



A statue of William Lloyd Garrison on the Commonwealth Avenue mall.

ARTS AND CULTURE / OPINION

Wanted: A home for Boston history

Database of 50,000 entries would let residents connect with city's rich past

 JIM VRABEL Feb 5, 2022

BOSTON IS A CITY rich in history – but one that sometimes does a poor job collecting and sharing *all* of it with *everyone* who might be interested in it.

Oh, Boston is pretty good from 1630 when the Puritans landed (after their first choice, Salem, “pleased us not” according to John Winthrop) up until 1776 when the British fled (lest their ships were blown up leaving them with no way to get home). But after that, not so much.

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The Transcendentalist and “Flowering of New England” literature periods are a bit of a muddle (Concord gets most of the ink). Boston is far too self-congratulatory about the Abolition era (William Lloyd Garrison was almost lynched in 1835, just steps from where Ted Landsmark was attacked on City Hall Plaza in 1976). The Civil War, China Trade, and Gilded Age fly under the radar, and, when it comes to the 20th century, forget about it – Boston history certainly has.

That history is chock full when it comes to the Brahmins (descended from North Shore shopkeepers and pirates) and the Irish (so unwelcome that it was suggested they be sent to colonies in Maine, Canada, and even Iowa). But where’s everybody else?

The original residents, the Massachuset (first converted, then confined on Deer Island in 1675, then consigned to slavery, prompted Rev. John Eliot to call their treatment “worse than death”)? African-Americans (W.E.B. Du Bois called William Monroe Trotter, who set off the 1903 “Boston Riot” at 600 Columbus Avenue, “probably one of the most selfless of Negro leaders during all of our American history”)? The Jews, who arrived and then left in large numbers (Joseph Soloveitchik, installed as chief rabbi of Boston in 1932 at Temple Beth El at 94 Fowler Street in Dorchester, was an internationally recognized theologian)?

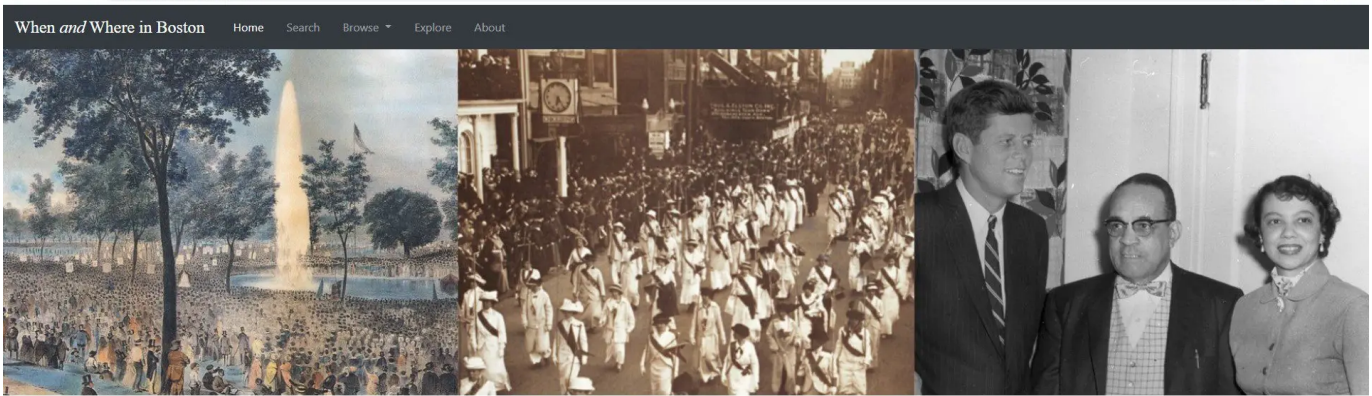
Abigail Adams implored “remember the ladies,” but for too long, Boston history didn’t (Anne Hutchinson, who lived on the site of the Old Corner Bookstore till banished in 1637, was a real firebrand, as were Maria Stewart, Mary Kenney O’Sullivan, and so many others). Boston history has avoided the unconventional (it took novelist Henry James to popularize the term “Boston Marriage” in 1886, and *Time* magazine to send Boston painter Jack Levine to cover the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968).

