

# The Boston Globe

## The hands of time are almost still in Watch Hill

By **Christopher Muther** Globe Staff, May 15, 2019, 2:00 p.m.



Ocean House reopened in 2010 after the original, built in 1868, was razed in the early 2000s. (CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF)

WATCH HILL, Rhode Island – A rather dour, weepy, and ill-tempered Greek philosopher named Heraclitus talked a lot about the fluid nature of life. He said things like, “No man ever steps in the same river twice,” and “Change is the only constant in life.”

I’m usually not one to argue with pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, but perhaps if Heraclitus were with me in Watch Hill on a recent brilliantly warm and sunny afternoon he would have philosophized differently.

I strolled into the [Candy Box](#), a little jewel of a shop located a shell’s throw from the beach. What I saw nearly floored me.

The interior of the Candy Box was unchanged since my childhood. The pink gingham ruffles that adorned the shelves when [Captain & Tennille](#) ruled the airwaves were still there, along with all of that delicious, multicolored saltwater taffy. I flashed back to my boyhood tantrums that ultimately ended with my parents purchasing Pez dispensers to shut me up.

On another shelf I saw a box of Honees, which was my sister's candy of choice. I think the Candy Box may be the only place I've ever seen Honees.

So, I'm sorry Heraclitus, change is not the only constant in Watch Hill, a village of Westerly that is located in the southwestern-most corner of Rhode Island. Sure, there have been *some* changes: There's now a picture of Watch Hill's most famous resident, Taylor Swift, pinned to a wall in the Candy Box. Some of the stores that once sold beach-y bric-a-brac have gone slightly more upscale.

But change is not the norm here. The [Flying Horse Carousel](#), a 1876 merry-go-round that is the oldest operating carousel in the United States with horses suspended from chains, is still churning away every summer.

Near the carousel is [St. Clair Annex](#), a sandwich and ice cream shop that has been in business since 1887. It's where I threw tantrums until my parents bought me peppermint stick ice cream to shut me up. When I stopped in earlier this month, the ice cream was as delicious as I remembered.

Across the street, the [Olympia Tea Room](#) is still serving patrons, just as it has for the past 100 years. The statue of Indian Chief Ninigret in Bay View Park, which was created by sculptor Enid Yadell in 1914, has held fish in each of his oxidized hands for more than 100 years. The Watch Hill Lighthouse, which is a quick walk from downtown, has been around (in some form or another) since 1745.



The Watch Hill Light House dates back to 1745. (CHRISTOPHER MUTHER)

Big changes don't come to Watch Hill, and for that I'm grateful.

We didn't stay in Watch Hill when I was growing up. We were day-trippers. My parsimonious parents would instead book us a room at the Moldy Grout Motel or the Seaweed Shores Motor Inn in some nearby, downtrodden town. If you haven't gathered by now, Watch Hill is a pricey place. Did I mention Taylor Swift has an 11,000-square-foot home here, and she paid \$17 million for it?

But Watch Hill is a short drive from other, more affordable beach towns and hotels. Nearby Misquamicut (also part of Westerly) offers the [Misquamicut Beach Front Inn](#). [The Pleasant View Inn](#) is three miles from Watch Hill. There are plenty of great lodging options for day-trippers. Just over the line in Connecticut there are more hotels and B&Bs in Mystic and Stonington.

When you visit this corner of Rhode Island, make sure you factor in enough time to enjoy both Watch Hill and [Misquamicut State Beach](#). I'm convinced that Misquamicut has some of the best sand and waves in New England. It's a classic, deliciously honky-tonk little beach town.

But let me wax nostalgic again for a moment — apologies for all of this wax. When I wasn't throwing tantrums for ice cream or salt water taffy, what I really wanted was to stay at the [Ocean House in Watch Hill](#). The grand dame hotel, built in 1868, lords over the town, perched on a hill above all the well-manicured and perfectly shingled homes.

The hotel, a remnant of Watch Hill's gilded age, almost didn't survive past the 2000s. By 2003, the once posh resort had more building code violations than guests and was sold to a developer who had plans to tear it down, subdivide the 11 acres of land, and build McMansions.

Enter Chuck Royce, the billionaire president of the well-regarded eponymous small-cap mutual fund manager. He and his wife, Deborah, stepped in and bought the hotel to prevent careless development. Because it had reached such a dilapidated state, the hotel couldn't be restored. So Royce tore it down and re-created it with a nearly identical footprint. Elements that could be saved, such as doors, windows, and the stone fireplace, were incorporated into the new design. Pieces of interior and exterior architectural details, such as moldings and beadboard, were stored away and then painstakingly re-created. After several years and \$142 million, the hotel reopened in 2010.

If you're looking for a bargain, the Ocean House is not it. If you're looking for an exceptional property that combines classic New England seaside elegance with modern amenities, then this is the place. I decided to realize my boyhood dream and stay at the Ocean House. It's a total splurge (a standard off-season room starts at \$415, and during the high season a standard room starts at \$850 a night), but the staff is outstanding and the rooms are beautiful. Sitting on the grand porches or looking over the croquet field feels like stepping back in time.

Is it worth the splurge? Absolutely. My (off-season) dream of staying at the Ocean House was finally fulfilled. Can you really put a price tag on that? Well, actually you can, but let's not dwell on it.

If you can't afford the stay, I'd at least recommend trying one of its restaurants. They range from fine dining to casual seafood to a summer pop-up that serves treats like goat cheese popcorn with a side of champagne.

Royce also spent \$20 million to restore the [Weekapaug Inn](#), sister property to the Ocean House. He's invested millions more bringing downtown Westerly back to life. The town is celebrating its 350th anniversary this year, so if you want to see how dramatically downtown Westerly has changed, this is a good time to do it.

Back in Watch Hill, the changes are less obvious. New sidewalks are being poured in anticipation of the summer season. Bay Street is being repaved, and final renovations are taking place on the large summer homes that will soon be reoccupied for the season.

But on Fort Road, the gingham ruffles remain on the shelves at the Candy Box. The saltwater taffy bins have been filled and the Honees are back on the shelf. It's one of the things that makes Watch Hill so special. As Heraclitus said, change may be constant, but in this town, changes occur at a gentle, comfortable pace. Or, sometimes, not at all.