

HISTORY NOTEBOOK: INVENTING THE FREEDOM TRAIL

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Goodness knows the world had its share of problems in 1951. The Korean War was raging in the Far East, while race riots flared in the Midwest. America was testing old atomic bombs in Las Vegas, and detonating new hydrogen ones in the Marshall Islands. Gen. Douglas MacArthur was fired for being a relentless hawk, the week after Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death for allegedly hawking atomic secrets. Actor Ronald Reagan co-starred with a chimp in "Bedtime for Bonzo," and red-baiting Sen. Joe McCarthy co-starred with a similar crew, in the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee.

All things considered, it just wasn't a very good year. Except, perhaps, in Boston.

"Boston in those days reminded me of a fishing village, which I loved," remembers 87-year old Bill Schofield of Newton. "It was slower, more placid, more comfortable. You could walk across Boston Common at night and not give a thought to it ... or walk up and down Chinatown at 2 o'clock in the morning and not worry about it."

There was one Boston walk, however, that Schofield simply couldn't make. Though the Hub was filled with marvelously well-preserved historic sites -- ranging from Paul Revere's house and the Old North Church to the Old State House and the Old South Meetinghouse -- there was no organized route linking these gems together. Even a veteran newspaperman like Schofield would invariably lose his way.

So, in March of 1951, Bill Schofield, an editor and daily columnist for the old *Herald Traveler*, did something that no one had really done before: He invented the Freedom Trail.

"Being a Swamp Yankee descendant, I had always been interested in Yankee history," Schofield explains. "So here I am in the most historic city in the country. I used to go wandering all over the place, and I found out that when I'd go looking for something, it was never there. So if it was bad for me, think what it was for the person from Cincinnati or someplace."

Early in 1951, Schofield found a kindred spirit in Bob Winn, a member of the North End's Old North Church who had kept that historic building open and available to the public since 1942. Aware that weekday visitors were always curious about the Old North -- especially Paul Revere's ride and the two warning lanterns hung in the church belfry -- Winn had long been regaling guests with fun and fascinating tales of yore. (When he died in 1969 at the age of 80, Winn's obituary noted that he "at one time greeted and guided about Boston more strangers to the city than any other individual.")

As Schofield remembers, Winn was "a nice old guy" who had long shared the columnist's concern about the accessibility of the city's historic structures. Somehow, the two agreed, Boston's downtown and North End historic sites had to be connected in an organized fashion, preferably with a walking route marked by attractive signs and arrows. After two or three visits with Winn at the Old North, Schofield fleshed out a trail prototype in his "Have You Heard" column, in the March 8, 1951 Evening Traveler.

"I hope Mayor John B. Hynes and Harry J. Blake are listening today," began Schofield's plea, "because I'm about to come up with an idea that would pay back diamonds for dimes in terms of good public relations. The Mayor could take it up for the

city, or Harry Blake could add it to his Chamber of Commerce project list. ... All I'm suggesting is that we mark out a 'Puritan Path' or 'Liberty Loop' or 'Freedom's Way' or whatever you want to call it, so [visitors and locals will] know where to start and what course to follow. ... [Y]ou could do the trick on a budget of just a few dollars and a bucket of paint. Not only would it add to the personality of the city, but also it would please the tourists."

After delineating a trail sampler, beginning at the State House and ending in the North End (neither Schofield nor Winn saw Charlestown's Bunker Hill or Old Ironsides as conveniently accessed sites), Schofield dared city politicians and businessmen to move quickly. "All that's needed is somebody to put the thing into action -- preferably before the spring and summer crowds begin to arrive."

Schofield pounded away in his column over the next two weeks, reiterating and embellishing his proposal. Finally, by March 31, victory was at hand. "A telephone call from Mayor John B. Hynes brings the news that the city intends to go along with the Freedom Way plan proposed here...", " began Schofield's column that day. "[A] foot-route leading to the best of Boston's historical shrines [will be] laid out and marked with directional signs .. [Mayor Hynes] has turned the project over to Paul Hines at City Hall for development. Meanwhile, the Boston Chamber of Commerce and the Junior Chamber of Commerce are plugging the plan and hoping to see it set up in time for this year's first big wave of tourists."

By June of 1951, "The Freedom Trail" was officially signed, sealed and delivered. ("The name change?" muses Schofield. "Don't ask me ... I can't remember. That's just too far back!") And though Schofield had long since returned to other subjects in his *Evening Traveler* columns, he was regularly called on to lecture about Boston's new trek -- and to collect accolades, awards, silver bowls and plaques honoring him as "The Father of the Freedom Trail."

Over the ensuing years, Schofield watched the Freedom Trail evolve. Admittedly, there were problems from the start: Markers were set up and vandalized; brochures were advertised but unavailable; sites on the Trail had vastly different hours of operation, and there was little coordination of their efforts. Still, by 1953 the Trail was attracting 40,000 people a year.

In the late 1950s and '60s, local businessman and philanthropist Dick Berenson (1909-1990) helped guide the Trail to maturity. "Berenson did more for this Trail than anybody else *dreamed* of doing," says Schofield. It was Berenson's idea, for example, to add the distinctive painted red line in 1958. He also molded the coalition of private and public sector groups which have helped the Freedom Trail survive to this day. By 1966, the first Freedom Trail information center was opened on Boston Common, distributing free maps to some half-million visitors a year. By 1974, the National Park Service stepped in, establishing that curious urban entity known as Boston National Historical Park. Annual attendance on the Trail soared to three, even four million.

At 87 and with limited mobility, Bill Schofield rarely makes it into Boston today. Hence, he was unaware of the National Park Service's current project of updating and "reinventing" the Freedom Trail, aided by consultants from Goody, Clancy and Associates and almost 100 community volunteers. Once apprised of the project, did the Father of the Freedom Trail have any advice? Did he find the Trail an obsolete entity in modern Boston?

"No way is it obsolete," replies Schofield. "I think [The Freedom Trail] is one of the things that can help to maybe bring this city back to what it should have been.

"And, well ... I haven't seen it for years, but remembering what it used to be like, what it needs more than anything is a couple of toilets!"