

KIERNAN P. SCHMITT



SECRET BOSTON

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

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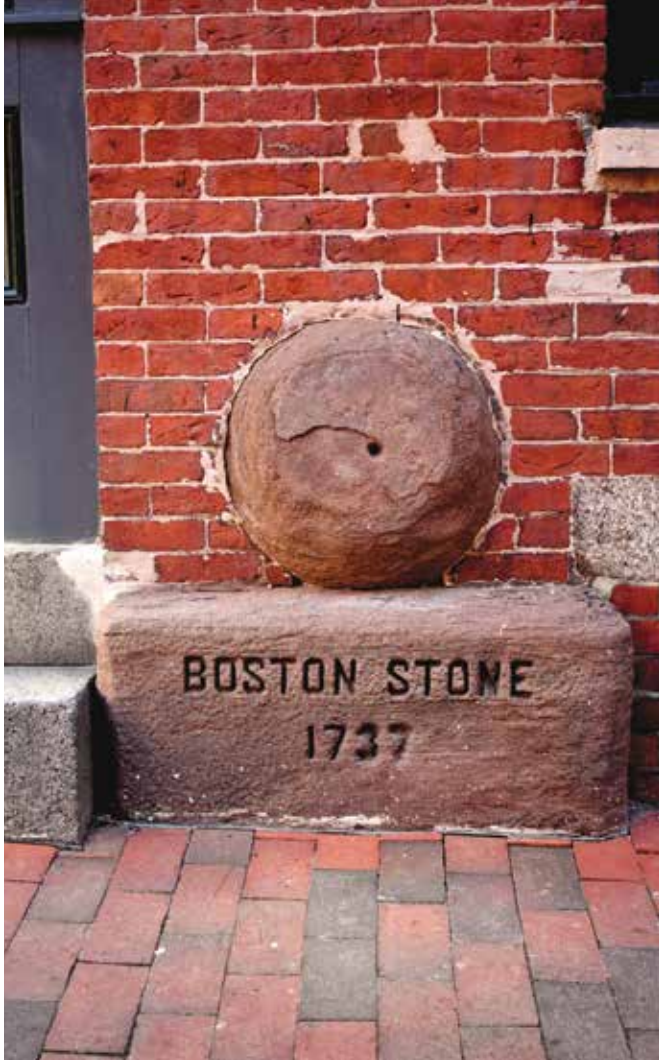
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THE BOSTON STONE

8

A simple mill stone or the center of it all?

9 Marshall Street
Green Line/Haymarket



Hidden down an unassuming alley and embedded into a typically Boston red brick wall, a 2-foot wide, round granite stone with a hole drilled in the center sits at street level, just beside a rather uninspiring fire hose intake connection. The stone sits atop a base simply inscribed “Boston Stone 1737.”

There is much debate about the significance – or lack of significance – of the Boston Stone, though it generally is agreed that nothing notable related to it happened in 1737.

It is thought to have been imported from England in 1700 by Thomas Childs, the owner of a paint mill that stood near the current site. Childs would have used the stone to grind material into paint pigments. Though Childs died in 1706, the paint mill stood until 1836 and, during its demolition, the Stone was purportedly unearthed and incorporated into the base of the new construction.

An oft repeated theory is that the Boston Stone was used by surveyors and city planners as the geographic center of Boston and that road markers reflect distance from the painterly rock, similar to the famed “London Stone.” However, historic milestones used Boston’s Old State House – several blocks away from the Boston Stone – as their reference point.

Others suspect that the Boston Stone is a ruse cooked up by a Scottish businessman looking to draw customers to his out-of-the-way Ale and Cheese shop in the early 1800s. The proprietor wanted a geographic reference point to lure attention and claimed inspiration from the famous London Stone.

Indeed, whether a brilliant stroke of early advertising or not, visitors today can experience some of the same: just around the corner from the mystery stone, The Boston Stone Gift Shop offers Red Sox tchotchkes and Boston-themed Christmas ornaments galore.

