Omni Parker House: A Brief History

Mention the name "Omni Parker House," and a century and a half of rich and varied history comes to mind. Founded by Harvey D. Parker in 1855, the Omni Parker House — located at the junction of Tremont and School streets — is the oldest of Boston's elegant inns, and the longest continuously operating hotel in the United States. It was here where the brightest lights of America's Golden Age of Literature — writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Longfellow — regularly met for conversation and conviviality in the legendary nineteenth century Saturday Club. It was here where baseball greats like Babe Ruth and Ted Williams wined, dined, and unwound. And it was here, too, where generations of local and national politicians — including Ulysses S. Grant, James Michael Curley, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and William Jefferson Clinton — assembled for private meetings, press conferences, and power breakfasts.

With its close proximity to Boston's Theater District, the Omni Parker House also played an important role for thespians. Many of the nineteenth century's finest actors made the Parker House a home away from home, including Charlotte Cushman, Sarah Bernhardt, Edwin Booth, and the latter's handsome, matinee-idol brother, John Wilkes. During the twentieth century, that list expanded to include stars of stage, screen, and television—including Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, Ann Magret, and Marlow Thomas.

The Parker House at the turn of the last century.

The corner of Tremont and School streets, where the Omni Parker House has stood since 1855, is almost as old as Boston itself.

In 1630, when Englishman John Winthrop and the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony first settled here, they initially named the peninsula Trimount, after the three hills — Beacon, Pemberton, and Mount Vernon — that dominated the skyline. The young colony's first church, town house, fresh-water spring, and stock and pillory were all located within two short blocks of where the Parker House stands today. Though the town was soon renamed Boston, to honor the Lincolnshire town that many had just departed, and though the three mountains were later leveled for landfill, their name lived on in the contraction, "Tremont." Tremont Street was laid out along the base of those three vintage hills and Boston Common.

Wild About Harvey

The concept of "hotel" is a fairly recent one. Hence, in colonial Boston, travelers found rest and refreshment not in hotels or motels, but at local taverns and inns. Since women were rarely on the road, colonial males generally frequented these roadside taverns. They slept in rustic shared bedrooms — and often, shared beds — after spending considerable time quaffing pints of colonial beer. Those taverns were centers for male bonding, conversation, and — in periods of unrest or revolution — secret political meetings.

As these precursors to the modern hotel developed beyond simple taprooms, they began to be known as "houses"— a gentler nomenclature for a far gentler environment. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, more and more travelers arrived in Boston by coach or ship. Lodging and dining houses proliferated throughout town, many bearing patriotic names, like the American House, the Shawmut, the Adams, and the Revere House. Boston's resident "houses" became so genteel — and sometimes, so luxurious — that even ladies were ably accommodated.

Harvey Parker (1805-1884)

In the midst of this period of expansion and change, a twenty year old farm boy named Harvey D. Parker arrived in Boston Harbor on a packet from Maine. The year was 1825, and his dilemma was real: with less than one dollar in his satchel, young Parker was in immediate need of employment. His first job, as a caretaker for a horse and cow, brought him eight dollars per month. Subsequent work as a coachman for a wealthy Watertown woman garnered somewhat more respectable earnings — and set him on a whole new career path.

Whenever Parker trotted the horse-drawn coach into Boston, the young man ate his noonday meal at a dark cellar cafe on Court Square, owned by one John E. Hunt. By 1832, the ambitious young Parker bought Hunt's cafe for $432, and renamed it Parker's Restaurant. A combination of excellent food and perfect service immediately began attracting a regular clientele of businessmen, lawyers, and newspapermen. By 1847, he took on a partner, John F. Mills. And by 1854, he was ready to embark on a much grander enterprise.

Parker's plan was to build a new, first-class hotel and restaurant at the School Street base of Beacon Hill, just down the road from the domed Massachusetts State House, Despite the competition — another popular, modern hotel directly across Tremont — Parker bought the former Mico Mansion on April 22, 1854, and razed the decrepit boarding house. In its place, Parker built an ornate, five-story, Italianate-style stone and brick hotel, faced in gleaming white marble. The first and second floors featured gracefully arched windows, while marble steps led from the sidewalk to the marble foyer within. Once inside, thick carpets and fashionable horse-hair divans completed an air of sumptuous elegance. Above the front door, an engraved sign read simply, "PARKER'S,"

The Reviews Are In

The constantly clever Oliver Wendell Homes, Sr., that self-avowed "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table"— waxed eloquent on the food and friends he encountered at this most favorite of haunts:

Such feasts! The laughs of many a pound hour
That shook the mortar from King George's tower;
Such guests! What famous names its record boasts,
Whose owners wander in the mob of ghosts!

