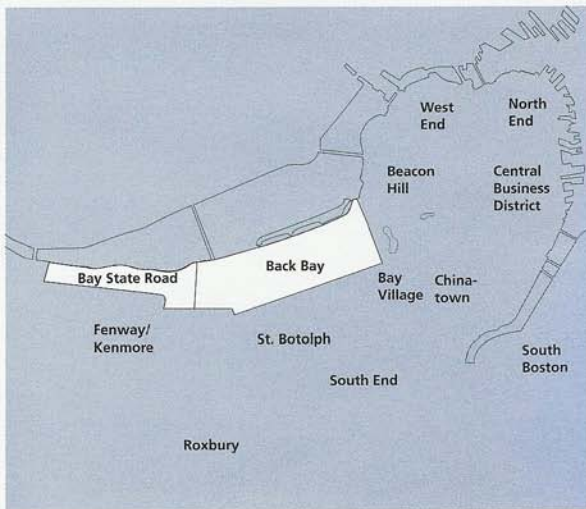




**W**ith the tremendous wealth created in Boston in the 19th century came a demand for luxury homes. The older residential districts of the city were already densely settled. Where were the rising elite to live? By 1859, new technology and the success of landfill



projects across the city made filling the Back Bay conceivable. The forty-year building boom would culminate at Bay State Road—the western edge of the district—at the turn of this century. As its planners envisioned, these residential districts remain among the architectural jewels of Boston.



*Boston Athenaeum*

### FILLING THE BAY

By 1849, the Tidal Basin of the Charles River had become a stinking mudflat. In 1821, the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation constructed a dam to harness the tides to power mills, but the project failed. Later, a railroad causeway contributed to drainage problems. Finally, the City Health Department demanded that the fetid tidal area be filled.

The Commonwealth established a commission to fill the basin, plan a new residential district and lay out lots for sale. Called the Back Bay, the neighborhood was conceived as an “ornament” to the city. To ensure the highest standards of taste, the state imposed deed restrictions requiring masonry construction and stipulating building heights and uniform setbacks from the street.

The filling of the Charles River basin is one of the most dramatic chapters in Boston’s topographical history. The Back Bay added 450 acres to the city’s original 783. Fill began in 1858. Each day, trains brought 3,500 carloads of gravel from Needham. Aided by the newly patented steam shovel, workers created land at the rate of two house lots per day. It took over thirty years of round-the-clock activity to complete the project.

### 1860s: FRENCH BOULEVARD

Architect Arthur Gilman (1821-1882) planned the new district. Embracing progressive ideas in city planning, Gilman laid out

An extraordinarily cohesive streetscape was created by the blocks of French Second Empire houses built along Commonwealth Avenue, seen here in 1872.



a series of oblong blocks with the 200-foot wide Commonwealth Avenue as the central axis. This avenue, with its tree-lined mall, was modeled after the boulevards of Paris recently created for emperor Napoleon III. The Public Garden, established in 1837, was redesigned by architect George Meade and city engineer James Slade in 1859, an upgrade befitting the new district.

The initial flurry of construction in the early 1860s coincided with the height of the French Second Empire style. Its signature feature, the mansard roof, dates from the court of Louis XIV. The style was revived in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris. In

the early Back Bay, whole blocks of impressive brownstone row houses were built in the new style. Noteworthy is the Bates House at 12 Arlington Street, designed by Arthur Gilman. A more modest example is the Gibson House at 137 Beacon Street, now open as a historic house museum (267-6338).

#### EARLY INSTITUTIONS

The Back Bay commissioners attracted cultural institutions by offering parcels of land at discounted rates.

*Boston Public Library*

The classical French Academic-style building at 234 Berkeley Street was designed by architect William G. Preston (1844-1910) for the Boston Society for Natural History. The museum and its companion building for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (now the site of New England Life) set the tone for institutional building in the district.

Boston's architectural monuments to art, science, religious thought and learning were clustered around Copley Square, named after colonial portrait painter John Singleton Copley (1738-1815). These included the Museum of Fine Arts, built in 1876 on the site where the present Copley Plaza Hotel now stands. Old South Church moved from their downtown colonial meeting house to the Northern-Italian Gothic edifice at 645 Boylston in 1875. The Boston Public Library, designed by Charles F. McKim in the form of a classical Renaissance palace in 1887, completed the image of Copley Square as Boston's cultural center.


