

INSIDE  
**THE  
COMBAT  
ZONE**

*The Stripped Down Story of*  
**BOSTON'S MOST  
NOTORIOUS NEIGHBORHOOD**

**you**

**HAVE JUST  
ENTERED THE**

**COMBAT  
ZONE**

**You HAVE  
NOTHING TO**

**FEAR  
EXCEPT  
FEAR ITSELF**

INSIDE  
**THE  
COMBAT  
ZONE**

*The Stripped Down Story of*  
BOSTON'S MOST  
NOTORIOUS NEIGHBORHOOD

**stephanie schorow**

BOSTON



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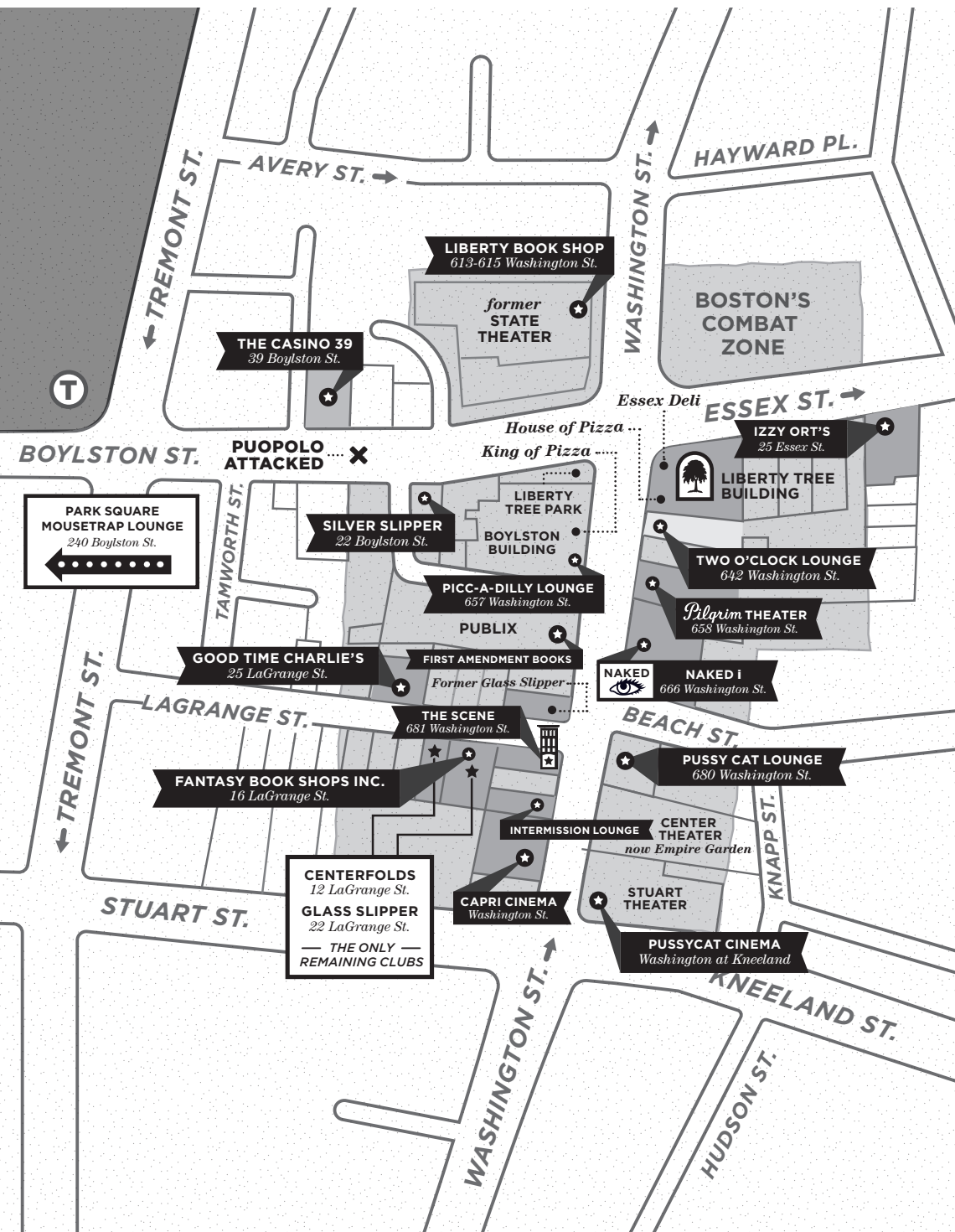
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A 1774 anti-Patriot print depicting the customs commissioner under attack beneath the Liberty Tree. Courtesy Library of Congress.



