



The Cambridge Historian

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Avon Hill: A Rose by Any Other Name

By Daphne Abeel

At some 80 feet, Avon Hill holds a certain pride of place in Cambridge. However, unlike neighborhoods such as Cambridgeport, which have names with a clear history, the name Avon Hill is a bit of a mystery.

This issue of the *The Cambridge Historian* presents a snapshot of the Avon Hill neighborhood, with articles on an ancient landmark, a made-for-television restoration project, the workings of the Neighborhood Conservation District, a place of deadly ends, and neighborhood traditions.



View up Washington Avenue, from *The Cambridge of 1896*.
Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission.

The architectural crown is Washington Avenue, notable for its array of late-19th-century mansions, “splendid throughout its length,” said the authors of the Historical Commission’s *Survey of Architectural History*, noting the “clarity and openness,” as seen in this c.1895 photograph. The *Survey*’s authors remarked that with its 70-foot roadway and building setbacks of 50 feet or more, neighboring Walnut

Avenue “seems to have been conceived as an oasis of fine mansions.”

But this area was not always so desirable. It was the outskirts of town for early Cantabrigians and was slow to be developed. In fact, the only residence on the 1854 Walling map is that of W. A. Mason, himself a mapmaker, which still stands at the corner of what is now Raymond and Bellevue streets. The network of nearby streets was developed during the 1880s by his son, C. A. Mason. (See page 5.)

But what about the name? Avon Street appears on maps before Avon Hill Street and before the hill is given that name. A look at the street names might give us a clue to the origin of the neighborhood nomenclature.

Avon Street originally bent and extended to North Avenue (Mass. Ave. today). In 1852, when it was extended to Garden Street, it was renamed Shepard Street. This recalled a sectarian controversy of some 40 years earlier. Thomas Shepard was a major figure in early Cambridge history; he was the second minister of the Puritan meeting house in Cambridge and an early leader at Harvard. When sectarian controversies split the Cambridge church in the early 1800s, 150 years after his death, the more conservative faction named itself the Shepard Congregational Society (eventually becoming the Congregationalists).

As the area continued to develop, Avon Street was extended up the hill and the new section was named Avon Hill Street. Is this the root of the neighborhood name?

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My Days at the Cooper-Frost-Austin House

By Brian Powell, Resident Overseer

The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, today’s Historic New England, bought the Cooper-Frost-Austin House in 1912, and the first Resident Overseers moved in. Now, exactly one hundred years later, that person is me. As any lover of local history can imagine, it is a joy to live here.

I first saw the house as a young man, when I worked on its chimney. The stack below the roof line is original and was laid up in primitive “clay mortar,” which has no binding lime; little lime was available in the area in 1681, when Samuel Cooper and his wife, Lydia Kidder, built the house. It works if you keep it dry. But after almost three hundred years, the attic section was a mess.

Hoping to preserve it, the seminal SPNEA architectural conservator Morgan Phillips designed a system to add strength but not change its powdery, dry appearance. Our R&D included my making perhaps the largest hot water bottle ever out of fiberglass cloth and resin to get the masonry up to the temperature for the consolidant to cure. But it didn’t work. We finally hit on a system to fill the void between our hot pad and the brick with sand. That didn’t work, either, and explains the present steel reinforcing girdle.

Most of Cooper-Frost’s visitors are neighbors, preservation students, or members of Historic

New England. We also get a small but steady stream of descendants, some of whom have been among my most memorable visitors. I once gave a tour to a Cooper from Colorado who had heard as a girl that there was an ancient Cooper house somewhere but had thought it lore until she got on the Internet and found us. Her son-in-law was running in the Boston Marathon that year, so he, she, and her daughter made the trip east for the run and the tour. They were delightful.



c. 1900, photographer unknown; CHS Image Collection

I have also had Frosts. One day I came home to find two Californians sitting on the steps, poring over an old book that turned out to be a Frost Genealogy published in the 1920s. It indicated that a tour would be starting soon. I explained that the guide who would have given that tour was long dead and that the schedule had changed, but I decided to show them my side of the house, the only time I ever gave a tour without first cleaning the space.

