who later is the President of Argentina, a very important person in the history of Argentina, but someone who looked to Horace Mann, the educational reformer from Massachusetts, as a sort of model of how schools could be developed and improved in Argentina in the 19th century. They're not contemporaries. Horace Mann is older, and dies as a relatively young man, but nevertheless, the people in Argentina have this association of Sarmiento with Horace Mann in the United States. In the 1920s, in honor of this connection, Argentina offered a statue of Sarmiento for Boston and Mayor [James Michael] Curley agreed to this was flattered at this international attention. The problem was the statue didn't actually come to Boston for another 60 years. Arrived here in the 1970s and was installed here in 1973. It's different in character, more modern than most of the statues along Commonwealth Avenue, and I confess, probably the one that passersby are least familiar with who the person is, and it's also something that caused, I think, a serious debate, not unwelcoming, but just to sort of think is, is the statue available to a large enough audience to be placed here? And if it wasn't placed here, where in Boston, would be an appropriate place for it? There was an argument that it should be on the grounds of the Massachusetts State House, which have other monuments and statues on them, but this decision was made. It's at the end of the main part of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall. I don't think that's sort of putting him at the back of the line, but simply where there was space available for it. But it's an interesting decision to make, and it had to be made sort of ad hoc, because someone who was working as an advisor to the city government told me the first people he thought in city government knew of this is when the custom service here in Boston called up and said, 'Your statue is here.' And literally no one knew of then present in city government knew of it. And then there became kind of this ad hoc attempt to decide what to do with this really quite remarkable gift.

Vivienne Charpentier 35:36

So, you talked a bit about the sort of culture, a little bit of Commonwealth Ave. When we're looking around, there's all these beautiful, beautiful buildings, brownstones, kind of elegant, elegant facades on these buildings. As an outside perception, you would be inclined to think that most of the people who live in

these places might be living kind of large. It's kind of a luxurious, rich area. Would you say that's an accurate statement, or was it true in the past, and it's changed?

Peter Drummey 36:11

It's one of these wonderful stories that if you think of this being built towards the end of 19th century, over 150 years, it's changed not just once, but several times. So certainly, very important social address when built out and built out an interesting way, sort of a block every 15 or 20 years. So, there's always open land and things under construction further along through the 19th century. But very elegant and and a prominent address to have a numbered address along Commonwealth Avenue, and people moving from social elite moving here, so build it. You know, not just new money, but old money that wants a larger, grander house, an address designed by distinguished architect in the 19th century. So that all happens, that's true. And some of these buildings have essentially remained in family hands, single family living on a very grand scale, because these these buildings can be enormous, that is but most of them between then and now have been either divided up, first into apartments and later into condominiums, simply people living again in an at an elegant address, in a large building, but living in part of it. And then a lot of them have become had taken on other functions, schools, residences for students, clubs and organizations have addresses along here. And some of these, it's hard to imagine before they were a social club, it was a single family's address. Now social historian, a member of the Historical Society named Ray Robinson, was working on a book on this, and he thought, when this was divided buildings, he had the insight that if you went back and looked at a census from the end of the 19th century, when this was first built out, you would have a number of people, both a family and maybe a larger family in the 19th century, and all of their servants living in address. So, you'd have a number, and then when the building was divided up into apartments or condominiums, you'd have essentially the same number of people living under the roof. They would just be living in a very different way from one to the other. And the scale of like the kitchen, you know, this is a these are the place where people would have a cook to cook for the servants and a chef to cook for the family. I'm exaggerating that some, but it's that's essentially the sensibility of it. So, there are places that I think went from being and a lot of early restaurant life in Boston was in clubs, restaurants, commercial restaurants came through hotels and maybe a little later than they did in other places. But here, a social club would have dining and so the dining facility for serving a family turned out to be adequate in space and material for having essentially a restaurant size number of guests at one time. That can be beautiful places because there's space between the avenues, back alley, so to speak, you can have light in to the building from more than just the front of it, and some of them have built glassed in rooms in them, many are modernized in a really kind of spectacular way, space

opened up within them. But there are other ones that retain an interior that's perfectly in keeping with the facade that is the same, even the same architect would design furnishings, often the built in furnishings in a building.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 39:53
Back at the MHS, we asked Vivienne about this experience. So, Vivienne what was it like to after having done a lot of research on the Back Bay, go out and walk it with Peter, and have Peter tell you about all the features that we can still see today?

Vivienne Charpentier 40:12
Really, really interesting because, again, Peter is a wealth of knowledge, and it's one thing to read and kind of understand the different areas that were developed, or the process of developing is another thing altogether to look at them and be standing there and have Peter say, 'Okay, so where we're standing now was the edge of Back Bay at one point,' or to say, you know, like 'This retaining wall that's now on the inside side of Storrow Drive was the edge of Back Bay.' Like I think that was the major thing for me, was seeing those landmarks of how it kept going further and further out, which I think was especially interesting to me because I think of the Charles River now is huge. It's extremely wide. It's a very wide river. And we're standing at these points, it used to be what, like twice as wide, almost before everything got filled in. So that was really interesting to me, to think about that the Charles River is big as it is now, before we started developing it must have been, like, absolutely massive, and that's something that's kind of hard to picture as well for me, but I think that was definitely the the most interesting thing for me was seeing okay, like, if I was standing here 200 years ago, I'd be underwater, or I'd be stuck in the muck.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 41:37
[Outro music fades in] The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Vivienne Charpentier, a 2025 Dean W. Eastman undergraduate library resident at the MHS. Peter Drummey, Chief Historian at the MHS, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please, rate review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.