Further, a bar at 147 Hanover Street called The Point cheekily contends that the true Boston Stone resides in its bathroom. The restroom door reads, “The cornerstone of Boston: Inside the first stone laid in Boston.”

BATHTUB MARYS

11

Renovations in reverence

Viewable at various locations around Somerville; notable example at 217 Powder House Boulevard



If you take the time to amble around Somerville's streets for more than a few blocks, you will notice an unusual tradition: residential front yard shrines featuring Catholic saints placed in old bathtubs.

Known to locals as "Bathtub Marys," the practice dates to the late 1940s and was popularized by the large Catholic immigrant communities in the area. Local experts believe the original shrine-makers were Portuguese immigrants in Fall River, MA (about an hour from Boston) who, while upgrading their homes to modern showers and bathroom fixtures, decided to reuse their old appliances – sometimes including claw footed tubs – as the backdrop for public religious displays. Irish and Italian immigrants emulated the tradition, and the concentration in Somerville is estimated at 600 Bathtub Marys.

True to the moniker, the Virgin Mary is the most popular subject for the shrines, which echo popular Church iconography of Mary standing inside a grotto as "Our Lady of Lourdes," referencing miraculous appearances Mary reportedly made to believers in a cave in Lourdes, France.

But other saints are also regularly featured in Bathtub Mary displays, notably Saint Francis (identifiable by his signature brown robe and friendly birds), Saint Fiacre (patron saint of gardens, typically with a shovel), and Jesus himself.

A number of academics have studied Bathtub Marys and theorized about their historical meaning and persistence. Some believe that Bathtub Marys were placed in the front yards – rather than the more private backyards – to signal pride in homeownership, achieving the so-called "American Dream." Others believe that the flowers and greenery often surrounding the shrines injected a bit of nature in largely urban, cement-filled neighborhoods.

That they survive in today's increasingly secular context is a miracle worthy of Mary herself.

Beginning in 2012, a local librarian named Cathy Piantigini systematically traversed Somerville's streets to document Bathtub Marys. Her photos and street addresses are available at: bathtubmarysofsomerville.tumblr.com.

JAMAICA POND BENCH

13

Unsittable seating

507 Jamaicaaway



Jamaica Pond teems with people out for a jaunt, but few notice that among the many benches surrounding the pond, there is a practical joker – a bench that mimics its neighbors... save for a place to actually sit down.

Its creator, Matthew Hinçman, is an artist and JP resident. In 2005, he was examining the ubiquitous benches when, “In my mind’s eye, I was using a mirroring tool to picture what those benches could be – they could be a kayak, a canoe, a cradle.” Inspired, he tracked down Herwig Lighting, the Arkansas-based manufacturer of the pond’s metal “Victoria” benches, and persuaded a manager to sell him two benches for \$5,000. He cut, positioned, and welded the bench backs together to realize the mirrored image he had dreamed up.

At 5am on a rainy day in 2006, Hinçman and some friends snuck into the park and got to work. At the end of a row of identical benches, they laid down heavy slabs of steel and bolted the bench into place, then drove spikes into the ground and covered the base with dirt. They then disappeared into the dark and waited for the guerilla art to be discovered.

“It took a couple of weeks to be noticed,” Hinçman remembers – even though he had attached a small plastic pocket on the bench to hold a card with his name and address. In place, the bench was so convincing that the few who did notice it figured it came from City Hall.

In time, the Parks Department realized it was unsanctioned and removed it. The Head of Facilities was so impressed by the workmanship he encouraged Hinçman to get permission for reinstallation. Within two months, Hinçman received approval by the Boston Art Commission.

Though Hinçman has experienced several rounds of removal and reinstallation since, the bench is back and has earned a cult following. A local nonprofit mailed a holiday card showing it loaded with presents. Someone installed a fabric top to transform it into a covered wagon. At least one proud JP resident has a tattoo of the bench. “Same sex couples love to take engagement photos on it – two of the same object, mushed together,” Hinçman notes.

