

Spotlight on: Jim O'Connell

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Biography



Jim O'Connell teaches in the City Planning-Urban Affairs Program at Boston University. He formerly worked as a Planner at the Boston Office of the Northeast Region of the National Park Service, where he specialized in planning for historic sites and heritage areas. Prior to that, Jim served as Economic Development Officer of the Cape Cod Commission. In Springfield, MA, his positions included Deputy Executive Director of the Springfield Redevelopment Authority and Executive Director of the

Hampden County Energy Office.

Jim has written six books and many articles on planning and New England history. His books include *Dining Out in Boston: A Culinary History* (2016), *The Hub's Metropolis: Greater Boston's Development from Railroad Suburbs to Smart Growth* (2013), and *Becoming Cape Cod: Creating a Seaside Resort* (2003). He also contributed to *A Landscape History of New England* (2011). He has written essays on regional planning and civic leadership for *Governing Greater Boston*, a public policy review published by the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Jim O'Connell has a B.A. from Bates College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Urban History from the University of Chicago. Jim currently serves as chair of the Massachusetts Zoning Reform Working Group, which has developed model state zoning legislation.

[Find Jim's work at the Sharon Public Library!](#)

Interview

1. You seem to have delved deeply into local history, governance, and the city of Boston in your work—both written and career-wise. Are you from the area originally, or did your interest grow out of something else?

I have written six books, each related to a place I have been living—three books about Western Massachusetts, where I grew up; one about Cape Cod, where I worked as an economic developer; and two books about Boston, where I have lived since 2000. My books have examined aspects of these places that have been overlooked. I ended up writing a book that I wanted to read but couldn't find. My books combine the research of an urban historian with the perspective of an urban planner who is active in the community. I try to bring out the cultural context of a city or region's development for a general audience.

2. What inspired you to write your first book?

I wrote [The Hub's Metropolis: Greater Boston's Development from Railroad Suburbs to Smart Growth](#) (MIT Press, 2013) because I could find no book that described the

development of the entire Boston metropolitan area. There are hundreds of books on the development of the city of Boston and surrounding individual communities, but nothing about the region as a whole—and we really lived regionally. I moved to Newton in 2000, but couldn't find any book that explained its role in the metropolitan area.

I wrote [Dining Out in Boston: A Culinary History](#) (University Press of New England, 2016) because, although there is a ton of writing—articles, reviews, blogs—on contemporary restaurants, nobody has delved into the amazing 200-year-old history of Boston's dining places. I discovered how Boston has had a reputation for good dining dating back to 1793, when [Julien's Restorator](#) opened as America's first true restaurant. Over the decades, the city pioneered many features of American restaurant life, opening some of the first hotel dining rooms, oyster houses, ice cream parlors, tearooms, ethnic restaurants, the twentieth-century revival of traditional New England dishes, and contemporary locavore and trendy foodie culture.

3. It seems, in my experience, that non-fiction occupies an interesting place in readers' collections—people really enjoy reading it, but it often seems to live in fiction's shadow as far as press and popular culture goes. Have you found that to be the case? How have you presented or marketed your books, as a writer of non-fiction?

One of the advantages of promoting non-fiction books is that they tend to have a very clear topical orientation, whether it would be biography, politics, history, or science. Readers can tell very quickly whether they are drawn by the subject or not. My books, which have covered local history topics related to Boston, Cape Cod, and Western Massachusetts, have had a very clear appeal in their respective areas. Of course, their appeal outside the local area would be limited. To my mind, it can be more difficult for a reader to tell whether they might be interested in a particular novel. Novels can be subjective and reliant upon the author's voice. At least that is my take. I should say there is nothing that I enjoy more than reading a good novel.

4. I see what you mean. Which elements, in your opinion, make for a particularly excellent piece of non-fiction?

*There are many types of non-fiction. Let me focus on history. Any good history book should be accurately researched and the story and issues should be clearly analyzed. An effective history book must grab the reader's imagination and help that person envision the historical experience that is being described. In my book *Dining Out in Boston*, I sought to provide a sense of what meals might have actually been like, in comparison with dishes of today. Was the food heavier? Were the ingredients fresher or not? I read historic cookbooks to figure out how skillful the preparations might have been.*

5. When you find a topic that you want to write about, how do you start the process? Which sources, tools, or organizations do you use to conduct your research?