# INTRODUCTION

## The Liberty Tree

*Everybody who walked through the Combat Zone at one time or another has left invisible footprints. Ghosts roam up and down the street all the time.*

### BOSTON POLICE DETECTIVE BILLY DWYER

A majestic elm tree once grew near the corner of what is today Washington and Essex Streets in downtown Boston. Its great height and wide-spreading branches made it a natural landmark for those dour but dogged Puritans establishing their city upon a hill. The tree was a century old when the Sons of Liberty, chafing at British rule of the American colonies, began meeting there to plan a rebellion. In 1765, they rallied under its branches to protest the Stamp Act, which imposed a tax on the colonies without their consent. From the elm's limbs, they hung an effigy of the despised British tax collector, jeering at the dangling figure. The Liberty Tree thus became the very embodiment of the American Revolution, a symbol of personal freedom and the right to defy authority. After the English Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, Bostonians flocked to the tree to celebrate.

So potent a symbol could not be tolerated. In 1775, the elm was chopped down on British orders.

For the next 240 years, the Liberty Tree lived on in Boston's collective memory, even as the neighborhood around its grave transformed. The open fields of the 1780s gave way to shops and commercial buildings, areas for business rather than fomenting revolt. In 1850, the Liberty Tree Building was erected on Washington Street near where the tree once grew. The building's imposing edifice, which combined



Greek Revival and Italianate architectural elements, was garnished with a bas-relief of the venerable elm. In 1887, a masonry and iron frame structure called the Boylston Building was erected on the corner of Boylston and Washington Streets. These landmarks—and the buildings springing up around them—were symbols of the city’s progress in the nineteenth century.

As the next century dawned, majestic theaters opened up along Washington Street and the blocks came alive with entertainment: plays, vaudeville, burlesque, silent movies, and later, talkies. Department stores near the corner of Summer and Washington Streets attracted shoppers and bargain hunters. Near lower Washington Street, along Hudson, Harrison, Tyler, and Beach Streets, Chinese immigrants created what would become New England’s oldest Chinatown. The branches of the Liberty Tree, were it still standing, would have sheltered a melting pot of Bostonians: Irish, Asian, Italian, and African-American.

Then came a post-World War II economic downturn, when investment ground to a standstill, Boston’s population declined, and the city hit the skids. Downtown, bars still swelled with patrons, but the watering holes became dives, where soldiers and sailors gathered for booze and good cheer, which often turned to fisticuffs. Clubs that once hosted jazz and rock ‘n’ roll began to showcase a more lucrative draw: striptease. B-grade movies dominated the screens at once-grand theaters, and adult bookstores moved into vacant storefronts, including the (by now) dilapidated Boylston Building. The Liberty Tree Building housed a popular delicatessen and a pizza parlor and, following that, what was euphemistically called “adult entertainment.”

By the early 1970s, the grave of the Liberty Tree was crossed by clubbers, men on the prowl, rowdy teenagers, pickpockets, tourists, hookers, and drifters. At night, Washington Street was ablaze with strip club marquees promoting girls, girls, girls. In the morning, secretaries, businesspeople, hospital workers, and shop clerks rushed past streetwalkers finishing up for the night and drunks sleeping off benders. Chinese residents moved quickly past the burgeoning pornography shops, seeking refuge in their nearby apartments.

City planners looked on in dismay. Something had to be done about the queasy oasis of sex shops and strip clubs in the very heart of



Washington Street, 1977. Courtesy *Boston Herald*.

the city. Boston’s officials weren’t the only ones wringing their hands over the X-rated sprawl; the entire nation was awash in what *Time* magazine dubbed the “Age of Porn.” The spread of pornography into the mainstream was bolstered by a string of Supreme Court cases that barred cities on First Amendment grounds from simply shuttering anything deemed unsavory. Moreover, the lessons of urban renewal missteps were ever present: razing an X-rated area could potentially drive those businesses elsewhere.

With fervor both visionary and vainglorious, members of an unusual public-private partnership, the Boston Redevelopment

Authority (BRA), decided to confront the plague. They would halt the spread of the lurid, licentious, and vile with a social experiment as controversial as any conducted by Masters and Johnson. The city would zone the sleaze.

In 1974, the city's zoning board designated a five-and-a-half-acre adult entertainment district (AED) along lower Washington Street—a kind of neon cage for the bawdy enterprises already operating there. And for a few years, it appeared Boston would once again lead the nation on a radical new social path, one focused on a few grungy downtown blocks.

Today, pedestrians strolling by the gleaming office buildings, luxury condos, and trendy coffee shops that line Washington Street seem largely unaware that the area was once the site of the nation's most notorious adult entertainment district. The adult bookstores, peep shows, and strip joints are all gone—save for two LaGrange Street stalwarts, tucked away like cigarettes behind the counter. Students from Emerson College and Suffolk University rush to class from their nearby dormitories, commuters chug lattes, and playgoers flock to revitalized theaters on upper Washington Street, with blazing marquees that bathe pedestrians' faces in gold and red. They don't notice the ghosts of patriots and pushers, soldiers and strippers, mobsters and prostitutes, johns and drunks who once walked these streets. The shiny storefronts give no hint of the neighborhood's seedy past.