With a laugh, he recounts the many names he has heard for it over the years: the Taco Bench, the U Bench, the Celery Bench. “People think it looks like a coffin or a joint roller or a cigarette roller. All these wacky things sit adjacent to it.”

Yet no one sits comfortably on it.

MUSEUM OF MODERN RENAISSANCE

29

Mythology on every wall

115 College Avenue

The museum welcomes visitors only sporadically. It can be visited most reliably during Somerville Open Studios

For dates and times visit somervilleopenstudios.org

The artist-owners also open the house for musical performances and occasional tours throughout the year, usually announced on the museum's Instagram handle @museumofmod.renaissance

Red Line/Davis Square



Nicholas Shaplyko and Ekaterina Sorokina describe themselves as “two artists with one soul,” and their home is the embodiment of that soul: whimsical, joyful, life-affirming, riotous. Every surface in the house – which Shaplyko and Sorokina conceive of as a single work of art – is meticulously designed, with ceilings, walls, doors, and floors covered in mythological symbols from around the globe. The artist-owners open their home – which they call the Museum of the Modern Renaissance – to the public on select dates throughout the year (see above).

At every turn, visitors are greeted by gods and mystical creatures, kings and queens, angels and prophets, benevolent spirits and demonic visages. Intricate patterns repeat and distort, framing scenes and merging spaces. Everything is painted in trippy-bright Technicolor.

Shaplyko and Sorokina immigrated from Russia to the United States as the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s. In 2002, the pair was searching for a building they could transform into a private home *cum* museum, a blank canvas. This former Masonic Lodge and Unitarian Church fit the bill, and for over a decade the artists painted, sculpted, and carved their vision into being.

From the street, it is clear this is no typical home. Above the main door sits the enormous sculpted face of a beast with bulging, heavily-lidded Muppet eyes and a bulbous nose. In warm months, a window box supplies flowery hair. Above, a stylized sun smiles serenely.

The entrance hall features a frieze entitled “The Parade of Planets,” a panoply of zodiac symbols and Greco-Roman Gods. A woman symbolizing the Moon rides atop a fearsome owl; Mercury nestles in a Celtic design; Venus emerges from sea foam while a pensive Neptune wields his trident. Mars, the God of War, is surrounded by foxes, the symbol of diplomacy. Two mirrors opposite one another offer a glimpse of Infinity.

The centerpiece of the museum is the high-ceilinged Grand Hall, where Shaplyko and Sorokina host occasional musical and theatrical performances. Fifty-seven murals cover 5,200 square feet of wall space, straight up to the steeped ceiling. “This main hall is dedicated to myth, fairy tales, fables from different nations, different countries...myths of world creation. And some of them we just made up!” Nicholas notes.

Describing what he hopes visitors discover at his home, Nicholas grows reflective: “When you’re looking at art and talk to it, you open the door to other dimensions and all of a sudden this other dimension is yourself. In normal everyday life, you don’t have time to think about it...but art and meditation is a tool to go inside your own world and see why am I here? What am I doing here? Is it worth doing what I’m doing right now?”

CHANGE-RINGING AT OLD NORTH CHURCH

47

Music by the numbers

193 Salem Street

Visit bellringers.scripts.mit.edu/www/ for upcoming performances

Visit oldnorth.com/admission-pricing/ for tours of the Bell Chamber
Green Line and Orange Line/North Station



Old North Church was made famous as the site of Paul Revere’s “one if byland, two if by sea” warning of British troops on the march. Most visitors to Boston take 10 minutes to amble through the church’s boxy pews and admire a bust of George Washington, but few take the time to head upstairs to the bell-ringing chamber.

The chamber, a small brick room with ramshackle wooden doors and rickety staircases, sits two floors below the bell chamber itself. Eight thick ropes are tied to a central post, then swoop in graceful arcs and ascend through holes in the ceiling, where each is attached to a bell. The ropes each have a special black-and-red striped covering called a “sally,” which protects the ringers’ hands from rope burn and indicates the position of the bells above.

