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photo: Greater Portland Convention and Visitors Bureau



Portland Pentimento

Who are we, really? Peel back the layers of our culture to reveal our incredible story.

BY COLIN S. SARGENT

What is it, exactly, that gives Portland big-city cred and feel with a population that matches Green Bay, Wisconsin? We're 177th on the list of the biggest urban areas in the United States, just one spot behind that cheese capital, thieves of our rightful 1996 Super Bowl. Perhaps what separates us from the dozens of other similarly sized micro-metros across the universe is our tradition of hosting diverse neighborhoods, just like the hubs, big apples, or cities of angels.

MACHIGONNE

Welcome to Portland before it was Portland. Machigonne, as the Abenaki called it, means Great Neck. Their name survived into English as a section of the original, pre-British-burnt Falmouth called The Neck—the hilly peninsula that would later become Portland. Falmouth would be rebuilt slightly to the north in its present position.

EAST END, MUNJOY, THE OLD PORT

Building houses over a matrix of Native American footpaths, the new locals were an immigrant population. Anglo-Protestants lived in much of the city, while the city's first ethnic neighborhood leapt to life near the base of Munjoy Hill. There lived much of Portland's black American population as ships crowded the wharves, many of whom worked on the waterfront. As attitudes about free blacks hardened in the American South, fewer slaves were freed and fewer free black workers could move freely to take jobs in Portland. Jobs over time increasingly were filled by immigrants fleeing lack of opportunity for Catholics in Ireland.

Portland's rowdy waterfront tavern culture sprang up in these days, when pubs dotted the waterfront and up India Street.

Portland also saw a relatively large influx of Chinese immigrants to the same area, although never quite large enough to form a distinct Chinatown. Some of the Chinese laborers

moved into the Munjoy Hill area, while others set up small businesses and shops around Middle Street. Maine was a popular destination for many Chinese after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The enforcement of the act in Maine was often predicated on whether or not the Chinese had made friends with a Christian family, instead of more aggressively enforced, as in Boston.

THE FIRE AND BAYSIDE: LITTLE ITALY AND ARMENIA

In the wake of the deadly 1866 fire that charred and leveled much of Portland—started by errant fireworks—much rubble was deposited on the Back Cove side of the city, filling in the land and greatly expanding what is now Bayside. Bayside proved to be the entryway for the next major phase of immigration, as Irish immigrants continued to populate the areas around Munjoy Hill and what is today Kennedy Park.

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VANISHING MAINE

Large numbers of Italian immigrants began to move into the area around India Street on the east end of Bay-side following Italian unification in the 1860s. As Italy industrialized, many small farms were incorporated into mechanized agriculture. Some of the dispossessed followed their dreams here. Today, although the neighborhood has a smaller proportion of Italian residents, you can still find traditional businesses such as Micucci Wholesale Foods. Many Italians, being the first group of immigrants who did not speak English as a first language, were willing to accept jobs at lower wages than second-generation Irish immigrants, many of whom by this time were able to move out of the city to smaller towns, often establishing small farms or, having had the chance to go to school (Portland High school opened in 1821—only Boston Latin has a longer history—moving to its present Cumberland Avenue location in 1863), seek better-paying jobs.

According to Gerard Kaladjian, co-founder of the Armenian Cultural Association of Maine, Portland was a place that welcomed Armenians fleeing murder on a mass scale during the Ottoman Empire. “I understand there was a small group of Temperance women here who had an organization that funded Armenians who wanted to come to Maine. Most Armenian families have been here since the turn of the century, so they came before the Genocide in 1915.” Many of these families moved into the area around today’s Lancaster Street, below Portland High School. A memorial dedicated by the association in 2003 stands at the intersection of Cumberland Avenue and Franklin Arterial.

URBAN RENEWAL

The Great Migration, in which literally millions of black Americans moved to Northern cities during the 20th century, contributed to a backlash as many black Americans originally from the South took up the jobs and social positions opened up by Irish and Italian-American families who in turn were moving to the suburbs. It was this migration of black Americans into poorer northern neighborhoods that helped fuel a national panic over “urban blight” at the time.

Lower-income neighborhoods became more visible as a “problem” to white-dominated city councils across the country once more non-white people lived with them. The solution was to bulldoze and informal-

ly segregate. The Franklin Arterial is an example: Much of what had been Little Italy and Bayside was bulldozed between 1958 and 1973, and a large street that greatly inhibited foot traffic divided the city's collective personality.

