

Those PERFECT Places

THE RESULTS OF THE LATEST CENSUS SHOW THAT BOSTONIANS' ESCAPE to the suburbs continues apace. People are moving out of the city, and they are also fleeing the inner suburbs for the outer suburbs, searching for that perfect place.

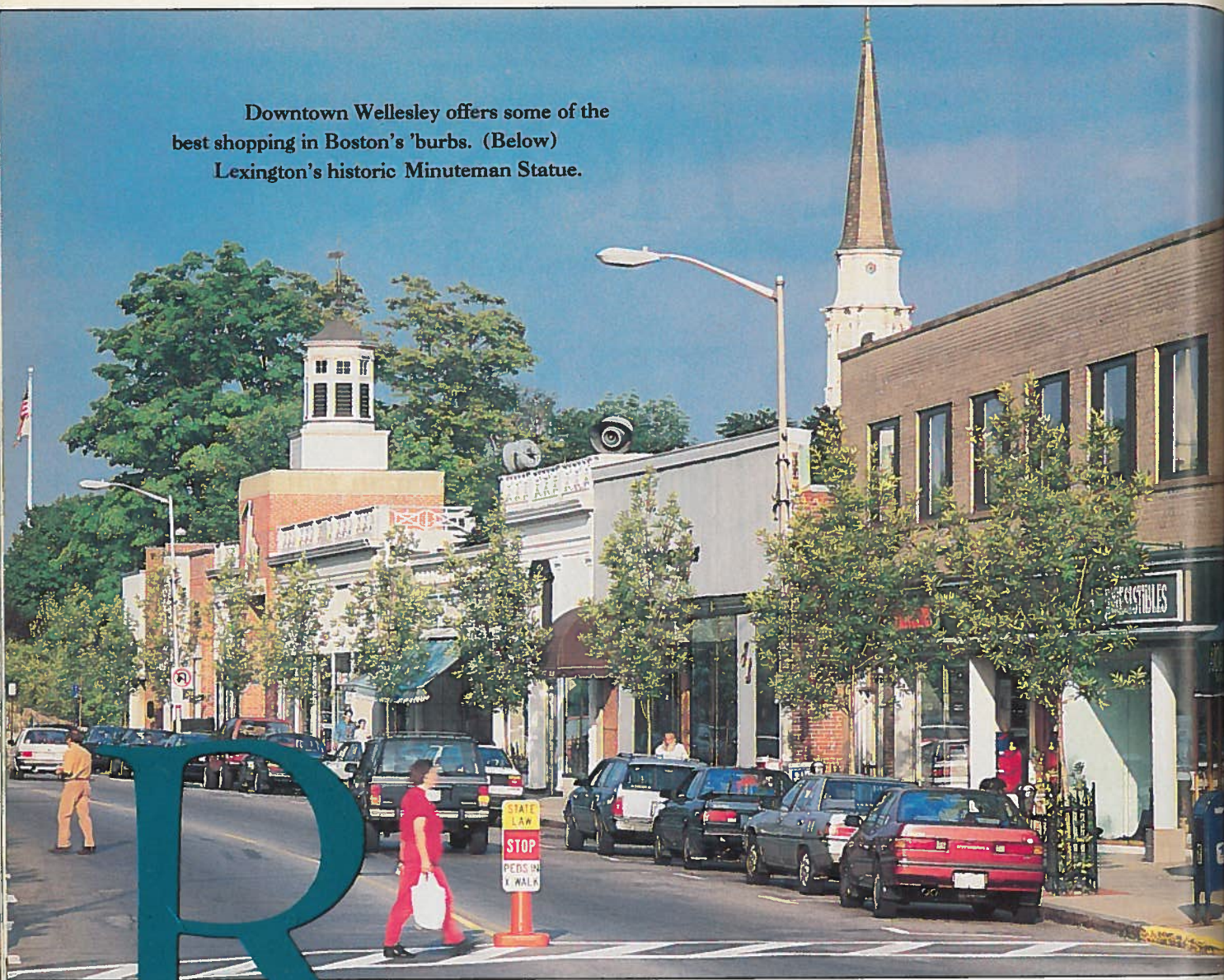
For some, the perfect hometown must offer the ability to zip in and out of Boston in minutes. For others, a good school system is more important. Each town and city in the area has much to offer, but which offers the most? Which town has the best schools? Which has the lowest crime rate? Which has the fastest commute to Boston or the most green space? We answered those questions and

