



# ***BOSTON***

## *Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century BOSTON before the Revolution*

*from a Bostonian clergyman in 1702, an English historian in 1720, a Maryland physician in 1744, an English clergyman in 1759, and a mapmaker in 1769.*

### ◆ “The Metropolis of the Whole English America.” 1702.

Rev. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana [The Great Works of Christ in America]: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New England*, 1702, Book I, excerpts.

Rev. Cotton Mather was the pre-eminent Puritan clergyman of Boston in his time, which meant he was the pre-eminent clergyman throughout New England. In his massive religious history of New England, he reviews the history of Boston.

. . . Our Town is now *Threescore and Eight Years Old*, and certainly 'tis time for us, with all possible Affection, to set up our *Ebenezer*, saying, *Having obtained help from God, the Town is continued until almost the Age of Man is passed over it!* The Town hath indeed *Three Elder Sisters* in this Colony, but it hath wonderfully *outgrown* them all; and her Mother, *Old Boston*, in *England* also. Yea, within a few

Years after the first Settlement it *grew* to be **The Metropolis of the Whole English America**. Little was *this* expected by them that first settled the Town, when for a while **Boston** was proverbially called **Lost Town** for the mean and sad Circumstances of it. But, O *Boston*, it is because thou hast *obtained help from God*, even from the Lord Jesus Christ, who for the sake of his *Gospel*, [which was] Preached and once prized here, undertook thy Patronage. . . It has been a Town of great Experiences. There have been several Years wherein the *Terrible Famine* hath terribly stared the Town in the Face: We have been brought sometimes unto the *last Meal* in the Barrel; we have cry'd out with the Disciples; *We have not loaves enough to feed a Tenth Part of us!* But the fear'd *Famine* has always been kept off; always we have had Seasonable and Sufficient Supplies after a surprizing manner sent in unto us: Let the *Three last Years* in this thing most eminently Proclaim the Goodness of our Heavenly *Shepherd and Feeder*. This has been the *help* of our God; *Because his Mercy endureth for ever!*

The *Angels of Death* have often Shot the *Arrows of Death* into the midst of the Town; the *Small-Pox* has especially **Four Times** been a *great Plague* upon us. How often have there been Bills desiring Prayers for more than an Hundred Sick on one Day in one of our Assemblies? In one *Twelve-month*, about one *Thousand* of our Neighbours have one way or other been carried unto their long Home. And yet we are after all, many more than *Seven Thousand* Souls of us at this Hour living on the Spot. Why is not *Lord, have Mercy upon us* written on the Doors of our abandon'd Habitations? This hath been the *help* of our God, because *his mercy endureth forever*.

Never was any Town under the Cope of Heaven more liable to be laid in **Ashes**, either through the *Carelessness* or through the *Wickedness* of them that *Sleep* in it. That such a *Combustible heap* of Contiguous Houses yet stands, it may be called A *Standing Miracle*. It is not because *the Watchman keeps the City*; Perhaps there may be too much cause of *Reflection* in that thing, and of *Inspection too*; no, *It is from thy watchful Protection, O thou keeper of Boston, who neither Slumbers nor Sleeps*. **Ten Times** has the *Fire* made notable *Ruins* among us, and our *good Servant* been almost our *Master*; But the *Ruins* have mostly and quickly been Rebuilt. I suppose that many more than a *Thousand Houses* are to be seen on this little piece of Ground, all fill'd with the undeserved Favours of God. Whence this Preservation? This hath been the *help* of our God; because *his Mercy endureth for ever!*

