

# Israel Sack and the Lost Traders of Lowell Street

by Jeanne Schinto

Histories of the antiques trade in America never question that Boston was its birthplace more than a century ago. In these narratives, Charles Street, the vaunted antiques row at the foot of posh Beacon Hill, is acknowledged as the main stage, and Israel Sack (1883-1959) is cast as the leading man. But the reality is more complicated, we discovered on a recent visit to the special collections library in the basement below the gold-domed state capitol.

Pickers who lived in a tenement neighborhood adjacent to Charles Street played a significant role, one that hasn't been given much attention; and what has been written so far about these independent, seat-of-the-pants guys, many of them immigrants, hasn't been all that flattering. In looking through volumes of city directories we also ascertained that Sack's own history has been simplified over the years. By presenting these new facts, we do not intend to disturb the great man's legacy, only to deepen it.

When antiques profit-making enterprises bubbled up here in the 1870's, they were doing so in direct response to local collectors who had already begun gathering the "relics" of the forefathers. The Boston trade continued to be dominant through the 1920's, which is the time that the magazine *Antiques* was founded here. Then came the 1930's, when the Great Depression rained down all its grief on everyone. During that period the Boston dealers' version of a diaspora occurred. Although our Brahmin families continue to be a reliable source of fresh material for the ever-hungry trade, the city itself never again reasserted its market supremacy.

The brainy Bostonian approach to antiques collecting always was more scholarly than commercially oriented. Sometimes our earliest collectors got reprimanded for deviating from the bookish code of conduct. Francis Hill Bigelow (1859-1933), a charter member of the Walpole Society—the exclusive collector association whose founders laid its cornerstone over lunch at Boston's Union Club in 1909—was asked to resign and did so in 1929 after fellow members discovered that he had worked in secret to buy and resell early New England silver from churches and old families. Meanwhile, Sack, Philip Flayderman and his son, Benjamin, and other Boston dealers were moving from Charles Street to Manhattan. Boston may have been where they made the market, but New York is where they made their real money.

A few people who witnessed the rise and demise of the Boston-centered antiques world have left personal memoirs. Sack's eldest son, Harold (1911-2000), was too young to have seen it all firsthand; nonetheless, his *American Treasure Hunt: The Legacy of Israel Sack*, written with Max Wilk, was published in 1986. A more objective

story line can be found and followed in the advertisements and "Shop Talk" columns of vintage issues of *Antiques*. In those pages, one can chart the musical-chairs-like changes of address, the mercurial partnerships, and the marketing spins variously employed by the major players. But what of the minor players?

While seeking Charles Street reminiscences for what was supposed to be just another then-and-now retrospective, we were told again and again of the early, largely unheralded lower-echelon antiques traders of nearby Lowell Street. Its denizens, in the city's West End behind Beacon Hill, didn't place ads in magazines, much less write memoirs after they retired.

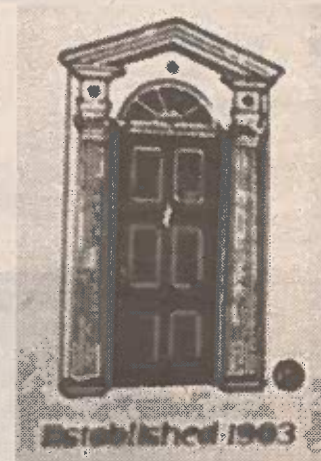
"A successful picker had to be a meld of prospector, secret agent, medicine-show salesman, and flimflam man," Harold Sack writes of them, mentioning only a couple of these seemingly stock characters by name. Joe Epstein ("probably the ugliest man I've ever met") is one. As for the other, referred to as only "Alpert," he, along with his unnamed partner, was killed when struck by a train in New Hampshire while returning home with a wagon load of antiques. "It was a devastating blow to their Lowell Street colleagues," Harold recounts, and "even those who never previously had a kind word to say for either of them joined in bemoaning their fate. Not to mention the loss of their load...."

Despite the ridicule, Harold does credit the Lowell Street pickers: "Even today, antiques dealers, as my father and his Charles Street fellows did then, rely on the picker's 'finds' as a source." A couple of pages later, however, he contradicts himself: "Not that my father relied on pickers for his source of supply." Why did Harold make a point of distancing his father from Lowell Street?

Harold's book, along with many other sources, situates Israel's first place of business on Charles Street. "The Israel Sack tradition began when Israel Sack set upon a career dealing in American Antiques in 1905 at 85 Charles Street, Boston," states the Web site for the Sack Heritage Group ([www.sackheritagegroup.com](http://www.sackheritagegroup.com)). And in *Antiques* magazine ads of the 1970's and 1980's, a line drawing of that address's fan-lit door serves as the business's logo, captioned, "Established 1905."

