

Coping with Economic Change

Quincy, Massachusetts

Quincy, Massachusetts has seen it all. Two U.S. presidents called it home and lie buried next to each other in the basement of First Parish Church. Granite blocks for the Bunker Hill Monument left Quincy quarries on America's first railway. Quincy-built ships were once the pride of the seas, and the Fore River Shipyard's payroll fueled a thriving downtown that billed itself as Shopperstown U.S.A.

But all that's in the past, and Quincy, like so many other American communities, is trying to find its place in the 21st century economy.

This is a story of my hometown. But it could just as easily be about yours because it's also a story of coping with economic change.

The Quincy I knew exists only in memory. Most of the people who made it what it was have either moved away or passed on.

Ghosts now inhabit the landscape; ghosts of industrial America and Main Street USA. The shipyard, the gear works, and the quarries have been idle for years. The union halls have gone silent. The specialty shops and department stores that lined Hancock Street have long since fled to the mall or gone out of business.

Which is not that Quincy is a sad or pitiable place. In fact, it may be more prosperous than ever. But there's also no denying that it is a very different place than it was.

Back in the 1950s, in the last days before interstates, automobiles, and air conditioning forever altered the patterns of American life, Quincy had a vibrant downtown and a healthy industrial base. Lunchbox-toting dads earned enough to support a family on one income, and differences in social status were measured on a scale that ranged from Chevy to Buick. In short, Quincy was a prosperous place that never flashed its wallet.

If this sounds a bit heavy on the nostalgia . . . well . . . guilty as charged. I miss the old Quincy. There was a lot to like about it.

No matter. The good old days are never coming back, and, in the end, nostalgia is a mug's game, a futile exercise. Things change whether we want them to or not, and we either adapt or languish.

Quincy has done its best to roll with the punches, and although some of its efforts have ended in frustration, there are signs that the city is finding its place in the 21st century economy. A healthy mix of professional and service sector jobs has kept unemployment low. A flurry of recent condo construction is attracting first-time buyers and empty-nesters looking for the convenience of living close to Boston without having to pay Boston prices. And affordable commercial space is drawing a new wave of small businesses, including a confectionary shop that makes the best Belgian chocolate brownies in the known world.

Why should any of this matter to you if you don't have a direct connection to the City of Presidents? Because regardless of where you live, you'll recognize aspects of Quincy's story in that of your own hometown.

We have all been touched by economic change. Our working lives, leisure pursuits, shopping patterns, and neighborhood streets have all felt the effects . . . for better or worse.

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