A number of exciting things have been discovered about the house in the time I’ve been here. A few years ago, an extremely talented HNE craftsman carefully eased back a corner post casing in the southwest chamber to prove, as we had thought, that it was hiding a splayed (wider at the top) and chamfered (the outside corner planed back) post. And in the parlor below we confirmed, also by easing back the

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A Dead-End that Led to a Deadly End by Michael Kenney

Unless you have a parking space in Stone Court, chances are you have driven right past it, heading up Massachusetts Avenue toward Porter Square.

But in olden times you would have shuddered as you passed by and perhaps felt a chill, because then it was known as “The Way to Gallows Hill.”

As one of the four towns in the Bay Colony where courts were held, Cambridge had not only a courthouse and a house of correction but also a place of execution.

In the Cambridge Historical Society’s *Proceedings* for 1923, historian Thomas Francis O’Malley wrote that “here as elsewhere,” the place of execution “was located upon the common land and a bit removed from the more thickly settled part of the community.” It was reached “by a bridle path or cart way from the Great County Road.” The gallows itself probably stood near what is now 15-19 Lancaster St.

“It is perhaps not too much to say,” O’Malley wrote, “that all of the executions ordered in Middlesex County took place on this lot until 1817,” when the East Cambridge jail was built. The earliest was likely that of Goody Kendall,

probably by 1701. As the court records put it, Kendall “did bewitch to death a child of Goodman Genings [probably Robert or Samuel Jennings].”

The best known executions were those in 1755 of Mark and Phillis, two slaves accused in the death by poisoning of Captain John Codman, a Charlestown merchant whose “rigid discipline” they had found “unendurable.” Phillis,

as was customary, was strangled and her body burned. Mark was hanged and his body suspended in irons on a gibbet along what is now Washington Street in Somerville, near the Charlestown line. Paul Revere, on his famous ride of April 1775, recalled

passing “nearly opposite where Mark was hung in chains.”

The last known execution on Gallows Hill took place in 1817 and was witnessed by the seven-year-old Oliver Wendell Holmes, who “received a vigorous scolding as a result.”

The haunted history of Gallows Hill apparently did not deter Anson Stone, the treasurer of the Mercantile Savings Bank, from building his house in 1847 at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and “The Way to Gallows Hill,” which now carries his name. The house was razed in 1936, and the dead-end Stone Court is a private parking lot.



The Stone Court street sign, from the Cambridge Historical Commission Collection; photo by Gavin Kleespijs

Trick-or-Treating on Avon Hill by Zelda Lacoss

Growing up in the 1990s on Upland Road, I did what most children did and trick-or-treated around my neighborhood. There used to be a lot of kids running around in costumes asking people for candy. There were always one or two people who would leave a bowl outside their door with a sign to just take one, which most kids ignored. So if you got to those houses too late, all that would be left were the Tootsie Rolls, which few kids liked.

As I got older, fewer of the kids who lived in our area went out trick-or-treating, and there would be more leftover candy at my house. When we got into high school, there were some who still went out trick-or-treating and some who decided to just stay home. I still went out, as I had friends who were a few years younger than me.

There was this house on Huron Avenue that always has blow-up holiday figures on the lawn. One year for Halloween they had this bubble machine that spat out a stream of orange bubbles.

One of the houses I remember had set up a rig with a cloth ghost that would come down toward you as you opened the gate on Bellevue Avenue. Then you had to walk past the fake cobwebs and over to a giant cauldron thing that had the candy. They would dress themselves up to blend in with the atmosphere.

When I got older, the people who lived there stopped all of that. While they still handed out candy, the part that made it more fun and scary was gone.



Zelda Lacoss and her brother, courtesy of the Lacoss family

The Avon Hill Neighborhood Conservation District

By Heli Meltsner

In 1997, a group of Avon Hill residents became concerned about encroachments and alterations that marred the character of the area's historic houses and discussed how the neighborhood might be protected. As a result, the City appointed architect Anthony Platt, Charles Sullivan and Sally Zimmerman of the Cambridge Historical Commission, and neighborhood residents to examine the area's development and historic architecture.

The committee selected a relatively new mechanism to guide future building and renovation: the Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD), a designation similar to historic districts but with more flexible regulations. The boundaries were selected as Raymond Street, Upland Road, Linnaean Street, and Mass. Ave.; 220 properties fell within this area. The commercial buildings on Mass. Ave. and the brick apartment buildings on Linnaean were excluded because they differed in size, material, and design.