Though indeed it provided a feeder from the new interstate highway system, it also served as a wall that kept the "renewed" downtown from Munjoy Hill, ensuring cultural separation and a sharp jump in land values on one side of the arterial. Previously, people going out to carouse in the Old Port—before its own revival—might end up as easily at a tavern on India Street as Exchange Street. This became less likely, thanks to the arterial. Even today, while Maine's population is 97 percent white, Kennedy Park is only 71 percent white. It's that area, the bulldozed former Irish and Italian neighborhoods, that saw the greatest inflows of Cambodian and other Southeast Asian immigrants following the Vietnam War, and Somali immigrants following the collapse of the government of that country and American intervention in the early 1990s. The bright side? Because of the wealth of cosmopolitan cultures invigorating this area due to economic segregation, it has become Portland's brightest hope. Look to the future here.

THE WEST END

Once Brackett's Farm, where locals gathered to watch Captain Mowatt's ships burn the Old Port and Downtown in 1775—and later the site of wealthy merchant J.B. Brown's "Bramhall" mansion, the western part of the West End was a comparatively new neighborhood in the late 19th century. After Bramhall was razed, the place where new, statelier houses were built for increasingly wealthy managerial and business-owning Portlanders (back when the 'middle class' referred to the wealthiest 5 to 10 percent of the population, minus the 'bluebloods'). The legacy of that time can be seen in the West End's Victorian and Colonial Revival architecture. As many of the houses on the eastern side of the West End aged, those residents moved into the suburbs. The mansioned western edge, particularly around the Waynflete School, remained the home of Portland's privileged just as, to a lesser extent, the heights of the East End had been the elite neighborhood in earlier decades.



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VANISHING MAINE

HIPSTERS AND BROS?

The era of bulldozing is past, and increasingly throughout American culture, ethnic identities associated with specific places have become more a matter of nostalgia as first-generation immigrants are a far smaller share of our population today than 100 years ago. An example: the statue of John Ford stands in the former rough-and-tumble Irish neighborhood called Gorham's Corner that's now home to Hi Bombay and Yosaku restaurants and a small, popular cluster of clothing and accessory shops.

Today, participation in a chosen subculture can be as important to sense of self as ethnic origin. Does this mean *taste* is the new identity? This trend began in the 1950s as self-chosen groups became recognizable across the country—greasers, beatniks, hippies. Our Old Port correspondent tells us that hipsters and bros do friendly battle for control of the drinking establishments on Commercial Street, retiring to their present day Longfellow Square and USM-area or Deering headquarters to work off their hangovers. We're betting the next great fight is going to be Team Edward vs. Team Peeta. ■



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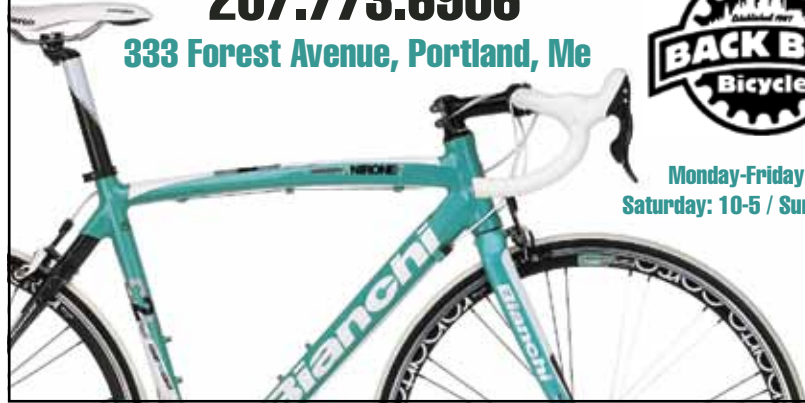
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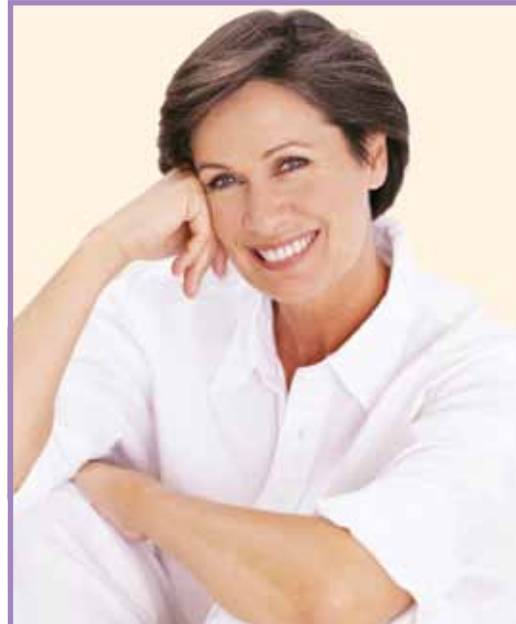


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