Boston's media was also awed by what Parker wrought, A reporter for the Boston Transcript fairly raved about the establishment in an October, 1855, review:

> *This elegant new hotel, on School Street, was opened on Saturday for the inspection of the public. Several thousands of our citizens, ladies as well as gentlemen, availed themselves of the invitation, and for many hours the splendid building was literally thronged. All were surprised and delighted at the convenient arrangement of the whole establishment—the gorgeous furniture of the parlors, the extent and beauty of the dining hall, the number and different styles of the lodging rooms—and, in fact, the richness, lavish expenditure and excellent taste which abounded in every department. The house was universally judged to be a model one.*

Visiting British author Charles Dickens marveled at the splendors of Boston's finest new hotel, in a letter to his daughter:

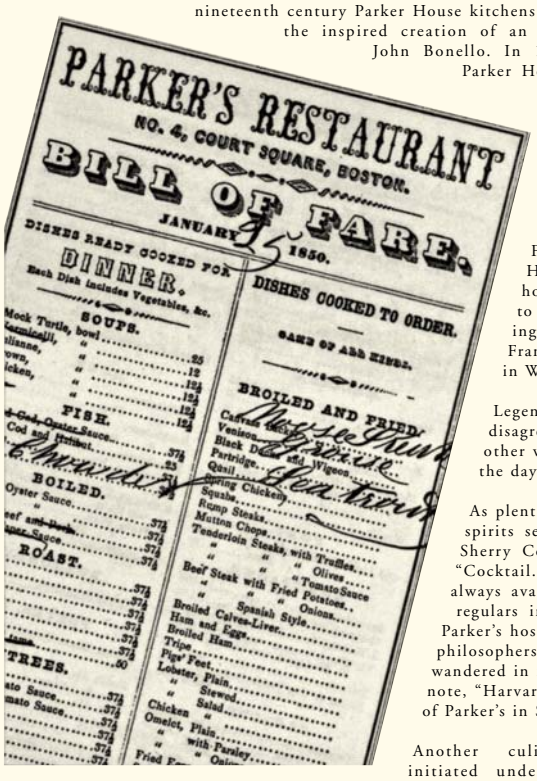
This is an immense hotel,
With all manner of white marble public
Passages and public rooms. I live in
a corner, high up, and have a hot
and cold bath in the bedroom
(connecting with the sitting room)
and comforts not in existence when I was
here before. The cost of living is enormous,
but happily we can afford it.

Food For Thought

Harvey Parker's earlier experience with Parker's Restaurant had taught him that catering to the local crowd—providing Bostonians with a fine and flexible dining experience—was equally important to his business as offering visitors architecturally elegant lodgings. Hence, in a day when a good Boston cook could be hired for eight dollars per week, or $416 a year, Parker hired the gourmet French chef Sanzian for an astonishing annual salary of $5000,

Sanzian's versatile menu drew large crowds and ongoing accolades. A typical Parker's banquet of the 1850s or '60s might include green turtle soup, ham in champagne sauce, aspic of oysters, filet of beef with mushrooms, mongrel goose, black-breast plover, charlotte russe, mince pie, and a variety of fruits, nuts, and ice creams. Among Sanzian's specialties were tomato soup, venison-chop sauce, and delicate mayonnaise, plus a distinctive method of roasting beef and fowl using a revolving spit over well-stoked coals.

