

Parkman Murder Tours combines grisly history and pop technology

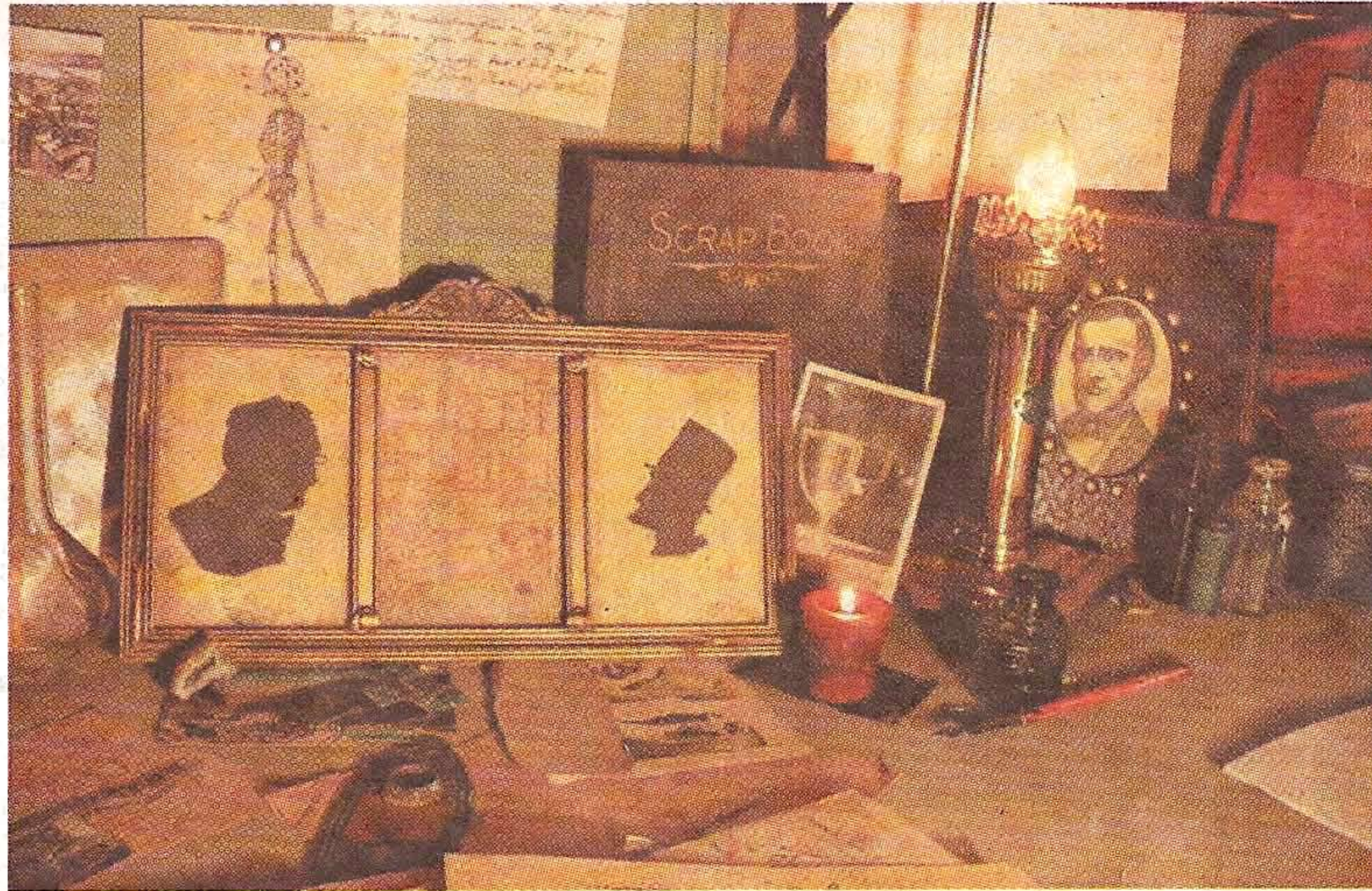
By Sarah Phelan

The grisly remains of a wealthy doctor interested in the welfare of the insane; the associated debts of a suspected professor, merely “tolerated” at his tenured alma mater, who was desperate to maintain appearances as his daughters reached the debutante age in a well-mannered society; the grim curiosity of a janitor who sold cadavers to the university professors for pocket money – it sounds like the opening teaser to a fantastic episode of CSI: Somewhere in the 1840’s.

