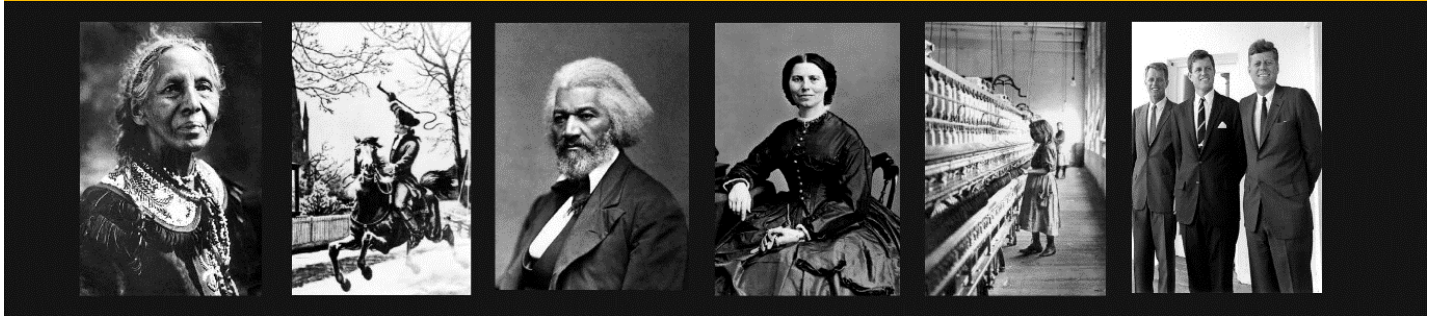


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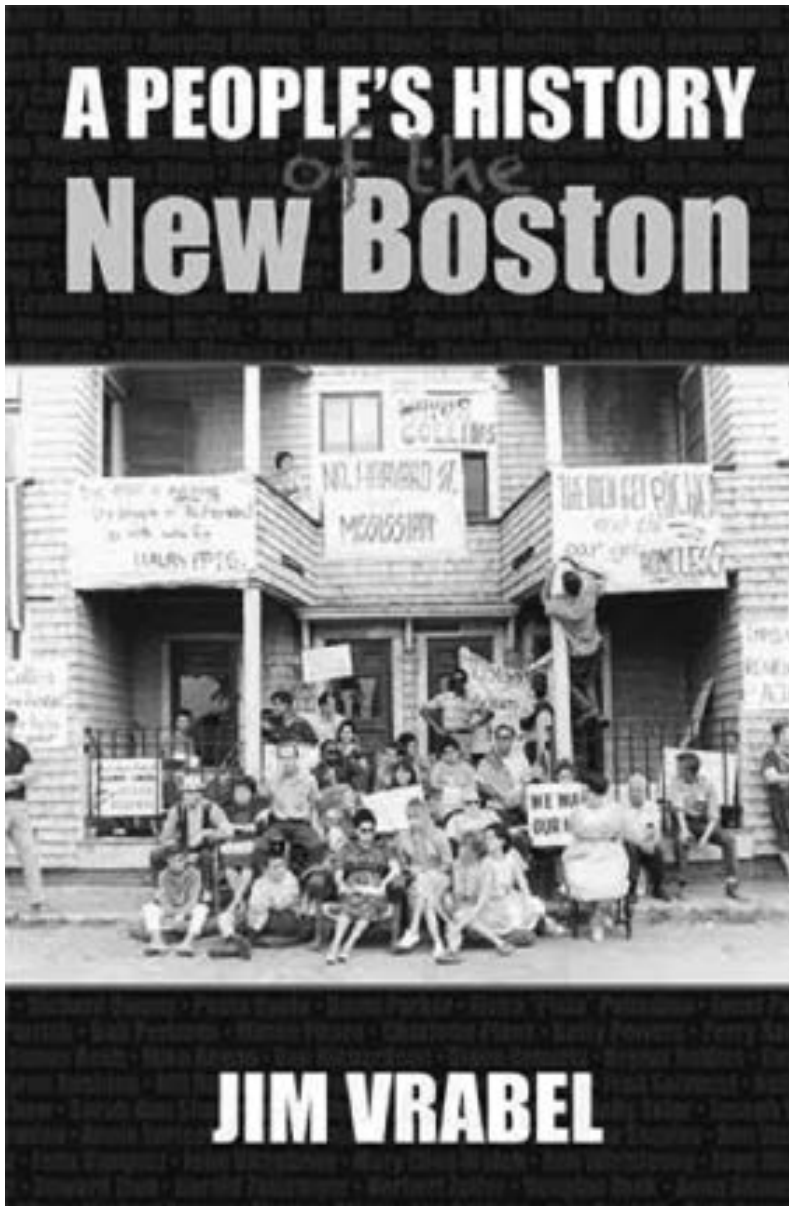


