



The Cambridge Historian

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Observatory Hill / Huron Village Issue

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The Cambridge Historian
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The Evolving Huron Avenue Area By Charles M. Sullivan

Huron Avenue is one of the newest neighborhoods in Cambridge, but it is intimately connected with one of the oldest. The sole example of the classic 19th-century streetcar suburb in Cambridge, it owes its existence to another neighborhood's rejection of that mode of transportation.

The development of Huron Avenue was dictated by the physical geography of Cambridge. The original settlement at today's Harvard Square was bordered by a level plain that ran from Dana Hill to the foot of Avon Hill. A ridge extending from Avon Hill west into Watertown separated the village from Fresh Pond and squeezed the Watertown Road (today's Brattle Street) onto a level route along the Charles River. The two roads that crossed the ridge, Garden Street and Sparks Street-Vassal Lane, dead-ended in the marshes around Fresh Pond.

The initial settlement of this area consisted of homesteads ranging from a quarter of an acre to eight acres in size along Garden and Brattle streets as far west as Sparks Street, which was the boundary with Watertown until 1757. The Watertown lots were divided into long, narrow tracts that gave each farmer portions of salt marsh, meadow, south-facing pasture, north-facing slope, and freshwater wetland. Beginning about 1758,

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Observatory Hill By Gavin W. Kleespies

The area called Observatory Hill has its center at the intersection of Concord and Huron avenues and stretches out to include the Harvard Observatory and surrounding areas.

The eastern half of the neighborhood was once a part of the Vassall estate. The first of the family in Cambridge was John Vassall, who purchased an old mansion and about seven acres of land in 1736 to move closer to his father-in-law, Lieutenant Governor Spencer Phips. In 1741, he sold this estate to his brother, Henry Vassall, who added to the house. Although it is unclear how much of the original structure that John Vassall purchased is still standing, the home Henry Vassall lived in remains today at 94 Brattle Street.



OBSERVATORY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Harvard Observatory Postcard, from the CHS Postcard Collection

In 1759 John Vassall's son, also named John Vassall, built what is today 105 Brattle Street (the Longfellow House) and began amassing a large estate. At its height, John Vassall's estate encompassed almost 100 acres from the banks of the Charles to Garden Street. Although it is difficult to be certain about how the land was used, it appears that much of this land was not farmed but served mainly for the entertainment of the family

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A Mystery Lingers over Huron Avenue By Michael Kenney

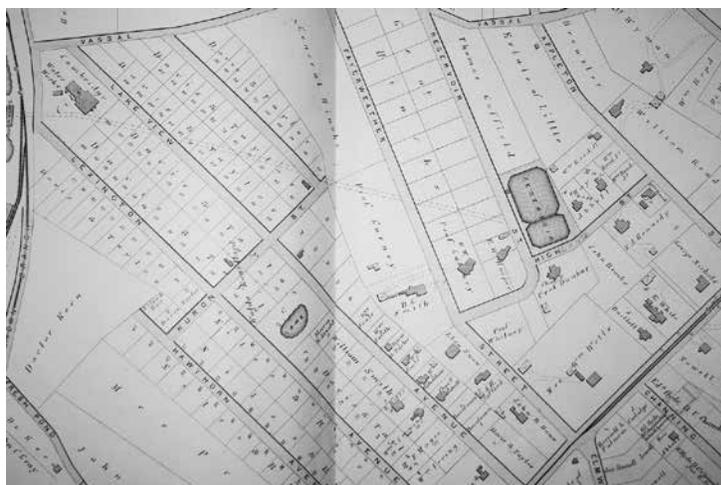
Cambridge’s streets have histories and stories, just as the city itself does. And among those stories, Huron Avenue is one of the richest – and one with a bit of mystery.

There are three main sources for these histories. The detailed records compiled by Lewis M. Hastings, the city engineer from 1889 to 1932, frequently identify for whom a street was named. Those published in 2005 by Christopher Hail, a librarian at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, also include the records of every building along every street. And “Streets and Ways,” the updated records published by the City Engineer’s office, provides the dates that succeeding sections of a street – six in the case of Huron Avenue – were laid out, along with their widths and lengths.

These sources are now being compiled and edited for publication online by the Cambridge Historical Commission.

According to Hastings, the initial section extended from “near Hawthorne Avenue [now Grozier Road] to near what [was then] known as Standish Street.” The name first appears on a subdivision plan to link Lexington and Lake View avenues, filed in 1871 by the developers, Person Davis, T. Alfred Taylor, and Reuben Demmon. It then appears on the Hopkins map of 1873.

