

Otterbein University

Digital Commons @ Otterbein

Art Faculty Scholarship

Art

Spring 2013

Crooked and Narrow Streets

Amy Johnson

Otterbein University, ajohnson@otterbein.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/art_fac



Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), and the [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Johnson, Amy, "Crooked and Narrow Streets" (2013). *Art Faculty Scholarship*. 1.
https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/art_fac/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact digitalcommons07@otterbein.edu.

Crooked and Narrow Streets

Photography and Urban Visual Identities in Early Twentieth-Century Boston

Amy E. Johnson

In The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston (1920), historian and social reformer Annie Haven Thwing documents the development of Boston's streets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She illustrates her text with stock photographs depicting these ancient alleys lined with nineteenth-century tenement buildings. This juxtaposition of colonial and modern Boston through text and image privileges the city as a historical site, significantly doing so at a time when Bostonians were grappling with the concerns of twentieth-century urbanism, such as overcrowding, urban reform, and historic preservation.

IN *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston* (1920), historian and social reformer Annie Haven Thwing documents the development of the city's streets and properties in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She traces, for example, the property record of "a lane in Cornhill" from 1712 to 1722, when it becomes known as "Savages Court," to 1756, as it becomes "Williams Court." A photograph of Williams Court accompanies the text; reading this history, one encounters the photograph as an illustration of colonial Boston's crooked and narrow streetscape, the bold caption proclaiming it as Williams Court, while its twentieth-century name, "Pie Alley," is italicized in smaller font below (fig. 1).¹ The image itself depicts a narrow alley overshadowed by six-story brick tenements complete with fire escapes, a representative scene of Boston's

business center in the early twentieth century. Thwing's juxtaposition of colonial and modern views through text and image privileges the city as a historical site, significantly doing so at a time when Bostonians were grappling with the concerns of twentieth-century urbanism, such as overcrowding, urban reform, and historic preservation.

Considered a source of disease and crime throughout the nineteenth century, the narrow alley and crowded tenement house had long been vilified in Boston and other cities by the start of the twentieth century. Urban development projects during the 1900s and 1910s called for the elimination of narrow streets and alleys, while American housing reformers recognized Boston's tenement house "problem" as second only to New York's.² However, Thwing, herself a housing reformer in the 1880s and 1890s, presents the cramped, tenement-lined

Amy E. Johnson is associate professor at Otterbein University.

The author would like to thank Amy Earls and the anonymous readers for *Winterthur Portfolio* for their thoughtful and helpful comments on this article. Research for this project was supported by grants from Otterbein University's Humanities Advisory Committee and Faculty Scholarship Development Committee. The author is also grateful for the help of librarians and staff at the New-York Historical Society, the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute, and the Massachusetts Historical Society, where she is particularly indebted to Margaret Hogan for her assistance.

¹ Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), 116.

© 2013 by The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc. All rights reserved. 0084-0416/2013/4701-0002\$10.00

² Housing reformers compared Boston to New York and London throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The *Report of the Committee on the Expediency of Providing Better Tenements for the Poor* (Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1846), compiled by Stephen Perkins, Charles F. Barnard, H. T. Bowditch, Walter Channing, James B. Richards, D. R. Chapman, Edward Winslow, reported the average age of death in Boston's tenement districts to be 21.43 years—slightly better than New York's figure (19.69 years) but worse than London's (27 years). The *Report of the Boston—1915 Housing Committee* (Boston: 1910) calculated that parts of Boston's North End had a density of 310 persons per acre per story, while New York's most crowded block housed 304 per acre per story; cited in Christine Cousineau, *Tenement Reform in Boston, 1870–1920: Philanthropy, Regulation, and Government Assisted Housing* (Hilliard, OH: Society for American City and Regional Planning History, 1990), 22.



WILLIAMS COURT
Now Pie Alley

Fig. 1. *Williams Court, Now Pie Alley*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 116, pl. 6. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

alley as a relic of Boston's and America's heroic colonial past through her use of photographic illustrations. I consider in this essay how this combination of images and text helped Bostonians make sense of the modern and historic juxtapositions found across

their city. By examining Thwing's illustrated history of Boston's streets, we can see how photographs contributed to understanding the modern city as layered with both historical fragments and new experiences. The photographic image therefore

becomes a component in the complex process of creating a new visual language for the modern city.

A variety of photographic styles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered multiple strategies for shaping and promoting various urban identities. Thwing's illustrations present neither the purely aesthetic contemplation of the city street offered by Alfred Stieglitz's pictorial work nor Jacob Riis's images of urban disease and decay; rather, her text and found images help promote an alternative perception of the city as a living historical site. This article examines how standard stock images could be used in publications like Thwing's *Crooked and Narrow Streets* to offer a particular interpretation of the city scene, regardless of the photographer's original intent for their use. Through her combination of text and image, Thwing offers a guidebook to Boston's urban history for both visitors and residents, encouraging them to identify the city's old streets and neighborhoods as relics of America's colonial past despite the physical reality of Boston's modern present.

Thwing and Boston's *Crooked and Narrow Streets*

Born in 1851, Annie Haven Thwing grew up in Boston with her older sister Florence and brother Walter. Introduced to travel at an early age, she made frequent visits to Washington, DC, and New York City as a young woman and first journeyed to Europe with eight women friends to celebrate her twenty-fourth birthday in 1875. According to Len Travers, Thwing began her historical research sometime in the mid-1880s, when she was in her thirties.³ Her work in housing reform commenced in the same period, and by 1890 she already held a respected position in reform circles. By the end of the 1880s, she had worked with Octavia Hill in London, lectured to the Brookline Friendly Union on Hill's work, published an article on housing reform, and joined the board of directors of the Boston Cooperative Building Company, a prominent tenement house reform agency.⁴

Thwing continued compiling data for her history of Boston's streets while working as a housing reformer through the end of the nineteenth century and beyond, eventually completing her research in 1916. Driven at first by the intention of finding where

in colonial Boston her own ancestors had resided, Thwing's project resulted in twenty-two volumes of deed extracts, a two-volume history of Boston streets, and the Thwing Card Index, consisting of approximately 125,000 index cards, as well as the 1920 text, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston*.⁵ *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* relates the histories of the streets of Boston's oldest neighborhoods as established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the North, South, and West Ends, the government and business center, and the neck—the narrow strip of land connecting Boston to the mainland, which currently runs through the South End and Roxbury.

Thwing accompanies these narratives with illustrations acquired from the Halliday Photographic Company, the Walton Advertising and Printing Company, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, and the Boston Public Library. These include fourteen prints, most depicting sites no longer extant at the time Thwing wrote her book, such as Mill Creek, which was covered over by Blackstone Street in 1824, and the Dalton House on Congress Street, which became the site of Post Office Square after the fire of 1872 (figs. 2 and 3).⁶ Thwing culled her other twelve illustrations from photographs found in the above collections. As standard stock photographs, these images could be used to illustrate any type of article or fulfill any number of uses in a discussion of the urban environment. They illustrate surviving eighteenth-century structures, such as the Clough House and the Governor Hancock Tavern, as well as the crooked and narrow streets of Thwing's title.

Thwing notes that "in appearance the old town cannot be pictured today except by exercising the imagination" because only a few streets survive at their original width. In addition, "it must also be left to the imagination to picture what the life actually was in the town."⁷ By combining prints and photographs with her written narrative, Thwing helps the reader find remnants of the old town and also imagine that which does not survive. This combination of elements, what Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls the "editorial environment" (prints, photographs, captions, and text), altogether establish the author's ultimate meaning.⁸ The combination and sequencing

³ Len Travers, "'You See I Am Addicted to Facts': Annie Haven Thwing and the Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 1 (1999): 119.

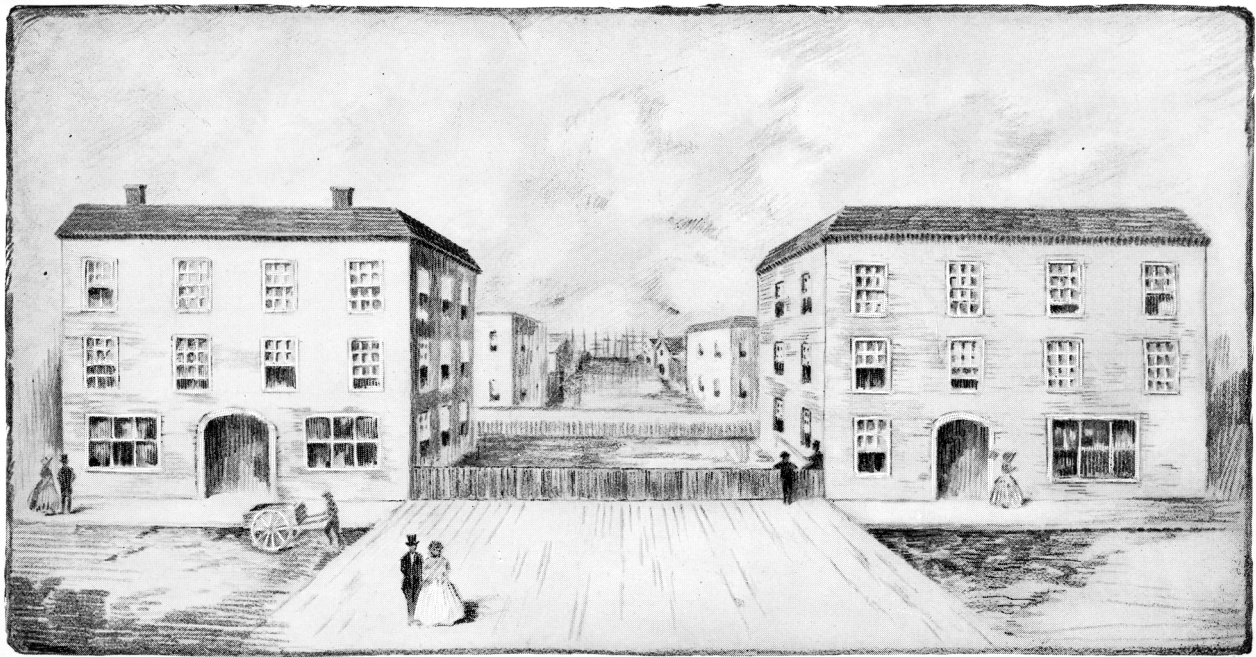
⁴ Thwing also wrote the well-known children's book *Chicken Little*, in 1899. Background on Thwing was compiled from scrapbooks and letters archived at Historic New England and the Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵ For background on Thwing, see Travers, "Annie Haven Thwing," 119. The Thwing Index is now an electronic database of the Massachusetts Historical Society, also available on CD-ROM.

⁶ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 28. Lawrence Kennedy discusses the creation of Post Office Square in *Planning the City upon a Hill: Boston since 1630* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 80.

⁷ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 23.

⁸ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 179–80.



MILL CREEK OR MIDDLESEX CANAL

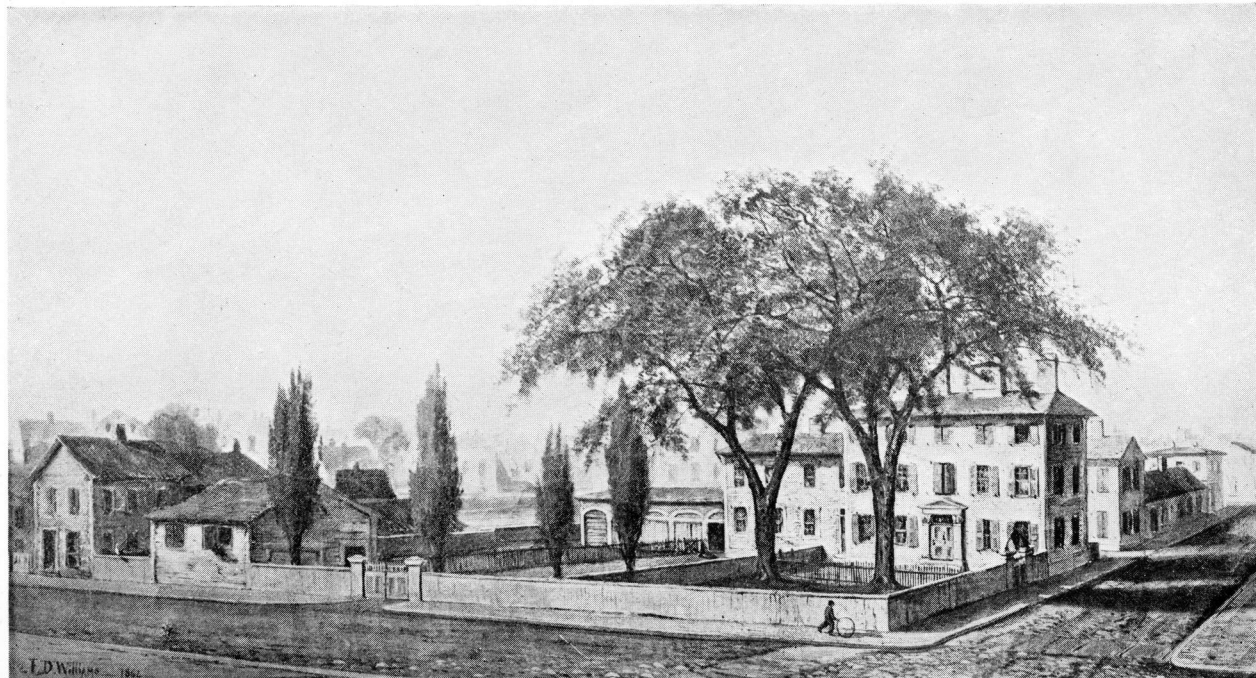
Now covered by Blackstone Street

Fig. 2. *Mill Creek or Middlesex Canal, Now Covered by Blackstone Street*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 28, pl. 2. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

of prints and photographs, for example, inform how the reader interprets the stock photographs, as does the combination of the written history and the photographic image, or Thwing's choice to emphasize the older name "Williams Court" in a caption, rather than the contemporary name "Pie Alley."

