

Cambridge-Somerville Go-Green History Bike Tour

Saturday May 21st, 2005



This pamphlet follows the tour's route (see map and cue sheet)

Cambridge

Cambridge Common is a reminder of city's historic public lands. Its 8-½ acres is all that remains of the thousands of acres of common land that were granted to the original proprietors of Cambridge in 1630. During Colonial times, the Common was the site of numerous military drills and encampments. Legend even has it that George Washington took control of the Continental Army under an elm tree located not far from the start of the bike tour. The Common's function changed in 1830 when it was landscaped as a park. Today it remains a recreational space but retains its historic consciousness with a number of monuments commemorating various events, including the most recent addition – an Irish Famine Memorial dedicated in 1997.

Brattle Street is the city's most notable street for history and architecture. Most of the City's remaining pre-Revolutionary houses are located here on a stretch known as Tory Row because of the Loyalist sentiments of the original occupants. The area was home to many wealthy and influential residents of what was originally part of Watertown. In 1754, these property owners convinced Massachusetts Legislature to move the boundary from Sparks Street. to Fresh Pond so they could attend church in the more convenient Harvard Square.

Most of the earliest homes on Tory Row were built in the 1760s as summer retreats for British owners of plantations in the West Indies escaping to milder climes. These Cambridge estates were palatial, stretching from the banks of the Charles River over the glacial ridge to present-day Garden Street. The Tory properties were confiscated during the Revolution, and later bought by newly rich merchant privateers.

In 1854 the route of the first horse-drawn streetcars ran from Boston, past Harvard Square and on Brattle Street to Mount Auburn Cemetery. The new easy access to the city created pressure to break up the estates for further residential development. Development of this area was divided along class lines with the marshy river banks (around which Brattle Street still makes a turn at Sparks Street) dedicated to tiny lots and houses for Irish workers. More desirable land on the sunny south-facing side of the glacial ridge here was devoted to housing for wealthier residents.

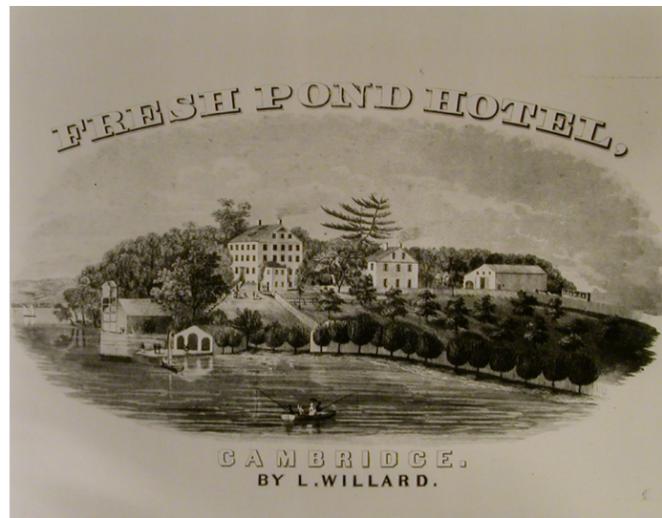
When a streetcar company wanted to improve its service by electrifying its tracks on Brattle Street in 1890, the residents again exercised their power and forced the company to abandon the line and build tracks elsewhere. Mount Auburn Street and the newly laid-out Huron Avenue instead became streetcar routes, and the Huron Avenue area became Cambridge's "streetcar suburb."



Period photograph of Hooper-Lee-Nichols House

Architectural highlights of Brattle Street include the Stoughton House designed by renowned architect H.H. Richardson (1883) at #90, the Vassal-Craigie-Longfellow House (1759) at #105, and the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House (1685) at #159.

Lake View Avenue. is located at the west end of the glacial ridge. Today we can see the former Fresh Pond Hotel which was moved to Lake View in 1895 and now serves as multi-family housing. The hotel was built on the pond in 1792 as the first "rural retreat" for Boston's upper class, but it went out of business in 1886 when Cambridge went "dry" (it remained so until the end of Prohibition in 1933). The hotel then served a brief stint as a convent. It was finally taken over and moved by the city as part of their transformation of Fresh Pond into a reservoir.



Fresh Pond Hotel, image from 1845

Danehy Park was originally one of Cambridge's many clay pits which were later used as trash dumps, then filled over and made into parks in recent years. By the 1950s, the pits where Danehy Park now sits were dug to about 30 feet deep. But the business was increasingly less profitable. In 1952, one of the clay faces collapsed, burying a steam shovel and killing the driver. The business closed and the city used the pits to dump garbage, which eventually mounded to 30 feet above ground level. The trash repeatedly caught (or was set) on fire, producing polluting smoke and awful smells until dumping ceased in 1971.



