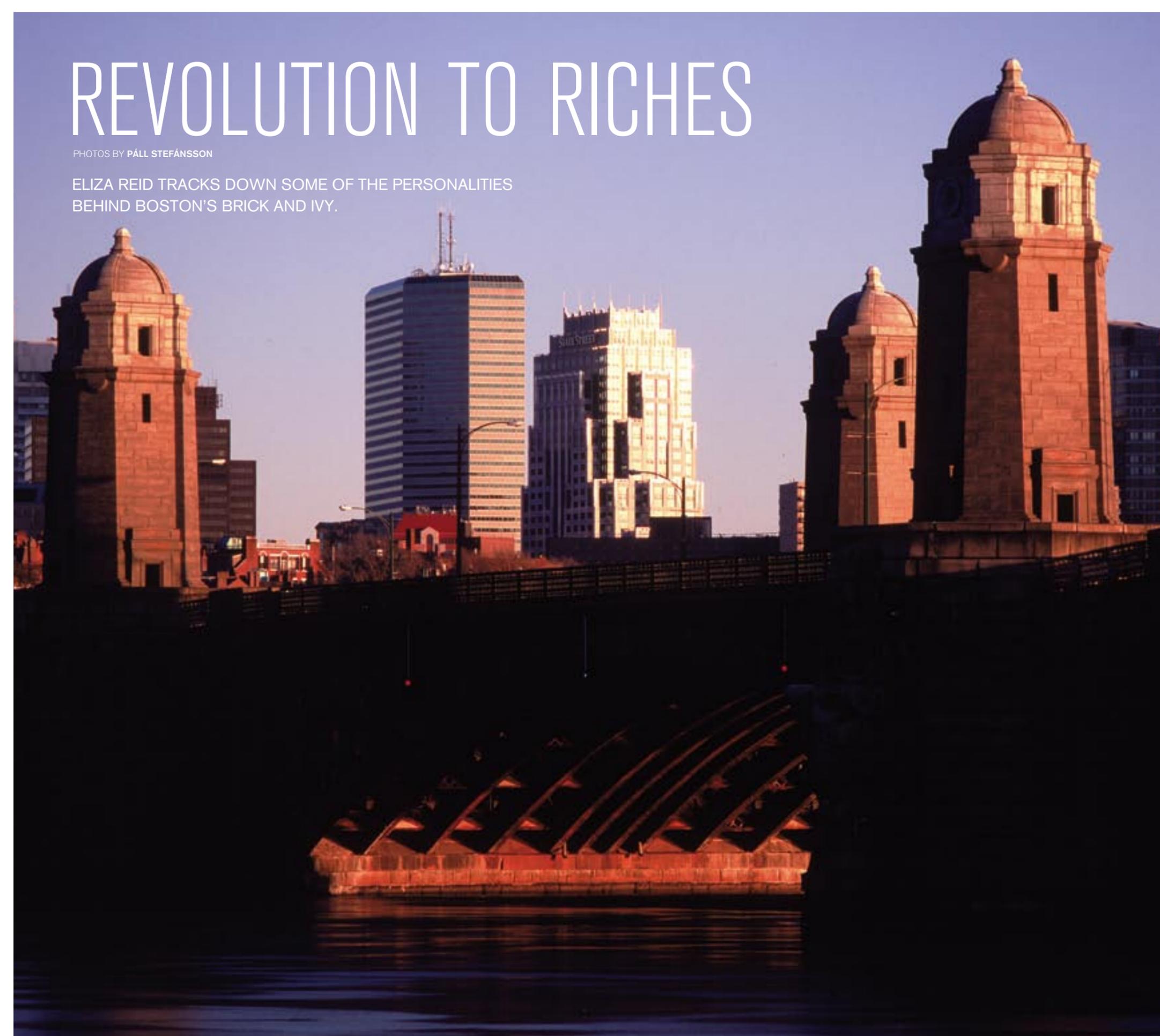


REVOLUTION TO RICHES

PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON

ELIZA REID TRACKS DOWN SOME OF THE PERSONALITIES BEHIND BOSTON'S BRICK AND IVY.



