

BIKE TOURS OF CAMBRIDGE 2007

Sponsored by Cambridge Bicycle Committee
RIDE INFO: www.cambridgebikes.org



Portions of the Riverside and Cambridgeport neighborhoods from the 1865 J.G. Chase Map of the City of Cambridge.

Rescheduled from May 19th

ROLLING
through
Cambridge
Geography

from 1776 to Today

Cambridge City Hall
Central Square

The background of this section is a sepia-toned photograph of a marshy landscape with tall grasses and water in the foreground.

SATURDAY, JUNE 16TH
10:00 a.m. Start

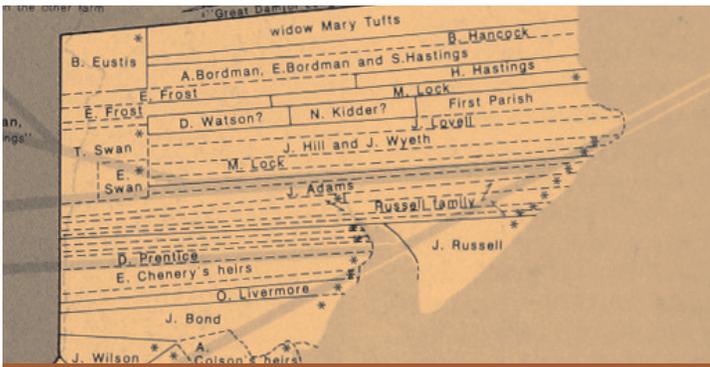


The structure and composition of Cambridge's land influenced settlement from the outset. The English did not find a wilderness of forest, but rather something like parkland since Native Americans had altered the landscape with agriculture and controlled burning. English settlers found the soil of poor quality and thus relied on grazing livestock to form the basis of Cambridge's agricultural economy. However, the geography underlying this land shaped the development of Cambridge to an even greater extent.



ride length: 12.5 miles
ride time: approx. 2 hours

Today's Cambridge looks little like the marsh-bordered grassland of 1630. These bordering marshes, the wide Charles River, and glacier-formed high ground determined the course of development in Cambridge. Many of these geographical features are evident on the relief map at City Hall where the tour begins. This map was created in 1976, depicting Cambridge in 1776 to celebrate the U.S. bicentennial. The map draws on research from the extensive stores of historical data held by the Cambridge Historical Commission who created the display.



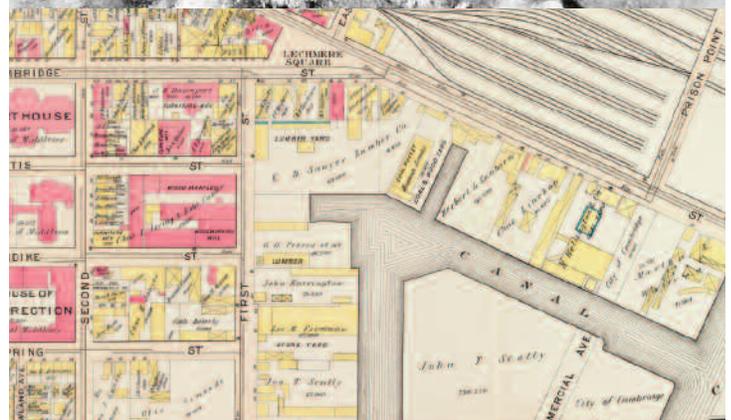
(a.) Salt marsh land ownership in East Cambridge, ca. 1759, showing the many long narrow lots.

EAST CAMBRIDGE

From City Hall, much of the ride is through former marshland. These were tidal salt marshes and actually made the high ground in East Cambridge an island at times. Marshland here was valuable, obviously not for building, but for harvesting salt hay, which was used as animal fodder and bedding. Throughout early development in the 1640s, many residents laid claim to land in this area with plots that stretched in long fingers through the marsh. (a.)

East Cambridge, where the courthouse is now located, was the highest ground in the area and was in fact a salt-marsh island. Lechmere's Point (b.) was so called after a wealthy Tory owner of the land in the 1770s and retains that name to this day. This high ground was nearly inaccessible from the rest of Cambridge, the only overland route was a path over what is now Kirkland and Washington Streets. Access to this remote piece of land was more often by water, either from Boston to the southeast or via the Millers River to the northeast which ran along the present-day Somerville-Cambridge border. The high ground, however, served colonial troops well as the site of Fort Putnam from which the final bombardment against the British was fired ending the occupation of Boston during the Revolutionary War.