Augmenting such records are the lively *Cambridge Chronicle* accounts from the late



From the 1873 Hopkins atlas of Cambridge, from the CHS Map Collection

1800s. In November 1872, reporting on a proposal to widen and extend what was then known as Huron Street, the *Chronicle* opined that “such an avenue could not fail to improve the value of property in this region.”

But in December 1891 the *Chronicle* reported that “the only apparent hitch in the proposed widening and extension... is in fixing the character and size of a curve at the junction of Sparks Street and Vassal Lane.” The original plan “would obliterate a row of spruce or pine trees which... [Morrill] Wyman planted himself and which form a shelter to the house from the bleak north winds.” But, the *Chronicle* went on, “the matter can and will be adjusted, probably to the satisfaction of all concerned.”

To the mystery: The name of the street was changed to Huron Avenue in 1894. However, the records give no clue to who gave it the name of “Huron” in the first place – or why.

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The Fayerweather Street School

Cambridge is a national leader in historic preservation, and some of the best examples involve adaptive re-use. One property in Huron Village is an example of this technique.

The lot was first offered for sale in June 1852 by William G. Stearns, who bought 40 acres of the Ruggles-Fayerweather estate and hired the surveyor Alexander Wadsworth to lay out a residential subdivision. A local politician and Civil War general, Edward W. Hincks purchased 35 of these lots in 1872, but, during his life, they remained largely vacant. The laying out of Huron Avenue opened the area to intensive development. By 1910, the city's population was booming and the builder Bernard Rice bought this property and a number of small plots. He put up two-family houses on lower Fayerweather Street between 1910 and 1913 and lived at 74 Fayerweather. Behind his own house he erected a two-story garage for 35 automobiles, the first building on this site.

Longtime resident Sue Poverman remembered, "My family moved to Fayerweather Street in 1937 and, having no garage, arranged to keep our car in the Fayerweather Garage... Someone picked up our car every evening and returned it in the morning. The large utilitarian garage was a rather dank building due to a stream running



Fayerweather Street School, 2007. (Lewis Bushnell)

beneath it that one could see through the floorboards."

The building was purchased in 1968 by the Fayerweather Street School, which had opened the previous year as a progressive alternative elementary school. The garage was demolished, and a new, reinforced concrete building was finished in 1969. Clad in brick and glass, it was two stories tall over a high basement. In keeping with the school's philosophy, sometimes called the Open Classroom or Open Education movement, the architects William Barton and Kenneth Redmond designed the internal space with movable partitions that allowed teachers and students to organize the large spaces as desired. A third floor containing a gym was added in 1987 as the school grew.

When it became necessary for the school to expand further, the property was put on the market. The Landers, who were parents of a student at the school, were fascinated by the possibility of saving the building and changing it from a school to a home. They worked with the architect Maryann Thompson and designed a total renovation, retaining only the third floor and the concrete staircase as they were. They have given this building a new life and have created a wonderful home that is full of light and delight.

Growing Up on Observatory Hill by Rolf Goetze

As a youngster, I remember tricycling among the trees and bushes at the Harvard Botanical Gardens, off Linnaean Street, before they turned into Harvard apartments. Back then, in the early 1940s, I also recall sledding down Observatory Hill, cluttered by neither trees nor buildings – a site now covered by tennis courts, the Harvard Dance Center, and the more recent Smithsonian Astrophysical Center structures.

In the observatory, the women seeking the planet Pluto on star photos regularly gave me back issues of *Sky and Telescope*, so I could mosaic the slanted dormer over my bed with superb moon photos — the magazine's back covers for a number of years.

I also recall spending many hours with a friend in a grand historic house at the corner of Garden and Madison streets, where an artist worked and Irish maids brought us snacks as we played. Gardner Cox was that artist.

Years later, I learned from his 1988 New York Times obituary that Mr. Cox painted several members of the Supreme Court, including Earl Warren, Felix Frankfurter, Potter Stewart, and Byron R. White. Among his other subjects were the poet Robert Frost and government figures including Robert

F. Kennedy, Dean Acheson, and Dean Rusk, as well as businessmen and educators.

At that age, I neither knew who the artist was painting nor the reason the quiet adjacent streets on which I learned to bicycle were called Gray Gardens East and West, nor even that my home address, 97 Garden Street, in the middle of the block abounding with orchard trees, had any historical significance.

