PART TWO: RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

Cambridgeport has such a great number and variety of buildings that discussion of its architectural history is best divided into residential and non-residential classifications, then into further subdivisions by building type, style, or period. Although much of the discussion concerns matters strictly architectural, the relation of Cambridgeport architecture to the history of the area should always be kept in mind. Many facts about the buildings are explained by non-architectural trends or events.

The fact that Cambridgeport had few 18th-century buildings - none of which survive - is explained by the fact that the area did not open up until the building of the West Boston Bridge in 1793. Declaration of Cambridgeport as a port in 1805 caused a flurry of building activity, brought to a halt by the Embargo of 1807-1809 and the War of 1812; these events explain an almost complete lack of Cambridgeport architecture from the decade 1810-1819. Cambridgeport’s subsequent role as a trade route and modest suburb brought the construction of scores of single-family houses on quiet streets near the main commercial arteries; the coming of industry later in the 19th century brought not only industrial architecture but also an increased demand for housing, much of it multi-family workers’ housing. Finally, the almost complete building-up of Cambridgeport’s vacant land by the time of World War I meant that more recent projects (except for those on filled land along the Charles River) have had to involve demolition of earlier structures.

The history of Cambridgeport, therefore, tells us that the area’s architecture is largely of the 19th century; that it involves modest vernacular buildings rather than trend-setting ones; but that in recent years the resurgence of building activity in the form of large-scale educational, technological, and residential complexes has brought some significant modern architecture to the area.

By far the largest number of Cambridgeport buildings are residential in function. Within this classification falls a great variety of building types and styles, from Federal-style single-family houses of the early 19th century to high-rise apartment buildings of the 1960’s. The following discussion of Cambridgeport residential architecture is divided into two parts – the first dealing with types of residential buildings, the second with 19th-century styles. Each section is arranged in roughly chronological order.

Types of Residential Buildings

Basic to an understanding of Cambridgeport residential building types is a knowledge of the pattern of land division and ownership. Like most 19th-century American cities, and like most of the rest of Cambridge, nearly all of Cambridgeport was laid out with rectangular lots, deeper than they were wide, fronting on straight streets. The fact that there was no master plan for Cambridgeport, as there was for mid-Manhattan in New York City (planned 1811) or for the Back Bay area in Boston (planned 1856), only reinforces the universality of this pattern of land division, utilized by so many different land speculators over so long a period of time.

Figure 31 reproduces a portion of Peter Tufts’ 1824 plan of Cambridgeport, showing a typical lot subdivision pattern. Rectangular lots such as these, sold off individually, were intended to be built up with separate houses, one per lot. Figure 32, an 1877 view of approximately the same area, shows the way individual houses were built on the various lots.

There were three basic house types during the first two-thirds of the 19th century, when Cambridgeport was achieving its present character; all three – the single house, the double house, and the row house – were single-family types in that the living unit and the land on which it was situated were capable of individual ownership. Later in the 19th century (around 1870 in Cambridgeport), still within the frontage lot system, new housing types emerged – multi-family types, where the living units were arranged one on top of the other rather than side by side, and where it was no longer possible for each living unit and its land to be separately owned. The distinction between single-family and multi-family types centers around the question of potential ownership of the land on which the living unit is situated.

The early multi-unit types – the two-family house, the three decker, and the tenement block – were related to and often resembled contemporary single-family types, with the distinction that their living units were divided horizontally instead of – or as well as – vertically. They were still thought of as
“houses” and were built for the most part on their own frontage lots, although they came at a time when Cambridgeport was rapidly filling up, and thus many were squeezed onto lots already occupied by earlier houses. At the end of the 19th century, Cambridgeport began to see full-fledged apartment buildings, larger in scale and different in organization from single-family or vernacular multi-family types but still built on individual frontage lots. Only in the last 30 years have new patterns of land organization emerged, in the form of large housing projects built on sites assembled for the purpose, usually involving the closing-off of existing streets and the demolition of earlier buildings.

Single-family housing types will be discussed first, since they preceded and to some extent gave birth to multi-unit types. So extensive was the takeover by multiple types that almost no single-family houses were built in Cambridgeport after 1900.

Single House

Of the three single-family housing types in Cambridgeport (the single house, the double house, and the row house), the first is both historically and numerically the most important. By “single house,” this report means a detached structure intended for occupancy by a single family. A large number of Cambridgeport’s single houses have subsequently been converted to multiple occupancy, but if they were designed as singles at the start, they are classified as such in the survey and in this report.