The eight bells – which date from 1745 and range from 620 to 1,500 pounds – are designed for a technique called “change-ringing.” Regular bells hang vertically and ring when a clapper is yanked to strike the bells’ sides. Change-ringing bells are mounted in a frame on a wheel; when the sally is pulled downward, the bell swings fully upside down so its bell is facing up, then momentum rotates the bell swiftly on its wheel, causing the clapper to hit its side and resonate when the bell is again facing fully upward. This position maximizes the volume of the note.

Posted on the wall of the bell chamber is a sheet of inscrutable numbers. These are the essence of change-ringing. The technique does not produce melodies, as most church carillons do, but follows precise mathematical patterns. The unique set-up of these bells allows for greater control over the speed of ringing. Skilled change-ringers control the speed precisely to follow mathematical permutations, or changes. Thus change-ringing.

If it sounds complicated, it is. The Old North bells were the first of their kind in the U.S. and, following installation, sat unused for five years until the church Reverend recruited a group of teenagers to learn the technique. Among that group was none other than a 15-year-old named Paul Revere.

Today the bells are rung by the MIT Guild of Bellringers each Saturday and Sunday.

Twice a year the Guild performs a full peal—an extraordinary 3-hour performance, done completely from memory. A full peal is a feat of athleticism: each bell rings no less than 5,000 times.

THE “GLOVE CYCLE” ARTWORK 67

In honor of lost gloves

Porter Square T-Station
Red Line/Porter



At 105 feet below street level, the Porter Square T-station is the lowest subway platform in the transit system. The escalators stretch downward ominously. As they ride, astute passersby note stray gloves on the partitions separating the escalators, just over from the railings.

The gloves – actually bronze sculptures – are in various states, some seemingly accidentally left behind, others stuck on anti-sliding knobs, still others splayed helplessly. The specificity of each glove starts to make them seem almost organic – little creatures worthy of a Pixar film, far from home and wondering what plot twist comes next.

This is “The Glove Cycle,” an artwork installed by Mags Harries in 1984 as part of an MBTA program to beautify its stations.

There are 54 gloves spread throughout the station, each cast using the lost wax method, save the totally flattened ones, which were sand-cast. While the gloves are stationary, physics does seem to apply to their story: as the escalators near their bottom and even out, many more gloves are gathered in heaps. (Mags once overheard a blind person say he uses the density of gloves to forewarn him when he needs to step off the escalator).

On the floors, the gloves are smashed flat, mangled, swept into tall piles in a corner. These most desperate gloves most powerfully evoke those that inspired Mags to create the work. In 1978, following a blizzard, Mags was walking through Radcliffe Yard and noted a lost glove someone had stuck atop a pole – “that was an aaha moment,” she says. As the snow melted, she went out searching for more lost gloves, mapping their positions and collecting them. Mags noted how the gloves “were all squashed and sodden in different ways,” seemingly animated. It was a sculptor’s dream.

A close study of the work reveals characters, allusions, and hidden dramas. A child’s alligator glove tells a different story than a workman’s glove. Some have spotted a cheeky reference to the Sistine Chapel’s “The Creation of Adam” as two gloves stretch toward each other, fingers extended, not quite touching. One can only guess why some gloves seem to have only three fingers, poor things.

Mags delights in the ways normal people interact with her creations: she has seen money and Hershey kisses placed in them, an open hand with an offering for the next tired commuter.

RED SEAT AT FENWAY PARK

69

Watch your head

4 Yawkey Way

Visit mlb.com/redsox/ballpark/tours for tour times and tickets

Green Line B C D/Kenmore

Fenway Park, home of Boston's beloved Red Sox, is known as one of the quirkiest national ballparks, not least for its oddly shaped 9-acre lot and 37-foot wall affectionately known as "The Green Monster."