The committee surveyed the residents and held public meetings, and in time addressed the issues they cared about most: a walkable area, pleasant streetscapes, a sense of open space, density, and architectural integrity.

The district order, finalized in June 1998, was written to guide any renovations visible from a public way and preserve the neighborhood's architecture and landscapes. It gave developers guidelines for new buildings that would continue the tradition of allowing views through lots and maintain appropriate density. Properties in the Avon Hill National Register Historic District, which includes Washington and Walnut avenues and Agassiz, Humboldt, Arlington, and Lancaster streets, were given greater protection.

From 1998 to 2005, the Avon Hill NCD Commission held public hearings and determined if proposed changes met the criteria for appropriate renovation, additions, new construction, and demolition. Fences that exceeded

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Cooper-Frost-Austin *(continued from page 2)*

boards, that the casings on the summer beam and chimney girt were original, a controversial topic among the tiny group of people who care about such things.

Historic New England's stewardship of the property has been very conservative; it has made as few changes as possible while making sure to keep the water out. That has preserved much early material that might have been lost in the type of aggressive restoration that was often done in the early 20th century. But in any dwelling you sometimes have to do work. During my time that has included the near complete replacement of the plumbing pipes, or, as I experienced it, a radical plumbectomy.

But in the kitchen and both bathrooms, east and west, only one fixture had to be replaced. So I still get to enjoy the old clawfoot tub.

The most noteworthy change during my time initially confused some of the neighbors. The rear lot had grown into a thicket of mostly Norway maples. It was picturesque, but it crowded out everything else and was poor landscape management. HNE took out the invaders and all the dead or dying trees (a selective arborectomy). We still have the sugar maples, two walnuts, an ash, a horse chestnut, and one brave American elm. But we now also have apples, birches, and witch hazel. In another ten years, it will be one of the most lovely stands of trees in the city.

My most emotionally difficult moment also happened on the lawn. When I moved in, there was an ancient and remarkable oak tree in back of the house; it was so large that three people could barely join hands around it. Few trees grow to be

so majestic. But the clock is always ticking for any tree, and the oak reached the end of its healthy life and began to endanger the house. When a huge limb fell on a windless day, its removal was cinched. I'm still moving through stages of grief.

I am also happy for the opportunity to tout our new wood shingle roof and copper work, which were beautifully designed and executed. When the removal of the present roofing confirmed the survival of an astounding number of original roof sheathing boards, including those that show the infill of the original 1681 façade gable, HNE realized that it had the same problem. Rather than nail the new shingles to the antique



1901, by Lois Lilley Howe; L. L. Howe Collection

sheathing, a series of strapping strips were screwed on and the new shingles nailed to them. No new roofing nails will ever go into the old boards. It raised the roof surface appreciably in relation to the raking gable trim – but I bet you can't tell.

You are right to pity us for having to heat the house in the winter. It is open on the inside from the first floor to the attic (an accident of restoration that doesn't reflect any time before it was a museum). So we wear sweaters. But we make it up in the summer when we have probably the coolest building without air conditioning in Cambridge. The house was built with brick "nogging," nonstructural masonry between the framing members on the exterior walls. Without the clapboards, it would look just like some English half-timbered house, to which it is a close cousin. All of that brick gives the house enormous thermal mass and keeps us cool in August.

I won't be at Cooper-Frost forever, but even in my dotage I'll never forget how great it's been.

An Old House for a Modern Family by Michael Kenney

Sally Peterson recalls that some 20 years ago, she and her roommate at Tufts took a very long hike that led them to Avon Hill, and she remembers saying how much she'd like to live there. As this issue of *The Cambridge Historian* goes to press, she and her husband, John Stone, and their two young daughters are preparing to do just that – but not until *This Old House* audiences see the televised makeover of their new home.

The house, a two-and-a-half-story Queen Anne at 23 Bellevue Ave., traces its roots back to the late-1800s development of the neighborhood, then known as Cambridge Heights, by W. A. Mason and his son, C. A. Mason. The older Mason, a civil engineer and surveyor, drafted a detailed map of Cambridge in 1849. He lived in a house he had built in 1846-47 at 87 Raymond St.

After his death in 1882, his son began selling off building lots along Bellevue Street – which the older Mason had named, according to Lewis M. Hastings's history of street names, “as being expressive of his opinion of the landscape as seen from this street.”