Continuing along the Charles, the ride turns inland at the current Broad Canal (c.) — just north of the Longfellow Bridge — which used to extend all the way east past Third Street and serviced the industries near what is today Kendall Square. Though the Longfellow Bridge in its current form has only existed since 1906, this was the location of the first river crossing to Boston — the West Boston Bridge built in 1793. From what is now Central Square, in-bound traffic passed over Pelham's Island (high ground located near the start of present-day Main Street), and then down a mile-long, man-made causeway to the bridge itself. Increased traffic through this corridor, as well as traffic along roads leading to the competing bridge built in the 1800s off Lechmere Point, spurred the first wave of development in this section of Cambridge.



(b.) Industrial uses along the Lechmere Canal. View from vicinity of current Galleria food court looking towards Lechmere T station. The 1903 map shows the location of Sawyer Lumber Co, whose sign is in the center of the photo.



(c.) Broad Canal from the 3rd Street bridge looking away from the Charles. The building visible at the end of the canal is part of the current One Kendall Square project at the corner of Hampshire St. and Cardinal Medeiros Ave.

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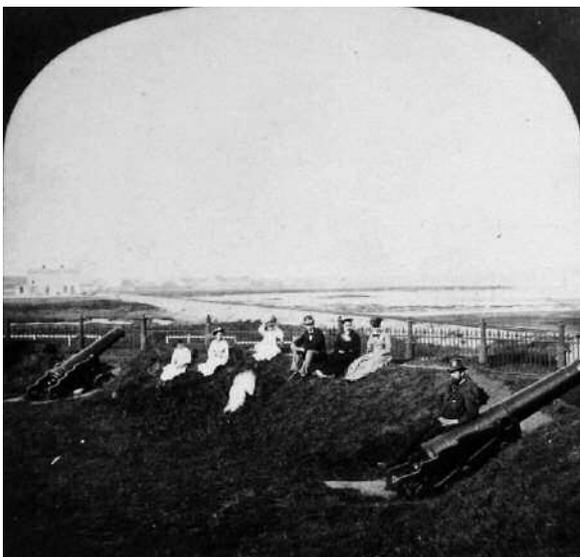
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MIT

From this point on, the ride again follows a path that would not have existed in 1776 since this area began to be filled in 1853 to create an embankment for the Grand Junction railroad that lays inland of the tour's path. The rails were laid on a high embankment that served as a sea wall, holding back the tides of the Charles River (*d.*). This new area of dry land was filled and occupied by industries that needed to be close to a railroad. Soap factories grew up here, as well as an organ factory, iron foundry and rolling mill. The railroads' importance steadily increased, and factories formerly centered on river traffic moved to be closer to the rails.

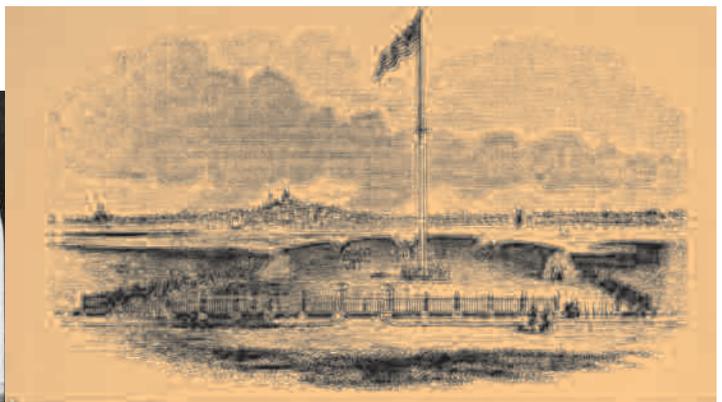
Nearly all of the MIT campus is located on filled land, mostly to the river side of the railroad, some of which was an inlet of the Charles and some of which was marshland. This filled land was not created until long after the original 1853 embankment, however. Grand plans for a handsome riverfront commenced with construction of a granite sea wall in 1883. Around 1900 the final push to transform the remaining tidal flats, by now filthy and smelly with pollutants and garbage, created a huge amount of new land along the river, just beyond the already-filled marshlands. This was originally envisioned as another Back Bay full of residential elegance – as displayed by the Riverbank Court Hotel, now MIT's Ashdown House, on Mass Ave at the river's edge. The project was delayed by economic depression in the 1890s and then uncertainty about the river's level, as plans to dam the Charles were in the works. That dam was finally completed in 1910, and the work of infill swiftly followed. Only two years later MIT decided not to become Harvard's engineering school and proceeded to build its campus on this new land, sparking the technology-driven development that continues in eastern Cambridge today.