April 18, 1775. “The regulars are coming out!” At 10 pm, silversmith Paul Revere sneaks from his wooden home in Boston’s middle-class North End neighborhood and, under cover of nightfall, makes his way across the Charles River to Charlestown and then on horseback north to Lexington. A member of the “Sons of Liberty” rebel group, Revere has been asked by Dr. Joseph Warren to warn revolutionaries John Hancock and Samuel Adams that British troops – known as ‘the regulars’ among locals – are coming to arrest them. En route, Revere stops at houses to warn residents, and arrives in Lexington at midnight in time to ensure his targets’ safety. Revere himself is arrested by the British an hour later, as he continues his ‘midnight ride’ towards Concord, Massachusetts.



February 2007. I’m standing on the wood-paneled floor of Paul Revere’s bedroom in the North End, now known as a district of Italian heritage and eateries. Thanks to his exploits as a leader of the revolutionary movement, Revere has attained the status of mythical hero in American history and his residence is now the 11th most visited historical home in the United States.

The small two-story building which once housed Revere and his large progeny – he fathered 16 children – is decorated in period style, complete with plastic reproductions of a typical evening meal meticulously set out on china plates in the dining area. Two staff members, one a young PhD student trying to pay off student loans, the other an assistant director of the Paul Revere House, stand guard inside the rooms to offer me glimpses into the legend’s everyday existence, just as they do for over 200,000 visitors each year.

Paul Revere is one of dozens of Boston’s children who played a major role in American history. The city, one of the oldest in the United States, was home to big players of the American Revolution in the 18th century and the Abolitionary Movement to outlaw slavery in the 19th century. Its 35 institutions of higher education, the most famous of which are Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), have fostered the minds of influential people like New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and seven presidents including John Adams, Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy.

The city’s roots as a birthplace of revolution and dissent remain defining characteristics today. In the 20th century, politicians – mainly, but not exclusively, Democratic – from the city’s

wealthier districts like Beacon Hill, made it big on the national stage or broke traditional boundaries. Former President John F. Kennedy and his extended clan, and former Democratic Presidential nominees Michael Dukakis and John Kerry, were all steeped in Boston’s cultural and historical tradition of rebellion. Deval Patrick is the state’s newly elected governor; he is the first African-American governor of Massachusetts and only the second in the United States.

History buffs like me have a lot to choose from while in Boston. One of the city’s main attractions is the “Freedom Trail”, a 2.5-mile marked path which guides the tourist through some of central Boston’s major historical sites, and on which Paul Revere’s house-cum-museum is one of 16 stops.

Armed with my two-dollar map of the route, I had begun in windy Boston Common, my feet following the two-red-brick-thick path cut into the pavement. It would be hard to get lost. Joggers raced past me, the distinctive white headphones of their ubiquitous iPods jammed into their ears, fleece headbands providing little protection against the sub-zero temperatures. Others walked their dogs, small furry varieties being the breed *du jour* in this town.

My information booklet told me that Boston Common is America’s oldest public park, purchased in 1634 from Englishman William Blackstone to be used “as common grazing land for the feeding of cattell”. The 50-acre park, swanky Beacon Hill on one side and the stately offices of Downtown Crossing on the other, is usually busier in summer, when it hosts concerts and outdoor movies.

The first indoor stop on the Freedom Trail is the gold-domed Massachusetts State House across Beacon Street from the park. A free and informative hour-long tour shows me the highlights of

the building, including the opulent Memorial Hall and the wooden “Sacred Cod”, a good luck symbol which hangs in the House Assembly. The House of Representatives will not meet without it. (Not to be outdone, the Senate has its own mascot of fishing’s importance, dubbed the “Holy Mackerel”. Seriously.)

My guide, a local woman in her 50s, also clarifies the legend surrounding Paul Revere. “It was William Dawes who actually *waahned* the colonists,” she drawls in her distinctive Bostonian accent. Apparently Revere is primarily credited with Adams and Hancock’s protection.

Outside, Bostonians are having lunch. Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts, often housed in old buildings, are always full of hungry folk, but health food shops and salads are also popular in this rarified city.

A short walk further along my brick-trail – I feel like Dorothy in a preppy version of *The Wizard of Oz* – is the Granary Burial Ground. Surrounded by a semi-circle of multi-story brick buildings and the infusing pressure of modernity, it is a small plot of tranquility.

