



# The Newetowne Chronicle

Summer 2012

Volume XII Number I

Mid-Cambridge: An Evolving Neighborhood  
By Paula Lovejoy 1

Antrim Street Block Party  
By Phyllis Bretholtz and George Metzger 2

Mr. Foxcroft and His Street  
By Michael Kenney 3

Erector Set Parties  
By George Bossarte 3

Opposition House  
By Susan Chasen 4

Upcoming Events 4

A Townie Benefactor  
By Daphne Abeel 5

1862: Casualties and a Comforting Hand  
By Michael Kenney 6

Interns and Volunteers 6

CHS Annual Meeting Highlights  
New Oral History  
By Daphne Abeel 7

Inner Belt Programs Set Records  
By Michael Kenney 7

Donation from Hartney  
Greymont and the Cambridge Plant and Garden Club  
By Annette LaMond 7

From the President  
By Charlie Allen 7

Lost Mid-Cambridge  
Back Cover

The Newetowne Chronicle  
Published by the  
Cambridge Historical Society

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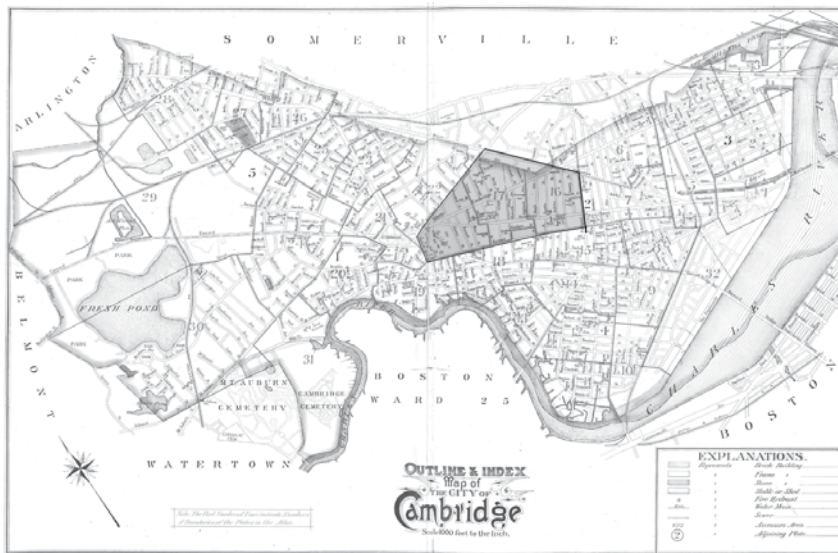
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## Mid-Cambridge: An Evolving Neighborhood

By Paula Lovejoy

As its name implies, Mid-Cambridge lies in the heart of the city between Inman, Central, and Harvard squares. Essentially a residential neighborhood since the 19th century, it's become a municipal center as well, including City Hall, the high school, the library, and a hospital. However, the area was not officially considered as a neighborhood until 1949. It went nameless until the 1970s, when residents formed the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association and the name stuck.

Mid-Cambridge began as an agricultural area soon after the settlement of Newetowne in 1630, with planting fields that evolved into large estates. One major landowner, Ralph Inman, built a grand house near the present City Hall and enjoyed views across open fields and marshes to Boston. Dana Hill was owned by Judge Francis Dana, an



Page from the 1894 *Atlas of the City of Cambridge* by G.W. Bromley with the area that is today known as Mid-Cambridge highlighted.

eminent patriot who joined a group of speculators to build the West Boston (now Longfellow) Bridge in 1793, the first direct link from Boston to Cambridge.

By 1830, the major roadways (Broadway, Kirkland, Cambridge, and Harvard streets) to the bridge were in place,

and the surrounding land became desirable. For the remainder of the century, the open land on these roads was sold piecemeal to developers. They constructed mostly single-family homes, first in the Greek Revival style (1840s-1850s), followed by mansard (1850s-1860s), Queen Anne (1870s-1880s), and other Victorian styles. Three-decker houses, many of them ornate, first appeared in the 1870s, and large apartment buildings began springing up near the turn of the 20th century. Many of these dwellings were later converted into condominiums, a trend that continues today.