Indeed, green dominates the stands across Fenway's 37,755 seats. But there is one that stands alone against this monochrome sea: Section 42, Row 37, Seat 21, which is painted a distinct strawberry red.

The seat honors the longest homerun ever hit in the park. On June 9, 1946, baseball legend Ted Williams hit the ball 502 feet off a pitch by the Detroit Tigers' Fred Hutchinson.

At that game, a construction worker from Albany named Joseph A. Boucher, dressed up with a straw boater to shield him from the summer



sun, was perched in the stands. Williams' ball sped toward Boucher and hit him square on top of the head, piercing a hole straight through his hat. "BULLSEYE!" *The Boston Daily Globe* declared the next day.

Boucher was less than amused. As *The Globe* recounted it: "How far away must one sit to be safe in this park?" asked Ted's target for the day, feeling his pate tenderly." Boucher also noted he didn't get to keep the ball, which bounced further into the stands.

While Boucher received first aid, he did not sustain any serious injury. *The Globe's* Harold Kaese couldn't resist some colorful commentary on the hat, "in the crown of which was a soft label that acted as a cushion... It made a tidy little hole that speaks well for the quality of the headpiece. One of my straw hats, for instance, would have broken up like a mat of shredded wheat struck by a hammer."

While history is clear on Boucher's plight, it is not exactly the case that he was installed in the famed seat at the time. In 1946, Boucher and his compatriots would have been in open, unshaded bleachers. The park added seat backs in 1977, and Red Sox owner Haywood Sullivan installed the red seat as a memorial to the homerun in 1984.

While the homerun record stands, it has not been without controversy. In 2015, Red Sox slugger David Ortiz cast doubt that anyone could hit the ball that distance. But the team's own baseball analysts have run the numbers and concluded that Williams' accomplishment wasn't impossible; it just required a rare combination of strength, a steep launch angle off the bat, and favorable wind (which on the day was estimated at a significant 18 to 24 miles per hour).

It's also rather hard to argue with the picture of Boucher after the incident, his fingers thrusting through the hole in his damaged hat.

If you want to spot the red seat, arrive at a game early. Serious fans request it specifically and take pride in playing Boucher for a day.



Initials in Morse code

Installed in 1934, the manual wooden scoreboard at the bottom of the Green Monster is still used today. Its 127 slots are updated with numbered cards by hand, despite Fenway's many digital displays. On the thin white stripe separating American League scores, note the series of dots and dashes: these represent, in Morse code, the initials of former owners Tom and Jean Yawkey, who owned the team from 1933 to 1992.

GREENWAY CAROUSEL



Ride a skunk

191 Atlantic Avenue
Blue Line/Aquarium

The Greenway Carousel was unveiled in 2013 as part of the Rose Kennedy Greenway, a park built atop the underground highways.



The carousel is both a child's amusement and a serious work of art. Handcrafted by sculptor Jeff Briggs of Newburyport, MA and vibrantly painted by artist Bill Rogers, the custom carousel forgoes the expected flouncy horses in favor of 14 fauna indigenous to the Boston area, including a few that are less-conventionally beautiful than your standard ride.

To determine which animals to include, third- and fourth-graders contributed drawings of what animals they'd like to ride. Some were no-brainers: the lobster, the Harbor seal, the cod. The right whale is encrusted with barnacles and – look close – the pole is a spray of water from its blowhole. Others were more subtle: the grasshopper is a historical nod to the weathervane atop nearby Faneuil Hall. Some seemed like good concepts but posed challenges for actual rideability, like the Peregrine falcon and three local species of butterflies.

According to Briggs, carousel design is challenging because of the need to balance engineering considerations, regulatory requirements, and pure artistry. “The tricky part is the actual safety inspection, which only happens once the carousel is up!” he noted.

Winged creatures are especially hard. Briggs positioned the butterfly wings fully upright, wrapped around the pole (“I crossed my fingers the inspector would okay that one”), while the falcon is tipped sideways with wings stretched high and low.

