Revisiting Auto Row

BU BUILDINGS TELL TALES OF BOSTON’S ORIGINAL AUTO MILE

BY PATRICK L. KENNEDY

ONCE UPON A TIME, more than 100 auto dealerships, car repair shops, and retailers selling parts and accessories lined a mile-long stretch of road that slices through what is now BU’s Charles River Campus. Downtown Boston had its “Piano Row” and its “Newspaper Row.” And for the first half of the 20th century, Comm Ave from Kenmore Square to Packard’s Corner was the city’s “Automobile Row.” Look carefully, and you can still see vestiges
of the area’s former life, many of them ensconced in buildings now owned by BU. The scallop shell, which looks suspiciously like the Shell Oil logo, sculpted into the facade of the BU Academy. The miniature mechanics and motorists that gaze down at student artwork from pillars in the College of Fine Arts. On almost every block of the Charles River Campus, an astute observer can find traces of its automotive past.
THE PRINCE OF PACKARD’S CORNER

It began with Alvan T. Fuller. Born in 1878, Fuller was a champion bicycle racer who at age 17 opened a bike shop in his hometown of Malden, Mass. After the turn of the century, he decided to bank on a more expensive form of transportation: automobiles. Fuller persuaded the Detroit-based Packard Motor Car Company to name him its exclusive dealer in the Boston area.

By 1908, Fuller anticipated that the motorcar business would soon outgrow the confines of central city locations such as his stall in the Motor Mart in Boston’s Park Square. The young entrepreneur thought the business might move westward. After decades that saw luxury homes rise in the Back Bay and Brookline’s Cottage Farm district, development had stalled on Comm Ave west of Kenmore Square. Fuller cast his eye on large unbuilt tracts that were close to downtown and accessible by trolley.

The site he chose for his grand new Packard dealership was a section of Brighton coincidentally named Packard’s Corner—after the nearby horse stable and riding school run by one John D. Packard. “Fuller may have been tempted to the neighborhood because of the name,” says William P. Marchione, a member of the Brighton-Allston Historical Society and author of four books about Boston.

Designed by architect Albert Kahn, the building Fuller erected at 1079–1089 Commonwealth Avenue—now home to condominiums as well as Supercuts and other businesses at street level—was New England’s first combined auto salesroom and service station. It included assembly, storage, and repair facilities, as well as offices.

The building’s showpiece, however, was its showroom, designed to appeal to the kind of high-end customers who could afford the $5,000 for a new Packard. “Fuller’s handsomely furnished showroom had high ceilings and fluted columns, and was lit by a combination of elaborate hanging fixtures and a barrel-vaulted skylight,” writes Marchione in Allston-Brighton in Transition: From Cattle Town to Streetcar Suburb.

At that time, any automobile was a luxury few could afford. Often called a touring car, the Packard was something to be taken out for Sunday spins on “pleasure roads” in the country, not driven to Buffalo to see one’s aunt (that’s what the train was for) or to work (trolley lines connected most suburbs to the city). Fuller’s typical buyer was either wealthy, a committed gearhead hobbyist (considerable assembly was required after purchase), or some combination thereof.

As the number of potential customers grew in the second decade of the century, other dealers followed Fuller to Packard’s Corner and the vicinity, where big open spaces afforded spacious showrooms that were ornate by today’s standards. “These buildings required large expanses of well-lighted garage space and display areas, and floors capable of supporting heavy loads,” writes Nancy Salzman in Buildings & Builders: An Architectural History of Boston University. “Their facades were often embellished with vigorous and distinctive designs.”

From 1910 to 1920, at least a dozen dealerships opened on Commonwealth and Brighton Avenues, selling models of Auburn, Rolls-Royce, Hupmobile, Pierce-Arrow, Clark-Crowley, and other brands.