As space for new development became scarce, many historic homes were demolished. At the residents' behest, the city enacted new zoning laws in the 1990s designed to preserve the character of the neighborhood. More high-rise buildings were banned, along with additional "infill" homes in backyards. Today the neighborhood is essentially full, with little to no land available.

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**Antrim Street Block Party: A History**

By Phyllis Bretholtz and George Metzger

In the true spirit of Antrim Street, Bob and Jane Richards and Jane and George Metzger gathered over dinner to reminisce about the origins of the Antrim Street Block Party.



Antrim Street Block Party (Phyllis Bretholtz)

In 1976, Jane Richards was sweeping her sidewalk when she saw a man walk across the garden of a neighbor's house and observed that the bumper stickers on his car were all wrong for this street. So she called her husband, who worked nearby. He came home on his bike to confront the thief and then called the police, who blocked off the street and caught the robber.

The Richards and Metzger families decided then that because many neighbors didn't actually know one another, they would plan a block party to bring people together. The first one took place in the fall of 1976.

They had to figure out a few details: a street-closing permit signed first by residents, then

by police, fire, traffic, and parking (thanks, Bob); a flyer with an image that is still in use today (thanks, George); tables for food and strings of light across the middle of the street. Neighbor and baker Lorraine McDermott made a cake decorated to resemble the houses on the street. Activities for children were

added - face painting, street chalking, a piñata, a treasure hunt - and expanded over the years to include live music (including a local group, The Mighty Mighty Bosstones), the local DJ and break dancer Greg Gianinni, and Bob Dolan's painted banner depicting the neighborhood "elders." In the first decade the Janes started a hidden gardens tour, and Bob organized a street-long yard sale.



Bob and Jane Richards and Jane and George Metzger (Phyllis Bretholtz)



Early flier, courtesy of George Metzger

But the block party's success was assured that first year by three young women who emerged from their midblock apartment to belly dance through the party. Legend has it that a few seniors had to pop nitros, and older residents came back each year looking for those dancers.

We never collected any money; we outlawed politicking; and it remains the longest running block party in the city.

This Mid-Cambridge Newsletter has been proudly sponsored by:

## Mr. Foxcroft and His Street by Michael Kenney

Along Cambridge Street one can spot a solid 1920s brick residence, now condominiums, known as Fox Croft Manor. The name, despite its fractured appearance, most likely refers to the Foxcroft family, Tory grandees who owned some 120 acres of fields and orchards stretching beyond the present Kirkland Street to Shady Hill.

Little else remains to recall, however loosely, that once-prominent family's imprint on Cambridge.

Francis Foxcroft, born in 1694, served in a number of posts in the colonial government, but was reported to be "happier at home making an index of the province records and the first alphabetical list of Harvard graduates."

His son John, born in 1740, also served in the colonial and town governments. An outspoken Tory, he was living in the family's mansion in January 1777 when it burned to the ground, with some suspicion that the fire had been set by patriot supporters. Foxcroft told a neighbor that he would rather have the house destroyed "than occupied by d---d rebels as other gentlemen's houses were" – a probable reference to the Tory Row mansions on Brattle



1716 Cambridge Street (Gavin Kleespies)

Street used by General Washington and his officers.

For a brief period in the early 19th century, part of Cambridge Street was known as Foxcroft Street. There was a Harvard residential hall at the corner of Kirkland and Oxford streets known as Foxcroft Hall; it was moved up Oxford Street to accommodate the construction of the old

Lowell Lecture Hall and later demolished.

For a few years there was a Foxcroft Street in West Cambridge, whose name was the cause of some annoyance to Frank Foxcroft, one of its residents and a "no license" temperance crusader in the late 1800s. In 1902, he wrote to the city engineer, requesting that the name be changed.

"There is a tradition," he wrote, "that the original owner of the abutting land, having been unfortunate in some

speculations, sought to commemorate that fact in the name of the street." But since it was not named in his honor or that of his ancestors, Foxcroft said that he "found it inconvenient to try to pronounce the name twice over" – as in "Mr. Foxcroft of Foxcroft Street." His neighbors agreed, and the city changed it to Hillside Avenue.

## Erector Set Parties by George Bossarte

Designed by A. C. (Alfred Carlton) Gilbert, Erector Sets were first sold for the Christmas season of 1913. Gilbert was running the fanciful Mysto Manufacturing Company in New Haven, Conn., which made magic sets and other toys. The name soon became the A. C. Gilbert Company, and it continued to make a wide variety of toys, but it was known for Erector Sets.