By Sue Hertz

compiled a Quality of Life index for 131 communities, taking into account the characteristics that most people consider desirable.

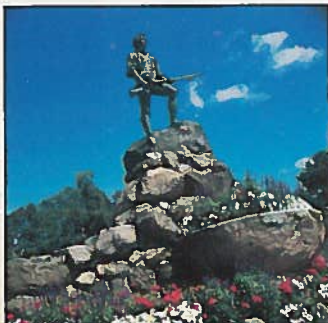
The winning town? Historic Concord, followed by the

Downtown Wellesley offers some of the best shopping in Boston's 'burbs. (Below) Lexington's historic Minuteman Statue.



Research shows that 43 percent of Bostonians want to leave the city.

similarly wealthy western suburbs of Wellesley, Lexington, and Lincoln. The loser? Carver, which scored poorly because of its driving time to Boston, its recent rapid growth, and its stingy library budget. Demographers say that our flight to the suburbs is irreversible. Historians tell us it is hardly new.



America began its surrender to the appeal of the green, clean suburbs in the nineteenth

century. By the 1850s, about 85,000 people traveled daily by foot, horseback, carriage, and railroad from the suburbs into the city of Boston. Those commuters were, in some ways, the beginning of the end of the metropolis. In the early twentieth century, automobiles made it easy to get into and out of town. In the thirties, the town of

Wellesley grew by 80 percent, Arlington grew by more than 90 percent, and Belmont doubled in population.

In 1930, Boston was the first city in the United States to have more people living in its suburban towns than in the city itself. Fifty years later, in 1980, it became one of several urban centers to have more people *working* in the suburbs than working in town. That demographic milestone can be read as a suburban declaration of independence. Today, while the city still provides energy, culture, and entertainment, people no longer rely on it for basic needs. More people than ever live, work, and play quite happily in the suburbs, trekking into Boston less frequently each year. The exodus that started 150 years ago continues.

A recent survey showed that 43 percent of Boston residents would leave the city if they could, and figures from the most recent (1990) census indicate that many people can and do move. Most of them are now moving to the more distant suburbs—towns way outside the Route 128 loop. Since 1980 the populations of most inner suburbs, such as Arlington, Belmont, and Watertown, have dropped by 2 percent or more, while towns that were once considered outposts—Newbury, Norfolk, Mansfield, and Hopkinton—have grown by 20 percent. Carver, that South Shore hamlet, has watched its residential listings mushroom by 51 percent in the past 10 years.

What has happened? Have urbanites opted to exchange easy access to Korean restaurants and late-night jazz for free parking and cow-speckled pastures? Or is the reason more practical? Is it that 60 percent of office space in Greater Boston is now in the suburbs, not in the city? Software programmers no longer have to live in Lexington for a 30-minute-or-less commute to work; they can live in rural Ashland.

Or is it that the young, single professionals who infiltrated the city and the inner suburbs in the seventies and early eighties are now married with children? Do they want their kids to grow up on two-acre lots surrounded by forests and red-tailed hawks? Or do they simply want to avoid the city crime that has spilled into the inner suburbs? Or is it that homes are less expensive in the outposts? How many people can afford a comfortable house in Cambridge or Brookline with a yard big enough for a game of kickball?