Thwing's selected prints depict scenes of Boston in the colonial and early national periods; in them, figures dressed in historic garb stroll, work, play, and shop. The raised viewpoint and broad open sky in each print project an open, airy scene. In a view of Milk Street, looking toward the Old South Church, a wagon pulled by three horses enters from the lower right corner, encouraging the viewer to look down Milk Street as it recedes toward the left of the composition (fig. 4). From our slightly raised vantage point, we can see a group of women talking on the sidewalk in the lower left, while another group of men converse around a streetlamp. The spire of Old South rises from behind a tree in the center of the composition, while two women stroll past it. Our view down Milk Street is stopped by a three-story wood structure, over which loom the tree and church spire. A wide expanse of sky fills the top half of

the composition. Overall, the scene presents the hustle and bustle of early American city life, with the emphasis placed more on sociability than crowded, chaotic city life, as both men and women converse and stroll arm in arm along the sidewalks. The church spire is the tallest structure in the scene; only the leafy tree and the three-story building rooftop rival its scale, and nothing else crowds into the sky. A print depicting Winter Street, while presenting greater street-front building density, also shows men and women walking and conversing; here again only a crenellated stone tower rises above the scene in the background, capped by an open expanse of sky (fig. 5). Overall, these scenes present picturesque views of street life in city neighborhoods. Thwing's photographic illustrations offer various compositional strategies for depicting the urban environment. Following the illustration of Winter Street, a photograph depicts Summer Street and the New South Church on Church Green (fig. 6). Similar to the prints, the vantage point is slightly raised, and we look down Summer Street to the church, its spire again dominating the sky and the viewer's gaze. Unlike the prints, the photograph, like the others in Thwing's



CONGRESS STREET, THE DALTON HOUSE
Site of Post Office

Fig. 3. *Congress Street, the Dalton House, Site of the Post Office*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 146, pl. 10. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

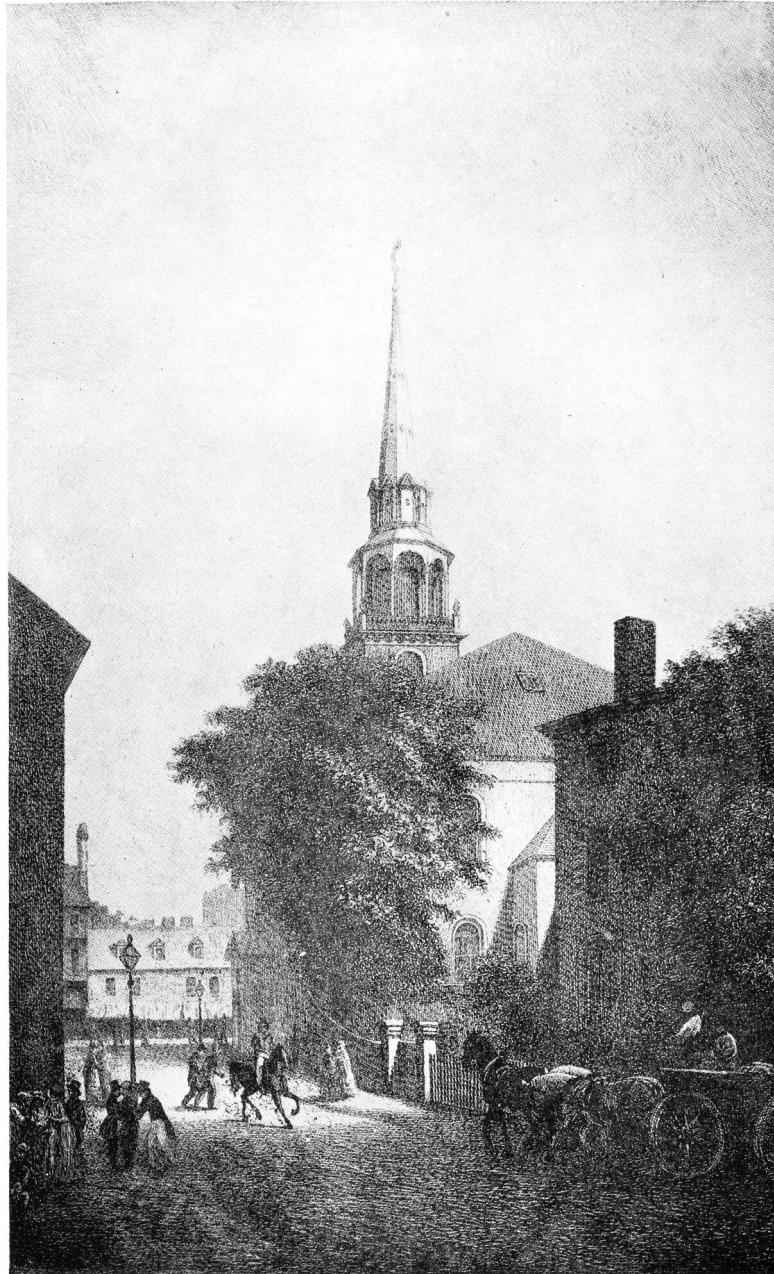
collection, is largely devoid of human activity. Only a solitary man stands near the curb in the picture's foreground. Thwing also includes both a print and a photograph of Fort Hill; the print depicts figures, carriages, and cattle, while the photograph largely omits any human activity, instead offering a panoramic view of the neighborhood (figs. 7 and 8).

Turn-of-the-century photographers intentionally captured street views with little human activity or photographed from a high vantage point to minimize human presence. This effectively emphasized the monumental stature of the building while simultaneously presenting a controlled, orderly city.⁹ As explained by Peter Bacon Hales, this approach to urban photography celebrates the city as a triumph of civilization, signaled by its grand monuments and majestic vistas. Thwing, however, adds another level of interpretation to these photographs by adding text and intermingling them with prints depicting more active scenes of human interaction and sociability. She encourages her reader to imagine or fill in the photographic scene with the missing characters

and implied activity by placing them among these more narrative structures. At the very least, the prints remind her readers that the city is replete with human activity and not defined solely by individual monuments and vistas, a point that might be lost if only photographs had been used for illustrations.

Many of Thwing's photographic illustrations depict Boston's surviving narrow streets and alleys, such as the already-mentioned Williams Court. Other narrow lanes represented include Salutation Street, Webster Avenue, and Tileston Street (fig. 9). These images suggest a different type of city scene and create an effect different from the other prints and photographs used by Thwing. Buildings in these photographs fill the full height of the composition and frame our view down a narrow way before being stopped by another towering structure. As seen in the photograph of Pie Alley, these views present a more congested urban scene (see fig. 1). An image of Corn Court, originally a "lane from the dock in 1650," looks down an increasingly narrow alley toward the eighteenth-century Hancock Tavern (fig. 10). Directly across from the tavern rises a tenement house, its full height cropped by the camera's lens, while another rises at the end of the alley, blocking

⁹ Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 180.



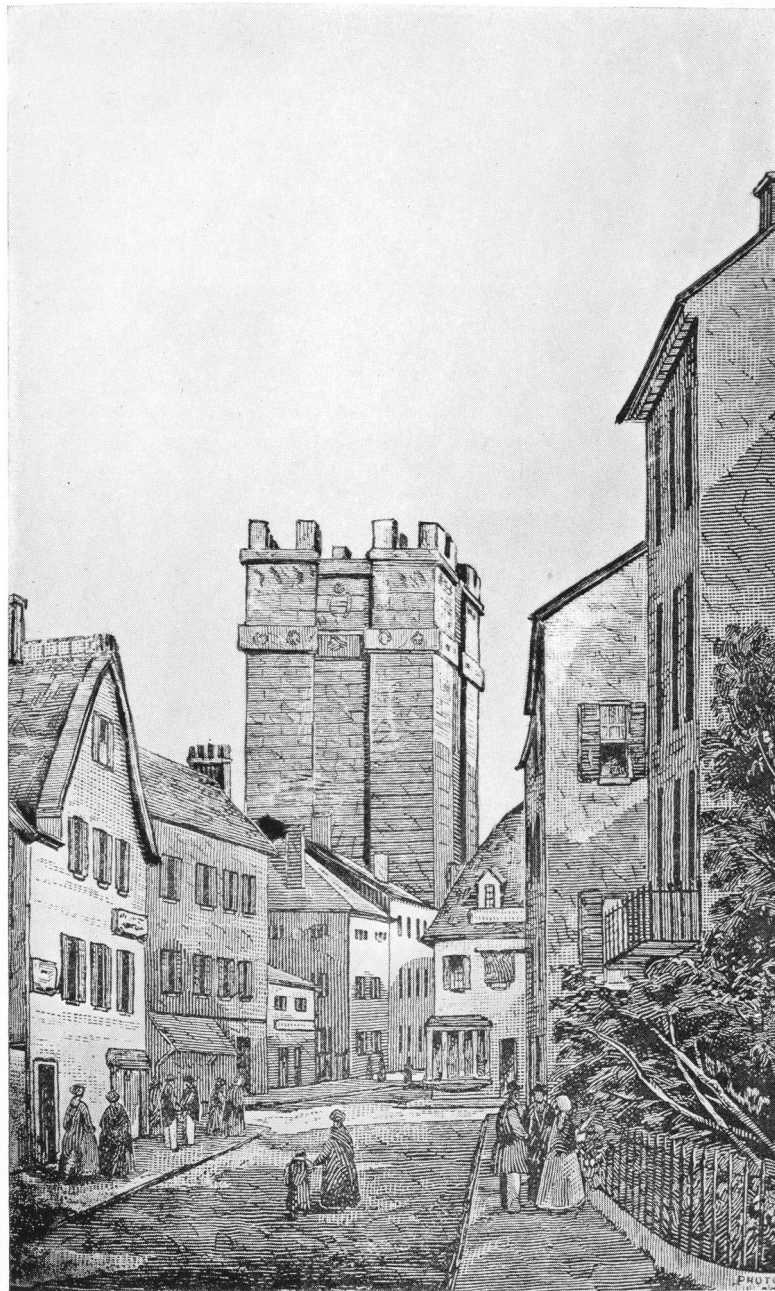
MILK STREET, THE OLD SOUTH CHURCH

Fig. 4. *Milk Street, the Old South Church*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 124, pl. 7. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

our way out. In a view of Ridgeway Lane, a 10-foot-wide lane created in 1769, a snowy alley opens ahead of the viewer, offering a hazy glimpse of West Church in the distance (fig. 11). Tenements with fire escapes line the alley where originally, according

to Thwing, a rope walk once stood.¹⁰ Now signs for a laundry and barber shop instead flank the lane's narrow entrance.

¹⁰ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 210.