When I was a youngster in the 1950s, I received a size eight-and-one-half set for Christmas, a substantial set. I spent many hours building and playing with bridges, elevators, Ferris wheels, and, my favorite construction, cranes. (There wasn't much to do in a small town in Illinois in the '50s.)

Fast forward to the '70s. I am a young father. On a trip back to the house I grew up in, I retrieved my Erector Set from the attic. It was more than complete, as I had been diligent about putting it away when I finished a project. I

had also added parts to it so I could build bigger bridges. My son was still too young to enjoy playing with the set for any period of time. Erector Set constructions require putting together a fairly large number of small nuts and bolts, which small fingers find difficult, and long periods of concentration, which small bodies find difficult.

What turned out to be the more age-appropriate father-son activity was hunting for Erector Sets at flea markets. We enjoyed going to the Sunday flea at the drive-in theater at the rotary of Routes 60 and 1 in Revere. (It's no longer there; it's now a mall.) This was a real flea market, with people cleaning out their attics and basements. There were always fascinating things to look at. Every time we went we would find a couple of Erector Sets for sale, cheap. Of course, most were not collectors items. They were the boxes of parts left over after the kids had lost all interest in them. I would buy them so I could add the parts to my set.

*Continued on page 5*

## Upcoming Programs

### Famous and Infamous

Cambridge's Fourth Annual  
Open Archives Tour  
July 9, 10, 11, and 12

Cambridge Historical Commission  
Cambridge Historical Society  
Cambridge Public Library  
Cambridge Public Works

Department

Harvard University Archives  
Houghton Library at Harvard  
List Center at MIT  
Longfellow House /

Washington's Headquarters  
MIT Institute Archives  
MIT Museum  
Mount Auburn Cemetery  
Schlesinger Library at Harvard

[cambridgearchives.org/OpenArchives](http://cambridgearchives.org/OpenArchives)

### Cambridge Discovery Days

August 4 and 11

Free tours across the city will be given by members of the Cambridge Historical Collaborative. CHS will feature two original tours, including one on the influence of the women architects who graduated from the Cambridge School.

[www2.cambridgema.gov/Historic/walks.html](http://www2.cambridgema.gov/Historic/walks.html)

### Photo Scanning Days

August 4 and 11

If you bring us a photo that was taken in Cambridge and let us scan it, we'll give you back the original as well as a free Toscanini's ice cream (they donate 100 individual scoops, so this is no coupon or delayed gratification; you can eat the ice cream while we scan your photo). To see examples from past years, visit:

[cambridgehistory.org/discover/photoscanning/](http://cambridgehistory.org/discover/photoscanning/)

### Cambridgeport History Day

September 29

Come learn about Cambridge's role in the War of 1812 and read about the neighborhood history as homes sprout "If This House Could Talk..." signs.

[cambridgehistory.org/discover/cambridgeport](http://cambridgehistory.org/discover/cambridgeport)

## Opposition House

By Susan Chasen

Tucked away on a short spur off Hancock Street stands a quiet, historic home that has been known — if not well known — for most of its two hundred and five years as Opposition House. The name suggests a headquarters for political activity or resistance. But it was the house itself that expressed the opposition: it was built to block the construction of Harvard Street.

In 1807 Harvard Street, heading from the West Boston Bridge toward Harvard College, had reached the eastern edge of Judge Francis Dana's 50-acre estate, between today's Lee and Hancock streets. Dana wanted it to stop there.

At the time, Dana had just retired after 15 years as chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. He complained bitterly of the "selfish schemes" of "speculators" who had bought up the land surrounding his and his brother's. So he came up with a scheme of his own.



Opposition House in 2008. (Gavin Kleespies)

In a February 1, 1807, letter to his brother in England, Dana wrote: "I have entered into a contract with persons immediately to build a large house on the east line of my own land so as to stop up a street which this speculating gentry have laid out up to my land and mean to force through your land if possible."