Site of Danehy Park, 1951

When the Red Line was extended in 1979-1986 from Harvard Square to Porter, Davis, and then Alewife, the MBTA covered Danehy with about one million cubic feet of dirt and rock waste from digging the tunnel. The area was then capped with clay, special pipes were built to capture the methane gas still being produced, and it was all turned into a park - which is slowly sinking as the garbage continues to decompose.

At the top of Danehy Park, the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles constructed "Turnaround/Surround," a public art installation that includes the first use of "glassphalt" in Massachusetts in the path leading to the hill's summit.

Sherman Street to Rindge Avenue to Harvey Street: In the 1850s, Sherman Street acquired the name "Dublin Street" because of the Irish clay-pit workers who lived there. Boston's Catholics found space on Rindge Avenue here for a cemetery as they were not afforded such in the Boston city limits. Later, another Catholic group – French-Canadians – moved to the area for work in the clay pits and built one of the few French-language churches in the area, which closed only about 10 years ago.

From 1837 to 1855, the area bounded by Rindge, Jackson, Harvey and Cedar Streets was the Cambridge Park trotting course, a horse racing course. The affiliated Park House Hotel was built facing the race track and adjacent to the grandstand in 1847 and today survives as the 20-unit apartment building at 39 Cedar St.



The Old Grey Mare -- lithograph hand colored, 1849

Houses developed in this area after the track closed feature unusually high basements. This feature reflected old-world traditions of preserving space for animals, and also served to protect the buildings from (still occurring) occasional flooding from the Alewife Brook area.

Linear Park runs along the Central Massachusetts Railroad line. Constructed late in the railroad era, the Central Mass. never got further west than Northampton. Although it closely paralleled the Boston and Maine's Fitchburg Division, it was kept in use until 1978 because it had the advantage of not having height or width restrictions on freight cars. The Linear Park was built above the subway tunnel that replaced the railroad.

Orchard Street is an early example of "transit oriented development" – the practice of planning streets with respect to transit centers. The opening of the Porter Square railroad station in 1842 spurred the construction of Orchard Street as a convenient, direct route to this hub. Though the Cambridge-Somerville boundary generally runs generally parallel to Orchard St., there is a notable "bump" in the line. This jog in the boundary was implemented in 1802 to place a tavern (and its tax revenue) under Cambridge's control since most of its clients came from Harvard Square area rather than the more distant Charlestown (the municipality of which Somerville was a part at this time).

The physical fabric of Orchard Street features a cohesive collection of well-preserved mid-nineteenth century buildings. Examples of the Italianate, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival building styles can all be viewed here. Notably, Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, Jr., former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, grew up at 26 Russell Street, on the corner of Orchard Street.



Tip O'Neill's House, 1868

The Davenport Street Mural is actually a compilation of several different works from 1977, 1989 and 2000, all depicting the history and architectural styles of Porter Square. In 1977, Porter Square resident Jeff Oberdorfer received a grant from the Cambridge Arts Council to turn the large back wall of the shopping center into an extension of the neighborhood. Oberdorfer and a small group of dedicated neighbors painted a mural of triple-decker houses, very much like the abutting buildings. In 1984, the mural was restored by artist Lisa Carter, who added several figures to the scene. In 1989 a second large mural was painted by students from Massachusetts College of Art under the supervision of Professor Al Gowan. The mural shows the Rand Estate, which used to be on the current shopping center site. Finally, in 2000, muralist Joshua Winer turned a remaining 200-foot-long stretch of the back wall into a lively neighborhood street scene with houses and gardens. Designed as a response to the character of the North Cambridge neighborhood, the mural references the architectural styles and history of Porter Square, including the area's cattle yards and the famous "Porterhouse Steak."

Somerville

Linear Park

Created in the mid 1980's along abandoned railway tracks the one-mile Linear Park links Somerville and Cambridge with outlying communities, Arlington, Lexington and points beyond. Just as the extension of the railways to Davis Square in 1870-71 prompted full-scale development of the area thereafter, the new recreational path has spurred a number of building rehabilitation projects and historic property designations along its length. Examples of this are adaptive reuse of the Comfort Pillow factory and M.W. Carr Co. complex into spacious residential units and live-work space, and the Mix-It Studios within the former soap factory on the other side of the Davis Square linear path.