For every move, there is a myriad of reasons—and a myriad of trade-offs. Those in the exurbs know the joy of waking up to a chorus of birds gurgling and chirping, of walking to the town center knowing they will probably bump into a friend or two. They relish driving for miles and miles unimpeded by traffic lights. The nights are quiet in the outer 'burbs, haunted only by the sound of a teenager or two skateboarding down the middle of the street.

Those in the inner suburbs can plant daylilies in their yards after work and still make curtain call at the Shubert Theatre that evening. The inner suburbanites can eat lo mein at the local Chinese restaurant or drive just 20 minutes to Chinatown for dim sum. They can shop on Newbury Street or at the Arsenal Mall. Their children can shoot hoops in the neighborhood cul-de-sac in the morning and learn about the galaxy at the Museum of Science in the afternoon. Living near the city means choice, a choice that those in exurbia have to drive an hour or more to exercise.

And what about the city itself? What does this exodus to points beyond Greater Boston mean to Boston? Although the city's population has grown slightly in the past decade, the increase is due mostly to immigration, not to middle-class professionals seeking diver-

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Why I Live in Newburyport

By Sue Hertz

IT WASN'T SO MUCH THE MAZE OF STREETS LINED WITH TILTING Colonials and stately Federals, or the idea of living within biking distance of Plum Island's beach and walking distance of Middle Street Foods' black-bean soup.

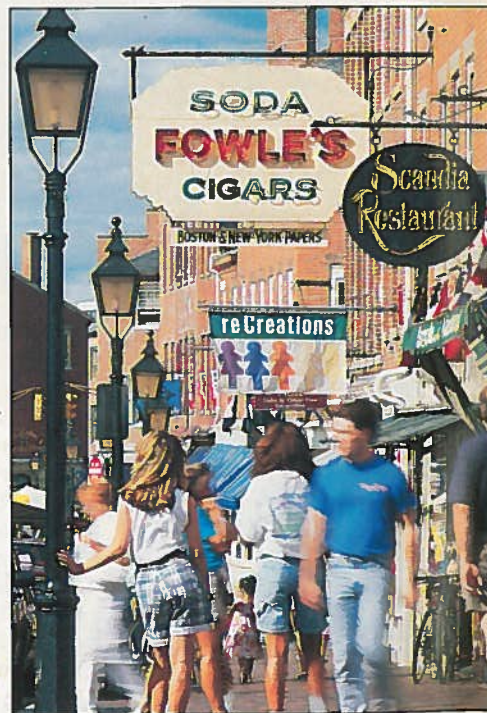
Rather, what inspired me to choose Newburyport as my home was that it was almost equidistant from the University of New Hampshire, where I was going to teach nonfiction writing, and Boston, where I hoped to peddle my nonfiction writing to local magazines. At least that is what I told people. My real drive was to be as close to Thai restaurants and the Nickelodeon as I could without creating an unbearable commute to UNH. Indeed, in my zeal to maintain an urban connection, I almost overlooked all the charm that made people ooze, "I love Newburyport."

Seven years later, I still appreciate the relative ease with which I can dart to my classroom and to Bangkok Cuisine (depending, of course, on Tobin Bridge traffic), but what has kept me here, lured me into buying one of the city's 2,500 historic homes, is something more visceral than the spell of living in a quaint seaport with brick sidewalks and narrow streets.

Newburyport harbors a sense of community that makes even couples without kids care about the school system and compels even transient renters to celebrate the long-awaited opening of the renovated firehouse. Sure, anyone can be happy that a public building that has lain dormant for decades now boasts a new theater and a restaurant with tables on a patio overlooking the Merrimack River. But it was more a sense of pride in the city—the smallest in the commonwealth—that brought hundreds of people to the firehouse's opening party last year.

Perhaps this community spirit stems from the fact that our old houses sit so close together that we can look into one another's kitchens and compare breakfast cereals. Or perhaps the spirit is there because while many residents brave the one-hour trek to Boston jobs, many others of us—free-lance writers, artists, architects, graphic designers—work independently in town and crave the connectedness we lack in the isolation of our

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Summertime shoppers in Newburyport.