From a creative point of view, Parker's was not only the best; it was frequently the first as well. Boston Cream Pie (now the official dessert of the State of Massachusetts) and lemon meringue pie, for example, were perfected and popularized in nineteenth century Parker House kitchens. The moist, fluffy, and internationally-known Parker House roll was the inspired creation of an in-house German baker named Ward, who worked under Chef John Bonello. In 1876, famed French composer Jacques Offenbach stayed at the Parker House during his U.S. tour. At his first dinner, he was served those soft, crustless rolls, which delighted him to no end. He initially hummed a tune in their praise, then began singing, "Parker rolls, Parker rolls, how I love you," to the amusement of the other diners. Later, From the start, the Parker House menus promised fine dining and innovative culinary creations. Offenbach enlarged on this theme in his only grand opera, the masterpiece *Les Contes d'Hoffmann.*


PARKER'S RESTAURANT
NO. 4, COURT SQUARE, BOSTON.
BILL OF FARE.
JANUARY 15 1850.
DISHES READY COOKED FOR DINNER.
Each Dish includes Vegetables, &c.
SOUPS.
Mock Turtle, bowl
" 25
" 12
" 12½
" 12½
" 12½
FISH.
Cod and Haddock.....37½
.....25
BOILED.
Oyster Sauce.....
" 37½
.....37½
ROAST.
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
.....60
TREES.
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
.....37½
DISHES COOKED TO ORDER.
GAME OF ALL KINDS.
BROILED AND FRIED.
Venison
Black Duck
Wigeon
Partridge
Quail
Spring Chicken
Squab
Rump Steaks
Mutton Chops
Tenderloin Steaks with Truffles
" " Olives
" " Tomato Sauce
Beef Steak with Fried Potatoes
" " Onions
" Spanish Style
Broiled Calves-Liver
Ham and Eggs
Broiled Ham
Tripe
Pigs' Feet
Lobster, Plain
" Stewed
Chicken Salad
Omelet, Plain
" with Parsley
Fried F

Legend has it that the term *scrod* also originated at Parker's. Though many disagree over its precise definition, the word is generally used for cod or other white-fleshed fish that are the youngest, freshest, smallest, or best of the day's catch. Unlike cod, haddock, or halibut, scrod is *not* a type of fish.

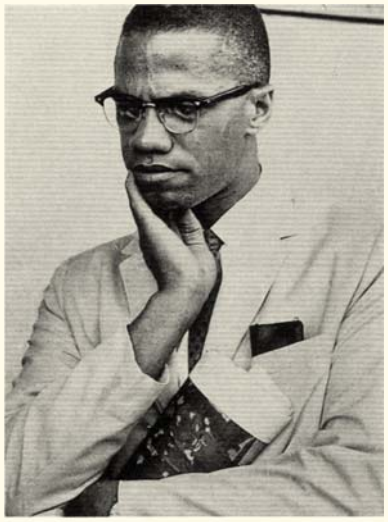
For many decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Parker House Rolls were packaged and shipped from the kitchens here to hotels, restaurants, and stores across the U.S. Today, they are still served to Omni Parker House patrons—and imitated everywhere. The rolls' ingredients, incidentally, remained a well-kept secret until 1933, when Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt requested the recipe be forwarded to them in Washington.

As plentiful and interesting as the food found in Parker's restaurant were the spirits served in its bars. Early menus list such interesting concoctions as Sherry Cobbler, Timber Doodle, Mint Julep, Gin Sling, Sangaree, and the "Cocktail." More conventional draughts of rum, whiskey, and gin were also always available, as were fine wines. As might be expected, single men were regulars in the barroom. And though all bars attract the occasional rowdy, Parker's hosted a hefty dose of merchants, businessmen, writers, politicians, and philosophers. Harvard students readily found their way across the Charles River, or wandered in from the nearby medical school, inspiring humorist Artemus Ward to note, "Harvard University was pleasantly and conveniently situated in the barroom of Parker's in School Street."

Another culinary innovation initiated under Harvey Parker, known as the "European plan," separated the charges for food and lodging. Before Parker's, American inns and hotels generally lumped room and board together in a single fee, often resulting in rigid dining schedules and uninspired, mass-produced meals. When Parker's became the first hotel in America to employ the European Plan, they made food available to guests any time of the day or evening. While the system allowed lodgers more flexibility, it also gave Parker's staff the time to develop, perfect, and personalize their varied dishes. Parker's menus, incidentally, have continually balanced what we now consider traditional New England fare—from Parker House Rolls, Boston Cream Pie, and Baked Boston Scrod to New England Clam Chowder and Pan Seared Jonah Crab Cakes—with eclectic continental cuisine.

