Schools

Although a majority of Cambridgeport houses and churches date from the 19th century, the district's six public schools are all of the 20th century. Three of the six, in fact, are less than fifteen years old. Continual updating of educational facilities has been part of the story of Cambridgeport - and of the city as a whole - from the beginning. While the result is beneficial to schoolchildren, the architectural historian is left with fewer surviving old schools than any other building type. Fortunately, despite the lack of physical evidence, enough records survive to reconstruct the history of Cambridgeport schools from the district's beginning to the present.

Early Wooden Schoolhouses

The first Cambridgeport school was built in 1802 at the corner of Windsor and School Streets on land donated by Andrew Bordman. It was a one-room wooden schoolhouse measuring 24 by 38 feet. Known as the Boardman School (an "a" was added to the Bordman name at some point), it lasted until 1868, when it was replaced by the present Boardman School, now the oldest surviving school building in the city (though no longer used for its original purpose).

The second Cambridgeport school was the Franklin School on the south side of Franklin Street between Pearl and Magazine Streets. Built in 1809 on land donated by Judge Francis Dana, it was a two-story wooden schoolhouse with a cupola; each floor had one 20-by-30-foot classroom. The building was used until the opening of the Webster School in 1853, when it was sold at an auction and moved to Somerville.

Although one-room schoolhouses have often been romanticized, life in them was by no means always happy, as an autobiographical sketch by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. (author of Two Years Before the Mast) makes clear. Writing in 1842 of the Cambridgeport school he attended at the age of seven in 1822, Dana says:

My recollections of this school are far from being pleasant. I am told there are great improvements in the art of school-keeping and that school houses and school going are much more attractive than formerly. Certainly from my own experience there was abundant room for improvement. This school house was a long low dark room, with wooden benches well cut up, walls nearly black, and a close hot atmosphere, for it was winter and there was a tight sheet iron stove with a long pipe to warm the room. I had been told that the master was very severe, and I knew that flogging was the punishment for every offense. All these things, added to the dismal and repulsive appearance of the room, made my entrance one of gloomy forebodings. (The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., edited by Robert F. Lucid, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, vol. 1, p. 7.)

Although Dana was attending a private rather than a town school, the conditions he described were probably to be found in the public schools of the period.

The Boardman School of 1802 and the Franklin School of 1809 sufficed for Cambridgeport until the 1830's; then came a rash of school construction - four new buildings in the eight years 1835 to 1843. All were built of wood. The Mason School on Massachusetts Avenue at Lafayette Square (site of the present Lafayette Square Fire Station, Fig. 242) was the first of the four, in 1835. Two stories high and measuring 34 by 50 feet, it had a pilastered, pedimented Greek Revival facade surmounted by a cupola (Fig. 209). The Mason School was built (according to the 1845 School Committee Report) "on the modern plan," which apparently differed from the old one-room (or one-room-per-floor) plan principally in having a recitation room attached to each of the large classrooms. By separating recitation activities from the main classroom space, the "modern plan" provided an appreciably quieter study environment for the remaining students. Another school of the same period - the Bridge Schoolhouse of 1836, long demolished - apparently lacked this new feature, for it is reported in 1845 as being "a small one-story structure, 32 1/2 feet by 22%, including wood-closet and entry." The Bridge School's location on Carleton Street between Main Street and Broadway shows that the Kendall Square area was sufficiently residential then (unlike now) to warrant a school. The fact that all four of the earliest Cambridgeport schools - 1802, 1809, 1835, 1836, - were situated within two blocks of Main Street or Massachusetts Avenue indicates the closeness of early settlement to the bridge thoroughfare. Subsequent school construction occurred further afield, as the limits of residential settlement spread.

The next school, built in 1838, was intended to serve the entire town as a Classical or high school. Located at the corner of Broadway and Windsor Street, it was a two-story, gable-roofed structure with a square cupola surmounting the gable end toward Broadway (Fig. 210). Without the cupola, it resembled a private house of the period - five-window facade (toward Windsor Street), Greek Revival corner pilasters, entablature, and pedimented gable. Within, it had a large schoolroom and a recitation room on each floor (the "modern plan"), plus an additional meeting room on the first floor. The idea of having one high school
for the entire town was not successful in 1838, because people from Old Cambridge and East Cambridge objected to sending their children so far. The experiment lasted only until 1843, when high school instruction was turned over to grammar school masters in each of the three parts of town. The high school building became a grammar school known as the Broadway School (later the Sargent School). The building was demolished in 1914, and the site was subsequently taken over for the present Roberts School.

The Harvard Schoolhouse on Harvard Street opposite Essex was described in 1845 as “truly a noble building... quite an ornament to the town.” Built in 1843 on the foundations of an 1841 school that had burned, it was a two-story wooden building, 42 by 60 feet, with a cupola and a bell. The first floor had two rooms, each 20 by 40; the second floor had one large classroom, 46 by 42, with an attached recitation room 13 by 20. When a new Harvard School was opened at the corner of Inman Street and Broadway in 1871 (in a building that now serves as the City Hall Annex), the old Harvard Schoolhouse was named the Stearns School. Its site, which adjoins Sennott Park, is now a playground.