#### TRINITY CHURCH

The centerpiece of Copley Square is Trinity Church, built in 1877. In the aftermath of Boston's Great Fire of 1872, rector Phillips Brooks determined to relocate to the Back Bay. The national design competition for the new church was won by the 34-year-old Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886). The design reflected Richardson's unique interpretation of the Romanesque, the style which dominated western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Trinity is considered Richardson's masterpiece and one of the most beautiful buildings in America. The robust massing and rough granite inspired a generation of builders, making "Richardsonian Romanesque" the most pervasive style of the 1880s.

#### MORE CHURCHES

The Back Bay was home to at least twelve churches. Arlington Street Church, designed in 1859 by Arthur Gilman for the Unitarians, was the district's earliest. In 1871,



Harbridge House at 12 Arlington Street, built in 1860, is an elegant example of the highly organized facades that characterize the French Academic style.



another Unitarian congregation relocated from old Brattle Square to Clarendon Street. Their building, now the First Baptist Church at Commonwealth Avenue, was Richardson's first major commission. The majestic tower, with a frieze of trumpeting angels, is its most striking feature.

The Church of the Covenant at Berkeley and Newbury streets (originally called Central Congregational Church) was built in 1866. Architect Richard M. Upjohn (1827-1903), whose father was a major proponent of the Gothic Revival, chose that style for the Roxbury puddingstone edifice. The pointed windows were filled with stained-glass Biblical scenes by Tiffany and Associates Artists in the 1890s.

## ECLECTIC STYLES

In the 1870s, Back Bay builders embraced Victorian eclecticism, choosing from a wealth of historical forms for the district's mansions and townhouses. The brick Hotel Victoria at 275

Lively patterns in colored stone, series of rounded arches and robust massing of granite are the hallmarks of H. H. Richardson's exquisite Trinity Church.

Dartmouth Street, built in 1886, includes Moorish Revival terra cotta decoration. No. 176 Commonwealth Avenue, built in 1883, has Flemish dormers.

The Burrage Mansion at 314 Commonwealth Avenue, built in 1899, is French Gothic. An imposing Norman-style corner tower was incorporated into Charles Francis Adams' stately house at 20 Gloucester Street, designed by Peabody & Stearns in 1886.

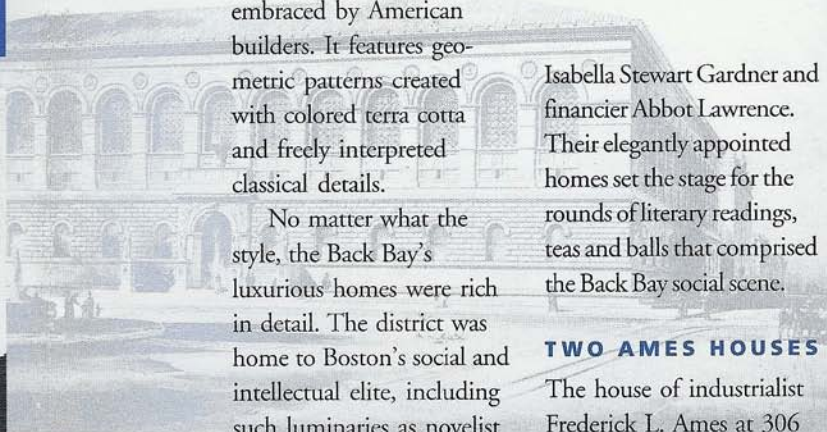
Many of the brick rows incorporate the picturesque Queen Anne style developed by English architect Richard Norman Shaw (1831-1912) and embraced by American builders. It features geometric patterns created with colored terra cotta and freely interpreted classical details.

No matter what the style, the Back Bay's luxurious homes were rich in detail. The district was home to Boston's social and intellectual elite, including such luminaries as novelist William Dean Howells, painter John Singer Sargent, art collector

This projecting bay on Gloucester Street is an example of the popular Queen Anne Revival or Eastlake building style.



The Bostonian Society



Isabella Stewart Gardner and financier Abbot Lawrence. Their elegantly appointed homes set the stage for the rounds of literary readings, teas and balls that comprised the Back Bay social scene.