But in fact, this is the story of an 1849 Boston murder of Dr. George Parkman as it unfolds today to the participants of Untravel Media’s onsite participation tour. The drama travels through a mile-long path in Beacon Hill. Eight interactive “stops” direct the tour from the “obscure remains of the... Harvard Medical College... on the Massachusetts General Hospital campus...to Parkman’s house,” a mansion on Walnut Street.

The “stops” engage the tour participations in onsite games, puzzles, and even a pop-up book to create a unique experience that bridges the gap between the oft-hypnotic pull of hand-held technology and the more public connections that can be shared in hands-on activities.

Called by its creators as “part movie, part stroll, and part participatory theater,” the Parkman Murder Tour is the product of a cooperative grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. “The grant was established for re-purposing the PBS American Experience documen-



Clues to the Parkman Murder as shown on the web site www.parkmanmurder.com.

tary, ‘Murder at Harvard’ from 2003,” explains Michael Epstein, CEO of Untravel Media, a Boston-based mobile media and software company that has created the free “tour guide” iPhone application, as well as the podcast and web version. It became a “...transmedia extension of the original film” from Spy Pond Productions, an Arlington historical documentary company. “Murder at Harvard” was produced in association with the Center for Independent Documentary (CID).

The tour, however, took the cooperation of many more Beacon Hill neighbors. As part of the tour of a murder that took place in their historically Brahmin backyard, local businesses and retailers seemed eager to house some of the

eerie “evidence” that would help to prove the story of the Parkman-Webster crime.

The Liberty Hotel, the former site of the Charles Street Jail, agreed to be involved because the story “...is loosely tied to our address,” informs Sean Reardon, Director of Sales and Marketing for the hotel, “...the Parkman family owned the land on which our building sits.” The tour narrator tells where to go in the hotel, guiding the participants to ask for an actual board game dealing with issues of morality leading to clues that further reveal the story.

“Black Ink,” reveals Epstein speaking of a unique card and stationary store at 101 Charles Street, “houses some indicative clues among their stamps.” At

Blackstone’s gift shop, owner Mark Duffield explains that the “evil architecture” involved in the murder is illustrated in “a pop up book with secret panels that reveal clues that we keep by the register.” Other businesses and associations who are housing ‘evidence’ include The Harvard Musical Association, MGH and the Appalachian Mountain Club.

“When we first approached the businesses with the idea, they really had no idea what we were asking for,” laughs Epstein. Still, most of the associated businesses credit Epstein with the reason they decided to get involved, “We were interested in working with Michael based on the quality of his work,” Reardon clarifies. Duffield even expressed how this participation

has led to exposure to new customers, “People who have never been in Blackstone’s have taken the tour and then purchased something from us, it’s been a win-win situation.”

As one of his first requests, Charles Dickens, on his visit to Boston in 1867, asked to be brought to the room where Parkman had been murdered. Attaching up-to-the-minute technology to a 160 year-old murder mystery seems to draw in the imagination of today’s young participants as well. Epstein recalls one young tour-taker telling him about how history had always seemed to bore her, “...but being able to touch things, and play games, she said that she was able to ‘walk herself right into the story.’ She even said that this would be something she would like to do with her parents.” Now that’s connecting to history.

The Parkman Murder Tour is available for free download at the Mac App store from an iPhone or you can find links to the podcast or take an armchair journey from your laptop at <http://www.parkmanmurder.com>.

Untravel Media hopes to expand on this technology that involves the user with their surroundings rather than disconnecting them from it, by creating a national project in several different cities across the country. They are even currently working on a way that tourists can “create their own” tour by including content - photos and tags - from their own iPhones and mobile devices. For more information on Untravel Media and their upcoming projects, visit their website at <http://www.untravelmedia.com/>.