The majority of houses built in Cambridgeport in the first two-thirds of the 19th century were single houses, although double houses were also built in significant numbers. Even after increasing land scarcity caused multi-unit types to predominate, single houses continued to be built in outlying areas (such as lower Cambridgeport near Magazine Beach) until the end of the century. Although relatively few mansions were built in Cambridgeport, there was a considerable size range in the district’s single houses, as seen in a comparison of Figures 64 and 82. Small singles, important at the beginning, ceased to be built toward the end of the century, as multi-unit types absorbed the demand for modest accommodations. Nearly all of Cambridgeport’s single houses, even the large ones, were of frame construction; fewer than a dozen were built of brick.

The East Cambridge survey report (pages 66-68) outlined three basic plan types for vernacular single-family houses of the first part of the 19th century. Since much of the residential architecture of Cambridgeport is similar to that of East Cambridge, the same plan classifications will be used in this report (Fig. 33).

Plan A was a four-room center-hall plan, with two rooms on either side of the central entrance and stair hall (Fig. 33A). Plan B was a smaller version of A—a two-room center-hall plan, with one room on either side of the hall (Fig. 33B). Plan C was a side-hall plan, with two rooms opening off the same side of the entrance and stair hall (Fig. 33C). Only the major rooms are mentioned in these classifications; nearly all houses had additional smaller rooms, particularly on upper floors and in ells.

For at least the first third of the 19th century, Plan B was the most common for Cambridgeport’s single houses; very few Plan A houses were built in the area. If enough room were available on the lot, the entrance facade faced the street; more generally in Cambridgeport, with its narrow frontage lots, the entrance facades of center-hall houses were along the sides of the lots. Beginning around 1840, single houses in Cambridgeport began adopting the side-hall plan, formerly used only in row houses or halves of double houses. The Plan C single with gable to the street (Fig. 102) is the most ubiquitous single-family type in Cambridgeport—a type that continued to be built until nearly the end of the century. After 1880, however, the rigidity of earlier plan types broke down; it is less easy to classify these later houses, for their porches, bays, and protrusions make them irregular where earlier ones are regular (Fig. 157). But in Cambridgeport, as opposed to Mid Cambridge or the Brattle Street area, this last period is less important for single houses than for emerging multi-unit types.
Double House

The double house is the second most important single-family type in Cambridgeport. A double house (called that in the 19th century but more frequently called a duplex today) consists of two living units separated by a vertical party wall (Fig. 34A). This arrangement differs from that of a two-family house (a multi-unit type), where the two units are separated horizontally (Fig. 34B). Although both structures contain two living units, the double house is a single-family type in that each half, together with the land on which it stands, can be owned separately; the two units of a two-family house, being placed one on top of the other and thus occupying the same land, must remain in one ownership.

Historically the double house preceded the two-family house, gradually being replaced by it toward the end of the 19th century. The most common early 19th-century double house consisted of two Plan B's back-to-back (Fig. 35A), generally sharing chimneys going up to the peak of the roof (Fig. 78). Another type of double house, more common in Cambridgeport than the back-to-back Plan B type, consisted of two adjoining Plan C's (Fig. 35B), generally with their entrances paired at the center of the street facade (Fig. 116). This plan-type was particularly prevalent in the era of the gable-to-street side-hall single; during the years 1840-1870, nearly every new house in Cambridgeport followed the side-hall plan, as many did even after 1870. Like the singles, Cambridgeport double houses were nearly all of frame construction; no more than half a dozen were built of brick.

Row House

Since the pattern of land development in Cambridgeport was more suburban than urban, the row-house – essentially an urban type – was not as important as the single or double house. A few brick rows, often combining commercial and residential usage, were built at the beginning of the 19th century along the road (Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue) between the West Boston Bridge and Central Square; a fragment of one such row, built in 1807, remains at 452-458 Massachusetts Avenue (Fig. 260). Most Cambridgeport row houses were built between the 1850's and the 1880's. They were too much an urban type for the earlier, less densely settled period, and they gave way to the emerging multiple housing types toward the end of the century. They are significant, however, because of the relation between the row-house group and one of the early multi-unit types, the tenement block.

The row-house group consists of a series of three or more narrow, vertically oriented single-family houses, separated from each other by party walls; each unit, together with its narrow strip of land, can be – and frequently is – in separate ownership. Tenements, as will be seen shortly, involve a horizontal as well as a vertical separation between living units still on the row-house pattern.

Of the three plan-types illustrated in Fig. 33, Plan C – the side-hall plan – was the one used for row houses. In fact, it originated as a town-house plan, necessarily narrow because of the shape of urban lots; only in the second quarter
of the 19th century did it come into use in Cambridgeport for detached single houses. Adjoining row houses, like the halves of double Plan C houses, frequently had their entrances paired (Fig. 90), in which case the rear ells (if there were any) were also paired, sharing the party wall and providing more light and air to the rear yards (Fig. 36). Not all row houses had rear ells, especially if they were built on basements high enough to permit kitchens to be located there; rows without rear ells more often than not had the individual houses lined up next to each other without paired entrances or other unifying features (Fig. 144). As befits a densely built, urban dwelling type, row houses in Cambridgeport were built of brick much more frequently than were single or double houses; still, a number of modest wooden rows were constructed as well.

There is a difference between suburban Cambridgeport’s occasional rows and the street after street of row houses in contemporary urban areas of Boston. Especially on Beacon Hill and in the Back Bay, Boston row houses more often than not were built individually, unrelated by ownership or time of construction to adjoining houses but having enough stylistic affinity to make whole streets appear as one. Cambridgeport row houses, on the other hand, were always built in groups of three or four or more, with one owner and builder for each group. In Boston, row-house-width lots were nearly always plotted individually, making unified groups of row houses possible only when one owner bought up a sufficient number of lots. In Cambridgeport, where the lots were initially larger, suburban in scale, and intended mainly for single and double houses, an owner would need only one or two lots for a row-house group, the individual units of which could then be sold off one by one with their narrow strips of land. Once again the pattern of land division helped determine the type of architecture. It is not surprising that many of Cambridgeport’s rows, initially built as one, have remained in single ownership despite the fact that the individual units are separable single-family types.

Two-Family House

The various multi-unit types began to appear on the Cambridgeport scene around 1870. The first to appear were the two-family house and the tenement block—both resulting from horizontal subdivision of established single-family types. Later developments brought about the three-decker and the apartment house.

“Two-family house” in this report means a structure with two living units separated horizontally—one above the other (Fig. 34B). It is sometimes difficult to distinguish a two-family house from a single house that has been converted to two living units (as so many have in Cambridgeport), but frequently there are enough telltale signs to enable the distinction to be made. The most common two-family house from about 1870 to 1890 followed the pattern of the gable-to-street side-hall single, except that the building was designed to have one living unit on the first floor (with access to the basement) and another on the second floor (with additional rooms on the third) (Fig. 37). Frequently two exterior doors express the fact that the house has two units rather than one; a more reliable sign of a two-family house is the existence of a two-story rear ell, with a service stair leading to the second-story kitchen of the upper unit.

The plans of two-family houses, at first much like those of the two-room-deep side-hall single with rear ell, soon became wider (allowing rooms on both sides of the interior hall) and deeper (generally three rooms deep without rear ell rather than two rooms deep with ell) (Fig. 38). Larger two-family houses of this type, prevalent from about 1895 to 1910, are characterized by features similar to those of contemporary singles—protruding bays, large front porches, high gable or gambrel roofs with dormers (Fig. 39). From about 1915 to 1930, the
two-family house was the most common Cambridgeport housing type; by this time it had become fairly standardized – two-story front porch (often glassed in as a sun porch), two entrance doors (one to each unit) at one side of the street facade, and a fairly low gable (occasionally a gambrel) facing the street (Fig. 40).

Just as there were double houses resulting from the joining of two single-family types, so also were there double two-families, particularly in the period from 1870 to 1900. A double two-family has four units – two (one above the other) on each side of a vertical party wall, with entrances usually grouped at the center of the street facade (Fig. 41).

Nearly all Cambridgeport two-family houses, whether double or detached, were of frame construction rather than brick.

Tenement Block

The term “tenement” implies lower-class urban housing but nothing much more specific. Bearing in mind the customary usage of the term, the Cambridgeport survey has isolated a particular type of multi-unit structure as the “tenement block”. This type, which began to appear in Cambridgeport around 1870 and continued to be built until the turn of the century, was an evolved form of row-house group, with horizontal as well as vertical division between living units (Fig. 42B).

Just as it is frequently difficult to distinguish a true two-family from a converted single house, so it is often difficult to tell a tenement block from a group of converted single-family row houses. Telltale features such as rear service ells and stairs help in this case as well (Fig. 43).

Tenements usually had one living unit per floor in each vertical section (corresponding to the old row house), although early tenements (those built in the 1870's) sometimes had two-floor units. In the latter case, each vertical section of the tenement block had one unit on the first floor (with an additional
room or rooms in the basement) and another unit on the second and third floors (Fig. 44). Early tenements were usually two rooms deep, with or without a rear ell. Three-room-deep plans later became common, but for units on the inside of the block there were problems of light and air for the middle rooms.

Tenements were the standard form of urban workers' housing; their appearance on the Cambridgeport scene occurred when manufacturing was expanding rapidly and land was becoming scarce. Like the row-house groups out of which they evolved, they appeared principally along main roads in the more built-up sections, close to industrial areas. One or more stores were frequently included on the ground floor of tenement blocks. The heyday of tenements in Cambridgeport was between 1870 and 1900; few were built after that, as the three-decker took over as the standard form of workers' housing.

Early tenements (1870's and 1880's) were nearly all of frame construction (Fig. 45); later Cambridgeport tenements (1890's) were generally built of brick (Fig. 46).
Three-Decker

The three-decker evolved in the 1880’s as a suburban form of low-cost housing. The standard three-decker is a long narrow building with its short side to the street; the entrance (with one to three doors) is on one side of the street facade, balanced by a bay window the height of the building at the other side of the facade (Fig. 47). There are three nearly identical living units stacked on top of each other, capped by a flat roof. Open rear service porches are another characteristic feature (Fig. 48).

The three-decker is related to the other early multi-unit types (two-family house and tenement block) in having its living units separated horizontally. It can be thought of as an expanded two-family, with three flats instead of two, or more accurately as a kind of detached tenement. In plan the three-decker is generally three rooms deep, with sufficient width to allow rooms on both sides of the hall within each flat (Fig. 49).

Although the three-decker, as its name implies, is nearly always three stories high, it also appears occasionally in four-story form (the four-decker) or in two-story form (essentially a two-family house but designated a two-decker because of its flat roof and other similarities to the decker type). Four-story buildings of frame construction were outlawed by the city building code in the mid-1890’s; subsequent four-deckers were more substantially built of brick and are better categorized as apartment houses.

The three-decker began to appear in Cambridgeport in the later 1880’s and continued to be built until the 1920’s. Few differences other than those of stylistic detail exist between early and late three-deckers except that those of 20th century frequently (but by no means always) have three-story front porches, somewhat analogous to the porches on contemporary two-family houses (Fig. 50).

Just as there were double two-families, so also were there double three-deckers, particularly in the early years of the type (late 1880’s-1900). Double three-deckers (and double four-deckers – much more common, perhaps because of their better proportions, than single four-deckers) nearly always shared a single entrance at the center of the street facade and a single stairway giving access to the two flats per floor (Fig. 51). Some early three- and four-deckers...
were quite pretentious buildings, elaborately ornamented and given high-sounding names. “Hotel So-and-So” was a particularly common name, reflecting the contemporary American interest in the fashion of "French flats" (called hotels but more analogous to present-day apartment houses than to transient hotels) (Fig. 52). Most three deckers, however, were closer to the lowest level of vernacular housing at the time.

The earliest apartment houses in Cambridgeport were buildings of the double four-decker type. It is a moot point whether these should be classified as deckers or as apartment houses; generally those built of brick are called apartments, those of frame, deckers, since frame construction was a universal characteristic of the decker type. When such buildings go beyond four stories (possible with the introduction of the elevator) or when they have more than one flat on each side of each floor, there is no problem about calling them apartments (Fig. 53). Designed for families, they normally had units of six or seven rooms, duplicating as far as possible the rooms found in single-family dwellings. Single persons or young couples just starting out were accustomed to living in boarding houses rather than to maintaining their own apartments.

The decker-type apartment house prevailed in Cambridgeport until the early 20th century, when a new type began to appear. The new kind was organized around a deep entrance court extending in from the street; entry to the various apartments was made from doors opening off this court into stair halls. Bay windows extending the height of the building continued as important features; brick or stucco were the characteristic exterior materials. Riverbank Court of 1900, a luxurious apartment hotel that now serves as M.I.T.'s Graduate House, was the city's first and foremost example (Fig. 54). More modest and typical were buildings such as Farwell Chambers of 1909 at Pleasant and Franklin Streets (Fig. 55). A trend toward smaller units (three or four rooms instead of seven or eight) accompanied the change to the court-type apartment house.

After World War I, apartment buildings lost their many bays and gained flat exterior facades, but the court-oriented plan continued to be popular (Fig. 56). Relatively few apartment houses were built in Cambridgeport during this period because the land was mostly built up and because the economic level of the area was insufficient to support the buying up and leveling of old structures to provide land for new ones. It took the government with its broad powers and resources to instigate the next residential building type in Cambridgeport – that of the public housing project. The first projects of this sort in the city – New Towne Court (1937) and Washington Elms (1941) – were built in Cambridgeport in the years prior to World War II; others followed after the war. The basic feature of all the housing projects was a cluster or grouping of separate small apartment buildings on a large tract of land cleared of older structures through the government’s power of eminent domain (Fig. 57). The buildings themselves were mostly the flat-walled, flat-roofed brick type already established for private apartments, with greater freedom of building shape and sitting because of the relatively large sites available and with a minimum of stylistic detail or elaboration because of the low-cost nature of the operation. Since the buildings did not have elevators, height was limited to three stories.

The newest direction of Cambridgeport’s residential architecture was foretold by one of the more recent of the area’s housing projects, Roosevelt Towers (Fig. 58), built in 1949 to designs by Desmond and Lord. This group, with its eight-story, twin-towered main block, as well as its smaller subsidiary buildings like those of the earlier projects, illustrates the trend toward high-rise elevator buildings as a solution to the problem of increasing land costs. Except for a few
53. DECKER-TYPE APARTMENT HOUSE
THE CANTABRIGIA, 1010 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., 1896; A. H. VINAL, ARCHITECT

54. RIVERBANK COURT,
305 MEMORIAL DR., 1900.
H. B. BALL, ARCHITECT.
NOW ASHDOWN HOUSE, M. I. T.

55. COURT-TYPE APARTMENT HOUSE (FARWELL CHAMBERS,
19 PLEASANT ST., 1909; NEWHALL & BLEVINS, ARCHITECTS)

56. POST-WORLD WAR I APARTMENT HOUSE
THE RIVERSIDE, 410-420 MEMORIAL DR.,
1926-1928; SILVERMAN, BROWN & HEENAN,
ARCHITECTS; NOW BURTON HOUSE, M. I. T.

57. NEWTOWNE COURT (1937)
AND WASHINGTON ELMS (1941)

58. ROOSEVELT TOWERS, 1949. DESMOND & LORD, ARCHITECTS
small structures, recent apartment projects in Cambridgeport have all involved high-rise buildings, many taking advantage of fine views by providing private balconies for the various apartments. 100 Memorial Drive (Fig. 59) was the first of the new type: indeed, it was the first postwar apartment building in the Boston area with balconies. It features a skip-stop elevator pattern, with elevator stops and public corridors every third floor instead of every floor, a system that is clearly expressed on the Amherst Street side of the building (Fig. 60). 100 Memorial Drive was conceived primarily as housing for M.I.T. faculty members, though it was built as an investment by the New England Mutual Life Insurance Company. Responsible for the 1949 design was a team of architects consisting of William Hoskins Brown, Vernon deMars, Robert Woods Kennedy, Carl Koch, and Ralph Rapson.

A skip-stop elevator system was also followed at Harvard's Peabody Terrace (Fig. 61), a married-student housing complex containing three 22-story apartment towers and a number of lower structures, including a nursery school, stores, and a parking garage. Despite the large size of the project, human scale was maintained in the various courtyards and open spaces connecting the buildings (Fig. 62). The antithesis of the sort of rigid, formalistic planning exemplified by Roosevelt Towers (Fig. 58), Peabody Terrace sets a standard of design that could well be emulated in future Cambridgeport housing projects. Sert, Jackson and Gourley were the architects of Peabody Terrace, which was built in 1963 at 900 Memorial Drive, a former industrial site along the Charles River.