

Nobody Asked Me, But... No. 173: Hotel History: Omni Parker House Hotel (1855)

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by Stanley Turkel, CMHS

Hotel History: Omni Parker House Hotel (1855), Boston, Massachusetts (551 rooms)

Opened in October 1855 by Henry D. Parker, the Parker House is the longest continuously operating hotel in the United States and is located in historic downtown Boston on the Freedom Trail. The hotel was home to the Saturday Night Club including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and John Greenleaf Whittier. Charles Dickens lived at the Parker House for two years and gave his first public reading of "A Christmas Carol" at the Saturday Night Club.

The hotel has seen its share of major political characters. John Wilkes Booth stayed at the Parker House Hotel the week before he shot President Lincoln. Ho Chi Minh, Marxist revolutionary and president of North Vietnam, worked there as a pastry chef and his marble baking table is still being used. Malcolm X, the African American activist, worked as a waiter in the hotel's restaurant. President Ulysses S. Grant stayed at the Parker House Hotel. It was also a favorite of the late President John F. Kennedy. JFK gave his first public speech in the hotel's Press Room, announced his bid for the U.S. Senate here, and even proposed to Jacqueline Bouvier in Parker's Restaurant.

The Parker House was one of the first hotels to deviate from the American plan and embrace the more flexible European plan. Hotelier Harvey Parker was also the first to offer meals continuously throughout the day, rather than at fixed intervals, and the second floor became a popular choice for the dining clubs of the time. 19th century Americans resisted the European plan as an affront to democratic ideals. Today, the American plan exists only on cruise ships and certain inclusive resorts, like Sandals Royal Plantation, Ocho Rios, Jamaica. The Parker House had little culinary competition in Boston, but its great contribution to the nation's menu is its namesake roll. The ideal Parker House roll "should be delicate, soft and rather sweet, typical of American rolls in the 19th century," said food critic James Beard, "and consume butter by the ton." The recipe for Parker House rolls was kept secret until 1933 when President Franklin Roosevelt requested it for a state dinner at the White House. The hotel's bake shop is also well-known as the birthplace of Boston Cream Pie, the official

Massachusetts state dessert. Parker House chefs also invented the term "scrod," for the fish catch of the day. Well-regarded chefs like Emeril Lagasse, Jasper White and Lydia Shire launched their culinary careers in the Parker's Restaurant kitchen.

On Monday, October 8, 1855, the Boston Transcript announced the hotel's opening:

The Parker House. This elegant new hotel, on School Street, was opened on Saturday for the inspection of the public. Several thousands of our citizens, ladies as well as gentlemen, availed themselves of the invitation, and for many hours the splendid building was literally thronged. All were surprised and delighted at the convenient arrangement of the whole establishment - the gorgeous furniture of the parlors, the extent and beauty of the dining hall, the number and different styles of the lodging rooms - and, in fact, the richness, lavish expenditure and excellent taste which abounded in every department. The house was universally adjudged to be a model one. It opened for business this morning, to be conducted on the European plan, and under the personal supervision of its enterprising, experienced and popular proprietor, its success cannot be doubted.

The success of the Parker House led Harvey Parker to begin a program of improvement and enlargement. He acquired the adjoining Horticultural Hall in 1860, demolished it, and in its place built a six-story addition to the hotel. Stepped forward of the old marble facade, the new building was faced with bay windows and topped with a stylish mansard roof. Three years later Parker acquired the land behind the new wing and again expanded the hotel. In 1866, he bought a narrow lot at 66 Tremont Street, a few doors from the corner of School Street. On this property, which adjoined the rear of his hotel buildings, he built a third hotel extension, closely modeled on the School Street annex, with bay windows and a steep mansard roof.

The hotel was a curious mixture of styles and heights when Charles Dickens returned to Boston for his second visit in 1867. The Tremont House, where Dickens had stayed in 1842, was still in operation, but the popular writer preferred the more luxurious surroundings of Parker's. Dickens had come to America for another of his popular and highly lucrative lecture tours, and he found the Parker House a comfortable place in which to plan his itinerary, rehearse his readings, and rest between performances. Two days after his arrival, Dickens set pen to paper to describe the hotel to his daughter:

This is an immense hotel, with all manner of white marble public passages and public rooms. I live in a corner, high up, and have a hot and cold bath in my bedroom (connecting with the sitting room) and comforts not in existence when I was here before. The cost of living is enormous, but happily we can afford it. I dine today with Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, and Agassiz. Longfellow was here yesterday. Perfectly white in hair and beard, but a remarkably handsome and notable-looking man.