More than 8,000 Bostonians are buried in this two-acre plot, not all of them identified by one of the faded gray slabs scattered throughout the area. A dozen or so worn American flags have been speared into the ground in front of stones marking the most illustrious of the burial grounds’ residents, which include revolutionary leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams (who also has the dubious honor of having a local lager in his name), eight governors, and the ever-present Paul Revere.

As I stroll further into the city’s past, I stop at many other sites linked to the American Revolution: the Old South Meeting House where residents gathered to protest the British tax on tea; the Old North Church, from where Robert Newman hung two lanterns in 1775 to signal the beginning of Revere’s ride; and, across the Charles River, the Bunker Hill Monument, site of the first major battle of the American Revolution.



In one afternoon, I’ve walked through the city’s most tumultuous historical moments.

January 20, 1961. Washington D.C. John Fitzgerald Kennedy delivers his inaugural address as the 35th President of the United States. The charismatic former Massachusetts Senator has lofty goals. He wants to bring peace to the globe, to protect oppressed nations and the poor, to “explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.” The United States’ first Irish-Catholic President, who grew up in affluent Brookline Massachusetts, in the greater Boston area, inspires a nation with the key words of his oratory: “All this will not be finished in the first hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first thousand days, nor in the lifetime of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.”

These words stand in large black letters on one wall of the expansive pavilion of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, its floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the President’s beloved Boston harbor.

“JFK is still a huge psychological presence in Boston; I don’t think you can underestimate that,” Brian Flanagan, a PhD student at Boston College, told me over breakfast before I drove south to the library.

President Kennedy is the most internationally known of the large Kennedy clan but almost the whole family was influential throughout the Boston area. His father was mayor of the city and a Congressman for the area. A series of parks and public spaces are being constructed in the name of the family’s matriarch, Rose Kennedy (and as part of the city’s infamous “Big Dig” road works project). Late brother Robert, assassinated almost five years after his elder brother, was Attorney



General. Ted Kennedy, another brother, is still a member of the US Senate.

The Library and Museum is one of 11 of presidential libraries dotted throughout the US, usually in the hometowns of each former president. Like the others, the JFK library highlights the achievements of its namesake, glorifying his significance to history and noble causes.

Children have their photos taken by proud parents on benches celebrating JFK’s narrow victory against Richard Nixon in the presidential campaign of 1960. Exotic gifts given by international leaders or quirky presents sent by adoring fans are all on display. There is even a glowing video on permanent loop, featuring another charismatic president, Bill Clinton.

Brian Flanagan, while extolling the virtues of the Kennedy clan, also explained to me how every Irish-Catholic family, traditionally one of Boston’s biggest ethnic groups, was required to own two things: a crucifix on one wall, and a portrait of JFK on the other.

“After Vatican II, the crucifix became optional,” Flanagan joked.

August 1895. Newport, Rhode Island. The Vanderbilts are hosting a ball. The grand occasion has two objectives. It is the coming-out party of their eldest daughter, Gertrude. She waltzes down the plush red-carpeted grand staircase into the Great Hall of the Breakers, the Vanderbilts’ palatial summer residence in Newport. The Great Hall is a perfect 50-foot cube. A string quartet plays in the corner to the over 300 invited guests. High windows afford views of the rough Atlantic Ocean. The room’s lavish furnishings and decoration, made from 22-carat gold leaf and marble imported from abroad, showcase the other objective of this party. The Breakers has just been constructed - and the housewarming party will go on all night.



Above: The Breakers in Newport. Opposite page from left: The USS Constitution. Walking the Freedom Trail. Newport, Rhode Island.

The wooden “Sacred Cod” is a good luck symbol which hangs in the House Assembly. Not to be outdone, the Senate has its own mascot, dubbed the “Holy Mackerel”. Seriously.



The trumpet, bass, sax and piano players all take their turns with their own improvisation, each song transforming into a ten-minute musical extravaganza.

The Breakers is now the most visited site in Rhode Island, the best-known of the so-called “Newport Mansions”, a series of palatial homes constructed by the US’s wealthiest families during the “Gilded Age” of the late 19th century, when income tax did not exist. At one point, the Vanderbilt family owned more money than the reserves of the United States government.