WINTER STREET

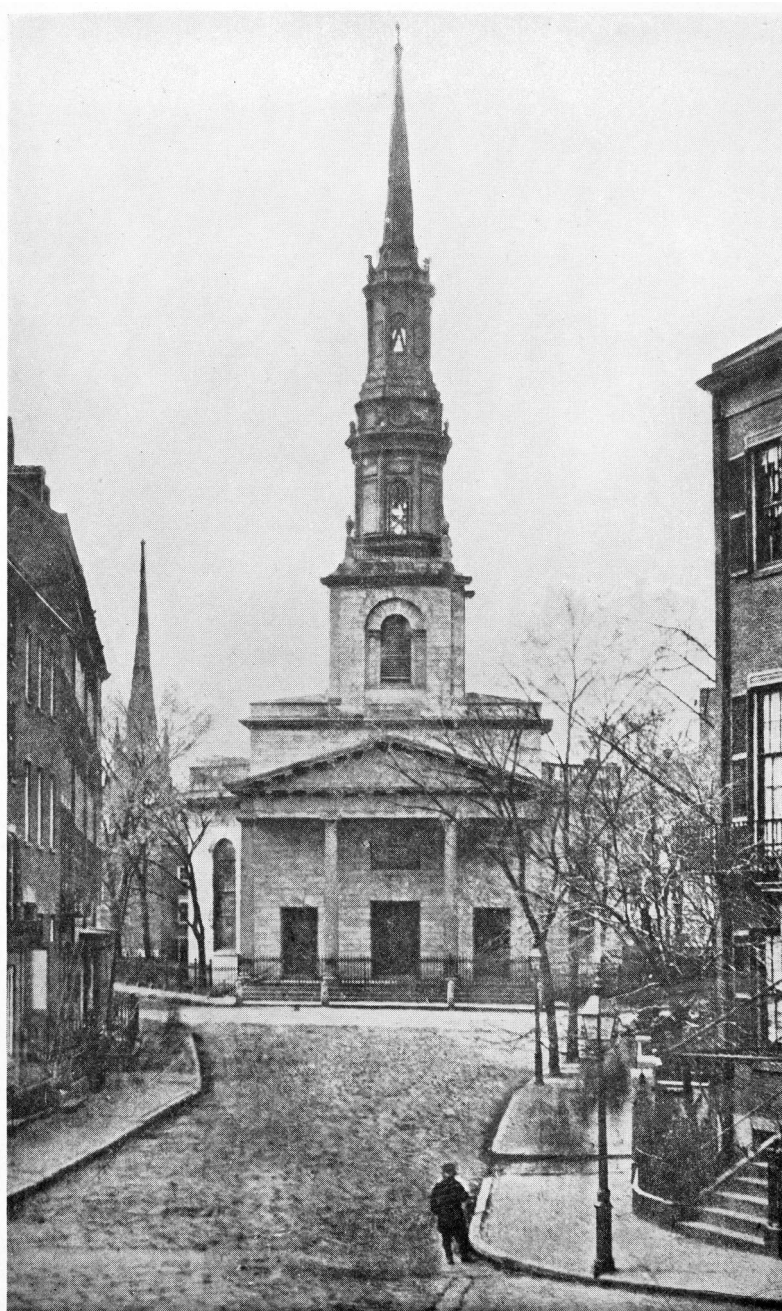
Looking east from Washington Street

Fig. 5. *Winter Street, Looking East from Washington Street, 1920.* From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 180, pl. 15. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

Tenement Neighborhoods

These photographs of narrow tenement-lined streets seem almost contradictory to Thwing's written history

of early Boston. While the prints and even the photographs of more distant, wider views enable the reader to envision Boston's quieter, less congested colonial streetscape, the narrow alleys with their tall buildings

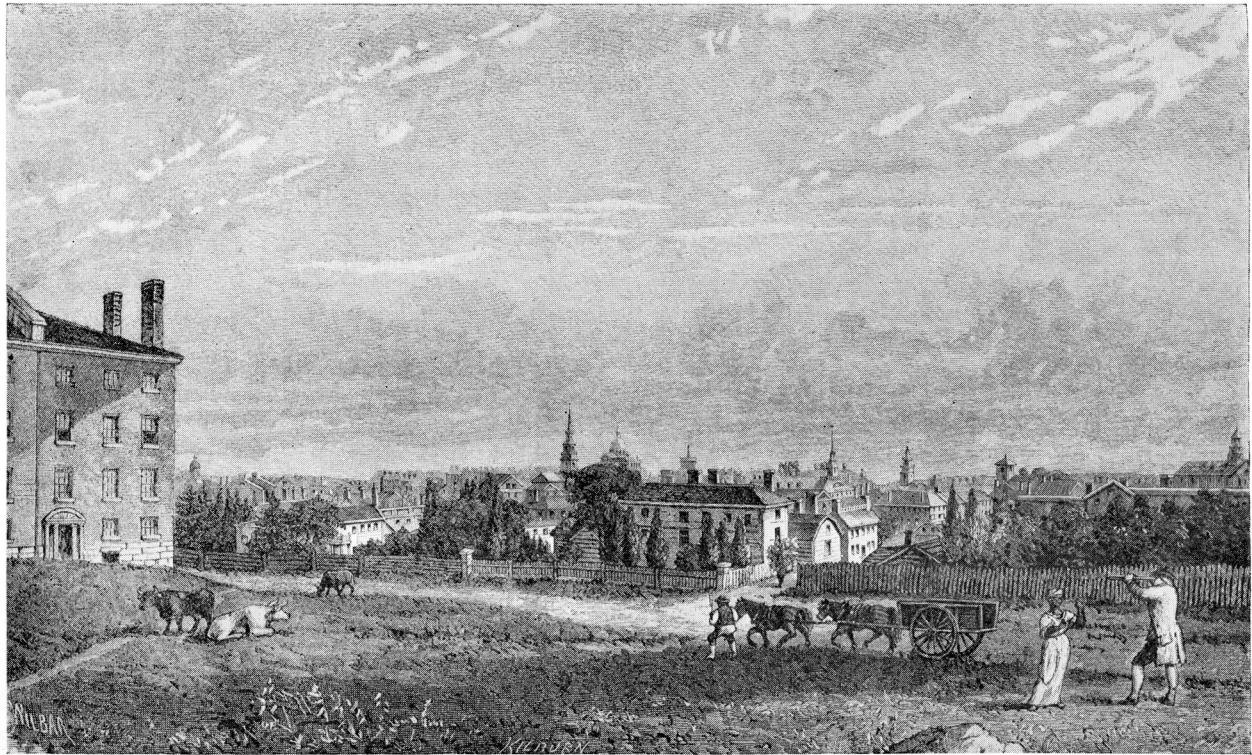


SUMMER STREET, THE NEW SOUTH CHURCH ON CHURCH GREEN

Fig. 6. *Summer Street, the New South Church on Church Green*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 184, pl. 16. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

looming overhead instead show a more crowded modern city. The photographs show historic structures standing alongside contemporary structures such as tenement houses, which according to urban

planners and reformers presented one of the most troublesome aspects of nineteenth-century growth and urbanization. Thwing's early twentieth-century readers would have attached their previously held



VIEW FROM FORT HILL

Fig. 7. *View from Fort Hill*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 194, pl. 19. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

beliefs about tenements and crowded alleys to her illustrations; as noted by Solomon-Godeau, “a photograph’s subject is rarely neutral or unmarked,” meaning that these previously held assumptions necessarily affect the viewer’s interpretation.¹¹

Common assumptions about tenement houses associated them with the negative effects of nineteenth-century immigration and industrialization, especially crime and disease. Purpose-built tenement houses were rare in the United States before the second quarter of the nineteenth century; as a building type, they did not appear in American cities until immigration led to rapid urban population growth beginning in the 1840s.¹² With no widespread tradition of multifamily housing, single-family houses less than three stories high instead dominated the American conception of the ideal home. As the city’s population expanded, the shortage of affordable working-

class housing led landlords to adapt older single-family homes into multifamily rental units, while speculative builders began erecting purpose-built multistory, multifamily houses. Building regulations across the United States referred to both types as tenement houses.¹³ By the end of the century, New York City tenement houses typically rose ten stories compared to five or six stories in Boston. Although not as tall as New York tenements, Boston’s narrow, winding streets visually emphasized the height of the tenement houses built along them, especially as they often blocked the sun from reaching the street.

Although tenement houses disturbed the traditional appearance of residential neighborhoods, Americans also reacted against them because of their unsanitary conditions and their presumed threat to traditional ideas about family life. The shortage of affordable rooms led landlords to rent

¹¹ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 180.

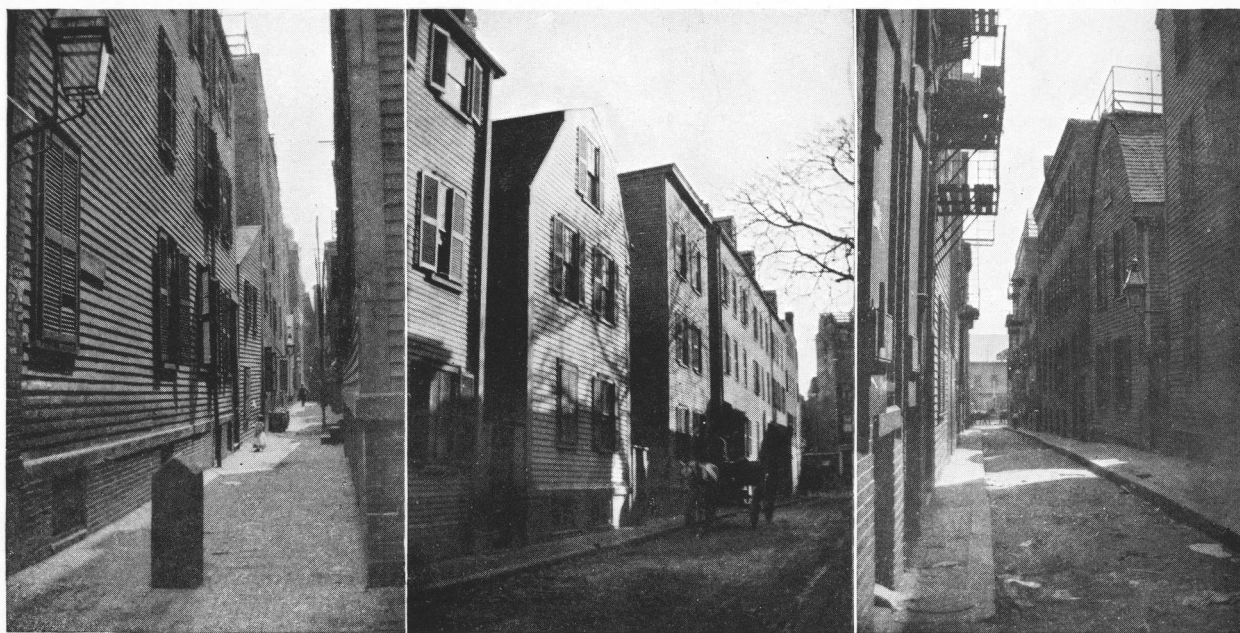
¹² Boston’s population expanded from 200,000 inhabitants residing in a 3-mile radius in 1850 to over 1,000,000 residents in a 10-mile radius by 1900, although annexation of neighboring towns also contributed to this increase. Sam Bass Warner Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 135.

¹³ For the development of multifamily housing and tenements in the United States, see Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 6; Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 117.



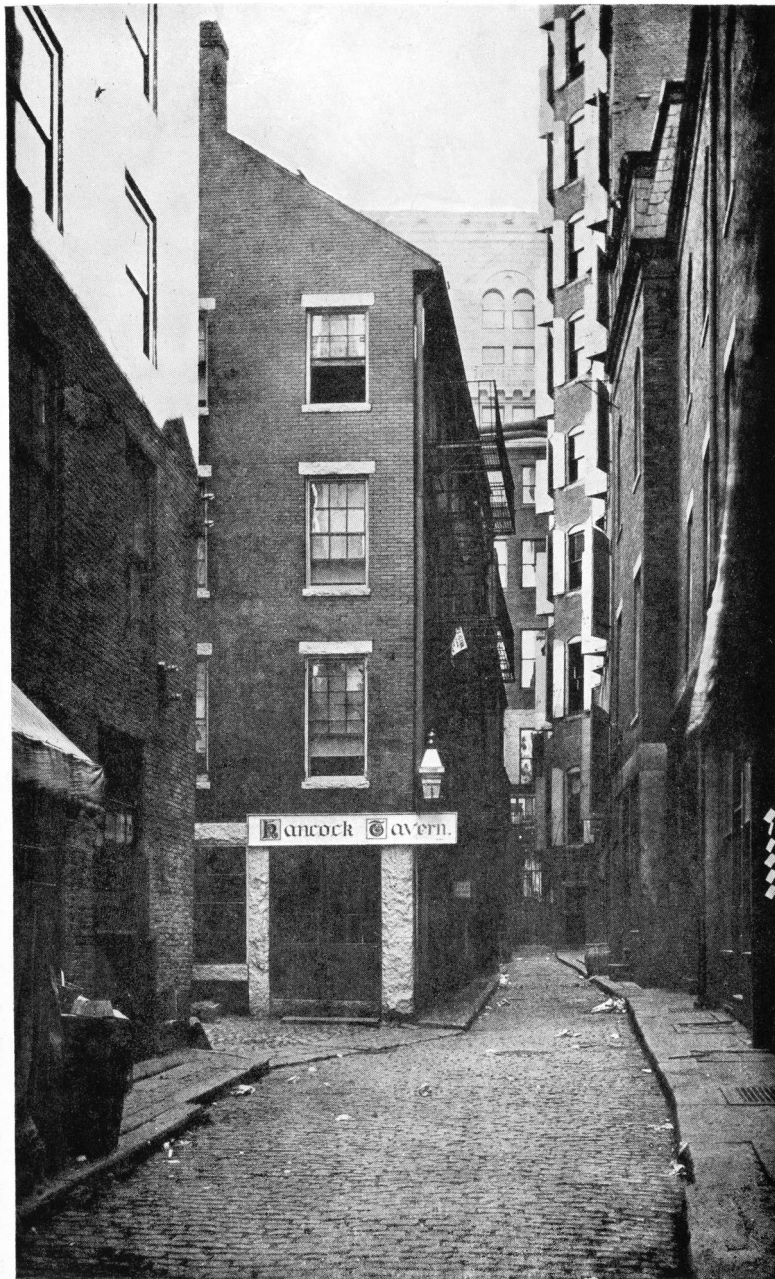
FORT HILL AND VICINITY

Fig. 8. *Fort Hill and Vicinity*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 190, pl. 18. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)