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EDITOR'S CHOICE

The New Boston: A People's History

JIM VRABEL



Editor's Introduction: *Our Editor's Choice book selection for this issue is A People's History of the New Boston by Jim Vrabel, published by the University of Massachusetts Press (2014). Although today Boston is a vibrant and thriving city, the mid-twentieth century was characterized by decades of economic decline and political and cultural stagnation. From 1925 to 1950, the city lost a quarter of its tax base. During the 1950s, it lost residents faster than any other major city in the country.*

Credit for the city's turnaround is often given to a select group of "civic leaders." Vrabel documents how numerous community activists were also responsible for, and should be equally credited with, creating the "new" Boston so many enjoy today. This book provides a wonderful, grassroots perspective on the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, when residents of the city's neighborhoods engaged in an era of activism and protest unprecedented in Boston since the American Revolution.

Vrabel describes the demonstrations, sit-ins, picket lines, boycotts, and contentious negotiations through which community members exerted their influence on the city that was being rebuilt around them. He includes in-depth and revealing case histories of the fights against urban renewal, highway construction, and airport expansion; documents the struggles to achieve civil rights, school desegregation, and welfare reform; and explores the social conflicts and controversies generated by the Vietnam War. Jim Vrabel is a longtime community activist and historian. A People's History of the New Boston fills in a significant gap in our understanding of Boston's transformation over the last fifty years.

* * * * *

Boston, today, is seen as one of America's best cities—one that works for its residents, generates jobs, welcomes visitors, remembers its past, and embraces its future. But this latest incarnation of what the Massachusetts Bay Colony's first governor, John Winthrop, called the "City upon a Hill" is a fairly recent one. The "New Boston" only came into being in the second half of the twentieth century. The "Old Boston" that preceded it didn't work very well for anyone, and was described as a "hopeless backwater" and "tumbled-down has-been" of a city.¹

Credit for building the New Boston usually goes to a small group of "city fathers"—all of them men, all of them white, and most of them well-off. That story usually focuses on the bricks-and-mortar improvements made to the city's downtown.

But that is only half of the story. As the late, great, and very local journalist Alan Lupo wrote, the building of the New Boston was really "a tale of two cities." "One city was that newer Boston, brimming with confidence, attracting money and the middle class, [the other] the old Boston, increasingly angry . . . at what it perceived to be an insensitive government . . . and distrustful now of all outsiders, preachers, planners, reformers, and do-gooders."²

A People's History of the New Boston attempts to tell the other half of the story. It gives credit to many more people—women as well as men; black, brown, and yellow as well as white; the poor and working class as well as the well-off. This story focuses on how those people made Boston a more humane and a morally better city, and it extends to Boston's neighborhoods.

This book also attempts to explain how they made Boston better—by engaging in an era of activism and protest the likes of which the city hadn't seen since the fight for abolition and, prior to that, the beginnings of the American Revolution. Like that revolution, this one was directed at

an insensitive or inept government and selfish business interests. That first revolution, however, was directed at a king, a parliament, and companies an ocean away. This one took aim at government and business interests here at home. That first revolution gave birth to a new nation, conceived in liberty and equality. This one helped make a city much more of, by, and for its people.

* * * * *

Boston has a long history when it comes to activism and protest. It was founded in 1630 by Winthrop and others who were out to purify Protestantism. After Boston's early activists sparked the revolution that gave the United States its political independence in the eighteenth century, the city's preachers, philosophers, and writers helped the country achieve its spiritual and intellectual independence in the early nineteenth century. Boston was a hotbed of abolitionism and strongly supported the effort to preserve the union in the middle of that century. It was very much involved in the labor, temperance, and suffrage movements at the end of it. But in the twentieth century, just as the city's economic fortunes declined, so did its involvement in activism and protest.

In the 1950s, by the time the Great Depression and World War II were over, the people of Boston—like those in the rest of the country—seemed interested in nothing more than going back to work, raising their families, and getting on with their lives. Conformity, not confrontation, was the order of the day, and politics had less to do with protest than personalities.