(*d.*) Looking downstream over the tidal flats towards the Harvard Bridge from somewhere on the current MIT campus, perhaps in the vicinity of Fort Washington.

CAMBRIDGEPORT

Past MIT, the tour reaches Fort Washington (*e., f.*) which was on a point on the Cambridgeport peninsula, called the "Great Neck", jutting out into the Charles. This made it an advantageous lookout spot towards Boston and the harbor. The fort was one of four gun batteries that protected the river approaches to Cambridge; others were located at Lechmere Point, on Portland Street, near the current intersection of Franklin and Brookline Streets, and at Riverside Press Park; other forts protected the Miller's River approaches. Fort Washington is the only one to survive, and has been a park since 1857.



(*e.* left) Folks relaxing on the grassy embankments of Fort Washington, with the Charles River tidal flats in the immediate background.
(*f.* top) 1861 image of Fort Washington.



RIVERSIDE

Riding further west through Cambridgeport, the tour is again in former marshland. Initially, much land in Cambridgeport was used for grazing if it was dry, and salt hay and oyster harvesting if it was marshy. In the 17th century, the land on this neck that jutted into the Charles was mainly viewed only as working land, not residential space. Cambridge residents centered their home lives in Old Cambridge around Harvard College, with only a few buildings in “mid-Cambridge”. The physical layout of Cambridgeport came in the 1840s when the Dana family, which owned much of the area, laid out a grand pattern of streets and parks similar to Boston’s new South End. But not much development ensued and almost all we have left are Dana and Hastings squares as well as the BU Bridge (1850) (*b., g.*).

The tour next stops at Hoyt Field which was located squarely in a marshy district between Wigwam Neck (*i.*) (Putnam Avenue) and Cambridge Neck (Cambridgeport). In fact, the park occupies the site of a mill pond that serviced a tide mill located at the current Shell station next to the Riverside Press Park.



(*g. top*) View from Boston towards Cambridge along the Grand Junction rail bridge, which still crosses at the same location (although since rebuilt) under the BU bridge.

(*b. bottom*) Looking down the end of Magazine Street with the sign post for Granite street at the far left. The houses are where the Morse School now sits.

(*i.*) A view of the natural outlet of the tidal creek associated with the Hoyt Field mill pond, although the water course had long since been diverted to the tide mill which sat at the current site of the Shell station. The long shed is located about where Whole Foods now sits. The houses in the center are at the Allston and Putnam intersection.

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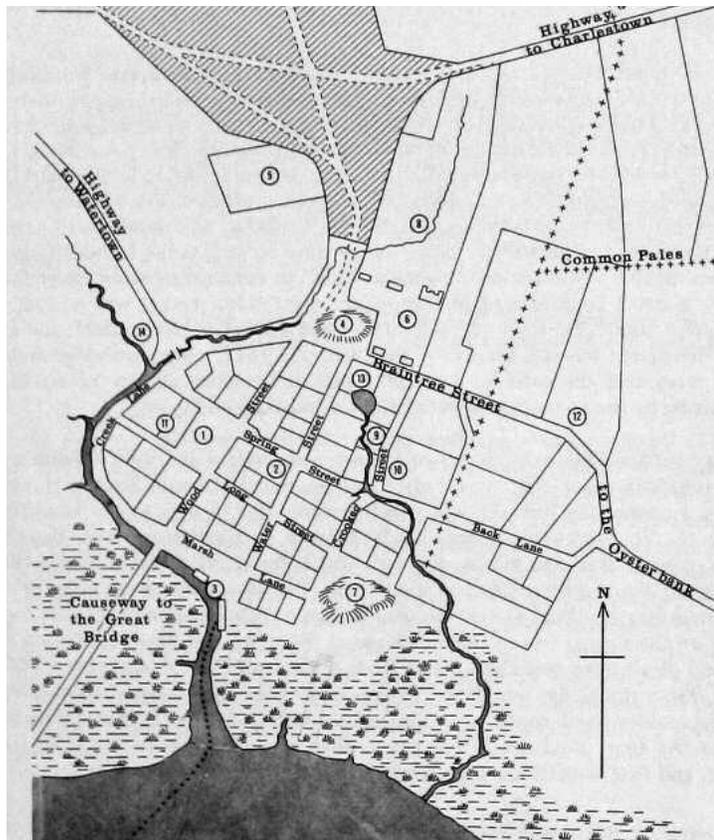
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HARVARD SQUARE