The emergence of the Combat Zone and the subsequent adult entertainment district represents a unique chapter in American urban history. When pornography was decried as public enemy number one, Boston attempted a solution that would have made the Puritans shudder. Across the country, communities convulsed with changing social norms—about civil rights, women's liberation, homosexuality, and open marriages. Boston leaders sought to navigate the waves of change, honoring the legacy of the Liberty Tree while clearly hoping that development would smack down the smut for them.

Today, many see the creation of an official adult entertainment district as a failure, leaving lives damaged or destroyed. Others point to the skyscrapers, the condos, and the Thai vegan bubble tea bistro and exult, "It worked out exactly as intended; it just took longer than anticipated." The establishment of such a district required

vision and great political courage, says one city planner, adding emphatically, "It took balls."

The saga of the Combat Zone, however, is more than a tale of urban development; its history is rich with the stories of the people who worked in and visited the Zone. There was the exotic dancer known as "the thinking man's stripper," the former nun who became a lawyer representing pornographic bookstores, the tough but compassionate vice squad cop who knew every hooker on the street, and the stripper who put herself through graduate school. There were Chinese-American activists who fought to preserve their community in the face of pornographic creep and even development itself.

Writer Don Stradley calls the Combat Zone "a vortex," a place with the force of a black hole. This vortex drew conventioners, curious couples, and young men—and some women—looking for a thrill because, he said, "If you went there, you would have a story for a lifetime." It was a place on the edge, sleazy and seductive, its neon aura and mesmerizing marquees casting a titillating spell. In true New England fashion, now that the Combat Zone is gone, many Bostonians look back with a kind of nostalgia, if not actual fondness, for a time and place that will never exist again.





## CHAPTER 1

# IT REALLY IS A COMBAT ZONE

1950 to 1960

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*The barroom and bucket-of-blood days  
have nothing on that street today.*

**MUNICIPAL COURT JUDGE GEORGE W. ROBERTS, 1951**

**O**n April 27, 1951, a short article in the *Boston Traveler* described how one Albert A. Silva, a former United States Navy sailor from East Dedham, was sentenced to a month in jail for assault and battery of a policeman. It was a modest punishment, and Silva got the worst of it; the assailed officer had shot him in the chest. Silva probably didn't feel a thing. By his own account, he had downed a dozen or so drinks at the Playland Café, a bar on Essex Street, just a couple of blocks from the site of the former Liberty Tree.

Judge George W. Roberts was not amused. "Much of the trouble is due to the licensees on this street who would continue selling liquor to a man as they did to this man," he declared. "It is a dangerous area and the services should put it out of bounds. This is not the first shooting down there. A sailor actually on duty there was killed. It is really a combat zone."

No one knows exactly how the area of downtown Boston near the intersection of lower Washington and Essex Streets—the place where the American Revolution began—came to be called the "Combat Zone." Likely the name was linked to the proliferation of military police, out to keep an eye on the sailors from the Charlestown Navy Yard



or soldiers from the South Boston Army Base as they sought the pleasures of drinks and dames in the seedy bars. The nights often ended in barroom brawls. The drunk and disorderly were hauled off in wagons stationed in the area while the more sober were sent back to base.

Yet up until the 1950s, Washington Street—from the point where Kneeland became Stuart Street to the intersection of Winter and Summer Streets (the spot later dubbed Downtown Crossing)—was the city’s main entertainment district, filled with theaters, shops, offices, and restaurants. By the 1920s, fifteen theaters in the area offered everything from serious drama to vaudeville to travelogues. If Bostonians weren’t going to a show, they were shopping: the area became the city’s retail hub, anchored by department stores like Jordan Marsh, Gilchrist’s, Raymond’s, and Filene’s, with its vaunted discount basement.

A South Boston boy who would grow up to be the city’s mayor loved walking down Washington Street with his cousin Charlie—a lead saxophone player for Louis Prima, Gene Krupa, and other popular big band leaders—to see a show in one of the theaters. The admission price included a movie screening and a live band performance. His cousin would take him backstage to meet the musicians, a treat for any star-struck kid. Some years later, he and his wife would dine at what he thought were the finest restaurants in Boston: Luigi’s on Essex Street, the Prince Spaghetti House on Avery, or Jacob Wirth, the popular German pub on Stuart. Those memories were seared into the mind of Raymond Flynn, who served as Boston’s mayor from 1984 to 1993, even after everything that followed.

