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 Sunday Club. It was here where baseball greats like Babe Ruth and Ted Williams won, 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, mime-like 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 Marlon Thomas.

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 illustrious hotel: "Such fare! The length of many a pound hour That shook the mortar from King George's tower; Such feasts! The laughs of many a pound hour Whose owners wander in the mob of ghosts!"

With all manner of white marble public Passages and public rooms, I live in a corner, high up, and have a bath 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.
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 had 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.

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.

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.

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 Seated 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 contributed to the Parker’s dining experience by hiring European chefs like Sanzian and Bonello.

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.
Dickens Room. Today, that room is used for meeting and dining, but it still holds the marble fireplace mantle Dickens used.

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

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

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' 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'

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."
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 chummery for more than a century. State and local politicians dined and drank at Parker's, hubbubing 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.

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 City Hall and the Parker House. In 1992, author Jack Beatty reinvented Curley's oft-told tale in Party Politics from Old City Hall and the Parker House. In 1999, Boston University's prestigious Huntington Theatre Company hosted the world premiere of O'Connor's 1956 novel, The Last Hurrah. Spencer Tracy starred in the film version. Despite O'Connor's insistence that Skelfington was not modeled after the former mayor, it was rumored that Curley might sue the author for libel. As it became clear that 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 Curley was enhancing rather than tainting Curley's image, Curley began praising the book, and endorsing it as his own work. 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 folkway, 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.

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 stood 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.

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.

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