In the nineteenth century, Harvey Parker and his successors ensured the excellence of the Parker's dining experience by hiring European chefs like Sanzian and Bonello. In the twentieth century, that tradition continued with talents such as longtime Parker's chef Joseph Ribas, and a slew of rising restaurant stars—including Jasper White, Lydia Shire, Emeril Lagasse, and Paul O'Connell— who directed or creatively cooked in Parker's kitchens while sharpening their culinary crafts.

It's interesting to note that talent and fame were not restricted to the European and American chefs who graced the Parker House kitchens. Two cultural icons and notable revolutionaries spent time on the Parker House staff: Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh served as a baker in the bakeshop from 1911 to 1913, and Malcolm Little—remembered as black activist, Malcolm X—was a busboy in the early 1940s, during the period of the Pearl Harbor invasion.



Malcolm X, then known as Malcolm Little, was a busboy at the Parker House during the time of the Pearl Harbor invasion.

Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?

Harvey Parker's commitment to superior service, fair prices, fine food and drink, and handsome surroundings drew patrons into his hotel's restaurants and bars. Equally vital to his bustling restaurant business, however, was the hotel's ideal downtown location—which all but guaranteed Parker's a clientele that included poets, philosophers, politicians, and performers.

The Tremont Theater, which hosted literary, musical, and political events, made its debut around the corner from the future Parker House site in 1828. The Boston Athenaeum, a prestigious, well-stocked, membership library, opened its fine new home one block away, on Beacon Street, in 1849, Meanwhile, King's Chapel— Boston's first Anglican Church and, later, America's first Unitarian church—remained a popular and perennial draw to worshippers and visitors alike.

British author Charles Dickens made the Parker House his home base while touring America.

And two of the town's most historic burying grounds, King's Chapel and the Granary, were located but a heartbeat away. (These old graveyards regularly attracted friends and families of the deceased, as well as pilgrims fascinated by funerary art and the final resting places of celebrities like John Winthrop, Paul Revere, John Hancock, "Mother Goose," and the parents of Ben Franklin.)

There were two Boston buildings in particular, however, that proved most vital to the international fame and ongoing success of the 1855 Parker House. One was Boston's French Empire-style City Hall, which opened its doors across the street from Parker's in 1865. A second was the Old Corner Bookstore. Built as the apothecary shop of Thomas Crease in 1718, the quaint brick structure gained international renown from 1829 to 1903, when it housed a series of ten bookselling and publishing firms—and created a matching "bookend" with the Athenaeum up the street.

The most illustrious *group* to call the Parker House home was certainly that nineteenth-century men's social gathering known as the Saturday Club. A hint at the caliber of the club's membership is alluded to in an 1867 letter from visiting British author, Charles Dickens:

> *I dine today with Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, and Agassiz. Longfellow was here yesterday. Perfectly white in hair and beard, but a remarkably handsome and notable-looking man.*

Originating in the Literary Club and the Magazine Club, two private associations of the mid-1850s, the Saturday Club began as a small group of friends who chose the Parker House to host their festive roundtables on the last Saturday afternoon of every month. Typical among its nineteenth century members was poet, essayist, and preeminent transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson would take the train from his home in Concord, then visit the Old Corner Bookstore and the Athenaeum before dining at the Parker House, Alongside Emerson might be poet and Atlantic Monthly editor James Russell Lowell, scientist Louis Agassiz, novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, poets John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, diplomat Charles Francis Adams, historian Francis Parkman, sage-about-town Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, and many others.

The illustrious Saturday Club met at the Parker House for almost half a century.

The Saturday Club's afternoons were often taken up with poetry readings, impassioned discussions, and book critiques. Indeed, some great moments in literary history transpired in these Parker House meetings. Here, in the folds of the Saturday Club, Longfellow drafted "Paul Revere's Ride," the idea for the Atlantic Monthly was born, and Dickens gave his first American reading of "A Christmas Carol." As important to the group as intellectual pursuit, however, was camaraderie—and a hefty dose of mirth, gossip, revelry, and seven-course meals, all washed down with endless elixirs.

Literary superstar Charles Dickens, who resided at the Parker House during his 1867-68 American lecture tour, joined club members for one particularly memorable meeting, on November 30, 1867. Among the author's noted contributions was a favorite gin punch—concocted on site, after Dickens dispatched his assistant George Dolby to pull his stash of fine gin off the Cunard liner docked nearby.