Perfect Places

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sity and culture and the ability to walk to work. Instead, demographers show, 200,000 city residents, most of them middle-class, moved away from Boston in the eighties.

Who can blame the emigrants? The appeal of urban life often fades in the face of your children's needs or your spouse's safety or the hassle of reporting your car stolen for the fifth time in the same number of months. The truth is that there is no perfect harmony, that no matter where we live, there are gains and losses. And how we weigh those gains and losses depends on our needs at that stage of life.

Whether we live in the inner or outer 'burbs—or the city, for that matter—how we choose our home comes down to what is expedient for us and for our families. In the end, we're all searching for a sense of place, and that sense is often more instinctual than reasoned, easier felt than defined.

But that doesn't stop us from trying to clarify and explain why we live where we live. Read on.

Why I Live in Newburyport

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solitary offices.

All I know is that when there is a cause, the people of Newburyport pitch in. When the city didn't have the funds to do so, we started our own recycling center. Almost as soon as the Seabrook nuclear power plant was even thought of, the Newburyport-based Citizens Within a Ten-Mile Radius has been dedicated first to stopping the construction of the plant and, after its opening, to monitoring it. Most recently, local residents helped defeat a proposal to rezone neighboring Salisbury that would have allowed an incinerator to be built within view of Newburyport. The activists weren't as concerned with the visual obstruction as they were with the unknown health hazards they feared from the incinerator's emissions. Living in old houses provides a lesson about our obligations to those who will follow us, a constant reminder that we're only passing through.

Perhaps it is that unspoken bond, that respect for preserving the past while not sacrificing the future, that inspires community activism. And perhaps the most important outcome of that activism is the friendships born from it. When I first moved here, I was single and knew no one within the city limits. Within a few months, a Newburyport woman I had met at UNH introduced me to a writer friend of hers, and before I had finished my second magazine piece, I was eating lunch twice a month at a conference table full of other

free-lance writers eager to share ideas and horror stories about editors. Although those lunch meetings eventually dissolved, solid friendships were established, and other friendships formed from those friendships.

Not long ago, some Newburyport friends threw a party for me and my soon-to-be husband to celebrate our impending marriage. I looked around the room, crowded with faces of friends who live within walking distance of our house, friends who have fought for good schools, clean air, and viable evacuation plans. How lucky I am to live here, I thought. How lucky we are to live here.

Why I Live in Cambridge

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Avon Hill.

For the rest, Cambridge is indeed a small city, adjacent but not secondary to Boston. People work in our own downtown—big companies, big hotels, all that razzmatazz. You don't need a car here. You also don't need to conform to anyone else's expectations; our cohesiveness depends on maintaining our diversity rather than warring against it. And if my kids sacrifice a precious private backyard to learn that lesson, their gain is worth the price.

Coming out of our favorite Thai restaurant the other evening, we ran into one of our former neighbors from our short term in exile. Wasn't this exciting! they said, beaming. They had just come from hearing some outdoor South African music, and now they were going to scope a bookstore—what a treat! Once a month or so, they told us, they like to hire a babysitter and just drive down to Harvard Square and soak in the scene, sample the food, and maybe try for the ART or an old flick at the Brattle. But the parking, what a chore! How did we manage?

We walked, we told them. And with that we bid them a fine evening and ducked underground, to shoot over to Charles Street on the Red Line. After all, what's the good of living just the other side of the river if you can't visit? Hello, Boston—Cambridge here.

Why I Live in Cohasset

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Cohasset doesn't change, largely because its geography won't let it. Drive along the shoreline and marvel at the boulders. What sand is to Cape Cod, stone is to us. Henry David Thoreau, on his way to the Outer Beach in 1849 to begin the series of walks that would become the subject of his book *Cape Cod*, stopped first in Cohas-

Catch up on old times.



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