As it turns out, Alvan Fuller did more than open...
the first of many car dealerships; he sparked an enduring and nationwide promotional trend. Because people didn’t drive in the winter, Fuller figured that by late February motorists were ready to check out the year’s new Packards. By 1917, the car salesman had begun hosting an annual “open house” on George Washington’s birthday, February 22. Other dealers followed suit, offering their own sales and hiring bands and serving cherry pies. “It was a carnival atmosphere on Comm Ave,” says Edward Ellis, whose family owned an auto accessories store on Comm Ave for decades (see sidebar, page 28).

Such innovative marketing helped make Fuller one of the richest men in America, and in 1924, after serving eight years in the state legislature, he won the race for governor, defeating the legendary James Michael Curley.

HALLMARKS OF THE HALCYON DAYS
On the eve of the Roaring Twenties, the Noyes Buick building was built at 855 Commonwealth Avenue, today home of the College of Fine Arts. The building featured enormous arched windows (now filled in) looking into a showroom with a vaulted, Romanesque ceiling and Corinthian columns. This showroom is now CFA’s Stone Gallery, and visitors who look up at the top of the columns will notice gargoyle-like mechanics with wrenches and motorists in caps and goggles.

Automobile Row continued its expansion over the next decade, and by 1929, there were 117 car dealerships, garages, and other auto-related businesses on both sides of Commonwealth Avenue and spilling onto Brighton Avenue. And Fuller was still at it. More than 20 years after he opened his Packard complex, he built an imposing Cadillac-Oldsmobile dealership at 808 Commonwealth Avenue—today CFA’s 808 Gallery—across from the BU Bridge (then the Cottage Farm Bridge).

The opulent space, also designed by Albert Kahn, was initially derided as Fuller’s Folly, but combining sales of the luxury Cadillac brand and the workingman’s Oldsmobile turned out to be good for business. Mark Lande, a salesman at Herb Chambers BMW, one of Comm Ave’s few remaining dealerships, remembers Fuller’s business in its later decades: “The shiny red Cadillac Eldorado, rotating on a turntable, caught everyone’s attention,” he recalls. “But most people purchased the affordable Oldsmobile.”

In the second half of the 20th century, BU bought and repurposed many of the old dealerships. The College of Communication took over 640 Commonwealth Avenue, where Nash vehicles had been sold for three decades.

Today, the vault at 808 Comm Ave that held Fuller’s Caddy and Olds revenues is the office of Daniel LeClair, a Metropolitan College professor, and the grand street-level showroom displays the artwork of students and faculty. A concrete ramp inside the building still makes it possible to drive all the way up to the fifth floor.

An auto showroom owned by a former crony of pyramid-scheme swindler Charles Ponzi occupied the building at 830–844 Commonwealth

WEB EXTRA Watch a video of a tour down Comm Ave, from Packard’s Corner to Kenmore Square, and learn why it was once considered Boston’s “Automobile Row,” at bu.edu/bostonia.

IN 1929, THERE WERE 117 AUTO-RELATED BUSINESSES ON COMM AVE.

TREND-SETTER
Alvan T. Fuller opened the first of many car dealerships on Comm Ave.
Remembering the Rim Man
A LOOK BACK AT A VANISHED CAMPUS LANDMARK

BY PATRICK L. KENNEDY

The Rim Man sign is now the MATCH Charter Public School.

THE RIM MAN,” it proclaimed, in 3-D block letters that evoked a comic-book superhero. Rising almost 70 feet from the roof, the three-sided steel sign served as the western bookend to Boston’s Auto Row, while Kenmore Square’s famous Citgo sign marked its eastern margin.

Visible from the Massachusetts Turnpike, the Ellis sign could be seen in the background in The Thomas Crown Affair, the 1968 original starring Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway (CFA’62), as well as in several episodes of TV’s Spenser: For Hire, which was based on characters created by the late Robert B. Parker (GRS’57,’71). It was a “navigational and emotional landmark in our city,” wrote Emily Hiestand (GRS’88) in a 2001 Bostonia article.

Until 2001, when Edward Ellis sold the building and retired, the store’s windows attracted passers-by with the latest auto accessories. “My dad was way ahead of his time,” Ellis says. “He was very good at display—I mean, most auto parts stores even today are dark and dingy.”