SALUTATION STREET, WEBSTER AVENUE, TILESTON STREET

Fig. 9. *Salutation Street, Webster Avenue, Tileston Street*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 64, pl. 3. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)



CORN COURT, THE GOVERNOR HANCOCK TAVERN

Fig. 10. *Corn Court, the Governor Hancock Tavern*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 130, pl. 9. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

out every available space including basements, even though in the North End these tended to flood during a high tide. A report of the city physician from 1849 reported that thirty-nine persons occupied one cellar, while in another the tide had risen so high "it was necessary to approach the bedside of a patient by means of a plank laid from one stool

to another; while the dead body of an infant was actually sailing about the room in its coffin."¹⁴

¹⁴ "Report of the Committee on Internal Health," *Boston City Document*, no. 66 (December 1849): 172–73, quoted in Charles Eliot Norton, "Dwellings and Schools for the Poor," *North American Review* 72, no. 155 (April 1852): 469.

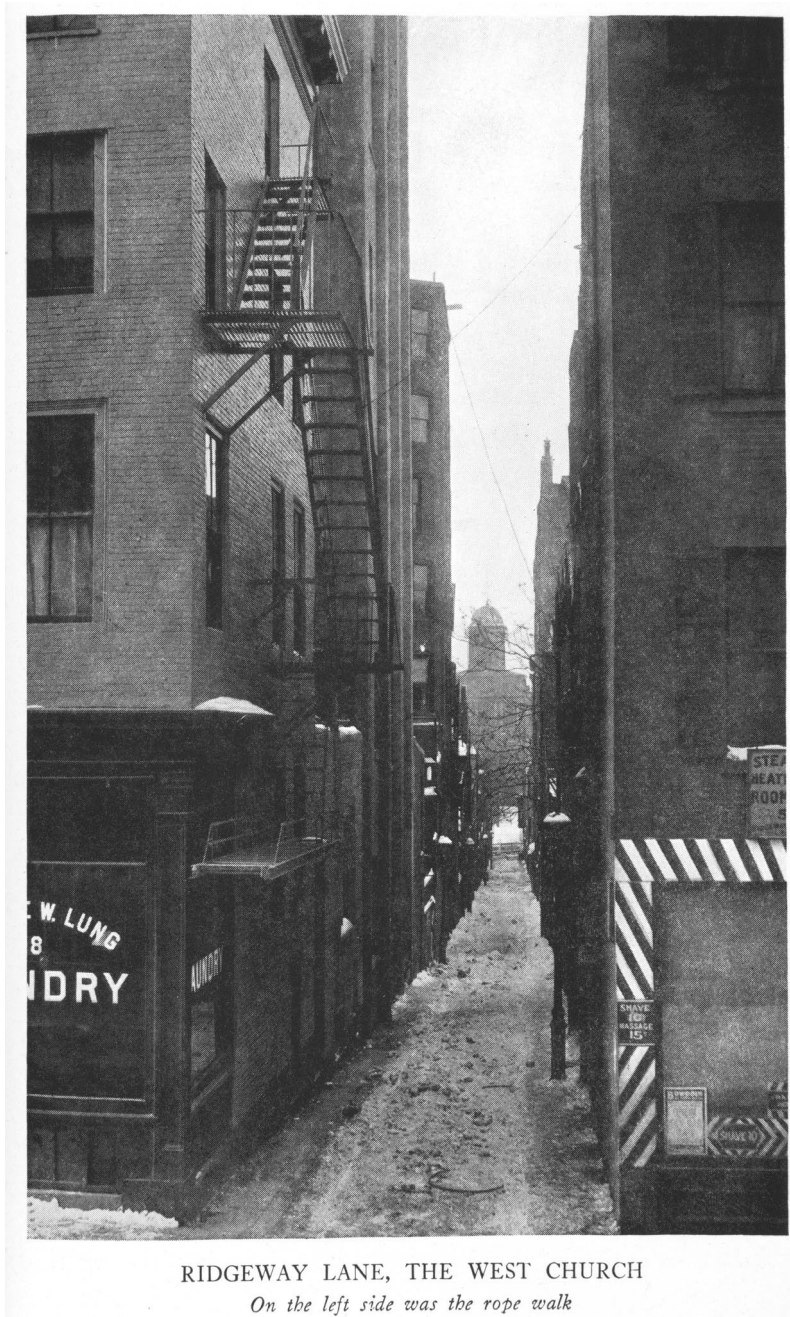


Fig. 11. *Ridgeway Lane, the West Church, on the Left Side Was the Rope Walk*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 210, pl. 20. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

Scientific theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed sunlight, air, and soil contained natural disinfectants. Crowded, windowless, and poorly ventilated tenement rooms therefore overwhelmed the ability of nature to rid the air and soil of disease, thus explaining the poor health conditions found in tenement house neigh-

borhoods.¹⁵ The many features shared in common by tenants, such as stairs, entrances, and water facilities, allowed families to come into contact with

¹⁵ Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization, and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 86; Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 57.

others while performing daily household tasks. This not only increased the spread of disease but also potentially threatened the moral health of residents. Robert Treat Paine Jr., a nationally known philanthropist and leader of the housing reform movement, stated the “gravest objection to tenement house life” resulted from “the poisonous influence” just one corrupt individual could exercise over all residents due to “constant contact and dangerous intimacy.”¹⁶ This lack of privacy along with limited sunlight and ventilation led tenement houses to become symbols of immorality and disease into the twentieth century.¹⁷

As homes for the working class and immigrants, tenements also reminded members of the middle and upper classes of increasing class and ethnic differences in American society. By the early twentieth century, Boston’s North and West Ends primarily housed European immigrants in tenement houses. During the colonial period and into the early nineteenth century, however, Boston’s successful middle- and upper-class families resided on these streets. As the city grew in the nineteenth century, those families fled the district for Beacon Hill and the Back Bay, leaving their single-family homes, such as one owned by Benjamin Franklin and included in Thwing’s illustrations, to be converted to rental properties housing multiple families. By the 1880s, these neighborhoods housed largely Irish residents and growing Italian and Jewish communities. By 1910, 30,000 Italians called the North End home, while 40,000 Jewish residents of largely Russian and Polish descent inhabited the North and West Ends, where they supported five synagogues as well as kosher markets, Hebrew schools, and a loan society.¹⁸ As these neighborhoods housed more and more immigrant and working-class families in crowded multifamily rental housing, middle- and upper-class Bostonians came to consider the North and West Ends some of the city’s worst slums.¹⁹

City planners and officials, such as those involved with the planning organization Boston—1915, proposed various solutions for the deleterious conditions of these districts, including removal of the

oldest buildings. The narrow streets lined by these tenement houses also came under attack, especially as building heights rose and limited the amount of light and air able to reach street level and penetrate tenement rooms. Unlike other colonial cities, notably Philadelphia, which began with a more orderly grid plan, colonial Boston’s more medieval approach to city planning created the crooked and narrow streets of Thwing’s title (fig. 12).²⁰ Early twentieth-century growth and development directly threatened these colonial-period streets and structures. Boston—1915, a private organization led by Edward Filene, Louis Brandeis, and others, tackled a variety of civic concerns beginning in 1909, and in 1910 recommended the demolition of all wooden buildings and “a gradual moving out process” for the West and North Ends due to the poor housing conditions found in those neighborhoods.²¹ In 1918, a committee appointed by the mayor recommended “improving” the North End by eliminating its narrow streets and creating open areas in the centers of blocks in order to “modernize” the neighborhood.²² These statements perpetuated the perception of the city as unhealthy and in need of physical redesign. Narrow streets signified disease, crime, and overall urban ill health—qualities of the antimodern and, even more important for city officials, antiprogress, as stated in an article by Lewis Palmer in *Survey* on congestion in Boston: “This fact of congestion stands on the threshold of the better housing problem, and until it is dealt with, no important progress can be made.”²³

Two photographs accompany Palmer’s article; they depict subjects similar to those found in Thwing’s illustrations: an unidentified alley and a wood-frame house (fig. 13).²⁴ The house, captioned “old house now occupied by several families,” looks similar in type to a wood-frame house

¹⁶ Robert Treat Paine Jr., *Homes for the People* (1881; repr., Boston: Tolman & White, 1882), 14.

¹⁷ See Wright, *Building the Dream*, 120–21, 150.

¹⁸ Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill*, 75.

¹⁹ Boston—1915 circulated a study by Harold K. Estabrook undertaken in 1905 documenting the particularly congested conditions in the North and West Ends. See Lewis E. Palmer, “Congestion in Boston,” *Survey* 24 (April–September 1910): 173; Edward T. Hartman, “The Housing Awakening: Housing Reform in Cold Storage—Boston,” *Survey* 25 (October 1910–March 1911): 672.

²⁰ Early colonists organized Boston around its marketplace according to standard English practice. Landowners first laid out public ways in relation to the topography; contrary to the myth, cows likely were not responsible for creating the city’s streets. For the history of Boston’s early planning and topography, see Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill*, 12; Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1968), 8–9.

²¹ *New Boston* (May 1910), quoted in Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill*, 124. See also James Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 46.

²² Charles Logue, Amelia Ames, J. Randolph Coolidge Jr., Mabel Delano Lord, James McConnell, Edward McGrady, Rev. Michael Scanlan, James Solomont, and Edward Chandler, “Report of the Committee Appointed by Mayor Peters on Housing,” *Boston City Document*, no. 121 (1918): 8.

²³ Palmer, *Congestion in Boston*, 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173, 175. The reproductions published in the *Survey* are poor quality.