Because Parker died without any children, operation of Parker House was delegated to lessees Punchard and Beckman who managed it until Joseph R. Whipple took over in the 1890s. The Whipple Company, organized in 1906, operated the building under lease until 1925, when the fee was sold to Whipple by trustees of the Parker Estate.

Executives of the Whipple Company learned that a historic hotel in a modern American city is something of an anomaly. If the Parker House had been a public building - a town hall, a state house, a museum, or a library - it could not have meant more to the people of Boston or, indeed, to the people of New England. Rehabilitation of the old structures would be costly. Nothing less than demolition and building anew would effect a complete rejuvenation and firmly restore the Parker

House to the front rank of Boston's hotels. Most of the original Parker House was demolished in the 1920s. One wing of the original hotel remained in operation until the new building was completed in 1927. Designed by the architectural firm of Desmond and Lord, the new building was a sleek, modern structure of steel and granite, but one that recaptured at least part of the style of its predecessor. It rose fourteen stories above the corner of School and Tremont streets.

After its re-opening in 1927, the Parker House enjoyed a new burst of prosperity. But the financial crash of 1929 taught the Whipple Company a grim lesson in the realities of hotel economics. In 1933, Whipple's mortgage was foreclosed, and the lender, First National Bank of Boston, transferred ownership to Glenwood J. Sherrard who operated it until his death in 1958. In 1969, the hotel was acquired by the dynamic Dunfey family, owners of nearly a dozen hotels and restaurants in New England. Under ownership of the Dunfeys- mother, Mrs. Catherine Dunfey, brothers, Bob, Jerry, Bill, Jack, Walt and Roy- the Parker House became the nerve center of a rapidly expanding national chain and Dunfey became Sheraton's largest franchisee. From New England the Dunfeys expanded their interests into New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Illinois, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas and California.

Beginning an extensive renewal program at the Parker House, the Dunfeys sought to make their historic "flagship" a showplace. The family name was prominently affixed to the hotel's marqueses, signs, letterheads, and menus. If traditionalists complained that the name of Harvey Parker was nearly overwhelmed by the torrent of Dunfey family promotion and advertising, they admitted that the new owners showed a refreshing concern for the history of their Boston property. Under the Dunfeys' management, doormen, bellboys, hostesses, clerks and other staff members, dressed in the costumes of the colonial era, greeted guests at the School Street entrance much as Harvey Parker did in the days of Longfellow and Dickens. In the mornings guests gathered for breakfast in the Revere Room just off the main lobby. In the afternoons and early evenings cocktails were served in the mezzanine-level Parker's Bar.

The 551-room luxury hotel is located right on the Freedom Trail, the red-bricked walking trail that leads to some of Boston's most significant historic landmarks, such as the Old State House, the Old South Meeting House, Paul Revere's House and Faneuil Hall (site of America's first Town Meeting). It is directly across the street from King's Chapel (built in 1686) and America's first public school. It's also just four blocks from the beautiful Rose Kennedy Greenway and the Wharf area with activities like whale watching, harbor cruises, and the New England Aquarium.

The hotel was bought by Omni Hotels in the mid-1980s. The "white facade" is darker now than it was in the days of Harvey Parker and the remembered voices of Longfellow, Dickens, and Holmes are nearly inaudible. But the "mob of ghosts" still stalks the halls and corridors of the palace inn- and will, if fate is kind, for a century yet to come.

The Omni Parker House is a member of Historic Hotels of America, the official program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

1. My Five Published Hotel Books

- [Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry](#) (2009)
During the thirty years prior to the Civil War, Americans built hotels larger and more ostentatious than any in the rest of the world. These hotels were inextricably intertwined with American culture and customs but were accessible to average citizens. Stephen Rushmore writes in the Foreword: "Drawing from more than 40 years of industry experience including managing some of the largest New York City hotels, Turkel captures the spirit of each of these pioneers and relates their

achievements to important lessons that we can learn from."

- [Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels in New York](#) (2011)
These thirty-two featured hotels have defied the passage of time for a variety of reasons, many explicable, some beyond explanation, all miraculous. Bjorn Hanson, Ph.D. writes in the Foreword: "Stanley Turkel is unique in his passion about the history of the United States lodging industry; he pursues and shares this passion by compiling information about great hoteliers and hotels for articles, updates for his clients, and this, the second of his two hotel books."
- [Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels East of the Mississippi](#) (2013)
All the eighty-six hotels featured in this book have unique and singular stories describing their creation, survival and revival. The book contains eighty-six antique postcard illustrations and a Foreword by Joseph McInerney, President and CEO Emeritus of the American Hotel & Lodging Association: "Stanley Turkel is one of the best writers I know at capturing our history - the "old" - and infusing it with new life and relevance."
- [Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf](#) (2014)
Hotel Mavens tells the interesting stories of the following pioneers and the hotels they built and operated:
 - *Lucius Boomer, one of the most famous hoteliers of his time, was Chairman of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel Corporation.*
 - *George C. Boldt who was the genius of the original Waldorf-Astoria. It was said of him that he made innkeeping a profession and, more than any man, was the creator of the modern American hotel.*
 - *Oscar of the Waldorf was the superstar of his time and one of the stalwarts who managed both the original and the current Waldorf-Astoria.*