More than a century earlier Asa Gray, the eminent Harvard botanist, lived in Gardner Cox's fine house. Before it was moved across the street from 79 Garden Street, this grand house was surrounded by extensive gardens, stretching from Linnaean and Raymond streets up to the Huron Avenue ridge joining Avon Hill to Observatory Hill, with Garden Street passing through on its way to connect Harvard Square to Fresh Pond. Gray was one of the leading American scientists, a confidant of Darwin, and involved in one of the greatest scholarly battles in 19th-century science with another Cambridge resident, Louis Agassiz. In the next issue of the Cambridge Historian, I will explore the legacy of Asa Gray and the tumultuous relationship between Gray and Agassiz.

Observatory Hill *continued*

and friends of the Vassalls; it once contained a summer home on top of Observatory Hill. However, John Vassall, like his Brattle Street neighbors, was a Tory, an Anglican, and loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolution. His estate was seized and became the headquarters of General Washington during the Siege of Boston.

After the Revolution, much of this estate was purchased by Andrew Craigie, who built the Canal Bridge (roughly where the Museum of Science is today) and developed East Cambridge before bankruptcy and scandal forced him to live out the end of his days as a recluse.

Just east of Observatory Hill was a free, self-sufficient African American community, known as Lewisville, from the beginning of the 19th century. This settlement was roughly between Concord Avenue, Garden Street, and Shepard Street. Some of the residents were the descendants of slaves of the Vassall family, and by the middle of the 19th century, some had become political. In the early 1850s, Adam Lewis joined the abolitionist colony at Dawn, Ontario, and in 1858 Enoch Lewis led a group of 23 members of the Cambridge Liberian Emigrant Association to settle in St. Paul's River in Liberia.

Garden Street was an early road that was, in part, known as the Way to the Great Swamp. It was later renamed to mark the site of Harvard's Botanical Gardens, which were tended to by Asa Gray, the famous American botanist and the namesake of Gray Gardens East and West. Concord Avenue was laid out in 1803 as the Concord Turnpike and run as a toll road by the West Boston Bridge Company. The turnpike was designed to funnel traffic toward the bridge (roughly at the site of today's Longfellow Bridge). The West Boston Bridge Company stopped charging tolls in 1829.

The area remained largely undeveloped until the mid nineteenth century. This began to change when Harvard College purchased farmland in the mid 1840s for its observatory. The first observatory (1843) was designed by Isaiah Rogers, although only a portion of the original structure remains.

A Reservoir's Wall on Reservoir Street by Michael Kenney

On a summer day, the passerby on Reservoir Street will find an embankment of wildflowers and shrubs filling the slope behind a massive granite retaining wall.

That wall, broken at one point by a driveway rising and turning out of sight, is what remains of the reservoir that supplied water to Cambridge homes for nearly a half-century. None of the houses on the nearby streets had been built when the reservoir was constructed.

By the 1850s, Cambridge had outgrown its patchwork water supply, which depended largely on wells. The Cambridge Water Works, a private company, was chartered to build a distribution system, and by 1855 it had a pumping station on the shore of Fresh Pond. From it, a 12-inch pipe climbed some 73 feet to the reservoir, which had a capacity of 1.7 million gallons. The company was not a success, and in 1867 the city took it over and expanded the reservoir with a second chamber alongside the first. The foundation of that reservoir is what we see today.



Reservoir wall, 2013 by Gavin Kleespies

But by the 1880s, Cambridge – and its need for water – was growing, prompting the city to acquire watershed land in towns to the west.

With oratorical flourish, Mayor William Russell described the future of city water in 1887:

“Old Fresh Pond, that has been giving to us almost [all] of her life-blood, feels today the impulse of renewed vigor, and knows that in her days of exhaustion and seeming old age, there stand behind her the hills of Weston, from whose gentle slopes the rains of Heaven shall flow to give her unflinching strength and perennial youth.”

Russell then intoned a familiar sentiment: “The springs of the hills have come unto us to refresh us.”

After the Stony Brook-Payson Park system was functioning in 1897, the city dismantled the reservoir. The entire lot reverted to the heirs of its prior owner and was sold to a former mayor, Alvin F. Sortwell, who built a large house that was taken down in 1948. By 1958, three modern houses stood on the site.

