

Who Remembers...The Paul Revere Sign?

UPDATE: The Paul Revere sign was sold by the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) for \$5,000 and will be shipped to Boston – likely never to ride again over New Bedford.

Here is another installment in our *Who Remembers?* series. You can browse previous articles by using the search bar on the right or by clicking **here**. These articles are strolls down memory lane. In some cases the buildings, but new businesses have replaced them. In other instances, the buildings or even the properties have been razed. Instead of a building, it may be a TV show, personality, or commercial that no one longer exists. Either way, it can't stop us from taking the Memory Lane stroll!

As always we would rather this be a discussion. No one knows this area better than those who grew up here! Please, leave constructive criticism, feedback, and corrections. We'd love to hear your anecdotes. Please share!

The old cliché “You don't know what you got 'till it's gone.” applies when the topic of the iconic Paul Revere sign is brought up. When the sign was up, it was part of the “furniture.” One would barely notice it outside of occasionally glancing for a passing moment as you sped down I-195. It simply was a big part of our daily lives, but it was a gentle reminder of the history of the region, and even the nation.

But boy, oh boy when news spread that the sign was going to be taken down it raised quite a fuss. Folks wanted to donate money, start fundraising campaigns, and contributed many ideas – both good and bad ones – on what to do. Albeit, there were

some who were happy to see it go – like those who lived near the neon sign and had to cope with the lights entering their bedrooms while sleeping.

The five colored copper sign was comprised of a thousand feet of neon in 126 sections, 200 sections of which created an illusion that the horse's legs were moving. The 25 foot high, 44 foot wide sign was originally erected atop the roof of North Front Street's Revere Copper and Brass building – a company founded by Paul Revere himself in 1801.

In the 1970s the sign started deteriorating and the neon legs got to the point that they simply no longer "galloped." The sign continued to be neglected and fall into disrepair before finally being taken down in 1994.

The City of New Bedford along with the Waterfront Historic Area LEague and New Bedford Vocational Technical High School combined efforts and took up the project along many others. In 1998, using their own funds and those collected from a fundraiser, they managed to restore the sign as best as possible to its former glory for approximately \$75,000. The sign was, of course, erected where most of us remember on Route 195 a full 60 feet in the air.

There it stood as a symbol of welcome to South Coasters returning home from short or long trips. "You're back!" From 1998 through 2010 it stood as such a beacon, but the New England weather and father time were not kind to it. Its location, particularly its height, made its regular upkeep incredibly difficult. While the framework itself was solid and could continue to be used, the sign itself fell into such a state of disrepair that the city declared it a public safety hazard and were quite concerned that it would actually topple over.

The community in general crawled out of the woodwork and made it known that they didn't want to see it go. Repair was

considered, but estimates between \$200,000-\$500,000 priced it out of the range of feasibility. The city kept up hope that funds could be raised again to repair the sign, but because of the possibility of it toppling, they decided to store it in the interim.

In May of 2013, Councillor Brian Gomes, made a valiant effort to retain the sign. At a city council meeting he suggested that the sign be placed on the Elm Street Garage with a "Welcome to New Bedford" sign and in its original place something functional:

"...even if [it] is by renting a billboard through our Office of Marketing and Tourism, in order to capture the traffic heading east on Route 195 towards the Cape, in order to inform motorists of the attractions available in the City and of their locations, so that the thousands of cars that pass by will not do so without noticing that the City of New Bedford is here and alive."

Since enough funds were not raised, the sign was dismantled on June 3rd, 2014 and placed on flatbed trucks. It was then hauled to an undisclosed location because of fear that it would be a target for salvage thieves.

The sign was like an old friend and seeing it taken down was a shame. Who or what is there to welcome us back when we return? Should we put some symbol of New Bedford there? A white whale for the whaling city? Instead of hearkening to the past, perhaps one that represents the future – where we're going?

Where are we going?