Rhode Island is the US’s smallest state, and is only an hour’s drive from Boston. Its sea views and location have always made it a favorite weekend getaway for socialites from both Boston and New York. (JFK married Jacqueline Bouvier here in 1953.) It, too, has a streak of the rebellious about it; in 2002, Providence elected David N. Cicilline as mayor, the first openly gay mayor of an American state capital.

Boston’s elite have always been part of a network of well-heeled New Englanders. Newport may not be quite as bursting with glittering parties as it once was – the Great Depression and inheritance tax took care of much of the glory of the old days – but the town is still a popular weekend break for city slickers.

The town itself is of the postcard-perfect New England variety. Even the donut chains and mega-pharmacies need to ensure that their facades fit into the local architectural style. The middle-class brick homes, a good deal larger than their European equivalents, mostly have wide front porches and shade from tall trees.

But past the city center comes the glitz and the blatant, but somehow classy, ostentation of old money. Many of the area’s mansions are now listed historical sites and museums administered by one charity, the Preservation Society of Newport County, their original owners having sold them decades ago when

their maintenance costs became prohibitive.

The Breakers dwarfs all the others. It has over 70 rooms and, at the time, about 40 staff members were employed on site, although it was only a summer home for the Vanderbilts who spent the remaining 46 weeks of the year in their even larger mansion in Manhattan. (That home, which took up an entire city block, has now been destroyed.)

Some of the mansion’s rooms were pre-fabricated in France and shipped over, complete with marble fittings and gold leaf designs. Others feature fireplaces taken from ancient Gallic chateaux. The Breakers was even fully fitted with both gas and electric lighting, in case the latter form faded out of fashion.

A guided tour of the Breakers takes about 90 minutes to meander through only a third of the palace’s rooms. And then it’s back downtown to enjoy a traditional bowl of chowder in New England’s little seaside town.

🎧 *One Saturday night, sometime in the 1940s. Boston. Errol Garner and his band are bringing down the house. Garner, possibly sitting on a Manhattan phone book to elevate his small stature, is playing all the latest jazz standards on his piano. It’s a well-known fact that he can’t read music, but his improvisations are a big draw to the international crowd at this family-owned café. The crowd swings to the music on the specially built dance floor, cordoned off from the seating area by purple velvet ropes attached to gold posts. Garner is already an established jazz pianist, but in a few short years, he will cement his reputation by composing “Misty”, the standard for which he will keep his fame.*

It’s Saturday night and standing room only at Wally’s Café, the oldest family-operated jazz club in Boston. Thanks to city by-laws, the fog of cigarette smoke that usually seems to waft around with every dusky saxophone note is blissfully absent.

A lone bartender serves the good-natured crowd martinis and other mixes garnished with lemon wedges. “Boston is more high-brow than other cities,” explains Pedro, a local mate who is showing me the city’s nightlife. “In another pub, I once ordered a beer and an orange juice for my date and me, and the bartender just told me to fuck off.”

Wally’s is more relaxed. At the end of the narrow room, now in a different building from when Garner tickled the ivories, a quintet of talented students from the nearby Berklee College of Music are blasting some high-speed jazz. The trumpet, bass, sax and piano players all take turns with their own improvisation, each song transforming into a ten-minute musical extravaganza.

Fans applaud after each solo, and then return to their conversations of politics or gossip.

Elynor L. Walcott, daughter of Wally himself, tells me what makes this café different from the others. “You could always find jazz in Wally’s, even when it wasn’t popular,” she tells me by phone after my visit. “And it’s still family-owned and operated.”

It’s almost enough to get you a little Misty. 📍

Icelandair flies 7 times a week to Boston from Keflavik International Airport. From late May, Icelandair will launch an additional four morning flights from Keflavik to Boston.



South Boston.

WHERE TO GO IN BOSTON

- The Freedom Trail, thefreedomtrail.org
- Paul Revere’s House, 19 North Square, paulreverehouse.com
- Massachusetts State House, www.sec.state.ma.us/trs/trsbok/trstour.htm
- John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Columbia Point, jfklibrary.org
- The Breakers, newportmansions.org
- Wally’s Café, 427 Massachusetts Avenue, wallyscafe.com