## TWO AMES HOUSES

The house of industrialist Frederick L. Ames at 306 Dartmouth Street was one of the most flamboyant mansions of the Back Bay.

In 1882, in a conspicuous display of wealth, the Ameses remodeled the 10-year-old house into a baronial English manor. The sophisticated design by John Hubbard Sturgis featured a lushly ornamented facade of brick, stone, terra cotta and wrought iron.

The architectural style most associated with Boston's Gilded Age is the palatial French Chateau-esque. This style emulated the great aristocratic houses of Europe. In many instances exact replicas were constructed. The first such mansion in Boston was designed by Carl Fehmer for Oliver Ames at the corner of Massachusetts and Commonwealth

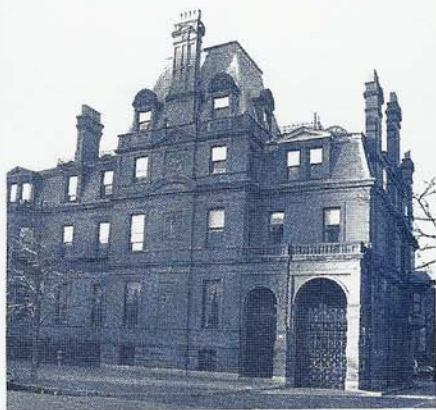
avenues. Built in 1882, it duplicated the same 16<sup>th</sup>-century chateau that had inspired New York millionaire W. K. Vanderbilt's 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue home.

## **BAY STATE ROAD AND THE COLONIAL REVIVAL**

The residential district beyond Kenmore Square was the last part of the Charles River basin to be filled. Sometimes called Back Bay West, this section of the basin was dredged in 1889. Landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted shifted the axis of Commonwealth Avenue at Kenmore Square, providing a visual terminus for the tree-lined mall. Charlesgate West became the gateway into the Bay State Road district.

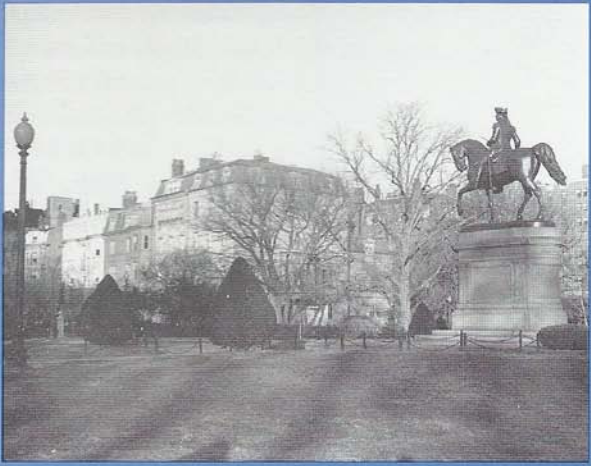
Most of the houses in this fashionable residential district were built between 1890 and 1917 and looked to America's colonial past

**Frederick Ames's richly ornamented baronial-like mansion, remodeled in 1882, is capped by a great hooded chimney emblazoned with the owner's initials.**





## BACK BAY AND BAY STATE ROAD ARCHITECTURAL DISTRICTS



The Back Bay and Bay State Road are distinguished by a consistency of character, form and scale established by the original planners' restrictions mandating height, street setbacks and building materials. The Back Bay was designated a historic district in 1966. The district extends from Arlington to Charlesgate East between Storrow Drive and Boylston Street. The adjacent Bay State Road District was created in 1979 and extends down Commonwealth Avenue from Charlesgate West to Kenmore Square.

Neighborhood street-scapes are important community resources that need to be protected.

Local designation promotes the preservation of the architectural, aesthetic and historic character of these remarkably cohesive historic districts for the educational, cultural and economic welfare of the greater Boston community. To this end, each local district has an architectural review commission to ensure that changes made to buildings will be in keeping with the historic character of the neighborhood.

For information on designating local landmark buildings and districts, please contact the Boston Landmarks Commission at 635-3850.

for inspiration. The double house at 413-415 Commonwealth Avenue was designed in 1890 by McKim Mead & White, the premier architects of the Colonial Revival. It is reminiscent of the work of Federal master Charles Bulfinch (1763-1844). With its monumental bow front, the granite house built for Ezra Thayer by Peters and Rice in 1900 at 77 Bay State Road, strongly resembles the 1819 Sears House on Beacon Hill.