But if ever this Town saw a *Year of Salvations*, transcendently such was the **Last Year** unto us. A Formidable *French squadron* hath not Shot one Bomb into the midst of thee, O thou *Munition of Rocks*.<sup>1</sup> Our Streets have not run with Blood and Gore, and horrible devouring Flames have not raged upon our Substance. Those are *Ignorant and Unthinking and Unthankful Men* who do not own [admit] that we have narrowly escaped as dreadful things, as *Carthage*, or *Newfoundland*, have suffered. I am sure our more considerate Friends Beyond-Sea were very *Suspicious*, and well nigh *Despairing*, that Victorious *Enemies* had swallowed up the Town. But *thy Soul is escaped, O Boston, as a Bird out of the Snare of the Fowlers*. Or if you will be *Insensible of this, ye vain Men*, yet be sensible That an *English Squadron* hath not brought among us the tremendous *Pestilence*, under which a Neighbouring *Plantation* [colony] hath undergone prodigious Desolations. *Boston*, 'tis a marvellous thing a *Plague* has not laid thee Desolate! Our Deliverance from our *Friends* has been as full of astonishing *Mercy*, as our deliverance from our *Foes*. We read of a certain City in *Isa[iah]*. 19.18, called, *The City of Destruction*. Why so? some say, Because delivered from *Destruction*. If that be so, then hast been a *City of Destruction*: Or I will rather say, *A City of Salvation*: And this by the *help* of God, because *his Mercy endureth for ever*. Shall I go on? I will. We have not had the *Bread of Adversity* and the *Water of Affliction* like many other places. But yet all this while *Our Eyes have seen our Teachers*. Here are several *Golden Candlesticks* in the Town. *Shining and Burning Lights* have illuminated them. There are gone to shine in an *higher Orb* Seven

<sup>1</sup> Queen Anne's War, 1702-1713, the second of the four intercolonial wars in North America.



A South East View of the Great Town of Boston in New England in America, ca. 1730, detail

### The Long Wharf



T. H. Page, A Plan of the Town of Boston and Its Environs, map, 1776, detail

Divines that were once the *Stars* of this Town, in the Pastoral Charge of it; besides many others, that for some Years gave us transient Influences. *Churches* flourishing with much Love, and Peace, and many *Comforts of the Holy Spirit*, have hitherto been our greatest *Glory*. I wish that some sad *Eclipse* do not come e're long upon this *Glory*! The Dispensations of the *Gospel* were never enjoy'd by any Town with more *Liberty* and *Purity* for so long a while together. Our *Opportunities* to draw near unto the Lord Jesus Christ in his *Ordinances*, cannot be parallel'd. *Boston*, thou hast been *lifted up to Heaven*. There is not a Town upon *Earth*, which, on some Accounts, has more to answer for. Such, O such has been our *help* from our God, because *his Mercy endureth forever*.

◆ “a Gentleman from *London* would almost think himself at home at *Boston*.” 1720.

Daniel Neal, *History of New England*, London, 1720.<sup>2</sup>

An English historian, Neal received an honorary master's degree from Harvard College for his two-volume *History of New England*, in which he describes (not from first-hand experience) the mercantile dominance and refined citizenry of Boston.

The Bay of Boston is spacious enough to contain in a manner the Navy of *England*. The Masts of Ships here, and at proper Seasons of the year, make a kind of Wood of Trees like that we see upon the River of Thames about [near] *Wapping* and *Limehouse*, which may easily be imagined when we consider that, by Computation given in to the Collectors of his Majesty's Customs . . . it appeared that there was 24,000 Ton of Shipping cleared annually.

At the Bottom of the Bay is a noble Pier, 1800 or 2000 Foot long, with a Row of Warehouses on the North Side, for the Use of Merchants. The Pier runs so far into the Bay that Ships of the greatest Burden may unlade without the Help of Boat or Lighters. From the Head of the Pier you go up the chief Street of the Town, at the Upper End of which is the Town House or Exchange, a fine piece of Building, containing, besides the Walk for the Merchants, the Council Chamber, the House of Commons, and another spacious Room for the Sessions of the Courts of Justice. The Exchange is surrounded with Booksellers Shops, which have a Good Trade. There are five Printing-Presses in Boston, which are generally full of Work, by which it appears that Humanity and the Knowledge of Letters [humanities] flourish more here than in all the other English Plantations [colonies] put together; for in the City of New-York there is but one

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted in Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (Boston: Printed by request of the City Council, 1871).

Bookseller's Shop, and in the Plantations [colonies] of Virginia, Maryland, Carolina, Barbados, and the [British Caribbean] Islands, none at all. . . .

The Conversation in this Town is as polite [refined] as in most of the Cities and Towns in *England*; many of their Merchants having travelled into *Europe*, and those that stay at home having the Advantage of a free [unhampered] Conversation with Travellers, so that a Gentleman from *London* would almost think himself at home at *Boston*, when he observes the Numbers of People, their Houses, their Furniture, their Tables, their Dress and Conversation, which perhaps is as splendid and showy as that of the most considerable [affluent] Tradesmen in *London*.