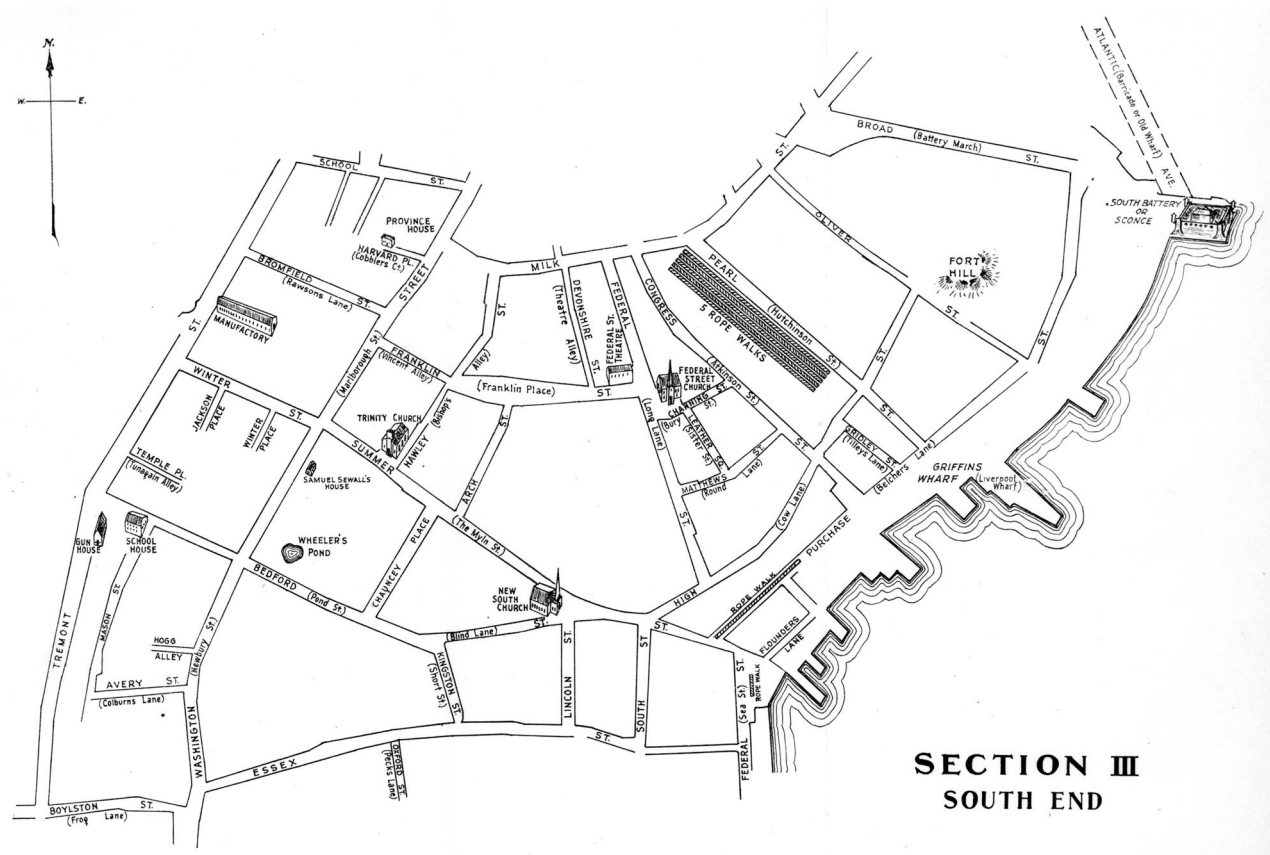
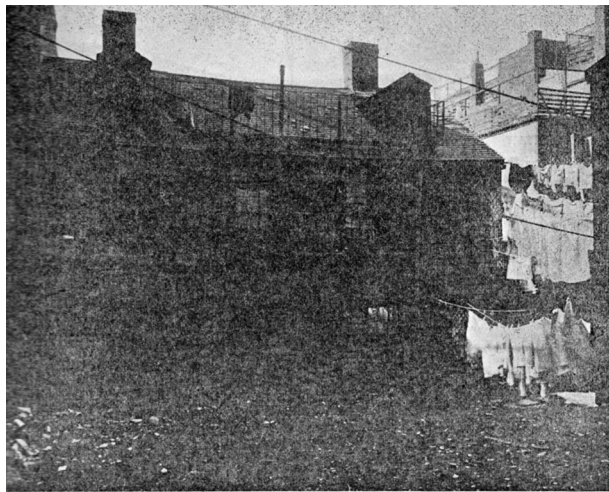


Fig. 12. Foldout map, *Section III, South End*, showing Fort Hill, Congress, Winter, and Summer Streets, and the New South Church, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920). (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

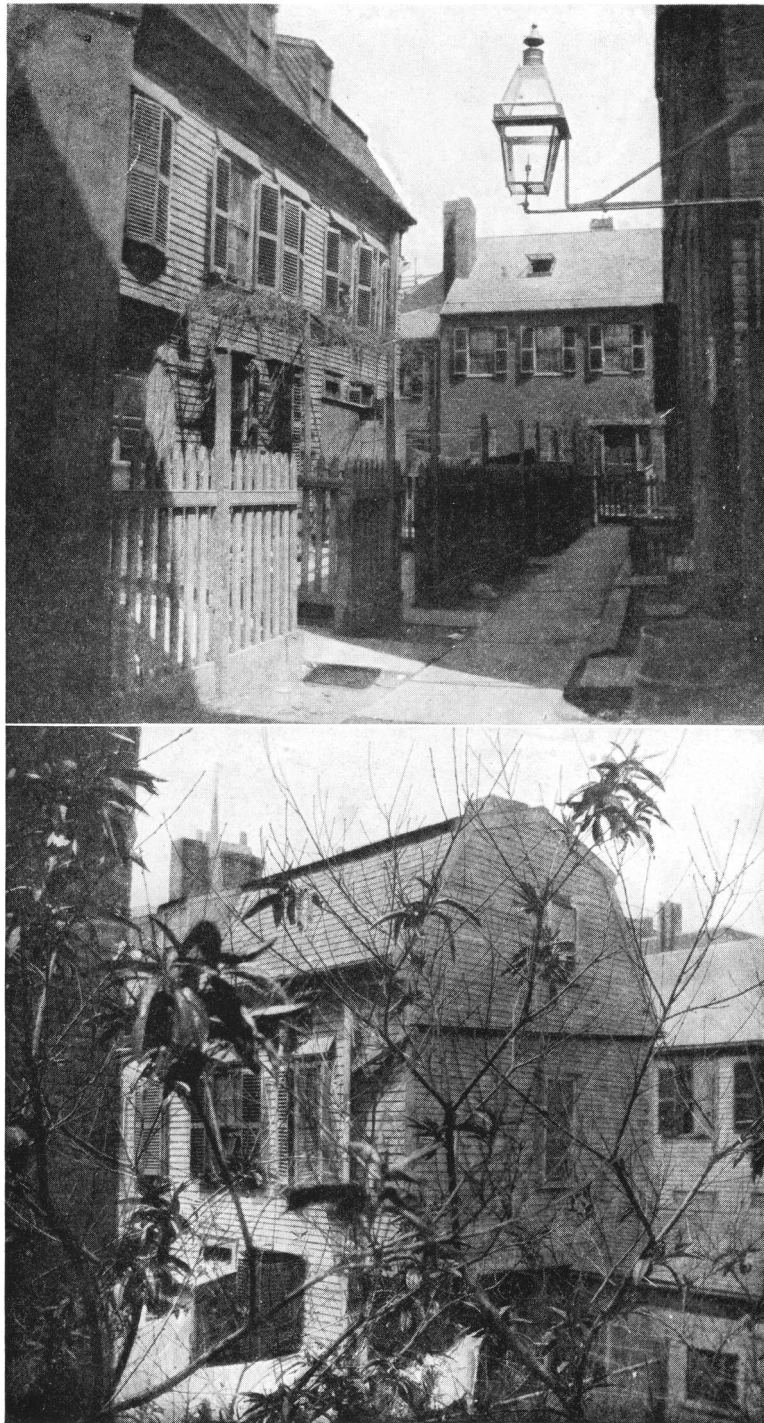


OLD HOUSE NOW OCCUPIED BY SEVERAL FAMILIES.

Fig. 13. *Old House Now Occupied by Several Families*, 1910. From Lewis E. Palmer, "Congestion in Boston," *Survey* 24 (April-September 1910): 175. (Periodical Collection, Courtright Memorial Library, Otterbein University.)

shown at top left in Thwing's illustration of Vernon Place in the North End (fig. 14). Palmer's illustration, however, is shown with laundry hanging off one side and from across a garbage-strewn court, elements missing in Thwing's photograph. Before the publication of *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, if and when Americans considered neighborhoods like the North End, they most likely encountered views such as the one in Palmer's article. Images of dark, narrow alleys and decrepit tenements surrounded by trash illustrated the publications and lectures of urban reformers, most notably those of Jacob Riis, the pioneer of urban reform photography. His first and most well-known text, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), as well as his subsequent books, incorporated both photographs and prints, similar to Thwing's format.²⁵ Reform photography countered the aforementioned approach to representing a controlled city

²⁵ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890; repr. of 1901 ed., New York: Dover, 1971).



VERNON PLACE, IN THE REAR OF CHARTER STREET
THE CLOUGH HOUSE, STILL STANDING

Fig. 14. *Vernon Place in the Rear of Charter Street; the Clough House, Still Standing*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 72, pl. 4. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

environment dominated by significant buildings and vistas, exemplified in Thwing's illustration of the New South Church. Riis instead selected photographic illustrations depicting an unhealthy and unstable urban environment populated by an impoverished immigrant underclass. By combining these images with texts in the form of lectures, books, articles, and pamphlets, he and other social reformers used photographs to goad viewers to act in support of social reform.²⁶

During the 1890s and 1900s, pictorial photographers began using working-class and immigrant neighborhoods as subject matter, offering an alternative view of these city streets and their inhabitants. Their approach differed significantly from reform photographers like Riis, even though they frequently captured similar scenes. The narrow alley lined with tenements and draped with drying laundry was, for example, a popular subject in reform photography that was also treated by pictorial photographers like Alvin Langdon Coburn. Comparing one of Coburn's photographs of an Edinburgh alley with one by Riis depicting New York's Gotham Court, we see how Riis's sharp focus captures the coarse and dirty texture of the brick wall and stone paving (fig. 15).²⁷ The photographer shows the individual faces of the children lined up in the middle ground, reminding us of the specific plight faced by families living in this alley. The young woman holding the barrel suggests the photographer has interrupted some daily task, underscored by the laundry hanging above in its shabby ordinariness. This sagging line blocks our view of the sky, emphasizing the oppressive setting and narrowness of the alley. Our eye is then carried back through the cramped alley as it becomes more crowded with fire escapes and more laundry before being blocked completely by the rear tenement house. Overall, the view is stifling; the viewer is offered no chance of escape either physically or mentally from the dirty and depressing setting.

Coburn also photographs a narrow alley, this one in Edinburgh in 1905, using a format similar to Riis's, with a group of small children lined up across the alley and laundry hanging overhead (fig. 16). In Coburn's *Cowgate*, the soft focus elides

the figures into mere suggestions of little children, the roughly textured wall becomes a pattern of light and dark, and the blocks of laundry become visual elements structuring our retreat into the haze of light in the background. Where Riis crowded *Gotham Court* with oppressive details, Coburn washes them away, enticing us instead with a mysterious play of light and shadow. The narrow alley becomes a site for potential discovery, a place for our imagination to explore, as the distant golden glow draws us deeper into the background. While Riis admonishes us for allowing the conditions of the narrow alley to exist, Coburn invites us into the alley and not only lets us look around without remorse but encourages us to find visual pleasure there.

The Picturesque City

The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston, like Coburn's photographs, also offers a picturesque approach to reading the urban landscape as an alternative to the reformer's representation of a diseased, chaotic city. Developed first in late eighteenth-century England during a period of rapid social change, the picturesque aesthetic offered a nostalgic view of the past by privileging scenes of dilapidated buildings and impoverished human beings, those left behind by the effects of modernization.²⁸ By the early twentieth century, the urban picturesque included immigrants and scenes of menial labor, such as Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of a "rag picker," as well as their humble neighborhoods, as seen in Coburn's photograph of Edinburgh's Cowgate. Stieglitz described how "homely" scenes, such as *Winter—Fifth Avenue* (1893), became picturesque and artistic "because of the poetic conception of the subject."²⁹ Thwing's selected illustrations similarly capture areas of the city considered outdated by civic leaders, such as narrow streets and old wooden buildings. By asking her readers to imagine the past life of Boston's streets, she evokes a sense of nostalgia through these scenes that heightens their emotional effect, making them also more picturesque.

²⁸ See Malcolm Andrews, "The Metropolitan Picturesque," in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape, and Aesthetics since 1770*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 286.

²⁹ Alfred Stieglitz, "Pictorial Photography," *Scribner's Magazine* 26 (November 1899), reprinted in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 166. Alan Trachtenberg analyzes Stieglitz's frequent use of the term "picturesque" to describe his photographs of New York in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), 183.

²⁶ Hales, *Silver Cities*, 320.

²⁷ Jacob A. Riis published this image in *The Battle with the Slum* (New York: MacMillan, 1902), 24. Although the original photograph, currently in the Jacob A. Riis collection of the Museum of the City of New York, features a less distinct background, Riis drew onto the printed image in order to sharpen and clarify it. Riis's alteration of the image to increase its legibility demonstrates the importance of sharp focus and clear details for his illustrations.

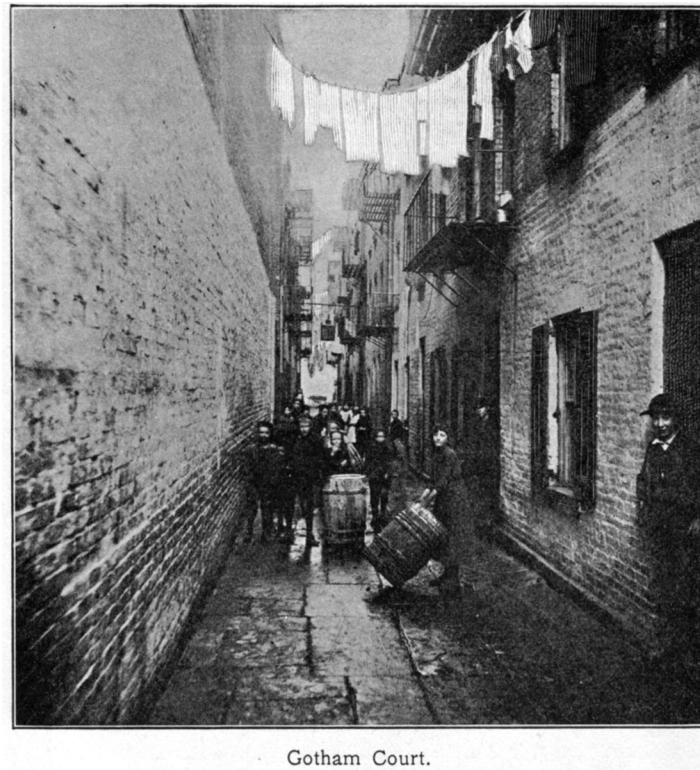


Fig. 15. Jacob Riis, *Gotham Court*, ca. 1900. From Jacob A. Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York: MacMillan, 1902), 24.