As the *Cambridge Tribune* reported in 1889, “Mr. Mason has been doing a good thing for Cambridge Heights, and at the same time making a fair investment for himself, by opening up a tract of his land between Raymond and Avon Hill streets. As a result of his enterprise, seven medium-class houses have been built upon the land.”

One of them is at 23 Bellevue Ave., built in 1887 as a two-family house for E. E. Twitchell, a furniture dealer.

By the time the house came on the market in 2011, its interior had been greatly altered. The kitchen was on the second floor, and many of the original details had been lost.

“From the second we walked in” as prospective buyers,

Avon Hill (continued from page 1)

Washington and Mount Vernon streets both honor the nation's first president; Bates Street, an early landowner; Linnaean, the botanist; Gray Gardens East and West, Asa Gray and the Botanical Garden he created; and Raymond Street, Zebina L. Raymond, the city's mayor in 1855 and 1864.

The collection of “Avon” names – Avon Street, Avon Hill Street, Avon Place, and the hill itself – is open to speculation. The connection to Shakespeare's river seemed dubious to

Peterson said, “we knew that for us to live there with two young children,” a lot of work needed to be done. And right from the start, they knew that they would make a pitch to *This Old House*, which they had been watching for years on WGBH.

“And the stars were aligned,” she said. The show's producers were scoping out a project for the 2012 season. The house on Bellevue was accepted from some 200 candidates to become only the second makeover in Cambridge since the program began 33 years ago.

Timing was an issue – the family was still living on Montgomery Street – and “we felt that with *This Old House*, the work would be finished on time and the quality would be better than what we could do on our own. We wanted a contemporary feel, but with the

quality of an old house.”

Tom Silva, the general contractor and a longtime member of the crew, gave this writer a tour of the project in early September.

All the exterior work, including the yellow paint color, had to win approval from the Cambridge Historical Commission, as the house is in the Avon Hill Neighborhood Conservation District – which it did, Silva said, even to the replacements for original features that could not be reused. At a Springfield salvage company he found nearly identical posts for the front porch and swapped them for the originals. The original front door was kept, but moved six inches to the right to give the front hall a better path toward the rear of the house.

Inside, Silva noted such state-of-the-art heating and cooling features that would normally be found in a brand-new house. And when the family moves in, in time for Thanksgiving, it will be something, Peterson said, “for a modern family to live in for a good long time.”

Laura Dubley Saunderson, who grew up on the hill. As she noted in an October 1960 article in the Society's *Proceedings*, “I have been unable to learn what lover of the English bard named the hill for his river.” But, she concluded, “the name Avon Hill is attractive and appropriate, but too many Avons have sometimes caused difficulty,” especially with the post office. In the end, the answer to who chose the name may be lost to history, but it is certainly more attractive to potential residents than Gallows Hill.



This Old House experts in front of the Cambridge 2012 project house. Pictured, from left: Landscape contractor Roger Cook, plumbing and heating expert Richard Trethewey, master carpenter Norm Abram, host Kevin O'Connor, general contractor Tom Silva. Photograph by Matt Kalinowski

CHS Interns and Volunteers



Sharon Miller developed and led a tour.



Zelda Lacoss helped with events and files.



Elizabeth Packer researched the Revolution.



Pooja Sen digitized our postcards.



Kristen Saucier designed websites.



Kait Gilpen is researching immigration.

Cambridge's Majestical Force by Gabriel Robinson

“Energy!” calls choreographer Brandi Hood. “Entertain!” Eleven pairs of feet step, jump, and turn in time to calypso rhythms. The girls and young women practicing in the late-August evening along the sidewalks of the Walden Square Apartments are part of the parade troupe Majestical Force, the brainchild of longtime resident and community activist Pamela Curtis. Majestical Force is a costume band that performs in the Cambridge Carnival, a festival of Afro-Caribbean music and dance that draws 30,000 visitors each fall.



Waldianika Neptune, Kylé-Simone Armstrong, Cynthia Major, Arasia Ricot, Brandi Hood, Aleyaia Smith, Desiree Campbell, Aliyah Curtis, Amira Ashby, Mayilani Goodridge, Jayanna Johnson, Jaelinn Hood.

The larger bands with which they compete travel an international circuit and spend thousands of dollars on elaborate, commercially produced costumes. Majestical Force is a more local phenomenon. They run on a shoe-string budget, design and sew their own costumes, and direct their considerable energy toward the Cambridge Carnival, where their spirited, crowd-pleasing dance routines help them hold their own among the bigger troupes.