The challenge of writing history or non-fiction is coming up with sources that enable you to address your questions. Serendipity plays a big role in locating the right sources. In the

case of Dining Out in Boston, I had always wanted to know about the history of restaurants, both as an avid diner and as a social historian. I was aware that some libraries owned collections of historic menus. A few years back, I dropped by [The Bostonian Society](#), which manages the Old State House, and asked if they had any historic menus. They dug out hundreds of them dating from the 1820s through the 1970s. As I pored through this menu collection, it struck me that I could put together a fascinating history of Boston's restaurants by explaining the evolution of these menus and the dishes diners ate over time. My book proceeded from there.

6. That sounds like an incredibly useful series of materials. Out of curiosity, what was the most interesting bit of information you gleaned from those menus?

I discovered that there has been an evolving approach to serving food restaurant dishes from era to era. During the period between the 1820s and the Civil War, for example, the main restaurants were hotel dining rooms. For a fixed price, waiters circulated 30 or 40 different dishes that a diner could choose tastes from. The leading hotels usually offered an array of British-American meat-oriented dishes plus a number of French dishes, which were considered to be prestigious. The Parker House introduced the first hotel a la carte menu in America in 1855, so a diner only paid for the dishes he or she ate. During the early twentieth century, the Colonial Revival movement spurred restaurants to feature dishes that might have been popular in the colonial era and early nineteenth century. Dishes that were formerly called simply boiled dinner, pot roast, clam chowder, or baked beans became "New England" boiled dinner, "Yankee" pot roast, "New England" clam chowder, or "Boston" baked beans. These dishes maintained a central place on menus through the 1960s.

During the 1970s, high-end restaurants sought to emulate the creative, seasonal dishes being served in the "nouvelle cuisine" restaurants of France. This trend has led to the innovative locavore menus being served today. During the 1970s, ethnic restaurants assumed increased importance, with the rising popularity of Indian, Szechuan, Thai, sushi, and Mexican food. Italian restaurants evolved from featuring spaghetti and meatballs to a wide range of non-tomato-based dishes drawn from Northern Italy. In more recent years, standard menus have been offering an eclectic mix that can include fried calamari, fish tacos, elaborate burgers, lobster ravioli, and wood-grilled pizzas. Menus have provided a fascinating look at how dining tastes have evolved.

7. I imagine that you did some legwork in Boston restaurants during the course of your research. Do you have any places you would particularly recommend to anyone interested in a night of dining out in the city?

I joke in the first line of the preface to Dining Out in Boston: "This is a guide to restaurants that mostly no longer exist." Since I discuss Boston restaurants going back to the 1790s, it is undeniably the case. Yet, Boston still has some restaurants where diners can get a sense of what eating out was like decades ago. [The Union Oyster House](#) (1826) is the oldest operating restaurant in America. Its oyster bar summons up the atmosphere from two centuries ago. [Durgin-Park](#) was established the following year. It still offers a Yankee menu featuring fish chowder, Boston baked beans, and roast prime rib of beef. [Jacob Wirth](#) (1868) provides a 19th-century German beer hall atmosphere with sauerbraten and bratwurst

accompanying the brews. I think the [Marliave](#) is an intriguing place. It was established by Henry Marliave in 1884 on Bosworth Street as a French restaurant. By the 1930s, it had become an Italian restaurant and maintained that cuisine until recently, when chef Scott Herritt brought back such traditional specialities as escargots, welsh rarebit, and beef wellington. For Italian-American cooking, I'd suggest the [Cantina Italiana](#) on Hanover Street. Opened in 1931, it is the longest surviving full-service Italian restaurant in the North End.

Unfortunately, or some would argue, fortunately, restaurants have changed dramatically in recent years, jettisoning many traditional dishes and dining customs. Restaurants are far more casual, ethnically eclectic, consciously innovative, and health-aware than they once were.

8. Are you working on anything new right now? (And if so, can you tell us about it?)

I teach in the City Planning-Urban Affairs Program at Boston University, where I will be introducing a course this year on Boston as a Global City. I will examine the development of the network of global cities that we live in and explore how Boston has a long history as a "global city" starting with being a port during the colonial era. My research is looking at issues of transportation, communication, trade, immigration, and cross-cultural exchange. With the current backlash against globalization, this topic is timely. I have no idea whether this course will result in a book, but I note that there is no book available that tackles this pressing set of issues.

Jim Recommends Great Boston Reads

I am recommending great reads related to Boston with an additional standout book about Cape Cod.

[The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley, 1874-1958](#) by Jack Beatty

[The City Below](#) by James Carroll

[The Bostonians](#) by Henry James

[Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families](#) by Anthony Lukas

[Boston: A Topographical History](#) by Walter Muir Whitehill

[The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod](#) by Henry Beston