Seven Hills Park

This ¾-acre park is flat, yet is named for Somerville's seven previously prominent hills, each of which originally served a different purpose, including dairy farming, apple growing, or residential uses. The Park was opened in 1990 and is popular for both residents and visitors alike who enjoy its welcome open space, central location in the heart of Davis Square, and historical place marking. Giant weather vane-like structures spin seven brightly-colored sculptures --an alewife fish, a clock, a cow, a tree, a fort and two buildings. The objects help recall the City's history and evolving land uses in a fun and whimsical way.

Meacham Road

Somerville is proud of its 300-plus properties that have been designated as significant due to their historical associations or architecture. Situated within 105 local historic districts (LHDs), many of the properties have historic plaques that owners purchased through the City in 1991 to recognize their home's historic significance. A number can be seen on houses along Meacham Road and the Campbell Park LHD. This area is part of a working- and middle-class subdivision with varying architectural elaboration representing diverse tastes. Built-up circa 1890-1900, this subdivision exemplified the development of the Davis Square area as a suburban community that had easy access to Boston and Cambridge for workers employed in those cities.

Nathan Tufts Park and the Powder House



The Powder House was originally built in 1704 by John Mallet as a windmill for grain milling by area farmers. It was later sold to Massachusetts as a storage place for gunpowder and was the site of the first act of Revolutionary War when the British marched from Boston and seized the gunpowder from the local militia. The Somerville Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC) awarded the City a Preservation Award in May 2002 for the major restoration effort it directed in 2001. The unusual structure lies within Nathan Tufts Park, a

wonderful oasis of open, green space that was also restored by the City from 2002-2003. The City earned its first Preservation Award from the Massachusetts Historical Commission in 2004 for the extensive work it undertook on the Park, its Field House and Powder House, as well as for its hands-on interpretive program that strategically installed historic objects in appropriate sections of the Park, representing different land uses over the centuries.

Somerville Highlands Station

Long before this newly renovated playground was created, this land housed a very handsome granite passenger rail station, known as the Somerville Highlands Station. Built in 1888 this station was well positioned for residents of the nearby "Somerville Highlands" subdivision. The subdivision of mostly one- and two-family houses was constructed on former brickyard land that was well endowed with hundreds of shade trees and a landscaped boulevard that still graces Highland Road today. The station was in use until 1926.

Somerville Armory

The Armory, designed by George A. Moore, was constructed in 1903 to house the Somerville Light Infantry of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia. It is notable for its use of "plastic" cement coating and poured concrete floors. The castle form was popular for turn-of-the-century armories. It was sold in 2004 at a State auction to a family that is interested in converting the cavernous structure to a multi-use art center with artist live-work space.



Somerville Museum

The Somerville Museum is the current home of the Somerville Historical Society which is celebrating its 107th anniversary this year. It houses the 32-foot "flying" Bulfinch staircase that was originally found within the Barrell Mansion, on Cobble Hill, East Somerville. A fine local example of the Federal Style, the mansion was designed in 1793 by Charles Bulfinch for Joseph Barrell, a wealthy merchant. It was razed in 1896. The Museum regularly sponsors art exhibits, concerts, lectures and other local cultural events. Its current volunteer staff works closely with the SHPC on various historical activities. The building anchors one end of the Westwood Road Historic District that boasts many fine houses, especially of Shingle Style design.