Dickens' presence in Boston always created a stir. When staying at the Parker House, he took lengthy walks almost every afternoon, dressed flamboyantly in a brightly colored coat and shiny boots, accessorized with striped cravat, fine hat, and gloves. Guards were regularly assigned to his hotel room door, since curious fans were eager to catch a glimpse of their favorite writer rehearsing the exaggerated gestures and odd facial expressions he used to create characters in his public readings. The colorful Dickens preened and practiced his animated talks in front of a large mirror which now rests in the mezzanine level hall by the Press Room. Artifacts from his stay were long kept on display in the Dickens Room. Today, that room is used for meeting and dining, but it still holds the marble fireplace mantle Dickens used.

Harvey's Notorious Guest

One of the theater-world guests Harvey Parker rarely discussed was actor Edwin Booth's brother, John Wilkes Booth. Edwin Booth (1833-1893) was a worldclass tragedian who made his theatrical debut at the Boston Museum on Tremont Street in 1849. Eight years later, at the age of twenty-three, Edwin headlined at the Boston Theatre on Washington Street as Sir Giles Overreach. That victorious performance proved the turning point of his career, and officially began his thirty-year reign as the American actor of note. Meanwhile, as Edwin was conquering audiences in the Northeast, another brother, Junius, Jr., was impressing the Midwest with his acting skills.

Younger brother John Wilkes, ten year's Edwin's junior, was arguably the least talented actor in this theatrical family. While Edwin came to specialize in difficult dramatic roles like Hamlet and Richelieu, John tended towards fluffier stuff, enamoring female fans with his dashing swordplay, daring leaps, flashing eyes, and impassioned gestures. He was a charming matinee idol, an unabashed ladies' man—and an ardent Confederate sympathizer. Though his primary stages were in the South, John Wilkes played elsewhere as well. In 1864, for example, all three Booth brothers collaborated in a New York production of Julius Caesar, and John played the romantic hero of The Marble Heart at the Boston Museum.

Matinee idol John Wilkes Booth was one of the Parker House's most infamous guests.

During the 1860s, the Booths' stage careers grew as the Civil War ravaged America. Edwin believed in the Union cause, and proudly cast his first vote ever for Abraham Lincoln in the mid-war elections of 1863. Southern-based John Wilkes fervently disagreed. "When I told him I had voted for Lincoln's re-election, he expressed deep regret, and declared his belief that Lincoln would be made king of America," wrote Edwin in an 1881 letter. "[T]his, I believe, drove him beyond the limits of reason."

On April 5 and 6, 1865, John Wilkes was registered at the Parker House, and was seen eating in its restaurant. It's possible that he went to visit brother Edwin, who was playing a successful three-week engagement at the 3,000-seat Boston Theatre. It was reported in the Boston Evening Transcript of April 15, that he was indeed practicing his aim: "[A man named] Borland...saw Booth at Edwards' shooting gallery [near Parker's], where Booth practiced pistol firing in various difficult ways such as between his legs, over his shoulder and under his arms."

Eight days after leaving Boston, on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, in Washington, D.C.

Party Politics

Boston's City Hall was built facing the Parker House School Street entrance in 1865—only a decade after its opening. Since the seat of Massachusetts government was just up the road, on the crest of Beacon Hill, the Parker House was thus directly on the "hot line" between City Hall and the State House—a fortuitous situation that ensured regular political clientele for more than a century. State and local politicians dined and drank at Parker's, hunkering down daily for pleasure, politicking, or clandestine tête-à-têtes. Moreover, the Parker House attracted pols of national stature as well: every U.S. Chief of State, from Ulysses S. Grant through William J, Clinton, has passed through the hotel's portals, stayed in its suites, lobbied in its Press Room, imbibed in its bars, or dined in its restaurants.

The twentieth century president most closely associated with Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, had an earlier start than most at the Parker House. Legendary politician Clement Norton often recalled the day in 1923 when former Boston mayor John ("Honey Fitz") Fitzgerald was being celebrated with a Parker House party. "I saw this little boy sitting outside the hall, and I said to him, who are you waiting for, kid?" The boy, the six-year old JFK, responded simply, "Grandpa," Norton reportedly took the youngster inside, then coached him to point at the former mayor and say, "This is the best grandfather a child ever had." (Other versions of the story have James Michael Curley lifting the boy on the table and urging him to speak). Whatever the impetus, the crowd loved the boy's words, heralded as "Jack Kennedy's first public speech."