Artists adopting an urban picturesque aesthetic demonstrated possible reinterpretations of those aspects of the city that might otherwise be dismissed as either ugly or ordinary for attention. Explaining his intentions behind the creation of his photograph of a New York City skyscraper, in February of 1907, Coburn stated that he wanted to capture the “beautiful smoke”: “The idea I had ... was to try and render the beauty of what is commonly, but quite erroneously regarded as a very ugly thing.”³⁰ Coburn wants his audience to see the city in a new way, to reenvision the narrow tenement alley and smoke-filled streets as beautiful and artistic, a goal shared by Stieglitz and also promoted by the critic Sadakichi Hartmann. In a 1901 essay, “A Plea for the Picturesqueness of New York,” Hartmann urged pictorial photographers to “conquer the beauties of New York” and “teach New Yorkers to love their own city as I have learned to love it, and to be proud of its beauties as the Parisians are of their city.”³¹

³⁰ “Is a Photographer the Best Judge of His Own Work?” *Photographic News* (February 1, 1907): 18.

³¹ Sadakichi Hartmann, “A Plea for the Picturesqueness of New York,” *Camera Notes* 4 (July 1900–April 1901): 97, quoted in Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 183–84.

While Thwing intended to capture and present the history of Boston’s streets and neighborhoods and not necessarily their artistic qualities, she did call attention to the positive qualities of the ordinary narrow alley and old wooden house, which, similar to these pictorial photographers, presented an alternative understanding of the city’s old neighborhoods. Pie Alley, for example, was a busy albeit narrow way in downtown Boston whose inexpensive restaurants and taverns were frequented by newsboys, journalists, and others due to its proximity to Newspaper Row. Picture postcards of this time period label Pie Alley as “the newsboys’ favorite haunt.”³² Thwing’s selected photograph of Pie Alley shows a narrow, tenement-lined alley; the Bell-in-Hand tavern and Jilligan’s Tap can be seen halfway down the alley (see fig. 1). Her text, however, tells us that this lane led to the house of Ephraim Savage in 1712–13 and was originally called “Savages Court.” The James Lloyd family owned the estate on the north corner of Williams Court and Washington Street after 1763; however, Thwing traces the history of that lot back to the 1630s. In 1633–34, Samuel Cole established Boston’s

³² The Bostonian Society maintains a collection of Pie Alley postcards.



Fig. 16. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Cowgate*, Edinburgh, 1905. (George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.)

first “house of common entertainment” on this site, which then became a licensed inn in 1635. By 1657, it became known as “the Ship Tavern” under ownership of Lieutenant William Phillips, who then sold the property to Captain Thomas Savage in 1660.³³ The narrative accompanying the photograph therefore explains this busy alley as a remnant of Boston’s historic past, its pubs and restaurants descendants of the seventeenth-century Ship Tavern. For Thwing’s readers, venturing into Pie Alley means not only joining twentieth-century newsboys but also stepping into history with seventeenth-century ship captains and mariners. She reveals the historical depth of this alley through her text and illustration, the nostalgic evocations of the scene now allowing the viewer to see the picturesque qualities of the narrow lane.

Thwing’s presentation of an urban picturesque through photographic illustrations mirrored contemporary approaches in art photography. Jessie

Tarbox Beals, a New York City–based photographer, produced both documentary images for various newspapers as well as art photography that she exhibited in galleries and competitions. Her images of Boston, displayed there in 1916, showed Bostonians their own city in an artistic light and won the critical acclaim of a reviewer from the *Boston Evening Transcript*, who called them “excellent photos [*sic*] of interesting nooks and doorways and out-of-the-way little streets and alleys on Beacon Hill.”³⁴ Besides Beacon Hill, Beals’s work depicts picturesque views of Boston’s neighborhoods and well-known sites, including the Commons, Old Granary burial ground, the Custom House Tower, narrow downtown alleys, and the Old “T” Wharf. A winter scene of the Custom

³³ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 116.

³⁴ “Mrs. Beals’s Photographs: Novel and Artistic Prints of the Beacon Hill Quarter of Boston by a New York Woman,” clipping, *Boston Evening Transcript*, 1916, Jessie Tarbox Beals scrapbook, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, quoted in Alexander Alland Sr., *Jessie Tarbox Beals: First Woman News Photographer* (New York: Camera/Graphic Press, 1978), 65.

House demonstrates Beals's use of pictorialist conventions (fig. 17). She crops the out-of-focus image, emphasizing the diagonal of the street receding toward the tower and cutting off most of a carriage driving by in the lower left corner. This cropping, haziness, and use of diagonal creates a feeling of movement in the foreground that then ceases with the rise of the vertical tower in the background. Her image represents the city as both active and static, the stable monument of the Custom House balancing the blurry movement of the street.

Many of Beals's images portray Boston Common and Beacon Hill at night and in the snow. These photographs capture seemingly ordinary and inconsequential scenes but treat them in an artistic manner. In her photograph of Mount Vernon Street, Beals depicts a quiet, snowy street scene (fig. 18). Two figures in the middle ground walk toward the viewer along this nearly deserted Beacon Hill street, their features obliterated by this distance and their winter coats and hats. Here Beals sharpens her focus, capturing the complex web of branches and ornamental ironwork of the fence but allowing the snowy expanse of street and atmospheric conditions of a cloudy winter day to reduce the overall attention to minute details. The ordinary subject matter forces the viewer to examine the emotional impact of the work's formal qualities, making the city an object for artistic study. Unlike the photography of social reformers or the sublime views of grand monuments, Beals, like Coburn, allows her viewers to enjoy the view without moralizing or idealizing.

In this period of growth and change, Beals's photographs reaffirmed the aesthetic potential of the Bostonian cityscape, as seen in her atmospheric views of the Old Granary Burial Ground and Old "T" Wharf. In these images, Beals softens the focus to increase the atmospheric haze and heighten the emotional effect of the scene, making her viewers aware of the picturesque qualities of these unique Boston sites. Overall, Beals's photographs capture the imagination particular to Boston, as the *Boston Evening Transcript* noted regarding her images of the Beacon Hill neighborhood: "One is astonished to find that on ground so well worked, there should have been found so much admirable and novel material."³⁵ In showing Bostonians the picturesque qualities of their town, these images encouraged them to embrace the preservation of what had previously



Fig. 17. Jessie Tarbox Beals, *Custom House Tower*, Boston, ca. 1906–14. (New-York Historical Society.)

³⁵ "Mrs. Beals's Photographs," quoted in Alland, *Jessie Tarbox Beals*, 65.



Fig. 18. Jessie Tarbox Beals, *Mt. Vernon Street*, Boston, ca. 1906–14. (New-York Historical Society.)

been thought of as ordinary or insignificant, as the *Transcript* quote suggests Beacon Hill had been considered.

Like Beals's sharp focus in her photograph of Mount Vernon Street, Thwing's selected stock photographs maintain the clear definition of the documentary approach, but they also minimize human presence. Whereas Pie Alley postcards depict the narrow way filled with a crowd of people, Thwing's chosen photograph shows an almost

empty alley with one lone figure looking out from the doorway of the Bell-in-Hand and a pair of figures walking away from the camera in the middle distance. In the view of Salutation Street, one small girl stands at such a distance that no distinguishing features are visible; in Webster Avenue, a horse-drawn cart rests also in the middle ground (see fig. 9). No strewn garbage or evidence of work provide direct evidence of any harsh or negative conditions that might exist in these narrow streets.

Instead, these photographs by themselves present the narrow alleys as merely functional passages through the city. Their minimal human characters do not deter or distract the viewer from focusing on the built environment alone. In the image of Ridgeway Lane, the viewer stands at the entrance to the narrow way (see fig. 11). Footprints in the trampled snow offer the only suggestion of human activity; we look straight down the lane to where it opens upon the vista of West Church in the hazy distance. Thwing's illustrations combined with her text guide readers to explore the narrow alley and imagine the rope walk to one side and the home of Benjamin Austin Jr. on the distant corner.

Artistic photographs of urban scenes by Beals, Coburn, and others laid the groundwork for picturesque interpretations of the places presented by Thwing in *Crooked and Narrow Streets*. Pie Alley, Corn Court, Ridgeway Lane, and other sites discussed by Thwing were located in well-known busy parts of Boston's commercial and governmental districts. These common views gained new meaning as Thwing uncovered their histories, allowing viewers to see them from a different perspective, one with more poetical implications. The narrow lanes and old buildings now call to mind stories associated with Boston's colonial inhabitants and their daily lives, rather than the negative, crowded conditions of modern city life.

Reading Boston as Old and New

Thwing's *Crooked and Narrow Streets* offered a guidebook to Boston's historical streets, which were often lined with tenements or located in business districts, in the same way that Riis's illustrated books served as guidebooks to New York's tenement neighborhoods for middle-class urban tourists. Riis's photographic illustrations allowed readers to survey New York's slums from the comfort of their armchairs, sparing them, in his words, from "the vulgar sounds and odious scents and repulsive exhibitions attendant upon such a personal examination" while encouraging them to support urban reform projects.³⁶ While Thwing's presentation of tenement-lined alleys and old wooden houses as remnants of Boston's heroic past offers a different representation from the more common

view of these older neighborhoods as being in a state of decay, she uses a rhetorical framework similar to Riis and other urban reformers by combining photographs with text to project a particular meaning.³⁷ According to Edmund J. Carpenter in a review of *The Crooked and Narrow Streets*, visitors unfamiliar with the North End more likely think they have been "suddenly transported either to Jerusalem or perhaps Jericho, on the one hand, or Naples or Palermo on the other" rather than "believe himself to be still in Boston in New England."³⁸ However, after reading Thwing's text, Carpenter claims readers will see that "the old North End was once, in the bustling days of the early settlement, the court end of Boston where dwelt men of substance."³⁹ Thwing's *Crooked and Narrow Streets* lifts up the historical roots of Boston's streets, enabling her readers to focus on the city's significant history in the built environment rather than on the more troubling effects of modernization. As explained in a review in the *Christian Register*, Thwing's "reader is carried back to the days of Old Boston with all its atmosphere of charm and interest."⁴⁰

While the standard perception of Boston's older neighborhoods like the North End considered them as filled primarily with tenement houses, Thwing also shows surviving eighteenth-century single-family houses and encourages her readers to see them as such, even though these likely served as multifamily rental properties in the early twentieth century. She includes photographs of Vernon Place and the Clough House, while her text reads: "Fortesque Vernon, mariner and merchant, bought the house between Greenough Alley and Vernon Place in 1758, and it is about the only old gambrel-roof house with overhanging eaves left in the town. One with overhanging eaves is in Sun Court Street, corner of North Street, and there is the Paul Revere house in North Square."⁴¹ Rather than simply viewing these as decrepit houses on airless narrow courts, Thwing's readers see them as houses of colonial ancestors, the homes of specific men with upstanding careers,

³⁷ For background on Riis and the nature of documentary photography, see Hales, *Silver Cities*; Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*; Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*; Allan Sekula, *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

³⁸ Edmund J. Carpenter, review of *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston*, newspaper clipping, Annie Haven Thwing scrapbook, vol. 8, "Old Boston," Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Review of *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston*, clipping, *Christian Register*, Annie Haven Thwing scrapbook, vol. 8, "Old Boston," Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴¹ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 74.

³⁶ *Morning Journal* (New York), December 12, 1888, quoted in Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 16. Both Stange and Hales discuss Riis's work as travel guide; Hales, *Silver Cities*, 303; Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, 16-17.

like “mariner and merchant” Fortesque Vernon, because of the accompanying written narrative. By including the photographic illustration of the particular site, Thwing strengthens the potential for reading the city in this historical light.

Thwing’s use of stock photographs means that she offers standard representations of the city scene, rather than constructed or manipulated views. The particular meaning of these images therefore depends upon the context into which they are placed. Historians and theorists of photography, most notably Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Maren Stange, situate the origins of photographic meaning within the image’s overall surrounding context.⁴² As Stange explains, Riis made his photographs “carriers of specific ideology” by embedding them in a “rhetorical framework created by their interaction with captions, texts, and his authority as presenter and narrator.”⁴³ According to Roland Barthes, connotation—the imposition of a second meaning onto the photographic message in addition to its straight analogical description of the scene—occurs with the addition of text that explains the image.⁴⁴ Thwing’s text operates in this way. While her photographic illustrations depict late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century streetscapes, the accompanying text addresses the earlier history of these streets and structures. Rather than the image helping to explain the text, as is the traditional role of illustrations, here the text explains the image, burdening it, in Barthes’s terms, with “culture, morals, an imagination.”⁴⁵ Thwing’s written description of the alley as a site of colonial history therefore provides the reader with a means of understanding and thinking about the site in a way that differs from what is simply depicted within the photograph.