But in an oral history that Israel himself recorded on February 11, 1953, for the Ford Motor Company, the dealer stated that his first antiques shop was not on Charles Street. Rather, it was "right near Charles Street and Beacon Hill" (emphasis mine). "I worked up a big wholesale dealer's business in Boston," the oral history continues. "I sold, and I'd buy quantities. First I went out to a shop; a fellow had two cellars full of antiques in the lot. The pickers used to bring it in the lot and sell it by candlelight. They would go out and work in the daytime and sell in the evening. I came in, and I had a flair for good things."

Where could this shadowy place have been? We wondered if it were near the locale, similar in kind, that Harold describes in this passage: "Consider the picker's lot. Early each day, he would venture forth from his premises, some low-rent Lowell Street base-



The caption for the chair in this ad from the January 1928 issue of *Antiques* states: "Philadelphia Chippendale Chair. Originally Belonged to the Family of Arthur Middleton of Virginia; One of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. Illustrated in Lockwood's Book." The Sack firm's information

reads: "Israel Sack, 85 Charles Street, Boston, Massachusetts, Specialist in American Antiques, New York Galleries, 383 Madison Avenue." At some point in the mid-1990's, after the address had changed to the Crown Building on 730 Fifth Avenue, which it still was when the business closed its doors on January 31, 2002, a curious thing happened to the little fan-lit door icon that for decades stated "Established 1905." It got appended by a registered trademark sign © and a new caption, "Established 1903." Someone in charge of the corporate identity had taken the opportunity to change the business's age to the same year that Sack arrived in Boston after sailing from Liverpool on the steamship *Etruria* on October 1.

ment, a dingy and dank headquarters lit by candles...."

In 1903, when the 20-year-old Sack got to Boston, having left Lithuania the previous year and worked in a London cabinet shop to earn passage to America, Lowell Street and all of the West End was becoming peopled by his Jewish immigrant counterparts. They were moving there en masse from Boston's North End, which was in turn being taken over by Italians. In the 1920's and 1930's, much of the Jewish population moved again, to Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, where Sack had lived as a married man. But where had he lived before he'd had a wife and sons?

We tried to locate Lowell Street on a map. We couldn't. When the entire West End was unceremoniously bulldozed in the late 1950's, during our country's urban-renewal heyday, all the narrow, European-style thoroughfares of the neighborhood were erased, never redrawn. New streets were mapped and named when the mammoth structures of today's Government Center rose up. "Except for the Old West Church, the first Harrison Gray Otis House, Saint Joseph's Church, the Massachusetts General Hospital, and the Charles Street Jail, nothing else in the entire 52-acre neighborhood was left standing," historian Thomas H. O'Connor asserts in his 1993 book, *Building a New Boston: Politics and Urban Renewal 1950-1970*.

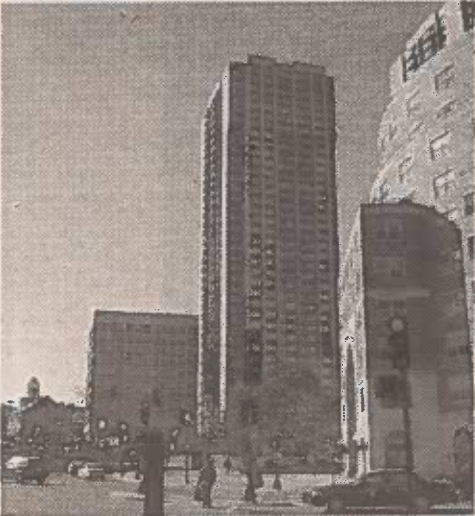
We decided to trace Sack's path from 1903 onward in the library's city directories. In Harold's book, in the Ford archives' oral history, and elsewhere, that year is always cited as Israel's date of arrival in the United States. It is also the same year he was said to have begun to work as a cabinetmaker for a man thus far identified only as "Mr. Stephenson." We did find a William P. Stephenson, cabinetmaker, 73A Brimmer Street, on Beacon Hill, whose home address was 10 Hartland Street in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood. In the same volume we found no listing for Sack, but according to the oral history, he hadn't arrived in the United States until October, no doubt too late for inclusion.

In 1904 William P. Stephenson's business was listed again, now at 51 Charles Street. Still no sign of Sack. In 1905 Mr. Stephenson listed no place of business, only his home address, and Sack was still

flying under the radar. Then, in 1906, Sack's first mention appears, along with his first listed business location: "Sack Israel (Tishler & Sack) cabinetmaker, 50 Charles," right across the street from Mr. Stephenson. His home address was listed as "99 do," the "do" ("ditto," according to the legend in the front of the directory) meaning that he lived at 99 Charles Street, just a few blocks from the shop.