◆ “more hospitality and frankness shown here to strangers.” 1744.

Dr. Alexander Hamilton, *Itinerarium*, 1744.<sup>3</sup>

A Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (not the Founding Father) took a four-month journey from Maryland to Boston and back in 1744, keeping a diary (itinerarium) that displayed his caustic wit as well as his impressions of the places he visited.

*August 16, 1744.* I need scarce take notice that Boston is the largest town in North America, being much about the same extent as the city of Glasgow in Scotland, and having much the same number of inhabitants, which is between twenty and thirty thousand. It is considerably larger than either Philadelphia or New York, but the streets are irregularly disposed and in general too narrow. The best street in the town is that which runs down towards the Long Wharf, which goes by the name of King's Street. This town is a considerable place for shipping, and carries on a great trade in time of peace. There are now above one hundred ships in the harbour, besides a great number of small craft, tho' now upon account of the war the times are very dead.<sup>4</sup> The people of this Province [colony] chiefly follow farming and merchandise. Their staples are shipping, lumber, and fish.

The Government is so far democratic as that the election of the Governour's Council and the great officers is made by the members of the Lower House, or Representatives of the people. Mr. Shirley, the present Governour, is a man of excellent sense and understanding, and is very well respected there. He understands how to humour the people, and at the same time acts for the interest of the Government.

Boston is better fortified against an enemy than any port in North America, not only upon account of the strength of the Castle, but the narrow passage up into the harbour, which is not above 160 feet wide in the channel at high water.

There are many different religions and persuasions here, but the chief sect is that of the Presbyterians. There are above twenty-five churches, chapels, and meetings in the town, but the Quakers here have but a small remnant, having been banished [from] the Province at the first settlement upon account of some disturbances they raised. The people here have lately been, and indeed are now, in great confusion and much infested with enthusiasm from the preaching of some fanatics and New Light teachers, but now this humour begins to lessen.<sup>5</sup> The people are generally more captivated with speculative than with practical religion. It is not by half such a flagrant sin to cheat and cozen one's neighbour as it is to ride about for pleasure on the sabbath day, or to neglect going to church and singing of psalms.

The middling sort of people here are to a degree disingenuous and dissembling, which appears even in their common conversation, in which their indirect and dubious answers to the plainest and fairest

<sup>3</sup> Full text online in American Notes: Traveling in America, 1750-1920, in American Memory, Library of Congress, at [hdl.loc.gov/loc/gdc/hbbtn.02374](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/gdc/hbbtn.02374).

<sup>4</sup> King George's War, 1744-1748, the third of the four intercolonial wars in North America.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the revivalist preaching of the Great Awakening.

questions show their suspicions of one another. The better sort are polite, mannerly, and hospitable to strangers — such strangers I mean as come not to trade among them (for of them they are jealous). There is more hospitality and frankness shown here to strangers than either at York or at Philadelphia, and in the place there is an abundance of men of learning and parts so that one is at no loss for agreeable conversation, nor for any set of company he pleases. Assemblies of the gayer sort are frequent here, the gentlemen and ladies meeting almost every week at concerts of music and balls. I was present at two or three such, and saw as fine a ring of ladies, as good dancing, and heard music as elegant as I had been witness to anywhere. I must take notice that this place abounds with pretty women, who appear rather more abroad [socializing outside of their homes] than they do at York, and dress elegantly. They are for the most part free and affable as well as pretty. I saw not one prude while I was here.

*September 27, 1744.* . . . In this itineration [journey] I completed, by land and water together, a course of 1624 miles. The northern parts I found in general much better settled than the southern. As to politeness and humanity they are much alike, except in the great towns, where the inhabitants are more civilized, especially at Boston.



### ◆ “one of the largest and most flourishing towns in North America.” 1759.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America, In the Years 1759 and 1760, 1775.*

An Anglican clergyman from England, Andrew Burnaby travelled throughout British America from Virginia to Massachusetts. Compare his description of Boston with that in the 1769 map of Boston (p. 6). What phrases appear in several of these selections? Why might this occur?