Too big a share of Boston history is confined to the original Shawmut Peninsula, and for too many teachers and students Boston history consists of downtown field trips with too much time stuck on the T (when they could visit the former Dorchester home of City Councilor Israel Muchnick at 43 Hewins Street, where Jackie Robinson had dinner after his “try out” with the Red Sox in 1945). Most college students leave here knowing little more about Boston history than where the latest movie scenes were shot (instead of the impact professors like Howard Thurman and Howard Zinn had on previous generations of students).

Sure, history can be hard to collect, condense, and make available. But Boston has figured out how to do just that for tourists, who are willing to pay for it (nothing new there, 19th century hotels stocked two books in every room – a Bible to promote morality, and King’s Handbook of Boston History to promote longer stays).

I think I’ve come up with a way to make *all* of Boston history available to *everyone*. It’s called “When and Where in Boston” – and I want to give it away for free.

“When and Where in Boston” combines two elements. The first is a Boston history database that I have been compiling for more than 20 years. It contains more than 50,000 short (one sentence to one paragraph) descriptions of significant things that have *happened, been said, done, built, written, or created* in Boston from 1630 right up until yesterday.



A curated, online, illustrated almanac of every significant thing that's ever *happened, been built, made, said, or done* in Boston.

The *who, what, when, and where* of Boston history, with links to local sources for the *how and why*.

An ongoing, ever-growing compilation of Boston history compiled by the entire community, free to all *residents, visitors, teachers, students, and scholars*.

The second is a website, built recently by software engineer and longtime history guide Dennis McCarthy. It adds photographs to the text, lets people *search* it for a word, name, or phrase, *filter* their search by date, group or subject, and *browse* through various “directories.” These include an Encyclopedia of Boston History, a Boston Biographical Dictionary, This Day in Boston History, Boston Firsts, and many more. Users can then create slideshows and maps to illustrate what they’ve discovered. They can also log on by cellphone and *explore* the city to find out what happened, when, and where.

Copyright and permission concerns keep me from providing a public link to the prototype website just yet. But the screenshots below give an idea of how it works.

When and Where in Boston Home Search Browse Explore About

Boston Subway opens.

09/01/1897

Car #1752 leaves Allston Depot at 6:01 a.m., and, after entering the Boston Public Garden, proceeds through the new, 6/10th-mile-long tunnel under Boston Common to the Boylston Street and Park Street stations. By midnight when the line closes, some 250,000 people pay the 5-cent fare to ride the first subway in the U.S. and the fourth in the world (after London, Budapest, and Glasgow). Ground was broken on the project on March 28, 1895. During construction, four workers were killed, some 900 graves had to be moved, and the excavated dirt was used to raise part of the Common and Public Garden by as much as six feet. The line is extended to Broadway (then Pleasant Street) in 1897,* to Haymarket and North Station in 1898,* and to Lechmere on July 10, 1912. The Main Line elevated uses the original tunnel between 1901 and 1908.

Sources Links

There's nothing special about using text, photos, links, etc. to provide information on a site. What's special about "When and Where in Boston" is how much history about one city it contains and how easy it is to explore that history in so many different ways.

Yes, part of it looks a little bit like Wikipedia. But it's a wiki that is home-grown, curated, reliable, concerned exclusively with Boston, and one that has ever so many more useful and cool features. Its This Day in Boston history directory looks a little bit like *Mass Moments*, a great product by Mass Humanities that offers subscribers a page-long description of one event per day of the year that happened somewhere in the state. But "When and Where in Boston" offers shorter write-ups of 20 or 30 events per day that took place in Boston alone, in addition to all its other features.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://bhdb.a2hosted.com/ui/#/>. The page title is "When and Where in Boston" and the navigation menu includes Home, Search, Browse, Explore, and About. A search filter for "Who" is active, showing "Last Name Starts With" as "A" with an "Apply" button. The main content area is titled "Biographical Dictionary" and displays a table of historical events.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Date	Event
<input type="checkbox"/>	1895	Antin (Mary) arrives in Boston.
<input type="checkbox"/>	1892	Balch (Emily Greene) helps found Denison House.
<input type="checkbox"/>	08/03/1921	Batson (Ruth) is named the chairperson of the education subcommittee of the Boston Branch NAACP.
<input type="checkbox"/>	1871	Bell (Alexander Graham) arrives in Boston.
<input type="checkbox"/>	1914	Cass (Melnea) returns to Boston.
<input type="checkbox"/>	11/20/1899	Curley (James Michael) begins his career in politics.
<input type="checkbox"/>	01/11/1829	Emerson (Ralph Waldo) is invited to become junior minister at the Second Church in Boston.
<input type="checkbox"/>	1837	Fuller (Margaret) arrives in Boston.
<input type="checkbox"/>	1845	Hayden (Lewis) arrives in Boston.
<input type="checkbox"/>	09/18/1634	Hutchinson (Anne) arrives in Boston on board the Griffin.