The girls at this evening's practice—about a third of the full troupe—clown and giggle but soon settle into the routine. They practice for two hours, twice a week, throughout the summer. In keeping with the vision of Pam Curtis, who passed away in 2009, these practices give them a safe place to go and an outlet for their energy, as well as instilling pride, self-confidence, and a love of Caribbean culture.

Curtis's son Joseph was killed in 1988. She responded to the tragedy by dedicating herself to protecting and nurturing young people, founding Majestical Force in 1992. Her thirteen-year-old granddaughter Aliyah (Curtis's

daughter's daughter) describes how even after illness kept her in her apartment, Curtis watched over the practices, leaning out of her window with a bullhorn to call out directions. Aliyah stands straight and serious, conscious of the legacy she upholds, but breaks into a smile when she recalls how her grandmother used to hand out popsicles, “people worked for those popsicles,” and ride on the parade truck, blowing bubbles.

Curtis had a way of drawing people in. Majestical Force's continued existence is a testament to her power to involve others in her vision. Brandi Hood, 33, an artist and dancer who teaches at a Boston charter school, began by offering to help with costumes. Now she not only creates the costumes from scratch, she also leads practices, choreographs routines, and works to raise the \$3,000 materials cost by selling T-shirts, snacks, and bottled water. The troupe used to receive funding from Wyndham Development, which runs Walden Square Apartments, but when that dried up last year, “we couldn't let [Majestical Force] die,” says Hood.

Troupe leader Nigel Cooper, 37—also known as DJ King Illabash—is another of Curtis's recruits. The DJ and singer, who holds a music degree from Mount Ida College, was spinning Caribbean beats in a Boston club 10 years ago when Curtis approached him to lead her band. The soft-spoken Cooper chuckles as he remembers his friend. Pam was “loving” but “very firm.” Put her in any situation and “it will be solved.”

Majestical Force participants develop a sense of responsibility toward one another and themselves, says Cooper. Experienced members lead newcomers in learning dance routines. The youth sections range in age from 4 to 16, but everyone brings their best. In the twenty years they have been performing, the troupe has never been late for the start of the parade. This September, presenting the theme of “Lil Ocean Dreams & Jewels of the Caribbean Sea,” Majestical Force stepped out again, leading the way in the Cambridge Carnival.

To see pictures, find out how to participate in or donate to the troupe, search Facebook for “Majestical Force.”

Transition for the Society's President By Gavin W. Kleespies

The Cambridge Historical Society has had a remarkable year. We launched a new website, increased our membership by 25%, and were listed by BuzzFeed as one of the most interesting photo sharing organizations *internationally*. Our three programs on the Inner Belt rank first, second, and third in attendance among CHS programs in the last 20 years, and our Open Archives tours gained national recognition.

Thanks to the generosity of our neighbors, the Kania family, our front fence has been repainted. We are now exploring what it



will take to get the exterior of the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House to look as good as our fence.

While this has been a year of significant accomplishments, it has also been a year of challenges. Our president, Charlie Allen, stepped down due to a family illness. Luckily, we have a strong Council and one of our vice presidents has stepped into the role. The leadership of the Society is now in the capable hands of Tod Beaty.

Our annual appeal will be in the mail soon. We hope our members, both long term and new, will think back on all we have done in 2012 and support CHS.

CHS and the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club by Annette LaMond

If you visited the Society's garden over the summer, you may have noticed the renovated grape trellis at the east side of the house. It's the latest improvement of the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club, thanks to a historical preservation grant of \$1,280 that the club won from the Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts. Thanks are also due to the Ricci Brothers, the contracting firm that rebuilt the trellis for the cost of materials, providing labor at no charge. In fact, Rocco Ricci, an expert gardener, also donated his pruning services, cutting the tangled vines back hard in March before the demolition

of the old structure and the installation of the new. The new trellis was completed by early April, and the vines grew splendidly through the summer. No grapes appeared this year, because of the hard pruning. But wait until next summer!

