

The West End Museum

150 STANIFORD STREET, SUITE 7, BOSTON, MA 02114

New Exhibit Revisits 19th Century's Most Infamous Murder, Trial & Execution

Highlights Long-Debated Legalities & Questionable Conviction

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 19, 2013

Boston, MA—The 1849 murder of George Parkman in Boston stands as the most sensational case of its time, and the prosecution of John Webster is often described as the O.J. Simpson trial of the 19th century. This case had it all: a grisly murder, a wealthy victim, a respected suspect, a dubious lead witness and unorthodox court proceedings. Nearly 60,000 spectators were ushered through the Boston courtroom in 10-minute intervals. An all-out media blitz ensued, including journalists from Europe. Ultimately, the case spawned books, documentaries and even an iPhone app. To this day—more than 160 years later—Webster's guilt is debated.

On September 24, *The Parkman-Webster Murder Case* opens at [The West End Museum](#) and runs through December 21 in the Main Exhibit Hall. The show reception takes place at 6:30 p.m. on Friday, October 4. Concurrent programs will be offered throughout the run of the show. The exhibit, reception and concurrent programs are free and open to the public. (Media Note: Reception and program details appear on the following pages; downloadable show-related images appear [here](#).)

The Parkman-Webster Murder Case exhibit traces the entire timeline of the case from Parkman's disappearance in the West End to Webster's trial and execution at the Leverett Street jail. The forensics of the case—one of the first trials to allow scientific evidence as testimony, and *the* first to allow dental evidence—are explored along with a brief history of the "Spunkers Club," a secret group of medical students and future dignitaries including founders of MGH and Harvard Medical School, that procured dead bodies for anatomical dissection. The lawyers and judges are examined, as are problematic issues with the case and oddities surrounding the trial.

"Among the many fascinating elements to this story are two unique aspects: the number of Harvard men involved in the case and the rapidly changing social climate being ushered in," says Duane Lucia, West End Museum Exhibit Curator. "To borrow from the Reverend Theodore Parker, the Athens of America was rapidly becoming the Dublin of America."

The trial is legally historic for Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw's charge to the jury, now known as the "Webster Charge." At the time, the legal standard for a capital murder case was to prove "to an absolute certainty" that the dead body was in fact that of the victim, but Shaw set a new precedent when he instructed the jury that the prosecution only needed to prove this "beyond a reasonable doubt." In his charge, Shaw also defined the difference between murder and manslaughter, the difficulty with eyewitness testimony as alibi, and the legitimacy of circumstantial evidence.

The Parkman-Webster Murder Case exhibit is free and open to the public during regular Museum hours.

Media Contact:
Matt Ellis
matt@ellisstrategies.com
617.278.6560

Museum Contact:
Duane Lucia
westendmuseum@gmail.com
617.416.0718

About the West End Museum:

The West End Museum is dedicated to the collection, preservation and interpretation of the history and culture of the West End neighborhood. The Museum's permanent exhibit, "The Last Tenement," highlights the immigrant history of the neighborhood through its decimation under Urban Renewal in 1959; two additional galleries feature rotating exhibits. The Museum is located near North Station at 150 Staniford St. Suite 7. Hours: Tuesday - Friday 12:00pm - 5:00pm; Saturday 11:00am - 4:00pm. Admission is free.

Parkman-Webster Exhibit Programs

Museum Talk: *The Spunkers*

Wednesday, September 25; 6:30 to 8:00pm

@ West End Museum

Cost: FREE

This talk will examine the “Spunkers Club,” a secret society of medical students and future dignitaries, including founders of MGH and Harvard Medical School that practiced human anatomical dissection. At the time, the practice struck fear, and loathing in the hearts of the general public, and no one was voluntarily offering recently departed loved ones for such study. The only legally sanctioned sources of human subjects—initially, executed criminals; later, convicted duelists and convicts who died in prison—was scarce. With an imperative educational need to study human anatomy via dissection, members of the Spunkers Club are said to have engaged in hijacking bodies between deathbed and grave as well as in midnight raids on local graveyards.

Film: *Sacco and Vanzetti*

Thursday, October 3; 6:30pm

@ West End Museum

Cost: FREE

Preregistration required at thewestendmuseum.org/whats_on/event-registration

This 2006 documentary brings to life the story of two Italian immigrant anarchists who were accused of a murder in 1920, and executed in Boston in 1927 after a notoriously prejudiced trial. The ordeal of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti came to symbolize the bigotry and intolerance directed at immigrants and dissenters in America, and millions of people in the U.S. and around the world protested on their behalf. Decades later, the story continues to have great resonance, as America once again grapples with issues of civil liberties and the rights of immigrants. Prison letters written by the defendants are read by Tony Shalhoub as Sacco and John Turturro as Vanzetti. Interviewees include Howard Zinn, Studs Terkel and Arlo Guthrie.

Show Reception

Friday, October 4; 6:30 to 8:30pm

@ West End Museum

Cost: FREE

Tour the exhibit and enjoy light refreshments.

Film: *The Boston Strangler*

Thursday, October 29; 6:30pm

@ West End Museum

Cost: FREE

Preregistration required at thewestendmuseum.org/whats_on/event-registration

The Boston Strangler brutally murdered 11 women in the Boston area over an 18-month period in the early 1960s. Most of the victims were also sexually assaulted. In 1967, while being held for unrelated rape charges, Albert DeSalvo confessed to killing 13 women, but his confession was ruled inadmissible and he was never charged. In 1973, while serving a life sentence for the unrelated sexual assault charges, another inmate stabbed DeSalvo to death. As of the release of this film, the Boston Strangler case remained open. (In July 2013, DNA evidence proved with near certainty that DeSalvo raped and killed the final Boston Strangler victim, Mary Sullivan, and the case is now widely considered solved.)

Film: *Murder at Harvard*

Wednesday, November 13; 6:30pm

@ West End Museum

Cost: FREE

Preregistration required at thewestendmuseum.org/whats_on/event-registration

In November 1849, Dr. George Parkman, one of Boston's richest citizens, suddenly disappeared. The police conducted an extensive search of the city and dredged the Charles River. Parkman had last been seen walking towards the Harvard Medical College. The School janitor, Ephraim Littlefield, who had a suspicion where Parkman might be found, spent two grueling nights tunneling beneath the basement laboratory of chemistry professor John Webster. What he discovered horrified Boston and led to one of the most sensational trials in American history.

Inspired by a book by historian Simon Schama, *Murder at Harvard* (A PBS American Experience production) uses a combination of film-noir drama and present-day documentary footage to tell the true tale of one of the most notorious American crimes of the 19th century. Grappling with frustrating gaps in the historical record, Schama assumes the role of a time-travelling detective who takes an unusual step for an historian and imagines how certain scenes and encounters might have played out.