Dana sold a lot to 21 investors who agreed to build not just any house, but an extraordinarily wide house,

to prevent the westward extension of Harvard Street. The investing merchants and tradesmen objected to the road because it was going to be a faster route from the bridge to Harvard Square and would bypass their businesses in Lafayette Square, near the intersection of Main Street and today's Massachusetts Avenue. Since Judge Dana himself was also developing property in that area, he shared these concerns.

Opposition House, reputedly built "overnight," is the oldest house in Mid-Cambridge. It originally had long, single-story wings on each side, for a total width of 90 to 100 feet, and was only 20 feet deep. In the early 1860s the wings were cut off and the house — which actually has a brick wall down the middle, dividing it into "two tenements" — was rotated 90 degrees and lifted onto a foundation. Today it's at 2-4 Hancock Place.

The story of Opposition House might have been forgotten if it hadn't been for a young girl named Sophia Shuttleworth, who lived in the house with her family from 1815 to 1821. Decades later, she included the story in her book, *Two Hundred Years Ago; or, a brief history of Cambridgeport and East Cambridge*, published in 1859.

Opposition House, she wrote, was "set up during the night by a party of gentlemen...to prevent a road being made from the causeway to the Colleges."

It's uncertain what, if anything, was achieved by the construction of Opposition House. As Sophia Shuttleworth Simpson (by then married) wrote: "The proprietors of the road were not to be thwarted in their purpose...for they branched off to the right and made the road now called Harvard Street."

The rerouted road passed 60 feet farther north and was completed in 1808.

## A “Townie” Benefactor

By Daphne Abeel

Frederick Hastings Rindge, Cambridge’s most important individual benefactor, was a “townie” who entered Harvard in 1875. The son of Samuel Baker Rindge, a successful merchant and businessman, Frederick grew up in the “Rindge mansion,” which still stands at the corner of Dana and Harvard streets.

At Harvard, he was a loyal and enthusiastic student — and clubman. Poor health forced him to leave the college in his senior year, and although he never returned to live in Cambridge, he made significant contributions to the city of his birth.

After extensive travel in the American West and Mexico, he married in 1887 and settled near Santa Monica, Calif., where he bought a ranch of some 23,000 acres. From 3,000 miles away, Cambridge continued to exert a strong influence on the man who had been educated in its public schools.

With the encouragement of William E. Russell, a Harvard friend who became mayor of Cambridge in 1887, Rindge began to make a series of significant financial gifts to the city. Between 1888 and 1890 he funded the construction of (and sometimes also bought the sites for) the City Hall, the public library, and the Manual Training School, now part of Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School. In addition, he made a major contribution to the building of Harvard-Epworth Methodist Church, next to Harvard Law School.

### Erector Set *continued*

After a few years I had a substantial inventory of parts, enough that I could think of sharing the joy. Thus the idea of an “Erector Set Party” was born. Have a party. Invite your friends and neighbors. Have food and drink. But also have lots of Erector Set parts, and encourage people to build things. I had a few parties in the ’70s, and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.

After I moved to Antrim Street in the late ’70s, I started to have these parties more often. For the last dozen years or more they have been an annual event. Many people look forward to them, whether or not they actually build.



Frederick Hastings Rindge

Rindge possessed a deeply religious nature; his aim was to teach. “It is my intention to build didactic buildings,” he wrote to his friend Russell, and he proceeded to do just that. He specified that his own name should not appear anywhere on the buildings, but he emblazoned the walls of the library with the Ten Commandments and composed the following inscription for the entrance to City Hall: “God has given Commandments unto Men. From these Commandments Men have framed Laws by which to be governed. It is honorable and praiseworthy to faithfully serve the people by helping to administer these Laws. If the Laws are not enforced, the People are not well governed.”

Unfortunately, he did not foresee his sudden death at the age of 48. A few sentences scrawled by hand left all his fortune to his wife. In her efforts to defend the ranch against the encroachments of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Rhoda Rindge spent millions, even hiring a small private army to patrol its borders. At her death, all the wealth her husband had accumulated had dwindled to a few hundred dollars.

Today Rindge is commemorated in Cambridge through the high school, Rindge Avenue, Rindgefield Road, and Rindge Towers, a public housing project.



Image courtesy of George Bossarte

These parties seem to attract two types of people. There are the people who get to the table or down on the floor and build things. And there are the people who enjoy a party, but who prefer to catch up and just watch the builders. All are welcome.