Winthrop Park in Harvard Square (*j.*) was the heart of the first settlement at Newtowne, as Cambridge was originally called. The village was founded on a drumlin or glacial hill, and at the time of settlement, the view all the way to Boston Harbor was unimpeded. Settlers picked this spot farther up the Charles out of concern for pirate attacks and the possibility of the English deciding to revoke and capture the charter of the Massachusetts Bay colony from the more vulnerable Boston peninsula location. This spot was also the location of the town market, but the “Newtowne Market” sculpture is misleading; there never was a market structure here.

Settlers also selected this area for its abundance of fresh water sources. The Harvard Square area had the first reliable springs past the Shawmut peninsula. One stream ran right through Harvard Yard and followed the curve of Brattle and Eliot streets around the base of the drumlin toward the Charles. In 1670, this road was aptly named Creek Lane. From Creek Lane south was tidal marshland where boats would dock. The first bridge crossing the Charles was built in 1662; until then travelers from the north were ferried .



(*k.*) Katherine Copeland Dunbar (Mrs William H.) standing on Highland St (54 Highland is the still-standing brick colonial on the right) with the reservoir wall on the left. (*l.*) The photo across the empty section of the reservoir is from that wall looking towards the standpipe in the direction of Fresh Pond. The map shows the route of the pipe from Fresh Pond to the reservoir.



(*j.*) Newtowne (now Harvard Square) in 1670.



MARSH DISTRICT to RESERVOIR

Leaving Harvard Square, the tour again traverses former marshes that stretched as far north as Foster Street and were the site of working-class Irish settlement in the years after the Civil War. The land was cheaper and less desirable since it flooded periodically until the early 20th century. Once through the former marshland, we climb Reservoir Hill, so named for the city water supply that used to sit on this hill (*k., l.*). It was the second highest spot in the city (about 75' above mean sea level), so water was pumped here from Fresh Pond and then distributed to the rest of the city through force of gravity.



(*m.*) New England Brick Company kiln, next to the clay pit which is now Danehy Park.

NORTH CAMBRIDGE

Today Danehy Park is one of the highest spots in Cambridge, but for years it was one of the lowest. Soil here is full of clay, and this space was a clay pit from which thousands of bricks were made at the nearby New England Brick Company (*m.*) (whose bricks labeled “NEBCo” you can still find in Cambridge sidewalks). Looking west from this site towards Fresh Pond, we would have seen extensive freshwater marshes that stretched along Alewife Brook.

AVON HILL to MID-CAMBRIDGE

After passing through some of North Cambridge, we skirt Avon Hill (about 85' high). This was the one higher point than the reservoir, which meant that gravity-fed water could not reach here, the reason for later development of the area. Again passing by the oldest part of Cambridge in Harvard Square, we summit one final hill on Harvard St. Dana Hill was the site of two lines of fortification during the Revolutionary War where the Colonials again took advantage of high ground to protect the main encampment on Cambridge Common.



Thank you to Charles Sullivan of the Cambridge Historical Commission (opening talk, historical information and images, cleaning of reliefmap at City Hall), Sergeant Kathy Murphy and the Cambridge Bike Patrol (ride escort and BBQ), Gerry Swislow (tour route, route map, general organization), Tim Ledlie (web site and advertising), Jenni Alden (graphic design), Jessica Zdeb (brochure writing), Steve Miller (speaker), Stephanie Anderberg (brochure copies and delivery), hollis.harvard.edu (maps), and the Cambridge Bicycle Committee and Cambridge Community Development Department.

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start: Cambridge City Hall
795 Mass. Ave.
ends: River Festival, Memorial Drive
ride length: 12.5 miles
ride time: approx. 2 hours

- Route
- 1776 roads
- 1776 wetlands
- 1776 river
- 1776 fortifications
- 1776 houses