"Politics was all very familial back then," recalled Neil Savage, who grew up in Roslindale, lives in West Roxbury, and is the author of *Extraordinary Tenure: Massachusetts and the Making of the Nation*:

Political offices were often seen as 'belonging' to certain families. If you knew the family, you worked on their campaigns. Voting was seen as a civic obligation, and winning candidates were obliged to do what they could for their supporters. The only people who didn't like the way things were run back then were the 'reformers' and 'do-gooders,' mostly liberals and women, who thought it was a corrupt system. But as far as demonstrations, well, they were for radicals. It just wasn't done.³

"Bostonians had developed a docile attitude toward government, especially city government," added Henry Lee, a Beacon Hill Brahmin who,

much to his own surprise, became an activist himself in the 1970s. “You didn’t know what was going on, and even if you did, you didn’t feel like you had any say in it.”⁴

“City Hall wasn’t a place to fight back then,” agreed Gerry Burke. He grew up in Jamaica Plain, and his family has long operated Doyle’s, a tavern where politics is always the favorite topic of conversation. “City Hall was a place to get a job or to ask for a favor, not a place to fight. There were no ‘issues’ back then. There was no such thing as ‘activism.’”⁵ That began to change, though, in the 1960s—and even those who changed it point to different reasons why.

Moe Gillen of Charlestown attributed it to the large number of military veterans who had returned home to Boston after World War II and Korea. “They had been at D-Day and Inchon and were going to do what was right. A mere politician didn’t scare them.”⁶

Dan Richardson of Roxbury claimed, “All the issues of the times created us . . . created the circumstances that allowed us to do what we did . . . to foment protest around urban renewal and civil rights . . . and plans to build new highways through the city.”⁷

Tom Corrigan, back then a young priest working in Jamaica Plain, called John F. Kennedy’s election as president “the catalyst for a lot of the activism in Boston. His election excited a lot of people.”⁸

Fred Salvucci of Brighton maintained, “The Vietnam War was a big part of it all. People had been in the habit of thinking that government knew more than they did. But the Vietnam War changed all that. The war was this giant red sign that said government doesn’t always know what it is doing . . . and that sometimes we knew better than government what the right thing to do was.”⁹

That last notion—that sometimes the people knew better—appears to have been the common denominator in all the protest that followed. Some of that protest and activism was directed against a government that tried to force people to accept flawed plans, policies, or programs; some at the failure by government to provide them with the services they needed and deserved. Some of it involved fights for social and economic justice or against U.S. foreign policy. Some was directed at landlords or developers or big companies who put profit over people. One of those protests was directed at a federal court that tried to tell people how to live their lives.

Some of the battles were simple cases of a good, grassroots us against a bad, monolithic them. Some were more complicated. They divided people into factions of “militants,” or “moderates,” or “conservatives,” and pitted people of goodwill against one another. Some of the protests were successful,

in whole or in part; some were not. Most of those involved conducted themselves nobly; some did not.

But all of the protest and activism sprang from a desire on the part of the people to gain more power over their lives and to make Boston better—and, in most cases, they succeeded.

This book is a selective history. It contains only some of the many remarkable stories of protest, and profiles only some of the many activists who took part in this tumultuous chapter of the city's recent history. Each story deserves its own book.

It is a collective and a collaborative history, one assembled as much as written, from interviews with those who took part in it, from stories by the journalists who covered it, and from the books written by historians since then.

It is sometimes a detailed history, in order to explain what sparked so much protest and to show how people were able to improve on those details.

It is a partisan history, and assesses the city's leaders, particularly its mayors, through the somewhat narrow lens of how willing they were to listen to the people of Boston and share power with them.

The book is a roughly chronological history. It tells each story in the order it began, follows that story to its climax, then doubles back to tell the next one. There was so much protest over so many different things at the same time that maintaining a strict chronological narrative proved impossible.

Finally, this is a collected history. Some of these stories have been told before and some have not. Gathering them together here, I hope, will illustrate what the longtime community activist Mel King has called the "chain of change" that made the New Boston the city it has become.

BOSTON'S DECLINE 1920–50

"Boston is a dead city, living in the past. If you want to be successful in any business, get out of Boston."¹⁰ As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, this was the kind of advice being given young entrepreneurs in the Old Boston. Boston wasn't the only dead city in the United States at the time. Many of them, especially older cities in the Northeast and Midwest, were struggling against powerful forces that they had to confront if they wanted to survive. But a case could be made that Boston was "deader" than most.

Part of the reason for Boston's demise was economic. As Alexander Ganz, the research director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, explained, "The Depression that lasted from ten to twenty years elsewhere lasted thirty years here."¹¹ Boston's original economy, the one that made the city the

primary U.S. port from colonial days until the 1830s, had been based on shipping and trade. That economy was eventually replaced by one based on manufacturing and trade, as the city imported raw materials for the textile, shoe, and garment mills throughout New England, and then exported their finished products. After World War I, those industries fell prey to competition from the non-union South and from overseas, where labor was much cheaper.¹² After World War II, the new economy that was emerging was based on something called “high technology,” but those new high-tech companies were bypassing Boston for the suburbs, where land was cheaper and the labor force better educated.