Thwing’s readers look at her photographic illustrations and find evidence of Boston’s colonial and early national history in the depictions of narrow streets because her text tells the story of their seventeenth- or eighteenth-century origins. Barthes explains the significance of this “parasitic” function of the text as it enables the written narrative to overtake the photographic representation. As the text sublimates the image, it gains authority and,

according to Barthes, becomes “naturalized.”⁴⁶ The modern urban tenement house is sublimated by the historical significance of the crooked and narrow alley.

Thwing presents Boston’s streetscape as a juxtaposition of old and new. For example, the description of the Hancock Tavern in Corn Court reads: “In Corn Court was the Hancock Tavern, bought by Morris Keefe in 1779. His daughter Mary married John Duggan who was a noted lemon dealer and who was granted a license to retail liquor in 1790. In 1795 he advertised lemons at the Sign of the Governor Hancock.”⁴⁷ Although the image depicts an early twentieth-century tenement house on a narrow, stifling alley, the photograph becomes a representation of an early American tavern where John Duggan once sold lemons in the late eighteenth century because of Thwing’s text (see fig. 10). Thus, she creates a new meaning for the narrow alley that foregrounds its historical significance. In contrast to the prevailing view of the North End as “un-American,” Thwing’s text offers an image of the North End as a remnant of Boston’s heroic past, not as an ethnic slum.

Tenement Reform and the New Boston

Thwing became familiar with Boston’s narrow streets and alleys, as well as the rhetoric of urban reformers, through her work as a housing reformer during the 1880s and 1890s. The American tenement house reform movement began in New York City and Boston during the 1840s as immigration and urbanization led to rapid population growth and severe housing shortages. Tenement housing reform aimed to alleviate poor conditions within urban multifamily rental housing, with an end goal of reducing overcrowding and improving sanitary conditions in American cities. Although exactly when and how Thwing became involved in this movement is not known; in January of 1887, while in London, she received an invitation from Octavia Hill to begin work with her in Deptford. Thwing likely already had participated in reform work in Boston before going to London. In a letter to her brother and stepmother written after spending her first day with Hill, Thwing wrote: “In none of the houses that I have seen thus far has there been anything like the dirt that I have seen so often at our North End,” suggesting that she already had

⁴² Sekula, *Photography against the Grain*, 4.

⁴³ Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, 2.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 25. Barthes explains multiple connotation procedures, including through manipulation of the photograph during production—the use of effects, pose, objects, composition, and so on, 20–25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁷ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 130.

worked in that Boston neighborhood and become quite familiar with its living conditions.⁴⁸ A letter from one Miss Carpenter in April of 1887 also provides evidence of Thwing's reputation as an experienced reform worker. Carpenter tells Thwing of "our new little mission place" in her letter and asks her to visit, noting "we are ashamed to get helped by Boston still someone with so much experience would be greatly welcomed."⁴⁹

Upon her return from London, Thwing continued reform work, joining the board of directors of the Boston Cooperative Building Company in 1888. Established in 1872, this organization was one of the earliest housing reform agencies in the United States and the first to require 50 percent of their directors to be women.⁵⁰ As a housing reform company, they both purchased existing tenements, which they cleaned and renovated, and built new model tenement houses. Directors made regular visits to residents in order to "establish personal relations with tenants."⁵¹ They also hired women property managers to collect rents in the manner of Octavia Hill's London operation, whose "friendly visitors" befriended tenants before "teaching and leading" them to contribute to the improvement of their homes.⁵² At the time Thwing joined the Boston Cooperative, the company owned a model tenement on East Canton Street in the South End, built to their design in 1872, and five small houses on Clark Street in the North End, which they had purchased in 1885, and had acquired property and existing tenements on Thacher and North Margin Streets, also in the North End. The company had constructed a new tenement house designed by the prominent architectural firm Cabot and Chandler in 1886. Thwing continued as a director until 1900; during her service through the 1890s, the company acquired an existing tenement

in the West End on Phillips Street and built a new model tenement in the South End on Harrison Avenue, designed by the architect Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow Jr., another member of the company's board.

The Boston Cooperative's mission intended to "show our citizens that poor people can be lodged in a thoroughly decent manner at a moderate rent, and yet that the property may yield an ample return to the owner."⁵³ They operated as a model company, not a charity organization, adopting the philosophy of "philanthropy and 5 percent" as first promoted by the London-based housing reformer Sydney Waterlow.⁵⁴ The company developed projects based on a goal of earning a profit for their investors; after the first few years, the company averaged returns of 3 percent from their rental income. By adopting this approach, the Boston Cooperative intended to improve housing conditions by providing an example to other landlords, demonstrating that by maintaining clean and healthy houses, tenants would pay rents more consistently and stay longer. In general, the tenement house reform movement did not seek the elimination of tenement houses. While reformers recognized the negative conditions existing within multifamily urban housing for the working classes, they also recognized that without tenement houses their residents would have nowhere else to go due to the expense of real estate and lack of affordable public transportation.⁵⁵ Their methods therefore focused on improved maintenance of tenements; by the start of the twentieth century, urban reformers called for construction of more model tenements to ease congestion and improve living conditions.⁵⁶

Unlike the urban planning profession in the early twentieth century, which called for large-scale demolition projects of buildings and streets, the

⁴⁸ Letter from Annie Haven Thwing to Anna Haven and Walter Thwing, January 31, 1887, Annie Haven Thwing correspondence, Historic New England archives.

⁴⁹ Letter from Miss Carpenter to Annie Haven Thwing, April 19, 1887, Annie Haven Thwing correspondence, Historic New England archives.

⁵⁰ Boston Cooperative Building Company, *By-Laws* (Boston: W. L. DeLand, 1871), 1. Other directors of the organization serving at the same time as Thwing include Sarah Wyman Whitman, Alice Lincoln, Frances Greeley Curtis, Helen Storrow, Martin Brimmer, Frank Chandler, Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow Jr., and James Tufts.

⁵¹ Boston Cooperative Building Company, *Annual Report for 1872* (Boston: W. L. DeLand, 1872), 6.

⁵² Boston Cooperative Building Company, *Annual Report for 1874* (Boston: W. L. DeLand, 1874), 13. For background on Octavia Hill, see Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 38–39. E. R. L. Gould also describes Hill's rent-collecting process in *The Housing of the Working People* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895), 161–64.

⁵³ Boston Cooperative Building Company, *Annual Report for 1872*, 4.

⁵⁴ J. N. Tarn provides a history of philanthropy and 5 percent in *Five Percent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas between 1840 and 1914* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973). American housing reformers mention the importance of profits in relation to the improvement of multifamily urban housing from the beginning of the movement; see Charles Eliot Norton, "Model Lodging-Houses in Boston," *Atlantic Monthly* 5 (June 1860): 676; Perkins et al., *Report of the Committee*, 18–19.

⁵⁵ The argument for providing affordable and healthy tenements occurred at a national level. In a 1902 report to the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Jane Addams of Chicago stated it was better for working-class families to have an apartment with adequate space rather than be tied down to a "cramped and uncomfortable" little house that would be difficult to sell if the breadwinner lost his or her job. Jane Addams, "The Housing Problem in Chicago," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 20 (July–December 1902): 102.

⁵⁶ "Battle with the Slums," *Boston Daily Globe*, March 8, 1900, 9.

housing reform movement Thwing participated in urged proper maintenance and renovation of existing structures along with construction of new model tenements. Their goal was not architectural preservation; rather, they hoped landlords would find financial benefits in maintaining safe and healthy structures for the poorest urban residents. Octavia Hill, who Thwing worked with in London and who also influenced the American housing reform movement, including the Boston Cooperative, was one of the first to take on the renovation of existing tenements as a key step in improving housing conditions.⁵⁷ The Boston Cooperative, following Hill's lead, purchased existing rental properties, which they renovated and maintained until the properties became too old to be cost effective. The Cooperative's Clark Street property in the North End, which they acquired in 1884 and maintained until 1914, included a house lived in by Edward Everett Hale during his childhood, a fact noted by the company in their annual report to investors.⁵⁸ While company directors recognized the history of the buildings and neighborhoods they worked in, the great expense of erecting new structures, not concern for historic preservation, drove their intention to maintain older structures. This meant reformers like Thwing expected the urban streetscape to contain both old and new; they worked to ensure all tenements, despite their age, met decent living standards. Only when buildings became too costly to maintain did Cooperative directors advocate demolition.

Like the directors of the Boston Cooperative who sought to improve living conditions within aging neighborhoods, early twentieth-century Bostonians grappled with the legacy of their nineteenth-century city, which, having rapidly acquired the ingredients of a modern city (crowds, traffic, factories, tenements) superimposed on a colonial city, now faced areas of inadequacy and obsolescence. The need for order and control over urban growth launched city planning as a profession and spurred activism by means of the City Beautiful movement during the early twentieth century. This movement contributed a range of projects for beautifying Boston, from planting trees and improving parks to the construction of South Station, the largest railroad terminal in the world in 1900, and increased commercial

development of the city's harbor.⁵⁹ Between 1900 and 1920, Bostonians debated a number of major civic projects, including the expansion of the Park Square Station and a driveway along the Charles River.⁶⁰ In 1907, the Boston Society of Architects urged the city to consider proposals for two new circumferential boulevards and the widening of Arlington and Commercial Streets; in 1909, the Metropolitan Improvement Commission proposed creating a civic center in the Public Garden, despite public opposition.⁶¹ During this period, Boston struggled to control development, restricting building heights and the overall appearance of neighborhoods, especially in the Back Bay and around the State House.⁶²

The cover for Boston—1915's periodical, *New Boston—1915*, illustrates these urban developers' vision for the modern city (fig. 19). Looking toward the city from the harbor, two monumental columns capped by winged figures flank the entrance to an open plaza. Beyond, two skyscrapers, capped with domes supported on columns, mark the opening of a wide avenue ascending a hill toward a distant domed structure fading into atmospheric haze. While the skyscrapers and soaring biplane define the setting as a modern city, the image itself does not include any references to Boston's already existing structures, or even its particular history. Its design instead draws on the architectural history of imperial Rome, as seen in the skyscraper domes and the paired pillars modeled on the column of Trajan. This visual conception of the modern city thus imposed a uniform composition across the urban fabric, all coherently organized through the principles of neoclassical design.⁶³ Having

⁵⁹ Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill*, 115–16. For background on the City Beautiful movement and urban planning, see Jon A. Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840–1917* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

⁶⁰ These proposals were debated in the *Boston Evening Transcript*: “South Station or Park Square?” March 12, 1907, and “Boston's Driveless Riverbank,” May 15, 1907.

⁶¹ See Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill*, 116–18; Alex Krieger and Lisa J. Green, *Past Futures: Two Centuries of Imagining Boston* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1985), 13–15; “Ingenious Schemes for Bettering Boston,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 9, 1907.

⁶² See Michael Holleran, *Boston's “Changeful Times”: Origins of Preservation and Planning in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 165–96; Kennedy, *Planning the City upon a Hill*, 112–14.

⁶³ Although these planners rely on classical elements of design, their preference for an overall uniform composition for the city is in keeping with modernist approaches to city planning, as explained by M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 43.

⁵⁷ Gillian Darley describes Hill's first venture in 1865, undertaken with the financial support of John Ruskin, in *Octavia Hill* (London: Constable, 1990), 91–94.

⁵⁸ Boston Cooperative Building Company, *Annual Report* (Boston: W. L. DeLand, 1885), 8.



Fig. 19. *New Boston*—1915 1, no. 9 (January 1911): cover. (Massachusetts Historical Society.)

characterized the city as outdated and in need of reform, a negative state caused by haphazard, uncontrolled growth, Boston's civic leaders now promoted the idea of the city as an entity that could be inten-

tionally created and controlled through organized, rational planning. This policy privileged new construction conforming to one all-encompassing design approach over variety and historical remnants.