The listing verified one fact—that he did not yet consider himself an antiques dealer—and it unearthed another—that he had a partner, Samuel Tishler, the only cabinetmaker with that surname in the directory for that year; he is listed as both working and residing at 42 Grove Street, Beacon Hill.

The business Tishler & Sack was listed again in 1907, this time at 83 Charles Street, and in 1908 at 85 Charles Street. Meanwhile, Sack changed his home address from 99 Charles Street to 31 Anderson Street, Beacon Hill, and then to 100 Myrtle Street, Beacon Hill. In 1909 Sack is listed for the first time alone, without a partner, again at 85 Charles Street, the storied place where he would do business in one form or another for many years. Significantly, his home address in 1909 was 30 Chambers Street, in Boston's West End, and he was still



The scene today: West End high-rises with the Old West Church dwarfed on the left. In contrast, the North End of Boston did not get bulldozed by urban renewal and has retained its quaint, narrow streets, its brick architecture of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and its little shops. It's a high-rent district now, an upscale destination for tourists. The West End eventually could have flourished too. Instead, the opportunity was lost.

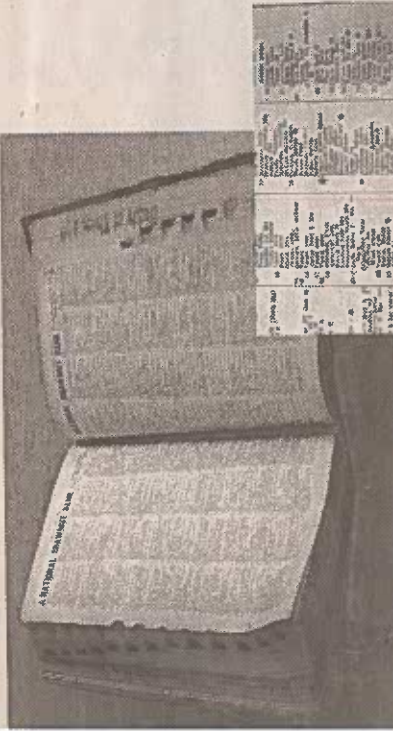


A government building looms where a neighborhood filled with antiques shops used to be. The banner on the light pole reads "Boston West End."



This is how 85 Charles Street, the site of Israel Sack's former shop, looks today. Note the blacked-out fanlight above the door. A real-estate company is the current occupant of the storefront, with residences on upper floors.

## FEATURE



Boston city directories in the State Library of Massachusetts go all the way back to the 1840's. They are a treasure trove for anyone interested in researching business histories, but be sure to bring your magnifying glass for the tiny print.

calling himself a cabinetmaker.

Not that there were many people calling themselves antiques dealers at the time. In 1905, under "Antique Goods," there was a single listing, "The Antique Shop, 390 Boylston," a street south of Boston Common. The Antique Shop's proprietor, Frederick Forehand, also placed an ad in the directory. "Antique Furniture and Historical China," it read. "Pewter, Brasses, Copper, Bric-a-brac, and Exclusive Foreign Novelties in Antiques."

The antique goods list grew longer in the directories published over the next few years, as did the list for antique furniture. People all over the city, not just on Charles Street, were entering the business. These dealers included James R. Jones of 183 Massachusetts Avenue and Mrs. Emma J. Call of 204 Huntington Avenue. But not yet Israel Sack.

In the 1910 directory we found in those antiques sections; it was for David A. Jacobs at No. 9. Harold's book mentions "such rough-and-ready types as 'Red' Jacobs, a wholesaler." It was Harold's claim that actual fist fights took place between Jacobs and Ben Flayderman, "over who was entitled to such-and-such particular antique piece which had emerged on the market."

In 1915 Jacobs was doing business not only at 9 Lowell Street, but also at 261 Dartmouth Street, in Boston's Back Bay. The following year, he added 147 Charles Street and 70 Harvard Street in Dorchester, having abandoned Lowell Street and the West End. In that same year, Mr. Stephenson was no longer listing himself as a cabinetmaker; he was now a seller of "antique goods" at 375 Boylston Street. When did Sack finally identify himself as an antiques dealer? This occurred, at least according

Inn, see its Web site [www.wayside.org](http://www.wayside.org).) Their relationship progressed from there. "After the inn it was free-for-all," is how he put it in the oral history. Ford bought from Sack, notably for Greenfield Village (now The Henry Ford), until 1930. By then, Sack had locations in Boston and New York City.

During that bullish time before Black Friday, Sack also opened the King Hooper Shop at 73 Chestnut Street, on a side street off Charles Street. Louis D. Prince occupied that space in later decades. Stephen Score does business at that address today.

