



Parker House

It was expensive and looked, from the corner of School and Tremont streets, just like any other downtown hotel. But we couldn't have stayed anywhere else during our eight days in Boston. In Japan we had spent three days at *Houshi Ryokan*, the oldest hotel in the world, so in Boston we had to stay at Parker House, the oldest hotel in the United States. Not only that, but Parker House in Old Boston was within walking distance of almost everything of historic interest. It can truly be said that Boston started both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the defining cataclysms in 18th and 19th century America. But the hotel itself is my focus here. Since the Omni chain of luxury hotels took over, the official name has been Omni Parker House, but I will never call it that because Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow didn't call it that when they stayed there. At *Houshi* near the Sea of Japan, Mr. Zengorou Houshi, the 47th-generation proprietor, came to our suite to show us photos of treasures associated with the ancient hotel. That didn't happen at Parker House. The closest we came was when I hailed beverage manager Frank Webber to take our picture in the famed Parker House dining room. Our waitress rushed up to intervene on behalf of this busy hotel executive, but Frank was nice and snapped a couple of photos, later greeting us warmly when we visited the hotel's even more famous Last Hurrah bar. Dinner was fine although neither of us liked Parker House's famous Parker House Rolls. Too soft, too sweet. We caused a stir when we asked for a more textured bread. Scrod was on the menu. It's just a white fish — cod, halibut, the catch of the day. Parker House, only a restaurant 150 years ago, had to invent the word "Scrod" so they wouldn't have to change the menu every damned day. Makes good business sense.





Grammatical Point of Order

I wasn't surprised that I wasn't the first to point out a grammatical error in a proud brass plaque next to Parker House's School Street entrance. What surprised me was that any corporation smart enough to acquire a string of luxury hotels would be dumb enough to order such a plaque without first consulting someone with more than a fifth-grade education. In 1996, says the plaque, "TRT Holdings, Inc., purchased the Omni Hotel chain and initiated an extensive restoration to return the Omni Parker House to it's original grandeur." One must sigh. "It's" must be "its." TRT Holdings should bite the bullet and reexecute the expensive plaque. They won't. They've got ignorant bean-counters, too, and they don't see the difference.

Charles Dickens Was Here

Actually, Dickens spent quite a bit of time at Parker House. It was headquarters for the famous British writer as he made speaking tours in America. John Wilkes Booth liked the place, too. A nearby shooting gallery offered him pistol practice just ten days before he shot Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington. There are no mementoes of the assassin Booth, but there is one for Dickens. The large mirror hangs in the hotel's mezzanine now, but it once was in Dickens's third-floor room. Before this mirror, Dickens practiced for his first American theatrical reading of "A Christmas Carol," delivered to a Parker House gathering that included literary luminaries. He was a big fan of Parker House. In an 1860s letter to his daughter, he wrote: "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.... The cost of living is enormous, but happily we can afford it." Happily, the Sellerses in 2005 could afford it, too.





A Political Landmark: The Last Hurrah

It's a poor but still elegant imitation of what it was. Ulysses S. Grant, Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and William Jefferson Clinton once lit up cigars at Parker House bars, but only Clinton was around to do it when the main bar was called The Last Hurrah. Boston's no-smoking ban has discouraged many recently. It's hardly visible in this photograph, but a back-of-the-bar cabinet holds boxes of pricey cigars, more for show than anything else. Smoking is politically incorrect in America while it flourishes in the rest of the world — the *backward* world, the one that doesn't have enough sense to force people to do what they don't want to do. Next door to our 12th-floor room was a

corner suite labeled "James Michael Curley Suite." Ah yes, Curley. Now there was a Boston politician! Alderman, state representative, congressman, Massachusetts governor, four-time Boston mayor and twice an inmate in a federal prison. He won an election while he was in jail! Edwin O'Connor's 1956 novel, *The Last Hurrah*, told Curley's story, and Spencer Tracy portrayed him in the movie. The Last Hurrah bar opened in Parker House in 1969. Curley didn't like the book at first, even threatening a libel lawsuit. But quickly he saw that the book was enhancing his career rather than tainting it, so he thanked O'Connor at a chance meeting, adding that he particularly liked "the part where I die."

Jackson Sellers, Lake Forest, California, December 2005