In 2006, an abutting homeowner acquired part of the still-empty reservoir site to prevent the construction of several houses. After studying the matter, the Historical Commission approved a curb-cut to provide access through the lot and decided that action “to designate the property as a protected landmark” was not necessary, given “the owner’s willingness to maintain and protect the wall in its current configuration.” The owner’s landscape architect, Alice Pickman, designed the present wildflower meadow.

Huron Village's Modern Houses By Heli Meltsner

Although Huron Village is dominated by houses dating from after the Civil War to the first quarter of the twentieth century, it is actually well furnished with what are still called “modern” houses. We say “modern,” although these four examples were built nearly half a century to three quarters of a century ago. Three were the architect’s own house or for his parents, a time-tested method of introducing a difficult new style into a neighborhood.

The oldest, 45 Fayerweather Street (1940), was designed by Walter Bogner, a Harvard Graduate School of Design faculty member. The clients were the Harvard mathematics professor Garrett Birkhoff and his wife, Ruth, a talented gardener. In the new International Style brought to Cambridge by Harvard School of Architecture



45 Fayerweather Street, 2012. Courtesy of Brattle Real Estate.

professors Joseph Hudnut and Walter Gropius in the late 1930s, it was constructed in warm red bricks recycled from a demolished Beacon Hill residence. The house turns its back on the street to open with glass walls to the lot’s secluded and beautifully landscaped backyard. This private space used the stone foundations of the site’s previous house to define a generous sunken garden.

David Fixler, an authority on midcentury modernism, has called the house “simultaneously austere and sumptuous” and believes it “occupies a unique niche in the history of early modernism in New England.” This year, the Birkhoff house was given Landmark status by the City Council – along with a very different neighbor, the 1882 Colonial Revival house at 28 Fayerweather Street.



26 Reservoir Road, 1968. (R. B. Rettig) Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission.

The house at 26 Reservoir Street (1955) was designed by Frederic Coolidge for his parents. Nestled into its corner lot and now screened by mature plantings, the informal look of the house is achieved by its matchboard vertical siding, a low-

pitched gable roof, and a comfortable relation to its site. Like the other homes here, walls of glass unite the house with a private garden at the rear. One year later, James C.

Hopkins Jr. designed his own house at 5 Hemlock Road (1956) in much the same style, using the shallow gable roof and large-paned windows set flush with the siding, but this time employing deep, overhanging eaves. Now altered, it has lost some of the delicacy of the original design.

Last, Kenneth Redmond’s own house at 11 Reservoir Street (1965) uses varied massing but organizes it into a tightly controlled series of blocks and stacked cubes. The two-story building has an obvious basement garage entered from the front, leaving the back garden open to a delightful swath of view.

These represent but a sample of the International Style and midcentury modern houses in Cambridge. Other notable houses of the period in West Cambridge include the quite early (1937) 22 Follen Street by Carlton D. Richmond Jr. and 4 Buckingham Street (1937) by Carl Koch and E. D. Stone, now altered with a mansarded third floor; the hidden 9 Ash

Street (1941) by Philip Johnson; the seminal prefabricated Techbuilt 23 Lexington Avenue (1954) by Carl Koch and Associates; a former garage turned into a house by Paul Rudolph at 144

Upland Road (1957); 64 Highland Street (1963) by F. F. Bruck; 4 Kennedy Road (1966) by Deck Associates; and 199 Brattle Street (1966) by Hugh Stubbins. Many of these replaced older houses on the site. For a fairly dense city, Huron Village and West Cambridge boast an impressive number and variety of Modernist houses. And the impulse to build and live in a contemporary style has not disappeared, as new homes featuring simplicity, lots of glass, open planning, and contemporary technologies continue to make intriguing new living spaces.



5 Hemlock Road, September 1968. Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission.



11 Reservoir Road, 1968. (R. Cheek) Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission.

Huron Avenue *Continued from page 1*

these farms attracted Boston merchants and West Indian planters looking for rural retreats, and their mansions gave the area its nickname, Tory Row.

After the Revolution, most of the Tory estates were sold to patriots who continued the luxurious lifestyles of their predecessors. The construction of the Cambridge Railroad, a horse-drawn streetcar line, down Brattle Street in 1856 enhanced the value of the estates by making them more accessible to Boston. The owners began to subdivide their properties but were not very successful until the 1880s. Even then, only the south-facing slopes found favor with the new homeowners.