While row houses dominate the district, several grand mansions grace the edge of the

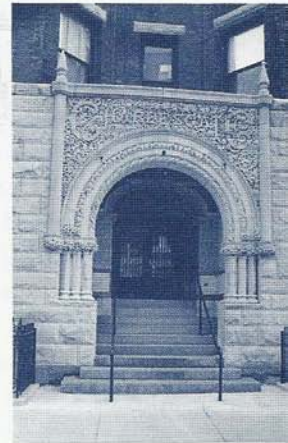
Charles River. The most remarkable is the massive Tudor-style house built for William Lindsey in 1905 at No. 225 Bay State Road. The Lindsey Chapel at Emmanuel Church (15 Newbury Street) was built in memory of his daughter Leslie, who perished aboard the liner *Lusitania*, torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1915. The Lindsey House became part of Boston University in 1939.

## HOTELS AND APARTMENT HOUSES

By the 1880s, there were almost 40 residential hotels and apartment houses in the Back Bay. Although now greatly altered, the Hotel Vendôme remains one of the finest French Academic buildings in Boston. Built in 1871, it was the most luxurious hotel of its era. An 1881 expansion doubled its size. Following a disastrous fire in the 1970s, in which several Boston firefighters lost their lives, the Vendôme was transformed into luxury apartments.

The Hotel Agassiz was built for philanthropist Henry Higginson, the original benefactor of the Boston Symphony. This building of “French flats,” where each family occupied an entire floor, was a precursor to the modern apartment house. The 10-story Hotel Cambridge at 483 Beacon Street, designed by Willard Sears in 1898, is a true apartment house, where each unit included its own kitchen and servant quarters.

Built in 1901, the Charlesgate Hotel, with its fancifully carved entrance, was one of the prestigious apartment houses marking the entry to Back Bay West.



Back Bay West includes some of the most opulent apartment houses, such as the red-brick and stone Braemore Hotel built at Charlesgate West in 1916. The monumental Beaux Arts style apartment houses serve as visual gateways into the district.

*Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston*



Borrowing from early American building styles, this double house at 59-61 Bay State Road, built in 1893, incorporates key stones, arched entries and stone lintels.



## COMMERCIAL PALACES

Commercial activity was originally excluded from the Back Bay. Customer demand eventually opened the district to shops about 1890. Shreve Crump & Low, the city's oldest jewelry house, relocated to 330 Boylston Street in 1929. Architect William T.

Street was designed in 1905 by Ogden Codman and French architect and M.I.T. professor Constant Desire Despradelle. Such projects opened the way for modern office buildings, including the glass-clad Hancock Tower, designed in the International style by I. M. Pei in 1968-75.



Steve Rosenthal

Aldrich remodeled the site into an Art Deco palace, adding stylized plant motifs and bronze window grilles.

The district's first large-scale commercial buildings included the Warren Chambers Building at 419 Boylston Street, built in 1896 as medical office suites. The Berkeley Building at 420 Boylston

Encased in expanses of glass and terra cotta, the Berkeley Building of 1905 used steel frame construction to achieve an airy confection-like effect.

## BOSTON UNIVERSITY

In the 1930s, innovative Boston University President Daniel Marsh determined to find a permanent home for the school in Back Bay West. In 1928, the college established the Harriet E. Richards Co-op, one of the first cooperative dormitories for women, now located at 191 Bay State Road. From the 1930s to the 1950s, as families gave up their Back Bay West townhouses for the suburbs, Boston University incorporated them as dormitories, offices and classrooms. BU has emerged as a narrow campus extending down Commonwealth Avenue. The Gothic Revival chapel designed by Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) is the centerpiece of the campus.

In the last half-century other Back Bay houses have been converted to accommodate institutional and commercial uses. Still a distinguished neighborhood in Boston, as a mixed-use residential district, the Back Bay remains an "ornament to the city" and a tribute to its far-sighted planners.

The Exploring Boston's Neighborhoods Series is published by the Boston Landmarks Commission.

Official Boston Landmarks are protected from changes that would adversely affect their historic character. For information on designating local landmark buildings and districts, please contact the Boston Landmarks Commission at 635-3850.

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