Boston, the metropolis of Massachusetts-Bay, in New England, is one of the largest and most flourishing towns in North America. It is situated upon a peninsula, or rather an island joined to the continent by an isthmus or narrow neck of land half a mile in length, at the bottom of a spacious and noble harbour, defended from the sea by a number of small islands. The length of it is nearly two miles, and the breadth of it half a one; and it is supposed to contain 3000 houses, and 18 or 20,000 inhabitants. At the entrance of the harbour stands a very good light-house; and upon an island, about a league from the town, a considerable castle, mounting near 150 cannon: there are several good batteries about it, and one in particular very strong, built by Mr. Shirley [governor]. There are also two batteries in town, for 16 or 20 guns each; but they are not, I believe, of any force.

The buildings in Boston are in general good. The streets are open and spacious, and well-paved; and the whole has much the air of some of our best country towns in England. The country round about it is exceedingly delightful; and from a hill, which stands close to the town, where there is a beacon erected to alarm the neighbourhood in case of any surprise, is one of the finest prospects, the most beautifully variegated, and richly grouped, of any without exception that I have ever seen.

The chief public buildings are three churches, thirteen or fourteen meeting-houses, the governor’s palace, the court-house or exchange, Faneuils-hall, a linen-manufacturing-house, a work-house, a bridewell, a public granary, and a very fine wharf, at least half a mile long, undertaken at the expense of a number of private gentlemen for the advantage of unloading and loading vessels. Most of these buildings are handsome; the church, called King’s Chapel, is exceedingly elegant and fitted up in the Corinthian taste. There is also an elegant private concert-room, highly finished in the Ionic manner. — I had reason to think the situation of Boston unhealthy, at least in this season of the year; as there were frequent funerals every night during my stay there.



full map



the Long Wharf



Boston Common

Great Fires.	Gen	Small Pox.
First..... 1653		First..... 1640
Second..... 1670		Second..... 1666
Third..... 1679		Third..... 1677
Fourth..... 1683		Fourth..... 1688
Fifth..... 1690		Fourth..... 1698
Sixth..... 1691		Fifth..... 1702
Seventh..... 1702		Sixth..... 1721
Eighth..... 1711		Seventh 1730
Ninth..... 1760.		

fires and smallpox epidemics

◆ “the Metropolis of New England.” 1769.

William Price, *A New Plan of y<sup>e</sup> Great Town of BOSTON in New England in AMERICA, with the many Additionall Buildings & New Streets, to the Year, 1769*; full map and details; text of cartouche.

BOSTON, the Metropolis of New England, is the largest, most populous, and flourishing Town in the British Dominions in America, in the Lat[itude] of 42 [degrees] and 24 [minutes] North, and 71 Deg. West from London. It Stands at the Bottom of a large Bay, Which (by being defended from the Ocean by a great Number of delightful islands) May be reckon'd among the safest and most Commodious Harbours in the World. At the Entrance of it Stands a good Light House and about 2 leagues towards the Town a Strong Castle mounted with about 120 Cannon. The Country round about is exceedingly delightful, well Stor'd with all Sorts of good Provisions, And all other Necessaries of Life. The Air is exceeding Clear & Pleasant, Perfectly well agreeing with the English Constitutions.<sup>2</sup> This Town hath been Settled 139 Years, its Number of Houses about 4000 and Inhabitants about 20,000. In it are 3 Churches of England, 10 Congregational [Puritan] Meeting Houses, 1 French, 1 Anabaptist, 1 Irish, 1 Quakers Meeting House, And a very handsome Town House where the Courts are held, The Town and Country daily increasing. In the Year 1723 were built in New England above 700 Sail of Ships and other Vessels, Most of which are fitted at Boston. There are in one Year clear'd out of this Port at the Custom House, about 1200 Sail of Vessels, which may in some Measure show the great Trade of this flourishing Town and Country. In the Year 1735 this Town was Divided into 12 Wards by a Vote of the Inhabitants; the bounds of the Wards are the [ ] Lines from N<sup>o</sup> [ ]. In each Ward is a Military Company of foot [infantry] & Captain &c, Also one Overseer of the Poor Chosen Yearly in March.

Zoomable map at [hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3764b.ar088800](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3764b.ar088800) [Library of Congress].