Boston has been described as a city of neighborhoods. Beacon Hill, Back Bay, Dorchester, South Boston, the South End, and the North End each have their own character, quirks, and loyalties. But downtown Boston was not—until well into the 2010s—generally viewed as a neighborhood despite its thriving community of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans during the nineteenth century.

The Chinese community and other immigrant groups settled in the South Cove, an area created in the 1830s with landfill piled into Boston Harbor. It included both housing and a railroad terminal. Beginning in the 1870s, Chinese immigrants, many coming from the American West, moved into this housing. Some opened businesses, such as laundries and restaurants, while many Chinese

women worked in the nearby garment factories. Fashionable townhouses dotted Harrison Avenue, but an elevated train track (which was used from 1900 to 1942) and an expanding number of garment factories made the area less desirable to well-heeled residents. From 1940 to 1950, the Chinatown population more than doubled from about 1,383 to roughly 2,900.

By the late 1950s, lower Washington Street, considered part of the South Cove, was a hot spot for popular music like big band, jump, jazz, and rock ‘n’ roll. Perhaps the most famous venue was Izzy Ort’s Bar & Grille on Essex Street (later known as the Golden Nugget), which opened in 1935. Isadore “Izzy” Ort, a reformed bootlegger and legendary impresario, could have “stepped out of a Damon Runyon story,” according to Boston jazz historian Richard Vacca. “He always wore a trench coat and fedora, smoked a cigar ... and settled disputes at his club with a [large metal] flashlight.” He was also known for his generosity to servicemen.

Over the years, the crowd at Ort’s Golden Nugget grew rougher and tougher; in 1956, the *Harvard Crimson* helpfully advised patrons to “take a club.” In September of 1964, evangelist Billy Graham, looking for souls to save, dropped by Ort’s after preaching to a packed house at the Boston Garden. Graham had no luck. Yet Ort “loved Essex and Washington Streets. It was his whole life and the people who went there were his people,” writes veteran reporter Bill Buchanan of the *Boston Globe*. Ort sold the club in 1969; by that time, his former neighborhood had transformed from a rough-edged stomping ground to something seamier.

The transformation had begun with the post-war slump. After World War II, Boston was enveloped by an economic malaise; investment in the city slowed to a trickle. The Charlestown Navy Yard and the South Boston Army Base closed, further undercutting the economy. Boston’s population shrank from eight hundred thousand in 1950 to a low point of six hundred thousand in 1970. Helped by the creation of an interstate highway network, people were moving to the suburbs. In 1900, the city was fourth in the nation for banking; by 1964, it was tenth. Over a twenty-year period, virtually nothing was built downtown; you couldn’t give away property there. The downturn extended throughout the region: In 1947, two hundred and eighty thousand



The Golden Nugget and the Playland Café on Essex Street in the 1960s. Courtesy City of Boston.

people worked in New England's textile mills. By 1964, that number had fallen below one hundred thousand.

To observers, Boston had entered a state of permanent economic decay. Downtown Boston had turned into “a dreary jungle of honky-tonks for sailors, dreary department store windows, Loew's movie houses, hillbilly bands, strippers, parking lots, [and] undistinguished new buildings,” reported Elizabeth Hardwick in *Harper's Magazine* in 1959. Park Square, a block away from Boston's Public Garden, had shifted from an upscale neighborhood into a shabby collection of parking

garages and bars. The downtown was still a place for entertainment—that is, if you could handle the fights. However, theater lights were dimming up and down Washington. Television had changed people's entertainment habits; families were staying home instead of heading to the theater. In the early part of the twentieth century, Boston had fifty legitimate theaters throughout the city; by 1979, only four remained open.

The *Record American*, one of the city's several newspapers, took aim in a massive investigative series at the nefarious activities that were springing up on lower Washington Street. Beginning on July 1, 1964, three *Record American* reporters wrote story after story laced with the purplest of prose decrying the “so-called combat zone,” where drinks were sold openly to minors on streets rife with prostitutes and where “homosexuals in some cafes and lounges” could be found. The series of articles charged Boston's licensing board with choosing to ignore the problems. On July 7, the paper printed a letter from an anguished mother to series author Jean Cole, praising the *Record American* for “exposing the filth and corruption in these so-called places of entertainment in our city.” By August, the *Record American* was still reveling in revelations, hammering away at the notion of a modest Boston. “Despite protestations to the contrary, there is a ‘red light district’ in Boston,” the paper reported, citing seventy-one prostitution arrests in the South End and the Combat Zone. Thanks in part to Jean Cole and the *Record American*, the label “Combat Zone” entered Boston's lexicon.

What converted the Combat Zone from a rowdy, rough neighborhood into an adult playground was an act of urban renewal, one of many that would reshape Boston through the 1970s. The transformation was an offshoot of a grandiose plan to launch a “New Boston.” Like every road to hell, it began with good intentions.