I am always amazed by what people can design in an evening. Some people follow the “Idea Book” and build an illustrated model. Some people just put parts together; wheeled vehicles are common. Some people make Art. Some play with the parachute drop or the zeppelin made in years past. I’ve had groups of people tackle a larger project. Some people ask that I keep their model so they can come back the next year to work on it. I’ve come to believe that Erector Sets will never go out of style. They are an activity that all can enjoy, and I hope to keep providing the opportunity for many years to come!

# CHS Interns and Volunteers



Maureen O'Brien has been helping us organize and process thousands of digital images that we have accumulated through three years of working with MIT students to photograph every building in the city. She also helped with the Inner Belt programs.



James Paulsen worked on the on-going project to scan the CHS journal *The Proceedings* and helped us with mailings and office errands.



Kathryn Lynch helped us scan the CHS journal *The Proceedings*.

# 1862: Casualties and a Comforting Hand

By Michael Kenney

As the first year of the Civil War came to its brutal end, Cambridge was counting and mourning its casualties — the first of whom, William H. Smart, was killed in action at Blackburn's Ford, Va., on July 18, 1861. When the Grand Army of the Republic was formed in 1866, the veterans post in Central Square was named in his honor.

But even as the second year dawned, a Cambridge woman, herself severely handicapped, had dedicated herself to care for the wounded.

The woman was Emily Elizabeth Parsons. She was in her mid-30s when the war broke out, the daughter of a Harvard law school professor. She was partially blind and deaf from childhood illnesses and walked with a limp. But realizing the need for women to care for the mounting number of sick and wounded soldiers, she enrolled in the nursing program at Massachusetts General Hospital and, after her training, was placed in charge of a ward at the Fort Schuyler Military Hospital on Boston Harbor's Long Island.

With the encouragement of Dorothea Dix, who had become the superintendent of Union Army nurses, Miss Parsons volunteered to work in St. Louis. There, according to contemporary reports, every available building had been converted into a hospital for the wounded from Vicksburg and other battles along the Mississippi. Soon, she was placed as head nurse on a hospital ship and later served as superintendent of women



Emily Parsons, engraved by John Sartain. From *Woman's Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism, and Patience* by Linus Pierpont Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan.

nurses at a large military hospital built on the St. Louis fairgrounds.

Returning to Cambridge after the war, Miss Parsons raised money to open a hospital for women and children on Prospect Street, later moving it to a house at Prospect and Hampshire streets before it closed in 1871. Miss Parsons died of a stroke in 1880, but efforts to raise money for a general hospital continued and resulted in the opening of Mount Auburn Hospital in 1886. The first building, now used as offices, was named in her memory.

As the year progressed, the city appropriated funds, totaling \$195,000, for aid to families of men serving in the military, and another \$95,000 for bounties paid to men volunteering for service. The year ended as the city ordered that a lot be set apart in the Cambridge Cemetery as a burial place for Cambridge men "who shall fall in their country's service."

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Cambridge, Mass. 02138

## CHS Annual Meeting Highlights

### New Oral History By Daphne Abeel

The highlight of the Cambridge Historical Society's 107th annual meeting was a presentation by Penelope Kleespies, Phyllis Bretholtz, and George Bossarte of *From the Heart of Cambridge: A Neighborhood Portrait*, an oral history of the Longfellow neighborhood. All three are members of the Longfellow Neighborhood Council, which conceived and carried out the project with the assistance of their fellow Council members: Paula Lovejoy, who acted as editor, Judy Bibbins, Jessica Piaia, Sarah Boyer, Sikha Sen, and Ken Bowles.

Kleespies described the process, which began in

2004, of collecting the stories of "ordinary people told in their own words," to create a record of life in the neighborhood based on the recollections of those who had lived there for many years. Bretholtz, who photographed every interviewee and also collected many of the historical images, touched on the affection for and importance of many of the local shops and institutions, including the S&S Deli and Sandy's Music Store.

The book is now on sale in local bookstores, including the Harvard Bookstore, the Coop, the Porter Square Bookstore and Rodney's in Central Square.

## Inner Belt Programs Set

### Records By Michael Kenney

The Society's three programs on the history of the Inner Belt project drew audiences of 137, 149, and 116 people. As Executive Director Gavin Kleespies reported, "These were the three largest programs the Society has hosted in the past ten years."