Historic Preservation

The fear of losing much of Boston's historical fabric to growth and proposed urban planning projects such as that of Boston—1915 contributed to the rise of the historic preservation movement. In 1907, Winslow Warren delivered a lecture at the Old South Meeting House (itself one of the first preservation successes in Boston) on "The Service of Historic Buildings." He stated that without the Old State House, Old North Church, Faneuil Hall, Park Street Church, and other such sites, "the city would be shorn of that which now makes it the most interesting and instructive spot in America, and without which we should suffer the irreparable loss of those examples and lessons in patriotism and public spirit which these links with the past continually offer to us."⁶⁴ Significant buildings serve as central components of a city's individual identity, as suggested by Warren, helping particularly to distinguish Boston from cities like Chicago or Cincinnati that have "sprung up within the last twenty years."⁶⁵ This argument for preservation claims it as a patriotic duty, a way of celebrating Boston's particular place in American history. The built environment thereby serves as the physical manifestation of the city's contributions to history.

Preservation also provided a method for Bostonians to actively engage in shaping their city, not just physically and cosmetically as advocated by urban planners, but psychologically and emotionally as well, as evidenced by the arguments for the preservation of significant structures. The first professional preservationist in the United States, William Sumner Appleton Jr., who in 1910 founded the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA, now Historic New England), recognized the value of preserving structures for their associations with the past. That same year, Appleton also attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to halt renovations to the Jonathan Harrington House in Lexington. Appleton claims to have been first drawn to the house by the story associated with Jonathan Harrington, the home's owner during the American Revolution, who, after being shot in the battle of April 19, 1775, made it back across the Common to die at his wife's feet on his own doorstep.⁶⁶ Appleton explained that "this story had always made a strong appeal to me and it

seemed as though a house having such associations should be safeguarded against all alterations."⁶⁷ As discussed by Michael Holleran, the symbolic associations of the house with the American Revolution, its ability to stir the imagination, initiated Appleton's interest in the structure while the threat of renovations motivated him to argue for the preservation of the structure and its original colonial elements.⁶⁸

According to Holleran, preservationists at the turn of the century adopted an interest in the material culture of everyday life in historic periods; a building's age alone might establish its worthiness for preservation because it thereby served as a link to the past.⁶⁹ The case of Paul Revere's house in the North End demonstrates how these changing views of the built environment affected the psychic life of a city. While the Massachusetts Statehouse and Park Street Church received monument status because of their architectural significance and prominent public function, the Revere House garnered attention because of its associations with its most famous resident and status as the oldest surviving house in Boston, even though it had undergone significant architectural changes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷⁰ Restoration, led by the architect Joseph Everett Chandler, privileged the building's age and returned the house to its overall seventeenth-century condition, with only the second-floor interior returned to its eighteenth-century state, to appease the house's patriotic advocates. The building therefore helped historians, preservationists, and tourists understand more about what life was like in the seventeenth century for ordinary Bostonians, when it was built, and, to a lesser extent, what the life of Paul Revere, America's hero, was like in the eighteenth century.⁷¹ This motivation for preserving certain elements of the built environment demonstrates a change in the way Americans thought about buildings. While the statehouse deserved protection because of its design by Charles Bulfinch, early America's premier architect, the Revere House received the same attention because of what it allows us to imagine about typical life in early America.

Thwing's text echoes the concerns of the preservation movement in this period by asserting the value and importance of Boston's oldest streets: "Even though they were not laid out with the regularity

⁶⁴ Winslow Warren, "The Service of Historic Buildings," August 28, 1907, lecture at the Old South Meeting House, quoted in "Value of Historic Buildings," *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 28, 1907.

⁶⁵ Warren, "The Service of Historic Buildings."

⁶⁶ Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times,"* 221.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

of the streets of Philadelphia, certainly the dwellers have played a leading part in many of the public events of the country at large, as well as of the town itself. Each street has its interest, and many of the public buildings and even private houses have a worldwide celebrity. The cows may indeed have been a factor. This appeals to the imagination, and this with the old records will easily solve the problem for us."⁷² In the first bulletin published by SPNEA, Appleton described the types of buildings and sites he sought to preserve: "blockhouses and garrison houses, of which but few are left; the oldest settlers' houses; Georgian houses and town houses; battlefields and taverns. We may also include Indian names, old trails, roadside watering places and other objects of note."⁷³ Such an inclusive approach to preservation focuses on the material culture of the everyday, not solely on famous names.⁷⁴ Thwing similarly writes about what would have been the ordinary sites and spaces of the colonial period and urges Bostonians to consider the value of the city's streets because of the associations acquired through their age, not because of grand design. *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* offers an alternative to the city planners' way of reading Boston's streetscape by presenting its narrow alleys as part of the city's unique identity, physical remnants of the city's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history—not simply as roadblocks to progress.

The Crooked and Narrow Streets encourages its readers to value the entire urban environment, unlike Appleton's emphasis on individual buildings devoid of their physical setting.⁷⁵ Thwing relates the story of each street within its neighborhood, telling when, why, and by whom a roadway was laid out. She records the property owners and residents of each street, describing as well any interesting anecdotes and happenings linked to particular sites. She writes the history of Unity Street in the North End, for example:

In 1710–11 a new street was laid out by Ebenezer Clough, Solomon Townsend, and Mathew Butler, in Bennet's pasture. In 1717–18 called Clough Street and 1733 Unity Street. Benjamin Franklin owned the house which came to him from Richard Dowse, the second husband of his sister Elizabeth, who had it from her first husband, Joseph Berry, who died in 1719. Franklin allowed his two sisters to live here. There was

thirty-five years difference in their ages, and they did not live happily together, which gave occasion for a letter from Franklin to the younger sister urging the duty of forbearance.⁷⁶

Thwing associates the early American hero Benjamin Franklin with this narrow street, while also providing a small glimpse into the lives of two eighteenth-century women living in this modest brick house (fig. 20). Although the photograph shows a fairly ordinary North End street, Thwing attaches historical figures and a narrative to the scene, which helps distinguish it from a nondescript setting.

"The Present Generation"

Thwing published *The Crooked and Narrow Streets*, as she explained, to "interest the present generation in the city in which they live, by telling them just where their ancestors lived and the neighborhood in which they were brought up."⁷⁷ Many of these readers, like Thwing, descended from middle- and upper-class families who had resided in Boston for generations. As most of these families moved into newer enclaves such as the Back Bay or Roxbury in the nineteenth century, the older neighborhoods they once inhabited became tenement districts housing the city's growing immigrant and working classes. These areas' earlier association with middle- and upper-class lives was forgotten until a renewed interest in colonial history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led many like Thwing to research their genealogy. Thwing suggested that to walk these streets was to walk in the footsteps of their early American ancestors.

Thwing's picturesque presentation of Boston's streets and alleys encourages and prepares middle- and upper-class readers for an excursion into the old neighborhood, either in person or through the pages of Thwing's book. Before venturing into the hidden, narrow alleys of the business district, for example, readers of *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* would already know that a towering ten-story tenement house looms over the eighteenth-century Governor Hancock Tavern on its narrow alley, thanks to Thwing's illustrations. The text explaining the accompanying photograph tells the reader what to look for and how to interpret it. While the associations of the tenement house are not removed, they are sublimated by the nostalgic and picturesque narrative Thwing attaches to the city scene.

⁷² Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 7–8.

⁷³ *Bulletin for the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities* 1 (May 1910), quoted in Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times"*, 224.

⁷⁴ Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times"*, 228.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁷⁶ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 75.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.



UNITY STREET

Showing on the right the house owned by Benjamin Franklin

Fig. 20. *Unity Street, Showing on the Right the House Owned by Benjamin Franklin*, 1920. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920), opp. 76, pl. 5. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

A picturesque aesthetic responds to environmental and social change through the early twentieth century, as shown by Malcolm Andrews and Carrie Tirado Bramen, by presenting the diversity of the urban environment and capturing the appealing qualities of ordinary, everyday scenes. According to Andrews, the London preservation movement privileged picturesque qualities when recording historic sites and preferred photography particularly for this task above other techniques, such as etching, due to the photograph's ability to capture the structure's relationship with its urban setting. The Society for Photographing Relics of Old London, established in 1875, stated that its aim was not to capture a building's particular elements, but rather to "show the picturesque manner in which the ecclesiastical and civil buildings are ... dovetailed together in the quaintest nook of Old London."⁷⁸ By displaying the diversity of the city's architectural heritage, the "dovetailing" of buildings of different functions and ages, the city's

history became visibly manifest. Beals's photograph of the newly built tower atop the 1847 Custom House presents this aspect of the picturesque. Boston building laws limited building heights to 125 feet in the business district; however, because the federal government controlled the Custom House, local regulations did not apply.⁷⁹ Peabody and Stearn's 496-foot addition, completed in 1915, therefore became Boston's first skyscraper and a controversial addition to the city's skyline. Beals's decision to photograph the Custom House tower in a picturesque manner enables Bostonians to recognize the modern city as a combination of old and new.

Representations of such juxtapositions, as also found in Thwing's *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, make evident the city's existence as one continuous human settlement, a community formed over time and encompassing both past and present simultaneously. This continuity helped unify a sense of community quickly being eroded by rapid urban

⁷⁸ Andrews, "Metropolitan Picturesque," 292.

⁷⁹ Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill*, 114.

growth and, in the United States especially, by immigration.⁸⁰ The urban picturesque made the modern city less terrifying, according to Carrie Tirado Bramen, because it established connections between old and new and offered its viewers a gradual means of acclimating to rapidly changing conditions.⁸¹ Thwing's use of photographic illustrations depicting picturesque views of Boston therefore functions in a similar way, easing concerns about urban living conditions and allowing her readers to understand the diversity of the built environment as marking the continuity of Boston's history. The urban picturesque therefore became central to ameliorating early twentieth-century anxieties about immigration and modernization by providing a visual system for reconciling disjunctive elements such as tenement houses and seventeenth-century streets.

Thwing also hoped that *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* would "interest the present generation in the city in which they live" by educating the reader about the history and significance of the streets and buildings with which they interacted daily. These readers included the working-class immigrant families residing in those neighborhoods discussed in her text. Women educators in Boston recommended *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* be adopted by the public library branches around Boston for this purpose. Winifred Blanchard wrote to Thwing, telling of the City History Club she formed for Italian girls in the North End and expressing her hope that *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* would be adopted by the library immediately.⁸² Mabel Sawyer also wrote of her recommendation that this book be suggested for schoolchildren as "supplementary help in history and geography." She also asked for Boston Public Library branches to adopt the text in order "to help increase wider knowledge of Boston's history among one increasing class needing Americanizing."⁸³

This concern for educating all urban inhabitants about their city's history and importance relates to

the tactics used by Progressive urban reformers to generate "civic loyalty" and, according to Paul Boyer, establish urban moral control.⁸⁴ Thwing already would have been familiar with these tactics through her work in housing reform. The Boston Cooperative's mission, like the tenement house reform movement overall, sought to both improve tenement house design and construction and to educate and Americanize tenement residents.⁸⁵ Thwing therefore already believed in and supported the role of educating immigrants about existing "American" values. The preservation movement also supported this agenda of educating those living in these neighborhoods in hopes of saving more of the older physical structures and sites. George Dow, one of the leaders with Appleton of SPNEA, explained one aspect of that organization's mission as "informing foreigners and less enlightened natives as to American traditions and values."⁸⁶ Thwing's text and illustrations therefore sought to directly educate readers of different backgrounds about the layers of history visually evident in Boston's streetscape in order to deepen their knowledge of early American history.

Thwing, who wrote that "in appearance the old town cannot be pictured today except by exercising the imagination," encouraged her readers to find Boston's historic past within her photographic illustrations of the city's oldest streets and structures.⁸⁷ Her written history of Boston's earliest streets and neighborhoods reminded inhabitants of the longevity of their town and provided a sense of continuity with the past. Her use of photographic illustrations offered visual proof of the city's historic past as still extant. More significantly, by combining historical text with photographic illustrations, Thwing gave her readers a process for understanding the contrasts they encountered in the urban landscape. *The Crooked and Narrow Streets* presents Boston's oldest neighborhoods as physical remnants of the city's heroic American past, while the photographic illustrations offer a visual system for actually interpreting and confronting those tenement-lined crooked and narrow streets, in turn allowing preservationists, reformers, and historians like Thwing to create new meanings for the oldest urban neighborhoods.

⁸⁰ Andrews, "Metropolitan Picturesque," 296.

⁸¹ Carrie Tirado Bramen, "The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (September 2000): 444.

⁸² Letter from Winifred Blanchard to Annie Haven Thwing, October 25, 1920, Annie Haven Thwing scrapbook, vol. 3 "letters received on the publication of my book ...," Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

⁸³ Letter from Mabel Sawyer to Susan Minns, February 25, 1921, Annie Haven Thwing scrapbook, vol. 3, "letters received on the publication of my book ...," Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

⁸⁴ Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 252.

⁸⁵ David Handlin, *The American Home: Architecture and Society, 1815-1915* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 253.

⁸⁶ *Bulletin for the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities* 6 (April 1915), quoted in Holleran, Boston's "Changeful Times," 234.

⁸⁷ Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*, 23.

Copyright of Winterthur Portfolio is the property of Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.