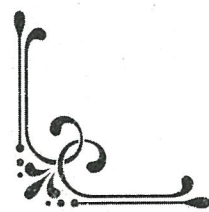


**Boston artist Francis Alexander painted the only oil portrait of Charles Dickens made during his four-month tour of the United States in 1842.**



When  
Dickens  
came to Boston



**A**s the steamship *Britannia* veered into her berth at Long Wharf on the evening of January 22, 1842, 29-year-old Charles Dickens stood on deck, huddled against the wind in a bearskin coat. The dashing British author of five blockbuster novels, including *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* and a popular collection of stories called *Sketches by Boz*, had just endured 18 dreary days at sea and a battering storm for the chance to tour the United States and write a travel book about the New World.

Dickens had been fixated on the possibility of the journey when, in September 1841, he received a letter from one of his literary idols, Washington Irving. The American author promised that if Dickens visited “it would be a triumph . . . from one end of the States to the other.” Fully expecting to love the young republic, Dickens finally made up his mind to go. It would be a four-month tour that began in Boston, a place many regarded as the Athens of America.

Soon prominent Bostonians such as future senator Charles Sumner and the US minister to England, Edward Everett, received letters from prominent Londoners introducing them to the internationally known author. Word spread. A buzz ensued. And the city of approximately 95,000 inhabitants went on celebrity alert. Boston publishers rushed to print editions of Dickens’s books; newspaper editors produced woodcut portraits to illustrate their laudatory articles on the author; local musicians composed pieces named for his characters; and enterprising tradesmen attempted to capitalize on the occasion by hawking decorations and commemorative trinkets. Boston would temporarily become known as “Boz-town.”

Several hours before the ship’s arrival, Bostonians of all classes lined the piers on that stinging winter evening, angling for a glimpse of a man whose work was read by the masses. If a person owned three books at the time, they were probably the Bible, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and *The Pickwick Papers*. Beloved for his comic portraits of middle and working-class characters, Dickens was truly a hero for humanity, a man who spoke for the voiceless. His writings were witty and rollicking, but also thoroughly unyielding in their attack on the hypocrisy he saw in public,

religious, and government institutions.

Exhibiting less restraint than the onlookers, a dozen or so reporters and editors leapt aboard the not-yet-moored *Britannia* and rushed to greet the author without the customary formality of an introduction. Later, Dickens would describe this first American experience in a letter to his friend John Forster in London, saying: “And what do you think of their tearing violently up to me and beginning to shake hands like madmen?”

But the Englishman’s annoyance with such familiarity was short-lived. After the ship docked, Dickens, his wife, Catherine, and her English maid, Anne Brown, took a carriage to their chosen hotel—the Tremont House at the corner of Tremont and Beacon—where one of those aggressively friendly newspapermen had just rushed from Long Wharf to secure the best suite of rooms for the travelers. With another crowd awaiting his arrival, Dickens burst into the warm, fashionable hotel lobby and announced, “Here we are!”

It was true. Charles John Huffam Dickens had arrived in every sense of the word.



The Tremont House in 1852

**B**orn February 7, 1812, the eldest son of Elizabeth and John Dickens was a sickly boy who spent his childhood observing people and

reading voraciously. The dream of someday becoming a wealthy, respected gentleman motivated him to excel as a student, until his father’s money problems forced the family to relocate to a wretchedly poor London suburb. In a time before public education, John Dickens could no longer afford to keep his young son in school. Charles was sent to work in a warehouse pasting labels on boot polish bottles—a devastating turn of events for the brilliant and ambitious 11-year-old. When his father landed in debtor’s prison and the family moved there with him, as was the custom, Charles stayed behind in a boarding house, working six days a week and visiting the prison on Sundays. Eventually, John Dickens inherited a sizable sum from his mother, and while it freed him from debtor’s prison, he did not rush to rescue his son from the factory. Only after he witnessed Charles’s misery in the warehouse did John Dickens allow the boy to resume his education.

At age 15, Charles became an office clerk and studied shorthand at night—a skill that led him to a job as a journalist. In 1836, he published his first book, *Sketches by Boz*, a

“*Boston is what I*

collection of pieces he’d published in various periodicals written under the pseudonym that would give him the long-enduring nickname of “Boz.” Based on the success of the collection, Dickens secured a contract to write what would become *The Pickwick Papers*, serialized comic stories that, when published as a novel in 1837, launched the author into the literary limelight.

The Dickens who burst into the Tremont House was the most popular writer of the time, the first celebrity in the new age of mass media. Described by the publisher James T. Fields in his 1871 *Yesterdays with Authors* as “Young, handsome, almost worshipped for his genius,” the charismatic guest ventured out that first night with a friend from the *Britannia*, strolling through the moonlit streets of Boston, rushing to embrace the city that was so eager to embrace him. Later, the two men lingered over an American nightcap from the curious offerings—gin slings, mint juleps, timber doodles—at the Tremont House Bar.