By 1950, Boston had lost a quarter of its tax base over the previous twenty-five years.¹³ Its tax rate was the highest of any major city in the country, and its bond rating one of the lowest. Only a handful of new office buildings had been built since the Depression—the most recent the “Old John Hancock Building” in 1947. In 1956, the city’s skyline was so unprepossessing that the dean of the business school at Boston College recalled flying into Logan Airport, looking out of the window of his plane, and wondering, “Where’s Boston?”¹⁴

Part of the reason for the city’s demise was demographic. In 1950, Boston’s population peaked at 800,000 and over the next ten years it lost more than 100,000 residents, the biggest drop of any major city in the country.¹⁵ Long before, most of the wealthy had left Boston, fleeing before the waves of arriving immigrants. Now it was the turn of the middle class, drawn to suburbs made suddenly affordable by federally backed mortgages and accessible by federally funded highways. Most of those remaining in Boston were poor and working class, which prompted Murray Levin, a Boston University professor, to write, “The traditional image of Boston as the city of old-world charm and elegant living is replaced by one of rooming houses, tenements, and slums.”¹⁶

Part of the reason for the city’s demise was political. “The Brahmins who built Boston had all but abandoned it to the politicians,” an article in *Newsweek* would later state.¹⁷ That abandonment had started all the way back in 1910, when John F. Fitzgerald, grandfather of John F. Kennedy, defeated the Yankee banker James Jackson Storrow to become mayor and put the Irish in charge of running the city. Ever since, mayoral candidates had cultivated ethnic and class conflicts in order to appeal to an electorate now made up primarily of not only the poor and the working class but also recent immigrants.

No one was a better cultivator than James Michael Curley, who succeeded Fitzgerald as mayor in 1914. A large man and grandiloquent orator, Curley was born and raised in Roxbury, the son of Irish immigrants. When his father



Politics, Old-Boston Style

James Michael Curley, the dominant figure in Boston politics for forty years, served four terms as mayor and two terms in prison. Undated photo.

died, the ten-year-old Curley, after graduating from the Dearborn Grammar School, went to work, and the career that he ended up choosing was politics.

Curley, who dominated the politics of the Old Boston for forty years, served four terms as mayor, four terms in Congress, one term as governor, and two terms in jail. To some, he was the “Mayor of the Poor,” a public servant who built roads and bridges, beaches and bath houses, health clinics and a new city hospital that provided services and created jobs to make life a little better for his struggling constituents. But to others, he was the “Rascal

King,” a profiteer who took a commission for himself on every municipal contract he signed.

Curley’s behavior in office was so egregious that, in 1918, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law prohibiting the mayor of Boston from serving consecutive terms, which forced him to leave the office frequently. But he managed to return to it every decade. Eventually, however, Curley’s ability to prosper politically and financially ended when the public investment he so expertly manipulated dried up after World War II. The city suffered because, thanks to Curley’s class-baiting politics and the corruption that had so alienated Boston’s business community, there was no private investment to take its place. “Curley had lived off the Yankee-Irish animosity, which he cultivated for his own political ends,” recalled Henry Lee of Beacon Hill. “It should have died fifty years before that.”¹⁸ The fact that it didn’t was a big reason for Old Boston’s demise.

THE NEW BOSTON: ELECTION DAY 1949

The birth date of the New Boston is usually celebrated as Election Day, November 8, 1949. That’s when the seventy-four-year-old James Michael Curley was denied reelection to a fifth four-year term as mayor. (The Massachusetts Legislature had repealed the law prohibiting the mayor from serving consecutive terms in 1938, under the mistaken impression that Curley’s time had passed.) The man who defeated Curley in the 1949 mayoral race was John Hynes, whose background was similar to Curley’s but who was unlike him in every other way.

