



## Shops, parks and a Kennedy

By Paul Restuccia

Friday, December 10, 2004

Oak Square gets its name from the Great White Oak that graced the intersection of Washington and Faneuil streets until 1855.

Once the state's largest oak, the tree was 30 feet wide at its base.

Today, a grassy common - enclosed by a wrought-iron fence and crowned with a large clock - sits where the tree once stood.

The park is ringed by a new YMCA building, a stately firehouse, a library branch and the Our Lady of Presentation School up a small hill. (Hills surround Oak Street's commercial area on three sides.)

Stores along Washington Street lack nearby Brighton Center's variety. But many Oak Square shops - which sell sandwiches, rent videos and provide other goods - have storefronts recently renovated under the city's "Main Streets" program.

Two months ago, Desi Manou opened "Agora," a gourmet-food shop that features Mediterranean fare.

Manou, who lives in nearby Watertown, admits she felt "kind of iffy" about Oak Square as a location for a gourmet store.

But her reasonable rent allows Manou to offer international brands at local prices. For instance, she sells jars of imported preserves for \$2 - about half of what in-town, upscale shops charge.

"I'm doing really well," Manou said. "People stop in here on their way to work in town or along Route 128 to buy . . . coffee, Greek (pastries) and lunch to take with them."

On nearby Bigelow Hill, the brother of Peter Faneuil (who built Faneuil Hall), once owned a 70-acre estate.

But today, Bigelow Street's most famous resident is Joseph Kennedy III, the former congressman.

"Oak Square is a terrific place to live," Kennedy said. "We've got families, big trees, quiet streets and even some wildlife roaming around the back yards. But best of all, we've got great neighbors who watch out for one another."

Bill "Red" Corcoran has owned a single-family home near Kennedy's place since 1957.

The retired **MBTA** worker paid \$18,000 for a property that he could probably sell for at least \$425,000 today.

But Corcoran has no plans to leave the neighborhood where he raised four children, who all went to the local Catholic grammar school. The school will remain open until at least next year, although the Our Lady of Presentation Church next door recently closed.

"The church closing was hard, but Oak Square is still a great place to live," Corcoran said. "The gentry have moved in, but they're nice people."

Bigelow Street has seen a lot of real estate activity recently, with six house sales in the past six months.

Buyers range from a longtime local renter to two married psychiatrists and their 7-year-old child, who relocated from New York City.

The neighborhood remains a mixture of longtime residents and newcomers.

"Oak Square is the kind of place that if you don't move out when you're young, you tend to stay," said Scott Kahn, 31-year-old assistant manager of The Last Drop, which he calls "the quintessential neighborhood bar."

Kahn has rented in the neighborhood for six years.

"I'd like to buy, but the prices are ridiculous," he said, noting that a bungalow near his apartment recently listed for \$560,000.

Charles Vasiliades, a longtime neighborhood activist who works as a state housing specialist, also worries about Oak Square's high housing costs.

"It's getting harder for regular people to buy here," he said.

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