By the next morning, the busywork of his visit began in an unexpected form—answering letters. They arrived at the Tremont House in huge bundles, requiring the overwhelmed author and his wife to hire a secretary.

There were appeals to edit book manuscripts, invitations to hundreds of proposed social events, endless requests for autographs (all granted, though not necessarily by Dickens himself), and even a note from some female admirers asking for a lock of his hair. This last request Dickens cheerfully denied, responding: “I confess that I am afraid to send you a lock of my hair, as the precedent would be one of a most dangerous and alarming kind, and likely to terminate before long in my total baldness.”

Letters from the time indicate that Dickens was initially both stunned and flattered by the gush of attention, but the demands of the public would wear on him over the course of his visit. The unceasing social obligations also affected Catherine, who received her own share of scrutiny.

A well-educated Scotswoman, Catherine Hogarth was able to marry Dickens in 1836 on the strength of his contract from *The*



A sketch of Catherine Dickens, the author's wife

to everything.” In a letter from Boston to her sister-in-law, Fanny Burnett, Catherine wrote: “We are constantly out two or three times in the evening. The people are most hospitable, and we shall both be killed with kindness.”

Americans could not get enough of Dickens, a man whose flamboyant spirit and flashy fashions—typically a brightly colored vest and scarf accessorized with gold jewelry—so captivated them. Sketches and cartoons appeared in the major newspapers,

would have the whole United States to be.”

*Pickwick Papers*. In 1841, when Dickens was planning his trip to America, he insisted that Catherine accompany him. With some cajoling, she consented, though she dreaded leaving behind their four young children.

“Mrs. Dickens felt all a mother’s anxiety for the little ones left at home, and seemed impatient to return to them,” according to the Dickenses’ hired secretary George Putnam in “Four Months with Charles Dickens,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1870. Putnam also described the cherished pencil drawing of the Dickens children made by one of their friends, the prominent British artist Daniel Maclise. “The picture was framed, and wherever we afterwards went, it was at once taken from its case and placed on the mantelpiece or table. Mr. and Mrs. Dickens talked constantly of their children, and seemed to derive great comfort from the pictured presence of their little ones.”

Dickens praised his wife, for she “always accommodated herself, well and cheerfully

but, constrained by time, the author sat for just two professional artists while in the States. Both were Bostonians. In his Tremont Row studio, Francis Alexander painted the one oil portrait of Dickens made during his US trip. Henry Dexter, by observing Dickens in his breakfast routine at the Tremont House and occasionally swooping in from the corner of the room to measure the subject’s nose or chin with calipers, produced the only sculpture.

Of the many Boston intellectuals whom the author palled around with, including the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Dickens is thought to have formed one of his most abiding friendships with Cornelius Conway Felton, a professor of Greek who would later become the president of Harvard. The two young, self-made men would take long rambles around the city, sometimes stopping for lunch, quite likely at the Union Oyster House. The bivalve, a favorite of both, would become a subject of playful banter in their lifelong correspondence. “Come to England!

## DICKENS ON DISPLAY

“Dickens saw a world of possibility in Massachusetts,” says Diana Archibald, associate professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Archibald is co-curator of the “Dickens and Massachusetts” exhibition, part of the Dickens 2012 Worldwide Bicentenary Celebration. “Massachusetts was the other America,” Archibald says. “It wasn’t the America that disappointed him. It was the one where he developed lifelong friendships and saw possibilities for reform in England.”

Seven months of events and an exhibition at Lowell National Historical Park that runs from March 30 to October 20 illuminate Dickens’s watershed experiences in the Commonwealth on his two visits, first as a youthful celebrity in 1842, then 25 years later as a wealthy and powerful man who had paid dearly for fame.



Among the exhibition’s highlights are five key pieces from the Dickens Museum in London, including the Daniel Maclise portrait of the Dickens children (above); an 1868 raised-letter version for sightless readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop*—part of a gift Dickens made to the Perkins School for the Blind; and, at the centerpiece, the Francis Alexander portrait from the author’s landmark 1842 visit to Boston. Loaned by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the painting has not been viewed in the city publicly in more than 30 years.

UMass Lowell Center for Arts and Ideas, 978-934-2957, [uml.edu/Dickens](http://uml.edu/Dickens)

Come to England!" Dickens implored Felton in a letter sent from New York in March 1842. "Our oysters are small I know; they are said by Americans to be coppery, but our hearts are of the largest size."