What makes me qualified to come up with something like this? Well, I'm obliged here – at least by the dictates of Old Boston – to apologize and acknowledge that I'm not Boston-born. But I have been here for more than 50 years – and during that time I've been heavily involved in neighborhood issues and city government, kept my eyes and ears open, read everything I could get my hands on, taken copious notes, and then organized them in a way that lets me share what I've learned about Boston with others. I've also written a couple of books.

The late dean of Boston historians, Thomas O'Connor, called one of them, *When in Boston: A Timeline & Almanac* (Northeastern University Press), the first book he turned to on his reference shelf. *A People's History of the New Boston* (University of Massachusetts Press), which tells stories of modern-day community activism in the city's neighborhoods, is used in most of the local colleges.

The trouble with books, though, is that too often the facts in them stay buried there. "When and Where in Boston" gathers the facts from hundreds of books about Boston (the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*) and puts them in one place. But it doesn't *compete* with other Boston history sites, organizations, and institutions. Instead, "When and Where in Boston" *complements* them by citing them as sources and providing links to them for people who want to find out more (the *how* and *why*).

The only thing "When and Where in Boston" does not have is a good home. I'm looking to give it up for adoption to a local, non-profit institution that will provide one, as long as they agree to three conditions.

The first is that it must be allowed to continue to grow. "When and Where in Boston" is not meant to be a finished product, but always a work in progress. It needs to be edited and added to by others going forward.

The second condition is that it be overseen by an editorial board made up of people who *know* Boston history so that it will remain accurate, and who *reflect* the entire Boston community so that it will become representative.

The third condition is that any institution that takes it on agrees to allow other institutions, groups, organizations, and individuals to help it grow. Boston institutions can be a little “turf conscious.” That won’t do here.

Everyone to whom I’ve shown “When and Where in Boston” thinks it’s terrific. They all think that *somebody* should give it a home – but so far, not one of them. Neighborhood historical societies are eager to participate once it gets going, but don’t have the capacity to host it. Citywide historical societies and institutions that might have the capacity have so far not stepped forward, citing concerns over staff time and “resources” (i.e., money).

I think the time it would take to operate the website would be akin to publishing a quarterly magazine that never comes out and has no deadlines, and I think it will attract plenty of history-loving volunteers eager to help out.. And I don’t think it will cost that much to operate, and I have reason to believe it will attract funding.

Estimates are it will take about \$25,000 to build the finished website and \$10,000 a year to keep it running. A couple of years ago, a history-loving state rep earmarked that amount for the project in the state budget, but the funds couldn’t be spent because it didn’t have a non-profit home. Local and statewide foundations have said they “would like to make the project happen,” when and if it finds such a home.

I’ve shown “When and Where in Boston” to most of the local universities. Faculty members are all for it and see it as a great tool not only to *teach* Boston history, but to involve students in *collecting* it. Librarians love it for its easy-to-get-at content. But university administrators who make the decisions have strung me along for months at a time before eventually saying they don’t think it’s the “right fit” for them. After showing everything that the prototype website can do to one provost (obviously *not* a history lover), her first question was, “Why should I spend my next dollar on this?”

Now I'm trying to convince the Boston Public Library to become the home for "When and Where in Boston." I think it would be a perfect fit. What better place to serve as keeper of all of the facts of Boston history than an institution whose motto is "Free to All"?

Boston should be a place that remembers and shares its past – *all* of it. After all, it was someone who grew up in Boston who famously warned about what happens to those who don't remember their history (George Santayana, who lived at 302 Beacon Street and graduated from Boston Latin School).

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