The Cambridge Plant & Garden Club's involvement with the Hooper-Lee-Nichols garden dates from the early 1960s, just after the house became the Society's home. Over the years, the club has contributed plant material (the perennial beds and the yew hedges, for example), funding for pruning and other maintenance, and uncounted hours of volunteer work by members. The renovation of the front gate and fence posts, completed in spring 2011, was also a CP&GC project. The club's last cleanup day of 2012 is scheduled for Wednesday, November 28, at 10 AM. Please join us. Bring a rake and gloves. We'll provide refreshments and camaraderie.



Avon Hill NDC (continued from page 4)

specified heights, some parking spaces, and significant grade changes in the landscape were also subject to review. Following meetings, the Commission issued Certificates of Appropriateness or, in rare cases, Certificates of Hardship.

In 2005, a group of dissatisfied owners on Raymond Street petitioned the Cambridge Historical Commission to withdraw their properties from the district. The City Manager appointed a committee to study the problems. After careful public discussion, the original order was amended in December 2009. Important changes involved designating authority for making nonbinding decisions to the Historical Commission staff instead of the NCD. Outside the National Register District, the construction of new buildings, demolitions, significant alterations to a building, some additions, and the

installation of vinyl or aluminum siding or windows still require a binding decision. However, applications for smaller alterations just require nonbinding staff reviews (see www2.cambridgema.gov/Historic/avonhillhome.html).

Between June 1998 and December 2009, the Commission heard 131 cases and issued 49 nonbinding decisions and 82 binding Certificates of Appropriateness. From 2009 to the present, it has issued 16 Certificates of Appropriateness while the CHC staff has issued 6. Since the NDC's inception, only 3 Certificates of Appropriateness have been denied. This low number is due to the Commission's working with applicants to find solutions that respect the historic features of a property while meeting the needs of the homeowner. As a result, the AHNCD is generally valued by neighborhood residents.

The Development of Avon Hill



The Walling Map of Cambridge, 1854



Plate 9 from the G. M. Hopkins Atlas of Cambridge, 1886

Changing Names

Upland Street was laid out in 1852, but was originally called Lambert Street. It was changed to Upland in 1899.

Massachusetts Avenue from Harvard Square to Porter Square was North Avenue.

Porter Square is called Union Square on the 1894 map.

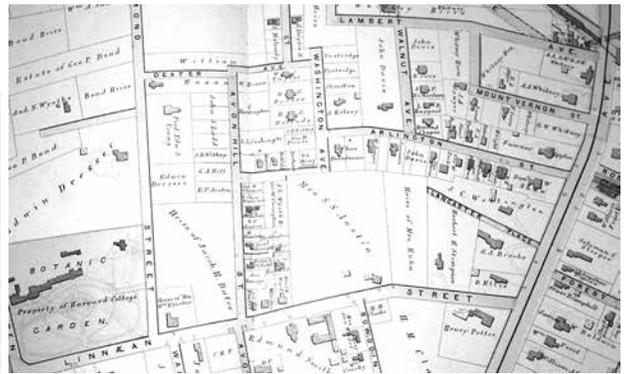


Plate F from the G. M. Hopkins Atlas of Cambridge, 1873

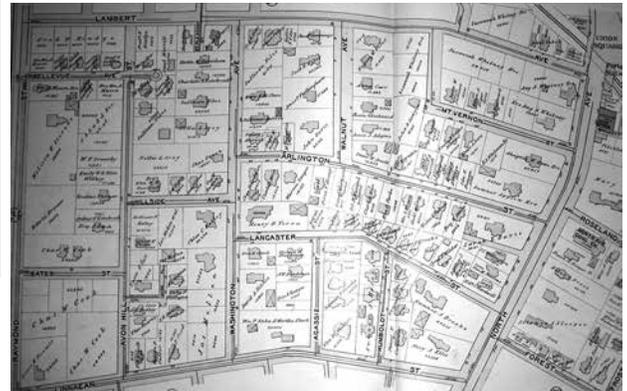


Plate 25 from the G. W. Bromley Atlas of Cambridge, 1894

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Did you know...

Avon Hill has a history of housing the less fortunate? The Avon Home was founded in 1874 as an orphanage by James Huntington, a Cambridge jeweler. Located on Avon Place, it could take in only ten children until a second building was secured opposite Mount Auburn Hospital. In 1917, the Avon Home moved to the Houghton mansion at 1000 Massachusetts Ave. (demolished in 1976). The orphanage closed in 1945 and is now part of the Cambridge Family and Children's Services, which serves in some 40 communities.