Twenty-three years later, Kennedy announced his candidacy for the U.S. Congress from the same site. By that time, he was a World War II hero whose valiant rescues on PT-109 were regularly recounted to the charmed voting public. Despite rumors to the contrary, Kennedy did not declare his candidacy for the U.S. Presidency at the Parker House in 1960. He did, however, hold his bachelor party in the Press Room half a dozen years earlier; that evening, JFK's friends presented him with an oil painting of the July 1953 cover of Life magazine, depicting Jack sailing near Hyannis with fiancée Jacqueline Bouvier.

John F. Kennedy (shown here with his grandfather) announced his candidacy for the U.S. Congress and held his bachelor party at the Parker House.

The most colorful of all the Parker House's regular political patrons was surely James Michael Curley (1874-1958), the charismatic, Irish-American "Mayor of the Poor" who dominated Boston politics for the first half of the twentieth century. A mover, shaker, and spellbinding speaker, Curley became a cultural hero to underdogs in general—and to Boston's Irish in particular—while alternately serving as common councilor, alderman, state representative, congressman, Massachusetts governor, four-time Boston mayor, and two-time federal prison inmate. The roguish politician was also an inside dealer who frequently alienated old-time Yankee Brahmins, and almost bankrupted the city of Boston with his welfare and city improvement programs.

Curley held court at daily luncheons in Parker's main dining room, delighting curious onlookers, and impressing the waitstaff by tipping silver dollars. As a result of his endless politicking, valiant efforts, and dubious escapades, James Michael Curley became the stuff of legend: his life, thinly disguised in a character named Frank Skeffington, was retold in Edwin O'Connor's 1956 novel, *The Last Hurrah*. Spencer Tracy starred in the film version. Despite O'Connor's insistence that Skeffington was not modeled after the former mayor, it was rumored that Curley might sue the author for libel. As it became clear that *The Last Hurra*h was enhancing rather than tainting Curley's image, Curley began praising the book, and endorsing it as his own story. In a chance meeting with O'Connor outside the Parker House in 1956, Curley thanked O'Connor for the novel, adding that he particularly liked "the part where I die."

Curley did die two years later, in 1958. Needless to say, his legend lived on. In 1980, two life-like bronze statues of Curley—a folksy, seated version and a powerful, standing one—were created by sculptor Lloyd Lillie, and installed near Faneuil Hall Marketplace, only a few blocks away from Old City Hall and the Parker House. In 1992, author Jack Beatty reinvented Curley's oft-told tale in *The Rascal King*. In 1999, Boston University's prestigious Huntington Theatre Company hosted the world premiere of O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*, adapted for stage by Eric Simonson, Since 1969, "The Last Hurrah" has also been the name of one of the Parker House's popular bars. More than just an inviting pub, "The Last Hurrah" is a mini-museum of twentieth century Boston: framed photos of Curley and friends in their heyday, plus images of a host of celebrated individuals associated with Boston and the Parker House line the walls.

Spencer Tracy played Frank Skeffington in the film version of The Last Hurrah.

Boston's City Hall moved to the newly constructed Government Center in 1969. Happily, the old City Hall building was spared demolition, and reincarnated as office and restaurant space. Though the Omni Parker House is no longer on the path from City Hall to the State House, the hotel maintains its political appeal. Some of the more recent visits by high-profile politicians have been joyous events—like Bill Clinton's successful fundraiser of 1991. Others have signaled sadder times: Massachusetts governor and Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, for example, announced the end of his political career at the Parker House, and Senator Paul Tsongas dropped out of the presidential race here, both in the early 1990s.

An interesting footnote to presidential politics at Parker's involves America's two best known Chiefs of State, who—though they never set foot in the Parker House—surely trod on the ground where it stands today. George Washington attended services at King's Chapel, directly across the street; but his visit came eighty years before the hotel was built. Though Abraham Lincoln lectured at Tremont Temple, just around the corner, his Boston sojourn predated Parker's construction by several years. However, his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, did stay here during a visit to Boston in 1862.