Briggs studied real animals closely to ensure verisimilitude. When he needed to design a seal that could provide back support, he spent time with Harbor seals to see if their tails could flex upward in a way that matched his plan.

A sea turtle, too, posed an unexpected problem: laid flat, it would take up two pole positions in the carousel's limited space. Briggs headed to the New England Aquarium to consult Myrtle the Turtle. “I was on a little raft, and she looked at me and went down – but when she turned to go she was so thick! I never knew! I turned to the guy and said, ‘She's pretty big through, huh?’” and the guy said, ‘Yeah ... she's fat.’” Once he realized there was plenty of room for a rider, a solution was born: Briggs sculpted the turtle sideways in mid-swim.

A few children suggested a sea monster, which went against the assignment of real animals. Briggs dove into historical research about a legendary “Sea Monster of Gloucester” and discovered that experts suspected a real, disconcertingly long oarfish. It made the cut.

When asked why he chose to include a skunk, Briggs laughed heartily. “It's got the ick factor!”

TECH MODEL RAILROAD CLUB ⑦

Toy trains, real software

Room N52-118

265 Massachusetts Avenue

Visit tmrc.mit.edu/ for upcoming openings or to arrange a tour

Red Line/Central



The Tech Model Railroad Club is famous to people who fall within two very well-defined groups: model train enthusiasts and computer software historians. The relationship between the two, while not obvious at first, becomes clearer upon experiencing how the MITers' model railroad works, backed as it is by student-created software and an extensive network of sensors tracking and organizing what's happening on the rails.

A visit to the TMRC (pronounced TUH-murk) is also a standout way to experience the uniquely MIT attitude of being both shockingly brilliant and cheekily flippant about rule-following.

Founded in 1946, the club's extensive railroad set-up has only been moved once. The club's first home was in a legendary building on campus, Building 20, which was intended to be a temporary home to MIT's military research during World War II. It remained in place for 55 years, gaining the nickname the "Plywood Palace" and a reputation that students could basically do whatever they wanted within its walls. The rogue spirit engendered by Building 20 remains a proud part of the TMRC culture.

TMRC moved to its current home in 1997. In the ensuing decades, members have built out an extensive network of cityscapes, residential areas, parks, foliage, cars, trucks, underpasses, and many colorful pedestrians. There are miles and miles of track, a roundhouse, and a freight yard.

Particularly notable is a tall model building with many windows, which is based on MIT's real-world Green Building; the model is programmed to light-up and emulate a game of Tetris, including the video-games' tinny music. (A group of students once wired the real 18-story building to do the same thing).

The trains are electrically powered through the rails and the whole system is run by "System 3," a third-generation software program created by MIT students themselves. The System can automatically throw switches and turn power on and off to specific tracks, allowing many trains to run at once with no human intervention.

The history of TMRC is tied closely to the broader "hacker culture" among software engineers; early members are credited with inventing the concept that "information wants to be free" – a core belief among hacker zealots.

KIERNAN P. SCHMITT



SECRET

BOSTON

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE

Cower before a Viking, conjure the ghosts of a lost convent, sit on an unsittable bench, artistically arrange abandoned rocking horses, worship a cod, roam ruins of a zoo, tour a dozen enormous eggs perched on an island, honor the forebears of Excel spreadsheets, lose yourself in a trippy Russian artistic dreamscape hidden in a Masonic Hall, honor a huge pear, rent a dragon, find Harvard's secret pig, take a mini gondola ride through teeny Venice, fall in love with a donkey, kiss President Jackson's lips, read 20,000 cookbooks, appreciate bad art, dress up as a marshmallow, hold a cremated elephant in a peanut butter jar.

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, Boston is a reserve of well-concealed treasures only revealed to those who know how to wander off the beaten track, whether residents or visitors.

An indispensable guide for those who thought they knew the city well, or who would like to discover its hidden face.

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