In September 1889 the city unveiled a plan to open the north-slope pastures to suburban development. A new road, Huron Avenue, would run from Concord Avenue to the Watertown Branch of the Fitchburg Railroad, near Fresh Pond, incorporating the east end of Vassal Lane and an existing cross street between Standish Street and Grozier Road. The landowners along the route agreed to grade the new street and to turn it over to the city as a public way.

The development of the north slope was facilitated by the introduction of electric propulsion for streetcars between Harvard Square and Boston in 1889. The early electric cars were extremely noisy, fast, and disruptive, and Brattle Street homeowners mobilized their considerable clout to block the electrification of their horse-drawn line. The Cambridge aldermen supported the project, but Governor William E. Russell, a Brattle Street resident, blocked it in 1893. Mayor William A. Bancroft, who later became president of the street railway company, worked out a compromise that involved laying tracks on both Mount Auburn Street and Huron Avenue and abandoning the Brattle Street line in 1894.

The new car line allowed the area to become a classic streetcar suburb. The north slope pastures of the old Lechmere and Lee estates were developed by builders who subdivided large tracts, laid out streets, and built large numbers of nearly identical two-family houses for sale to workingmen. For example, Enos Comeau acquired 57,000 square feet at the corner of Huron Avenue and Appleton Street, laid out Appleton Road, subdivided the land into twelve lots, and in 1915-16 built six two-family houses ranging from \$5,000 to \$7,000. Similarly, in 1917 the builder Jacob Sorkin put up four almost identical houses on the opposite side of Appleton Street.

The north end of the old Fayerweather estate, including several clay pits between Huron Avenue and Vassal Lane, had been subdivided for over twenty years when General Edward Hincks bought thirty-five vacant house lots in 1872. A highly decorated Civil War veteran, he had lived in the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House (today owned by the Cambridge Historical Society) after marrying Elizabeth Nichols in 1883, but moved to Huron Avenue after her



General Edward Hincks, c. 1865

death. In 1892 Hincks built a substantial Colonial Revival house at the northwest corner of Fayerweather and Huron, but it stood alone among the cornfields until well after the opening of the Huron Avenue car line.

Other builders filled the streets north of Huron with two-family houses and three-deckers until the neighborhood was substantially complete by the Depression. Today, Reservoir Hill remains the social watershed that divides the Brattle Street neighborhood from the streetcar suburbs reached by the Huron Avenue trolley line.

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Save the Date, Send the Photos, and Buy the Book

The Cambridge Historical Society has undertaken an ambitious project to document the preservation movement in our city. How has Cambridge been able to be a national leader in historic preservation while having the development pressure of being home to some of the most expensive commercial real estate in America? What is in danger in Cambridge, and what would change the character of the city if it were lost? All of these questions will be addressed in a book, an event, and an exhibit this fall.

The Book: *Saving Cambridge* is a history of the preservation movement in our city. Who's been involved? What has been saved? What has fallen through the cracks? All these questions and more will be answered in our book, due out this fall.

Daphne Abeel

Daphne Abeel was the first editor and an enthusiastic supporter of the Cambridge Historical Society's newsletter,



She died on March 2 while visiting her brother and his family in Portland, Oregon. The Winter issue, which contained her final article, was at the printer's when news of her death was received. A memorial celebration will be held this fall at the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House.

Creating and editing a newsletter for the Society was an obvious task for Daphne. She was a member of Radcliffe College's class of 1959 and graduated that year from Barnard College. She had a long career in publishing at Houghton Mifflin and

Seeking Old Photographs of Magazine Beach

A preservation project is under way for the derelict gunpowder magazine in Cambridge. Built in 1818, it was renovated into a bathhouse in 1899.

The Event: The Preservation Celebration will be held at the Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center on November 13, 2013, the 50th anniversary of the first meeting of the Cambridge Historical Commission. It will celebrate the work of the Commission and all the other groups that have helped preserve Cambridge.

The Exhibit: We will be mounting an exhibit, "50 for 50," at the Multicultural Arts Center from October 24 through November 22. It will show 50 images submitted to our photo contest that best complete the sentence "Cambridge wouldn't be Cambridge without..." If you would like to submit an image or learn more, please visit:

www.cambridgehistory.org/50for50.

Crown Publishers and with her own firm, Abeel & Leet. She was also an editor at the *Needham Chronicle* and the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*. An accomplished pianist, she was often joined by neighbors for chamber music recitals.