In addition to fulfilling countless social obligations, the most popular writer of the 19th century felt a responsibility to use his power for the benefit of society. Throughout his adult life, he toured and wrote extensively about public institutions in Europe and England. While in Boston, he spent a day at the Perkins School for the Blind, internationally recognized for its success in teaching Laura Bridgman, the first known deaf-blind person to acquire language. Fascinated by Bridgman, Dickens wrote at length about her in his travel book, *American Notes*. Years later, Kate Adams Keller read the account and became hopeful about the possibilities for her own deaf-blind daughter. In 1887, at Kate Keller's request, the Perkins School sent Anne Sullivan to Alabama to work with young Helen Keller.

Dickens also made the one-hour train trip to the planned manufacturing town of Lowell, where he toured a woolen mill, a cotton mill, and a carpet factory. Appalled by the horrendous working conditions in English industrial cities such as Manchester, Dickens found the Lowell mills to be comparatively clean and orderly. He was further impressed by the factory girls, who were not only healthy looking and well-mannered but also produced their own periodical of poems, articles, and stories called *The Lowell Offering*.

On February 5, amid a flurry of farewells, Dickens and his party swept through the grand lobby of the Tremont House for the final time. They boarded a train to Worcester before making their way to New Haven and then New York. There the feasting and feting continued, and the crowds swelled to insufferable levels. "I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see," Dickens complained to John Forster. By the end of

his visit, his bear coat would be plucked to mangle by fans snatching souvenir hairs.

As the trip continued to Philadelphia and Washington D.C., Dickens became disgusted by the American habit of spitting tobacco juice in public and, journeying by train and boat as far south as Richmond, Virginia, he grew increasingly outraged by the institution of slavery. Letters indicate that the farther he traveled from Massachusetts, the more disillusioned he became with America, and in a letter to William Macready, a friend in England, Dickens wrote, "Boston is what I would have the whole United States to be."

Back in England, he published *American Notes*, a mixed account of his experiences here. It turned out that the United States was "not the Republic of (his) imagination." The book was criticized for its attack on American values and incendiary portrait of slavery. Many Americans saw it as a betrayal by the guest they had welcomed so wholeheartedly.



This drawing of Dickens on his second American tour appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1868.

When Dickens returned to the United States to give a series of readings 25 years later, the resentment stirred by *American Notes* had largely been forgotten.

His star had only risen higher with the publication of nine more novels, five Christmas books, and his continued magazine work, but Dickens had also experienced turmoil and tragedy. He had buried two of his 10 children and separated from his wife of 22 years when he fell in love with 18-year-old actress Ellen Ternan. He was nearly killed in the Staplehurst Railway accident of 1865, an experience that left him traumatized.

"I sometimes think . . . I must have known two individuals bearing the same name at various periods of my own life," wrote James T. Fields in observing how greatly Dickens had changed from carefree to worldweary.

The 1867 visit was a more subdued affair. Fans once again thronged the docks—this time in East Boston—waiting for his ship, but Dickens's English manager, George Dolby, had a Custom House tug fetch the author and take him undetected to Long Wharf. The Parker House hotel arranged for Dickens to use a back staircase during his stay, and while the author happily reconnected with old friends, he also declined many social invitations.

His performances, however, were inarguably a triumph, with his December 24th reading of *A Christmas Carol* at the Tremont Temple a highlight. "I never saw anything like them on Christmas Eve," Dickens wrote home about the Boston crowd. He earned \$25,000, an astounding sum at the time, from the sold-out tour, which encompassed 18 American cities, but the experience left him physically depleted. Two years after returning home, while working on the *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, he died of a stroke on June 9, 1870.

In Boston, those present for his reading in the Tremont Theatre had heard his final goodbye to a city that had become a "memorable and beloved spot" for him. "Ladies and Gentlemen, — I beg most earnestly, most gratefully, and most affectionately to bid you each and all farewell." ■

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**SOURCES** Diana Archibald, co-curator and lead scholar of "Dickens and Massachusetts: A Tale of Power and Transformation" exhibition, associate professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell; *American Notes for General Circulation*, Gutenberg Etext (2006), by Charles Dickens; *Yesterdays With Authors* (1871), by James T. Fields; *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (1977, originally published 1952), by Edgar Johnson; *Dickens: A Life* (1979), by Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie; "Dickens and Industry," *Dickens Quarterly*, 2002, Vol. 19, No. 3, by Natalie McKnight; *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth* (2011), by Lillian Nayder; *Dickens Days in Boston* (1927), by Edward F. Payne; *Charles Dickens* (2009), by Michael Slater; *Charles Dickens* (2002), by Jane Smiley; *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (1974), edited by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson