I got out of the car and entered the factory. As I was about to pass through the entrance, I was stopped by the guard, and in response to their questioning I showed them my letter, whereupon I was directed to the Office of the factory. Arriving there, one of the office-holders took the letter and called the manager of the grindery. When he arrived, I was left with him and he took me to his room where he showed me the workplace but without the machine and the accessories. Here my predecessor named Opitz used to work and here I was supposed to start working now. On the table were sitting several unfinished carafes which I was told to finish. The foreman asked me or rather had the interpreter, the glasscutter Eugen Scheffer from Theresienstadt in Bohemia, ask me if I wanted to start working that very day. I asked him to tell him that my tool chest was still in Boston whereupon he immediately asked a coachman of the factory to drive there with me and fetch the box with me. . . . Back at the factory, I went in again to ask Scheffer if he didn’t know of a German boarding house for me, whereupon he said I could board with the family where he had room and board. . . . From this day on, therefore, I was a boarder at Herr Vogel’s at 10 Vine Street, East Cambridge. The next morning I got out my tools and went to the factory. After I had set up my machine, I began to work at the New England Glass Company in East Cambridge, state of Massachusetts, on April 9, 1851.

Thus began the East Cambridge career of Louis Vaupel (1824–1903), a German from Lower Saxony who came to the United States in 1850 and to East Cambridge in 1851. Arriving at the factory at the beginning of its period of greatest success, Vaupel soon became the chief engraver at the New England Glass Company; he remained until the factory closed in 1888 (Figs. 438–439).

Vaupel is known today for his exquisite engraved glass, examples of which are in museums throughout the country (see Fig. 357). He is equally important for the diary he left describing his work, his living situation, and his assimilation into American society. Although his experience was highly personal, it sheds light on the workings of the factory and the experience of glassworkers in East Cambridge.

Of all the industries and trades in East Cambridge at midcentury, glassmaking employed the most people and played the largest role in establishing the social and architectural character of the area. Many buildings and, indeed, whole streets, such as Winter Street, were put up to house the industry’s work force. By 1865, 650 people, including glassworkers, machinists, carpenters, furnace tenders, and laborers, were directly employed by the glass industry.

A study of six city directories between 1849 and 1873 and the censuses of 1850 and 1860 yielded information about the glassworkers. Between 1850 and 1860, the number of skilled glassworkers reported by the census to be living in East Cambridge rose from 120 to 348. In 1850, it was a relatively young group; their average age was 30, and most glassblowers were in their twenties. By 1860, the average age of glassworkers was 36, but many were 18 or younger, and the youngest was only 13. In 1850, slightly more than half the glassworkers were immigrants, and of them, 52 percent were from England and Scotland and 18 percent were from Ireland. By 1860, the percentages were reversed; only 22 percent were English or Scottish and 61 percent were Irish.

Many glassworkers were single, reflecting the recruiting policies of the companies. A manager of a Pittsburgh glass company was heard to say that “married gaffers breed like minks” (Palmer, p. 24), and presumably demanded higher salaries. Most single glassworkers lived in boardinghouses or boarded with families. Few glassworkers in 1850 and even fewer in 1860 reported owning real estate.

The glassworkers were a fluid population, reflecting the greater mobility of single men. Very few of them spent their entire working lives in East Cambridge. During the 1850s, 30 percent of the glassworkers could be expected to move away within a year of their arrival. Since employment was growing, the companies were constantly having to replace their workers.

In 1849, five streets — Gore, Winter, Otis, Thorn-dike, and Spring — accounted for two thirds of the glassworkers’ residences, although the 85 glassworkers listed in the directory lived on nearly every street. The modest houses and worker’s cottages on Gore and Winter streets alone housed 42 percent of the glassworkers’ families and was the center of their
community. Another 18 percent lived along Otis and Thorndike streets, which can be characterized as middle- and upper-middle-class streets. Otis and Thorndike were long streets and sections could have been stratified by class, but the evidence suggests that this did not happen until later. Architecturally, these streets were mixed, and the directories indicate that occupationally the streets were mixed as well.

No other streets had as many glassworkers, and some streets that could have been expected to attract them did not. Only four glassworkers were reported living on Bridge and East streets, close to the glass factories, and there were none on North Street, next to New England Glass. Each of these streets had a heavy concentration of general laborers, some of whom probably found employment in the glassworks, but the glassworkers probably could afford to live away from the smoke of the factories and the stench of the Miller's River.

During the 1850s, the proportion of glassworkers on most residential streets remained about the same, although their overall number almost doubled. This means that new glassworkers chose the same residential locations as their predecessors. All lived in private houses; the companies provided no housing.

Not only did glassworkers move in and out of East Cambridge with some frequency, but they also moved often within the neighborhood. This seems to have been particularly true of the bachelors. Vaupel's case provides a good example. Louis Vaupel was single when he came to East Cambridge in 1851, and during his first two years he moved six times, usually living with other skilled German craftsmen, not necessarily glassworkers. For him, as for many early immigrants, it seemed more important to be with others of his nationality than with people in his own trade. Vaupel's first wages were $2 per day, and he paid $2.50 per week for room and board, a usual rate. The houses he boarded in were mostly on Spring Street and south; he never lived on Gore or Winter streets, and he usually moved because of bad water, poor food, unclean conditions, or dampness.

In 1860, Vaupel was married with two children and a third on the way when he rented 124 Thorndike Street, a one-and-a-half-story worker's cottage built in the 1840s (see Fig. 169). By this time, the company of glassworkers seemed important to him. The house was owned by a glassworker and another engraver lived next door. Four years later, he bought it. Although he had been head of New England Glass Company's engraving department for eleven years and had received national recognition, his house was no different from those occupied by glassworkers twenty and thirty years earlier. It was also small for a family of five. Vaupel's purchase shows the continued popularity of this house type for East Cambridge glassworkers throughout the life of the factory.

A map of glassworkers' houses in 1857 (Fig. 440) shows that residential patterns had changed little since 1849, in spite of the vastly expanded work force. Some 45 percent of glassworkers continued to live on Gore and Winter streets, and the remainder were scattered throughout East Cambridge. A major change, however, occurred on Otis and Thorndike streets, where the proportions of glassworkers dropped substantially, to only 2 and 3 percent of the total. No other street showed such a dramatic change. Only one glass employee now lived on the hill, the most desirable part of Otis Street; he was a Bay State Glass Company official who owned half of a Greek Revival house at 71–73 Otis Street. One possible explanation is that East Cambridge was beginning to develop more of an industrial culture, in which the social and residential distinctions between manual and nonmanual labor were becoming greater.

By 1873, East Cambridge's residential development was nearly complete, and the clusters of glassworkers generally conformed to the trends seen first in 1857.
The glass industry was beginning to decline; employment was dropping, and many of the most skilled workers left the area. As in 1857, few glassworkers lived on either Otis or Thorndike Street, and only those in managerial positions lived in the middle-class blocks on the hill. More than half of all the remaining skilled workers now lived north of Cambridge Street, mostly on Gore and Winter streets, but more glassworkers than ever also lived on the most northern streets near the glass factories, along with most of the laborers.

The most significant movement was to the south along Charles, Spring, and Vine streets. Although they were farthest from the factories, these streets housed almost 20 percent of glassworkers in 1873 compared to only 7 percent in 1849. The southern streets were now more livable: the marsh was being filled in, and many new multifamily dwellings had been constructed. Highly skilled craftsmen (cutters, blowers, and engravers) were now fairly evenly distributed throughout East Cambridge, although a skilled glassworker was three times more likely to be living north of Cambridge Street in 1873 than he was in 1849. The major distinction was between manual and other occupations rather than among different classes of manual workers. Over this period, there was a clear shift of management toward Otis and Thorndike streets. By 1873, the glass manufacturers had all moved from Cambridge Street to Otis and Thorndike streets, where most houses were owner occupied.

In spite of these changes, the glassworkers' preference for particular types of houses remained the same. Many glassworkers continued to live in worker's cottages between Thorndike and Winter streets or in simple Greek Revival houses between Spring and Gore streets. Even on Otis and Thorndike streets, glassworkers generally chose the older Greek Revival rather than the more up-to-date Mansard houses. Although many multifamily houses — in which units were divided horizontally into flats — were built in the late 1860s and 1870s, they were not popular with glassworkers, who continued to prefer single-family houses.

By 1879, the glass industry had been surpassed by furniture making and meatpacking. Many skilled workers, even those who had spent their entire careers at New England Glass, had been forced to leave or accept drastically reduced salaries. Some found jobs in other local industries, but others moved from factory to factory and state to state in search of work. For example, Joseph Moran, Jr., a glassblower who left in the early 1880s, took his family to Connecticut, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio before abandoning the trade and returning to East Cambridge in 1896 to open a restaurant (Fig. 442).