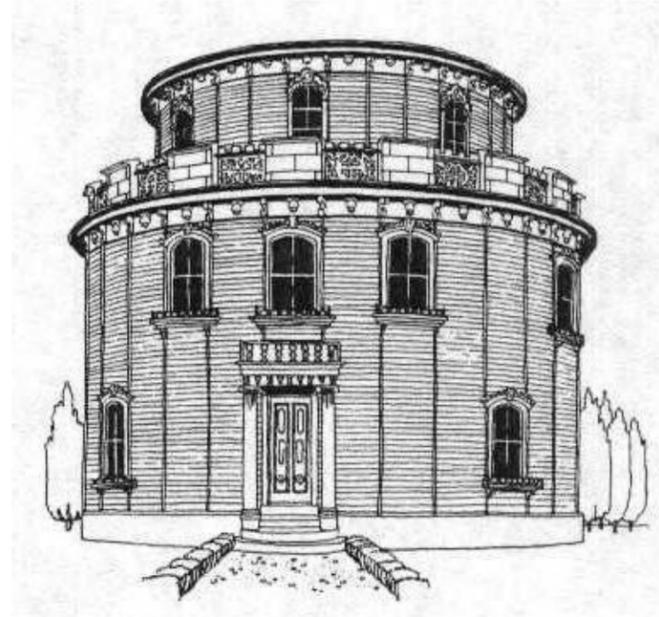
Carr Schoolhouse

The current Carr Schoolhouse building was built at 36 Atherton Street in 1898 in the Renaissance/Colonial Revival Style. It was named after Martin W. Carr who was president of a Somerville jewelry-manufacturing firm of the same name that had a national market. When the building opened at the turn of the twentieth century, it was one of 24 schools in the City, designed to accommodate 700 students. Originally a 14-room elementary school, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the mid 1980's, preserving its splendid interior woodwork, grand staircase, and many other fine architectural features.

After the City closed the Carr School in 1980 it was sold to a private developer who initially converted it to 16 spacious rental units, now owned as condominiums.

Round House

Directly opposite the Schoolhouse is the Round House that is one of the most unusual houses in Somerville, and arguably the whole New England region. The house was built in 1898 by noted inventor and businessman Enoch Robinson who developed a patented method of pressing glass furniture knobs in 1826. He later built a furnace and factory in Boston to manufacture knobs, and established a lock business in 1839, which he operated with his sons for many years.



Conway Park

The current Conway Park is an expansion of a long-existing recreational area that until the mid-1990's was situated next to a lead smelting operation. An acre of once-toxic grounds was reclaimed, thoroughly cleaned, and transformed into basketball courts, an in-line hockey rink, and a community park featuring a tot lot, multi-use athletic field, shaded seating and comfort stations. An extensive installation of interpretive signs and graphics in the park help local users appreciate the lively and surprising history of the site as well as the City as a whole.

Milk Row Cemetery

Established in 1804 this is Somerville's oldest burial ground with a rich collection of historic artifacts, including gravestones, tombs, and a Soldiers Monument reputed to be the first in the nation erected by citizens to honor soldiers who died in the Civil War. The Monument sits on a lot donated by Enoch Robinson of the Round House. Samuel Tufts is buried here, as are other members of the Tufts family associated with the founding of Tufts University. The City received a State grant in 2002 to prepare a Master Plan for its rehabilitation and restoration. Recently another State grant was awarded to begin implementation of the Master Plan this summer.

First United Methodist Church

Construction of the First United Methodist Church located at 1 Summer Street inexplicably took sixteen years to complete, from 1858-1874. In the end it was a handsome Victorian Gothic building with granite trim and a 90-foot slate steeple that was removed in the aftermath of the very destructive hurricane of 1938. Today a private developer is in the process of converting the former church to condominiums with expansive ceiling heights up to 65 feet!

Bow Street Police Station

The City's first Police Station was constructed in 1874 at 50 Bow Street. It was designed in the Victorian Gothic style by a well-known Boston architect, George H. Clough. He was also responsible for many new schools, firehouses and police stations for Boston when it was aggressively annexing communities like Brighton, Charlestown, and West Roxbury. After extensive stabilization work through a State grant, the City recently sold the building to a private developer who is rebuilding its original mansard roof, lost to fire in the 1940's.



On the return from Somerville's old Bow Street Police Station to Cambridge Common: Another anomaly in the Cambridge-Somerville border occurs on Beacon Street between Elm Street and Inman Square. The "bump" in the line at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences extends the Cambridge jurisdiction out to Beacon St. for a short distance. This alteration dates back to 1820 when a Harvard professor moved there only to discover that living within Cambridge was a requirement of his position at the University and that his property was on the Somerville side. The Legislature solved the problem by moving the line to the other side of his estate.

Credits

Tour route: Gerry Swislow and Ron Newman. Cambridge History content provided by Charles Sullivan of the Cambridge Historical Commission, assembled by Steve Miller, Gerry Swislow, and Tim Ledlie, and written by Jessica Zdeb. Somerville History content: Brandon Wilson and the Somerville Historic Preservation Commission. Map by Gerry Swislow. History pamphlet assembled by Tim Ledlie. Food and refreshments organized by Stephanie Anderberg of the Cambridge Community Development Department, Brandon Wilson, and Tim Ledlie. Additional support from Dick Bauer. Promotional material by Tim Ledlie. Advertising by Tim Ledlie and Ron Newman.

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City of Cambridge, Mayor Michael A. Sullivan:

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