

The Urban Miracle

Edward Glaeser /
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Humanity is a social species, like bees or spider monkeys, and we do our best work together. Cities bolster this collaborative genius by eliminating geographical barriers between smart people and their ideas. Even when cities form for utterly prosaic reasons, they can still foster the interactions that lead to our greatest achievements, from Greek philosophy to the skyscraper. Stephen Puleo's new book is more evidence of the urban role in civilization, as it reminds us of the remarkable accomplishments of late nineteenth-century Boston.

When Puleo begins his story in 1850, Boston is already 220 years old. For more than two centuries, the city had housed a remarkable collection of smart people who managed to keep Boston economically afloat and to create outsized political and cultural innovations. Boston's economic survival was never guaranteed, because it lacked the natural advantages—Aztec gold or Haitian sugar or Virginia tobacco—that had brought settlers to the southern colonies. Boston was intended to be a “bulwark against the kingdom of the antichrist,” but that was hardly a clear business model, especially since the city's hinterland found little wealth in direct exports to England.

Still, a combination of luck and human capital led to Boston's “Triangle Trade,” which buoyed the city during its first century. Bostonians exported basic commodities—wood, livestock, fish—to the cash crop colonies in the South, which then exported sugar and tobacco to England, which then shipped manufactured goods to Boston. Boston enjoyed a century's worth of economic eminence in the English colonies, until it was surpassed by Philadelphia in 1740. It managed to boom once more during the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the city's expertise in shipping and commerce became valuable in the era of the

Clipper Ship and the China trade. Then, as now, globalization made skills more valuable.

Puleo presents us with an enjoyable catalog of wonders produced by Boston during the period under review: the first American subway, the creation of the Back Bay, and Senator Charles Sumner. Puleo's stories are excellent, but his enthusiasm leads him to over-emphasize the unusual nature of Boston in this era. He exuberantly claims that "no other period comes close to 1850-1900 in establishing and solidifying Boston's as one of the world's most influential cities." But Boston's story is important not because the city is unique, but because it holds lessons that can be helpful today.

It is not at all clear that Boston really distinguished itself in the late nineteenth century compared to other great cities in that remarkable urban epoch. London was the world's largest metropolis, the nerve center of a great global empire; decades before Boston it had subways that were filled with the smoky engines of the pre-electric age. Paris was the great city of light, rebuilt by Baron Haussmann, and the cultural capital of Impressionism. New York made room for hundreds of thousands of new immigrants and built infrastructure, like the Brooklyn Bridge. Chicago changed from a small town of 30,000 to a massive metropolis of 1.7 million, giving humanity its first true skyscraper as well as millions of pounds of frozen rail-shipped beef.

It is also not clear that Boston, between 1850 and 1900, achieved things that were all that unusual relative to other periods in the city's past. In the seventeenth century, Boston was America's largest city, and its environs contained the colonies' first printing press, college, public school, newspaper, and ironworks. In the eighteenth century, Bostonians—Sam Adams, John Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere—played an outsized role in the American Revolution. In the early nineteenth century, the city had a remarkable array of thinkers and doers, from its transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, to its China traders, such as John Murray Forbes, who made a fortune connecting continents, and then bankrolled the first rail to Chicago from the east. Even abolitionism was arguably "owned" by Boston more in the 1830s, when William Lloyd Garrison was really out on a limb, than in the 1850s when it had become a national movement. Puleo's examples of Boston's special accomplishments are worth pondering precisely

because they are not *sui generis*, but rather because they are examples of ways in which cities frequently change our world.

The book weaves together five major stories: abolitionism and the Civil War, the rise of intra and inter-urban rail, the Back Bay, the telephone, and the flow of immigrants into Boston. Puleo starts with the remarkable story of the runaway slave Thomas Sims, who found freedom in Boston but whose “whereabouts reached James Potter, who claimed that Sims was his property.” Boston’s abolitionists were enraged at the prospect of sending a man back into bondage, but their fuming and plotting did not save Sims from slavery and martyrdom.