Sam Roberts in the [New York Times](#) wrote:

"Nostalgia for the city's caravansaries will be kindled by Stanley Turkel's [Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf](#)".

The fact-filled book by Mr. Turkel, an industry consultant, explains, among other things, the history of the hyphen (recently excised) in the name of the Waldorf Astoria, which inspired a mid-block street and even a song."

- [Great American Hoteliers Volume 2: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry](#) (2016)
Lawrence P. Horwitz, Executive Director, Historic Hotels of America, writes in the Foreword: "This book is an excellent history book with insights into seventeen of the great innovators and visionaries of the hotel industry and their inspirational stories."

These important and largely unknown biographies include Stewart William Bainum, Curtis Leroy Carlson, Cecil Burke Day, Louis Jacob Dinkler, Eugene Chase Eppley, Roy C. Kelley, Arnold S. Kirkeby, Julius Manger, Robert R. Meyer, Albert Pick, Jr., Jay Pritzker, Harris Rosen, Ian Schragar, Vernon B. Stouffer, William Cornelius Van Horne, Robert E. Woolley and Stephen Allen Wynn.

All of these books can be ordered from AuthorHouse by visiting www.stanleyturkel.com and clicking on the book's title.

2. Attorneys Take Note:

For the past twenty-four years I have served as an expert witness in more than 40 hotel-related cases.

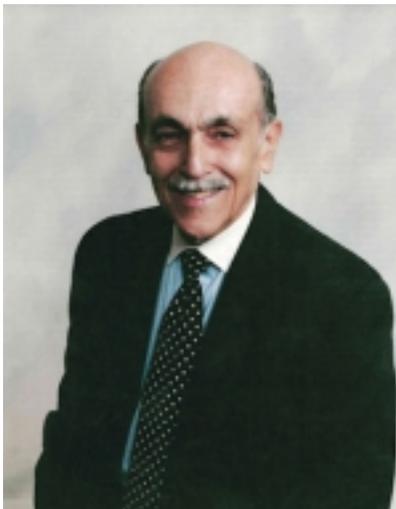
My extensive hotel operating experience is beneficial in cases involving:

- hurricane damage and/or business interruption cases
- slip and fall accidents
- wrongful deaths
- fire and carbon monoxide injuries
- franchisee/franchisor disputes
- management contract disputes

Don't hesitate to call me on 917-628-8549 to discuss any potential litigation support assignments.

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About Stanley Turkel



Stanley Turkel was designated as the 2015 and the 2014 Historian of the Year by Historic Hotels of America, the official program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This award is presented to an individual for making a unique contribution in the research and presentation of hotel history and whose work has encouraged a wide discussion and a greater understanding and enthusiasm for American History.

Turkel is a well-known consultant in the hotel industry. He operates his hotel consulting practice serving as an expert witness in hotel-related cases, providing asset management and hotel franchising consultation. He is certified as a Master Hotel Supplier Emeritus by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Lodging Association.

Stanley Turkel is one of the most widely-published authors in the hospitality field. More than 325 articles on various hotel subjects have been posted in hotel magazines and on the Hotel-Online, BlueMauMau, HotelNewsResource and eTurboNews websites. Two of his hotel books have been promoted, distributed and sold by the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (“Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry” and “Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels East of the Mississippi”). A third hotel book (“Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels in New York”) was called "passionate and informative" by the *New York Times*. His fourth hotel book was described by the *New York Times*: “Nostalgia for the City’s caravansaries will be kindled by Stanley Turkel’s... fact-filled... “Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf”. In his fifth hotel book, “Great American Hoteliers Volume 2: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry”, Lawrence P. Horwitz, Executive Director, Historic Hotels of America writes in the Foreword:

The author, Stanley Turkel is a great story teller.... This book is about risk takers, dreamers, inventors, entrepreneurs, innovators, visionaries, leaders and motivators. This is a collection of stories about hotel pioneers with a passion for inventing new ways to create demand for their product.”

All of these books can be ordered from the publisher (AuthorHouse) by visiting www.stanleyturkel.com and clicking on the book title.

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