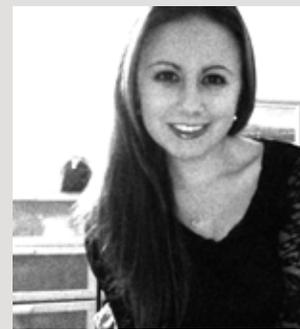
The first issue of the Society's *Newtowne Chronicle*, as it was initially known, appeared in 2001 and featured Daphne's article on Peter Tufts, the surveyor of her own Cambridgeport neighborhood. After stepping down as editor, Daphne continued to write for the newsletter. Her final article was an account of Andrew Craigie's role in the development of East Cambridge.

We seek images of the building from the 19th century, preferably before its collapse ca. 1883. Please email ninascohen@yahoo.com.

Interns and Volunteers



Lucy Caplan, a recent graduate of Harvard, will be attending Yale in the fall. Over the summer of 2013 she was our Cambridge Heritage Trust Intern and created and presented an original walking tour, "Cambridge Through the Pages." This tour explores how Cambridge has been a setting for and a character in numerous literary and poetic works.



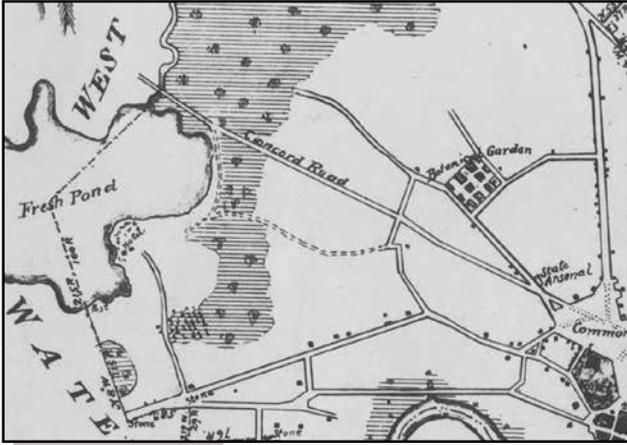
Amber Dargenio is at Wellesley College studying History and Anthropology. She worked with us over the

summer, helping us make our journal, *The Proceedings*, available to the public online. We have digitized the full run and have uploaded volumes 1-25. Check them out at www.cambridgehistory.org/content/proceedings.



Chalaya Greene, a recent graduate of UMass Boston with a degree in History, has been volunteering in the office to learn how public history institutions function and what our day-to-day operations are like.

The Development of Observatory Hill and Huron Village



Plan of
Cambridge by
Jonathan Hale,
1830

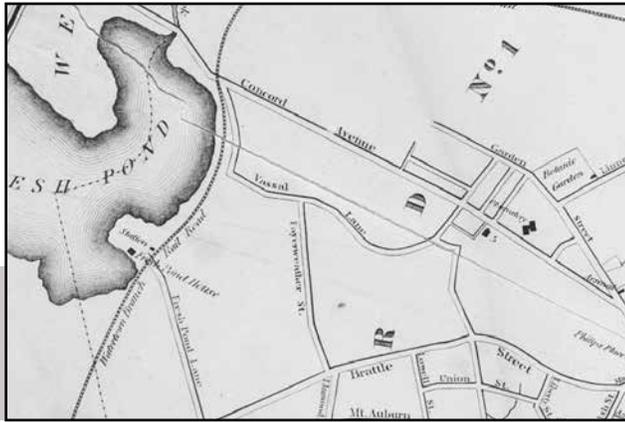


Plan of Cambridge by
W. A. Mason & son,
1878

Map of the City of
Cambridge by W. A.
Greenough & Co.,
1896



Map of the City
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The Inventor Down the Street

Bob Doyle is probably Huron Avenue's most prolific inventor. From 1968 to 1973, he was the director of the Harvard College Observatory and later worked for NASA. While making a name for himself in the field of astrophysics, Doyle also pursued his creative side. In 1973 he and two partners created Super 8 Sound, which allowed Kodak's Super 8 film to be synced with an audio recorder, creating the first affordable home movie recorder with sound. Later, with his wife Holly, and one of his partners from Super 8 Sound, he created 25 electronic games, 6 of which were published by the toy and game manufacturer Parker Brothers. In 1978, *Newsweek* featured Doyle's most famous game, Merlin on its cover, which landed Merlin on top of the the list of the Toy Manufacturers of America's 1980 bestselling games, with 2.2 million sold. Many children who grew up in the 80s remember playing Bob Doyle's games.

For more information on Cambridge inventions, visit:
www.cambridgehistory.org/discover/innovation