Correspondence in the archives of Historic New England (formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities) shows that during that time Sack also angered SPNEA's founder, William S. Appleton, for buying The Lindens, the former Robert "King" Hooper residence in Danvers, Massachusetts, with another Charles Street dealer, Leon David. They sold the parlor of the house to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Kansas City, Missouri, and the rest of the house to George Maurice Morris and his wife, Miriam, who moved it to Washington, D.C. The Appleton letters are bristling, their writer clearly incensed at the removals, considering them to be an assault on American antiquarian values. Sack and colleague David were, needless to say, *persona non gratae* in some New England circles thereafter. New York must have seemed a much more hospitable place.

During the Great Depression, however, Sack retreated to Boston from Manhattan. The business was in collapse, near ruin. Certainly the Lowell Street pickers were having no easy time of it either. They must have come around with pieces for him to buy, and returned hapless to their tentements. Then *Antiques* report- ed in its January 1934 issue: "Demonstrations of increasing optimism among important dealers are daily manifested. For example, I. Sack, who closed his New York shop approximately a year ago and retired to his well-known Charles Street castle in Boston, plans to establish new headquarters at 422 Madison Avenue, near 48 Street." He announced the opening two months later, in *Antiques*, March 1934, having left Boston forever.

After World War II, there was a surge of antiques activity on Lowell Street, with dozens of businesses coming and going, including that of Hyman Webber,



Sack also occupied 89 Charles Street at one time. Here it is today, home of Elegant Findings Antiques, with a sliver of No. 85 visible to the right.

at 20 Lowell Street, father of the late Robert Webber and grandfather of Harvey Webber, who is today a dealer and auctioneer based in Hampton, New Hampshire. A look at the street list for 1946 shows these businesses active:

No. 10 Lowell-St. Antique Shop  
No. 12 Bernhardt Abr antiques  
No. 14 Narefsky Morris antiques  
No. 15 Lampert Morris antiques  
No. 16 Fine Richd R antiques  
No. 19 Schwartz Lewis antiques  
No. 20 Touber Maxwell antiques  
No. 21 Gropman Harry antiques  
No. 23 Rutnam Jacob antiques  
No. 27 Village Antique Shop  
No. 29 Gray Richd antiques  
No. 33 Cohen Abr antiques  
No. 37 Gott Paul M antiques  
No. 41 Williams Pearl E antiques

No. 54 Fellows Karl A antiques  
No. 55 Sam's Antiques Shop  
No. 58 Sheffield Antique Shop  
No. 60 Catlin Esther T Mrs antiques  
No. 67 Wernick Saml antiques  
No. 91 Atlantic Junk Co.

But urban renewal was coming, and the directories of the 1950's document the fall. Gradually, Lowell Street started to shrink, with more and more numbers "vacant."

On May 4, 1959, while the West End demolition was taking place, Israel Sack died. His eulogy was delivered by Rabbi George B. Lieberman of Central Synagogue, Rockville Centre, New York. On the inside front cover of the June 1959 issue of

*Antiques*, where the Israel Sack ad was usually found in those years, excerpts from the rabbi's tribute were reprinted. "His career is really a part of the American saga," the rabbi said. "Here was an immigrant youth, coming from distant Lithuania, and becoming an authority on things distinctly American. To use a popular phrase nowadays: it could happen only in America."

The photos show the businesses occupying Sack's former addresses on Charles Street today. One happens to be an antiques gallery, but as part of the national trend, many dealers there have closed their storefronts or threaten to do so. To cite one example, Euro Exports (now Savenkov Gallery) left 70 Charles Street for Midlothian, Virginia, in 2005, and a Bodyworks Studios™ moved in. We don't know whether to be happy or sad that by 2006, the Pilates and Gyrotonic® instructors were gone, replaced by a combination contemporary art gallery, jewelry store, and "luxury accessories" shop, called Tesorino, whose proprietor, 25-year-old Laura Jane Littlechild, said she is definitely not moving soon. After all, she has a three-year lease.

There is still a lot of scholarly work to be done on the origins of the antiques business. It is an endeavor made more difficult by dealers' traditionally secretive nature. If anyone has good, primary source materials documenting any of the early players anywhere, especially the pickers, we would love to hear from you via mail (53 Poor Street, Andover, MA 01810) or e-mail <[poorstreet@comcast.net](mailto:poorstreet@comcast.net)>.



In the 1920's I. Sack Cabinet Hardware Company used to occupy this space at 91 Charles Street. The current business at street level is a nail studio. Apartments are rented out on the upper floors.



The entryway to 70 Charles Street, former home of Euro Exports, whose space is now occupied by Tesorino, a purveyor of contemporary art, jewelry, and luxury goods. Regency Antiques continues to do business at that same address. So does Café Vanille. These rentals are all within the structure that is the historic Charles Street Meeting House, shown in the other view. It was built in 1804, when today's antiques were new.



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