And judging from the enthusiastic responses, those who attended weren't disappointed in the presentations from urban planners such as MIT's Fred Salvucci, neighborhood activists like Cambridgeport's Ansti Benfield, and academic commentators such as Anthony Flint of the Lincoln Institute.

They traced the history of the controversial highway project, first proposed in 1948, that would have cut through Cambridgeport. The growing political and community opposition led to Governor Frank Sargent's decision in 1972 to terminate the project and use its millions of dollars in federal funds for mass transit.

Forty years later, with the bulldozers long halted, the project still held memories for those who fought it, and sparked the interest of those for whom it became an urban legend.

## Donation from Hartney Greymont and Cambridge Plant & Garden Club

This winter the Cambridge Historical Society received the generous donation of a three-man day of pruning by Hartney Greymont, one of Boston's premier arborists. In late 2011, members of the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club noticed that the red oaks on the east side of the house had some large dying limbs. With plans under way to rebuild the grape trellis under the oaks, the problem needed to be addressed. When Dave Anderson, Hartney Greymont's Cambridge representative, learned of the situation, he arranged for the donation. On February 15, a crew, including two climbers, spent a very full day at the Society. Not only did they prune both red oaks, they pruned a nearby white pine and a large privet bush as well as a crabapple tree (planted by the garden

club 50 years ago!). The firm's arborists also did a major pruning of the large Norway maple by the garage and of the sizable zelkova (another CP&GC tree) at the end of the driveway. Hartney Greymont's thoughtful donation is a gift of light that will make the grounds of the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House even more beautiful in the growing seasons to come.



## From the President By Charlie Allen

Your Cambridge Historical Society is having a good year. Just go to our new website, [www.cambridgehistory.org](http://www.cambridgehistory.org), and you'll see an exciting list of programs and upcoming events planned for 2012. I hope you find the site easy to navigate. We feel it's the finest website you could choose to access Cambridge history.

In my mind, the website is an example of our commitment both to "promoting an interest in all aspects of the history and heritage of Cambridge" as well as to using today's technology as a means to make it accessible to all. Check out all the photographs, *The Proceedings*, and see how much of

our collection has been digitized and is now available to you in the comfort of your own home.

We are making a concerted effort to get our message out to the entire city and to increase the Society's membership. This is the second of three newsletters to focus on a particular neighborhood (the others are Cambridgeport and Avon Hill). Extra copies have been printed and will be mailed to nonmembers in the neighborhood with a cover letter and membership envelope. Our membership supports and underwrites everything we do. Thank you for your support.

## Lost Mid-Cambridge

The Robert O. Fuller House (also known as the Valentine-Fuller House) stood at 125 Prospect Street. Robert Fuller was a dealer in iron and steel in Boston, which may explain the suit of armor in his front hall. These c. 1880 images show the Italianate house that was built in 1848 and demolished in 1937. In 1979 the site became home to the second Bread and Circus market, an early natural foods store. Bread and Circus went on to become the largest natural food retailer in the Northeast before it was purchased by Whole Foods in 1992.



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*The Hooper-Lee-Nichols House*

159 Brattle Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

Return Service Requested

### Did you know?

There was once a school in Mid-Cambridge called the Trout Fishing in America Communal School. It was based on the book of the same name by Richard Brautigan.

On November 3, 1969, the *Harvard Crimson* reported:

“A night session two weeks ago at Trout Fishing in America... resulted in a parade Saturday morning from Central Square to the Cambridge Common...”

Parade permit in hand. Trout Fishing members assembled at Trout Fishing headquarters on Prospect Street Saturday morning, then headed for Central Square about 11 a.m.

Exhorting bystanders to join in, the Trout Fishing members started slowly up Mass Ave, in an orderly but distinctive fashion. The size of the parade fluctuated along the route, and 30 hard core Trout Fishermen made it to the Parade’s conclusion in the northwest corner of the Common...

Two rock groups were scheduled to play during the afternoon in the Common, but they didn’t show up. All was not lost, however, as the Zoomobile from the Boston Zoological Society arrived with a complement of 15 captives, ranging from a four-horn sheep to a six-foot boa constrictor.”

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