Today, of course, seat belts are mandated by law, and items like side-view mirrors, air conditioners, and radios are standard. But for much of the 20th century, such things were considered frills, to be purchased separately from Ellis the Rim Man and similar (if less eye-catching) stores.

“Radios were a big accessory,” says Ellis. “First it was just AM, then AM/FM, then somebody had a great idea: a rear-seat speaker, and that was exciting for a while.”

Ellis, Inc., was considered the largest and highest-profile automobile parts and accessories distributor, wholesaler, and retailer in the area, and it was patronized by local sports celebrities, including Bill Russell (Hon.’02) and Sam Jones of the Celtics and George Scott of the Red Sox.

As car manufacturers began including AC units, mirrors, and other former accessories, Ellis adapted by catering to truck owners (who are more apt to add things like caps and custom wheels) and to those young men who relish turning their cars into rolling sound systems. The store also did a brisk business in novelty items.

“If anybody remembers Esso, later Exxon, now ExxonMobil, they had a promotion: Put a Tiger in Your Tank,” Ellis explains. “So some of our novelty dealers came up with a simulated tiger tail with an elastic band, so you could take off your gas cap, slip this over the top of the pipe, and put the cap back on, so it would appear that you really did have a tiger in your tank, and his tail was hanging out. And later, in the ’80s and ’90s, we sold the neon that would be installed underneath your car or motorcycle to give it an eerie, outer-space-type look.

“Anything people wanted,” he says, “we would try to have.”

Today, when people look through the windows at 1001 Comm Ave, they see a classroom filled with teenagers. The MATCH Charter Public School focuses on preparing students to not only enroll, but succeed, in college. The school requires students to take two BU courses to graduate.

And it strongly discourages fisticuffs with the faculty.

WEB EXTRA
Edward Ellis discusses his former auto accessories shop, Ellis the Rim Man, at bu.edu/bostonia.
Avenue, which now houses BU’s Photographic Resource Center and Sicilia’s Pizzeria. Up the street at 860 Comm Ave was a Pontiac dealership, now the East Coast Alpine block.

Diagonally across Comm Ave from 808 is the BU Academy, nestled in the 785 Comm Ave building that used to be the New England headquarters of the Shell Oil Company. In addition to the seashells and other aquatic symbols carved into the building’s facade, there was once a 68-foot-tall neon Shell logo looming from its roof. The sign now lives across the river in Cambridge, at a Shell station on Memorial Drive. The Shell building served for a time as a General Tire outlet, before housing BU’s College of General Education, Sargent College, and finally, the BU Academy.

END OF THE ROAD
The Depression was hard on the auto industry. On Boston’s Automobile Row, it closed a third of the 117 auto-related businesses, but the district survived, with at least 54 dealerships and many related businesses soldiering on.

In the postwar 1950s, the federally built interstate highway system boosted auto sales, and Auto Row enjoyed another peak. But, thanks to the G.I. Bill, something else was skyrocketing in this period: college enrollment. Boston University, scattered across several buildings downtown, had secured the tract of land west of Granby Street and north of Comm Ave three decades earlier. After World War II, BU began to consolidate on the Charles River Campus.

Meanwhile, as families moved to the suburbs, car dealers followed—setting up shop in places like Norwood’s Route 1 Auto Mile. By 1975, there were only 21 dealerships on Comm Ave, and by 1981, just 11. Today there are but three in the neighborhood, all Herb Chambers stores, and all beyond Packard’s Corner.

Change has been a constant for the transportation landscape on this stretch of Commonwealth Avenue. Horse-drawn buggies gave way to electrified trolleys, which had to share the road with automobiles.

From an environmental perspective, some welcome changes have arrived in the past few years. A joint beautification initiative of BU and the city of Boston widened the sidewalks and planted trees, and the addition of a bike lane and a Hubway bike-share program is encouraging cyclists to think of the road as theirs as well.

Alvan T. Fuller might appreciate the outcome: after all, he got his start selling bicycles.

Research by Robin Berghaus.