Hynes, too, was the son of Irish immigrants. He was born in the South End and grew up in Dorchester, and he, too, had had to leave school and go to work. In Hynes’s case, he left the Mary Hemenway School at fourteen after his mother died. But Hynes was twenty years younger than Curley and so “shy and unassuming” that he was called Whispering Johnny.¹⁹ Rather than run for office, Hynes had become a career civil servant. He did serve briefly as acting mayor of Boston—while Curley was serving time in federal prison on a postal fraud conviction—but probably wouldn’t have run for the office if Curley hadn’t boasted on his return from prison, “I have accomplished more in one day than has been done in the five months of my absence.”²⁰

As Curley’s biographer, Jack Beatty, described it, “A corrupt mayor, a corrupt City Council, a corrupt press, a swollen city payroll, a dying city economy, and the highest taxes beneath the wandering moon: such was the Boston scene as the 1949 election began.”²¹ During the campaign, the contrast between the two men was striking. The combative Curley derided



New Captain, New Course

Boston elected John Hynes as mayor in 1949, effectively ending the Curley era and style of running the city, which was in continued economic doldrums after the war. Undated photo.

Hynes as a “little city clerk” and “the Republican candidate of the State Street wrecking crew.” The mild-mannered Hynes promised to “Restore Dignity to Boston” and guaranteed a “clean, honest and efficient administration.”²² On Election Day, the people of Boston showed they were tired of corruption and combat and ready for manners and honesty. They elected Hynes with 138,000 votes to 126,000 for Curley, and in doing so set not only a new tone but also a new direction for the city.



Landmark of the New Boston

The Prudential Tower, constructed in 1964, was emblematic of a changing landscape and outlook in Boston. Mayor John Hynes was instrumental in persuading the insurance company to construct its new headquarters building in the city. Undated photo.

In that same election, the people also voted for a new city charter; it replaced the sometimes corrupt and always parochial city council, to which twenty-two members had been elected by ward, with a nine-member body elected at-large in hopes its members would spend less time looking out for themselves and the narrow interests of their district and more time looking out for the city as a whole. But as an unintended result of this change, greater voter turnout in wards around the edges of the city yielded more representation than their populations deserved, and the less politically active neighborhoods in the city's inner core got none at all.

The new charter also increased the power of the already-powerful office of mayor, which had been described after the last such change as a "municipal monarchy." The hope here was that by giving a mayor not named Curley more power—a woman would not appear on the mayoral ballot until 1967—he might be able to bring the dead city back to life.

In making the charter change, the people of Boston were making a leap of faith—one that some would come to regret. Because if they ever wanted any of that power back—as they soon would—they would have to either fight whoever was mayor to get it or else elect someone who was willing to share it.

In John Hynes the people elected a mayor who wasn't so much interested in wielding power as in mending fences. The fences he sought most to mend were those that divided "the people who 'owned' Boston (the Brahmin business community) from the people who 'ran' it" (the Irish-Catholic politicians).²³ Thomas O'Connor's *Building a New Boston: Politics and Urban Renewal, 1950 to 1970* is the best account of how the new mayor tried to do that.

Hynes set out first to win the business community's confidence by streamlining city government and reducing the waste and corruption that had been part of it for so long. This won him the community of the people of Boston, too. In 1951, they responded by reelecting him in the early election called for by the new charter. Once again, Curley was his opponent. But this time Hynes beat him by an almost two-to-one margin, 154,000 votes to 76,000. It was during the 1951 campaign that Hynes's vision for the city began to emerge, and he began to use the "New Boston" slogan for which he and the city would thereafter become known.

In his second term, Hynes continued to court the business community to become a partner in that vision, and he took advantage of the recently established Boston College Citizens Seminars to do it.²⁴ On October 26, 1954, he delivered a speech titled "Boston, Whither Goest Thou." Although his rhetoric was less than soaring, Hynes declared that the "most efficacious, the most logical and the quickest way [out of the] morass in which we find

ourselves” was “to broaden the present tax base of the city . . . by tearing down old structures and the building of new ones.”²⁵

In trying to build Boston back to health, Hynes spent the rest of his tenure cultivating not conflict but rather what the political scientist John Mollenkopf later called the “pro-growth coalition” of government and business leaders, labor unions, and newspaper publishers.²⁶ His biggest single success came when persuaded the Prudential Insurance Company to locate its regional headquarters in Boston and construct what would become at that time the tallest building in the United States outside of New York City. But Hynes’s broadest impact came from hitching Boston’s wagon to the star of a new federal program called urban renewal.

In doing this, Hynes did more than set a new direction for the city. He shifted the balance of power away from the neighborhoods, where it had resided since the Irish politicians had wrested control of the city from the Brahmins fifty years earlier, and back to the downtown interests that Curley had called the “State Street wrecking crew.” Hynes was reelected in 1955, defeating Massachusetts State Senate President John E. Powers of South Boston by 124,000 votes to 111,000. But the fairly narrow margin of his victory suggested that a significant number of people in the New Boston weren’t entirely happy with that shift.

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Notes

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