Abolitionism is an important story in this context, because it illustrates the ability of urban interactions to help foment powerful political movements. Garrison first published the *Liberator* in 1831, and started organizing anti-slavery groups soon after. He came to be surrounded by a great web of abolitionist intellectuals—Wendell Phillips, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau—who connected and fueled each other’s fervor. Higginson was one “of the ‘Secret Six’ who helped finance” John Brown; and he “continued to back Brown and defend the raid even when previous supporters began to desert him after the violence at the arsenal.” Puleo also rightly emphasizes the importance of Charles Sumner, who represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate from 1851 to 1874: he fought the Fugitive Slave Act and was famously caned by Preston Brooks on the Senate floor.

Puleo marvels at the enormous expansion that Boston experienced after the Civil War, but all of America’s largest cities in 1860 experienced extraordinary growth in this period. New Orleans, which grew the least, expanded by 129 percent. Boston’s population growth rate of 320 percent seems spectacular, except when it is compared with the faster growth rates of New York, St. Louis, Buffalo, Chicago and Brooklyn. Why did all of these urban areas expand so dramatically in the nineteenth century?

One reason for this dramatic urban growth is that America’s cities were the nodes of a great transport network that tied together an entire continent. The wealth of the American hinterland was made accessible to the tables of the east coast and Europe because of huge investments in canals and rail. In Boston, as in New York

and Chicago, rail lines were laid near to older waterways, and increased the city's dominance over transportation in New England. Manufacturing, freed from large rivers like the Merrimac by improvements in engine technology, could move to cities and take advantage of this growing transportation network.

Rail also enabled people to commute from longer distances to the urban core, thus pushing cities outward. Puleo tells the story of how Bostonians went to Richmond to see Frank Sprague's innovations in electric urban transport, and how six months later "Bostonians were taking their first rides in electric trolleys." But "the electric trolley's greatest differentiator—speed—was completely undermined in the downtown congestion," and the city turned to subways, another American first. In the late twentieth century, \$15 billion were spent on the Big Dig, which can be seen as an expensive attempt to reconfigure a pre-car city around the automobile. Puleo's account of the subway reminds us that Boston also had to retrofit itself more than a century ago, when its horse-drawn carriages proved inadequate for a growing city.

But as impressive as the Tremont Street Subway may have been, I have always found the creation of the Back Bay to be nineteenth-century Boston's most remarkable achievement in infrastructure. That investment created great swaths of urban space out of marsh. The great project was financed "by selling as yet unfilled plots to private individuals, who in turn profited handsomely from their investment." Creating usable land out of wetlands was hardly unprecedented—much of Holland was claimed from the Zee—but it was impressive both as a feat of engineering and urban planning. Some of Boston's most pleasant places, such as the charming homes of Marlborough Street and Olmsted's Emerald Necklace, were the result of this great project.

The vast profusion of space which was made accessible by subways, electric trolleys, and landfill made it easier to accommodate hundreds of thousands of new Bostonians, such as the Irish who came over in the wake of the Great Potato Famine. Boston folklore tends to emphasize the very real antipathy between Gael and Yankee, but Puleo gives us a more uplifting story—Robert B. Forbes's trip on the *Jamestown* carrying abundant aid to County Cork, "eight thousand barrels of meal, bread, beans, corn, beef, pork, peas, potatoes, rice wheat, fish and clothing and other supplies, valued at nearly thirty-six thousand dollars." Forbes, a

successful sea captain, whose brother, John Murray Forbes, was an even more successful China trader, industrialist and, of course, abolitionist, wrote that “I shall ever look back on the voyage of the *Jamestown* as the happiest event of my life.”

Puleo rightly revels in Boston’s creativity and contradictions. He proudly, and correctly, points to the city’s accomplishments in “technology and transportation, in education and medicine, in engineering and industry, in the arts and in the sciences, in political and social influence.” These things are urban marvels, but urban marvels are hardly unique to Boston. The story of late nineteenth-century Boston reminds us that humanity, when connected by cities, can do amazing things, and that creating cities requires serious investment in infrastructure. Those things were no less true in Rome two millennia ago than in Bangalore today.

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