At the time Cambridge became a city in 1846, Cambridgeport had six school buildings – Boardman (1801), Franklin (1809), Mason (1835), Broadway (1838), and Harvard (1843). All were built of wood, and none had more than three classrooms. As Figures 209 and 210 show, these early school buildings hardly differed in appearance from ordinary houses, except that they had fewer interior partitions and sometimes had a cupola. School buildings were, in fact, called “schoolhouses”; the name “school” was reserved for the level of instruction carried on within – alphabet school, primary school, middle school, grammar school, or high school (the five levels existing in 1846). Graded classes were a subsequent development. In 1845, for example, the Franklin Schoolhouse contained a middle school of 70 to 80 students in its upper room, a primary school of about 70 students in its lower room, and an alphabet school of “50 to 60 small scholars” in a separate one-story building behind. The 1845 School Committee Report, from which these facts are taken, shows that although educational methods and buildings may change over the years, certain problems – such as vandalism – remain constant. Describing the Franklin Schoolhouse, the report states: “The entry is shamefully marked, dirty, and uninviting. In this, and upon the outside of the building, the inspector is shocked by disfigurements offensive to decency.”

Mid-19th-Century Schools

The first Cambridgeport school built after the city’s incorporation in 1846 was considerably larger than its predecessors and was built of brick. Designed by Howey and Ryder, the Webster School of 1852 on Upton (then Webster) Street was three stories high and measured 60 by 65 feet. A pedimented wing 10 by 38 feet projected forward at the center front and contained the entrance. The original interior arrangement is not known from contemporary descriptions, but it probably consisted of a few large schoolrooms (no more than two per floor) with ancillary recitation rooms. The building was substantially remodeled in 1873 to plans by H. B. Dennison. The main part of the building was expanded forward at the corners, nearly eliminating the projection of the pedimented front wing, and the entrance was changed from the center front to the sides. The interior was subdivided to make twelve classrooms, four per floor, and the original outdoor privy was replaced by toilets in the basement. Although these 1873 changes were considerable, the basic style of the building was retained. Details such as roundheaded windows, elaborate lintels, and strongly projecting cornices are found on other buildings of the 1850’s.

In 1885 an addition was made to the Webster School at the right rear corner of the lot, backing up to Pleasant Place. Designed by James Fogarty, the new building blended with the old in style but was less exuberant in detail. It had two rooms per floor on the first two stories and a large hall with a stage on the third story. Figure 211 shows the expanded Webster School as it looked in 1890.

Less than two decades later, further expansion was necessary at Webster, and a twelve-classroom, three-story wing was added to the left, toward Pleasant Street. Designed by Wheelwright and Haven, the 1909 addition is still in use as the left part of the present Webster School. The 1852 and 1885 buildings were demolished in 1938 to make room for the main part of today’s Webster School (Fig. 212). Richard Shaw was the architect of the 1939 building, which includes the school’s main entrance on Upton Street (Fig. 213) and an auditorium wing on Pleasant Place.
Following the 1852 Webster came the Allston School of 1857 on Boardman Street. Designed by C. O. Holyoke, it, too, was a substantial three-story brick structure. A description published in the January 30, 1858 *Cambridge Chronicle* indicates the interior arrangement – two schoolrooms (each with a recitation room) on the first two stories and a large grammar school room with two recitation rooms on the third story, plus another recitation room in the attic. According to the *Chronicle*, the Allston was "the best planned schoolhouse in this city." Although that statement might have been true in 1858, by 1873 the Allston required complete interior remodeling to provide additional rooms – a modification similar to the one being made at the same time at the Webster School. Educational requirements had changed sufficiently to make the once-modern plan of schoolroom-plus-recitation room obsolete. Even the remodeled Allston School apparently did not suffice, for a new brick school designed by Clarke and Crawford replaced it in 1886. The site is presently occupied by a peanut factory.

Several schools were built in Cambridgeport in the years following the Civil War. The most important historically was the Boardman School of 1868, which occupied the site of the first Cambridgeport school and which survives today as the oldest public school building in the city. Designed by H. B. Dennison, the Boardman is a two-story, hip-roofed brick structure with a pedimented central entrance bay projecting slightly from the plane of the facade (Fig. 214). The plan of four corner classrooms per floor is clearly expressed on the exterior: each classroom has four discrete windows, two on each outside wall. The individuality of the windows is emphasized by their projecting brick segmental-arched lintels. Although the Boardman's pattern of equal-sized classrooms was to continue in school architecture well into the 20th century, fenestration was to change from individual windows to pairs or groups of windows and ultimately to entire window walls. The Boardman School continued in use until the opening of the present Roberts School in 1930. It now serves as a branch library and recreation hall.  

214. BOARDMAN SCHOOL, WINDSOR AND SCHOOL STS., 1868. H. B. DENNISON, ARCHITECT

A three-story brick school, the Willard, was built on Niagra Street facing Dana Square in 1870. Although no record survives, the architect may well have been the Boardman's architect, H. B. Dennison, for he was responsible for the plan for finishing the Willard's third story in 1873. Built as a primary school, the Willard survived until the opening of the present Morse School in 1957. When the building was demolished, Niagra Street was eliminated, and the combined land area became a playground adjoining Dana Square.

Although the Webster School of 1852, the Allston of 1857, the Boardman of 1868, and the Willard of 1870 were all built of brick, the city had by no means stopped building wooden schools. On the contrary, several were built in Cambridgeport in the post-Civil War period – the Gannett School of 1865 on Columbia Street between Lincoln and Cambridge Streets, the Riverside School of 1868 on Putnam Avenue opposite Hayes Street, the Tarbell School of 1882 at Howard and Callender Streets, and a new Gannett School of 1886 on Jefferson Street. The locations of these buildings indicate the spread of residential settlement to the limits of Cambridgeport; perhaps the peripheral locations had something to do with the decision to build of wood. By the 1880's, such a decision did not go unquestioned. With reference to the Tarbell School, the *Cambridge Chronicle* of December 17, 1881 stated:

We think the city is making a mistake in building another wooden schoolhouse. The proposal now is to build such a one on Howard Street in Ward Four. If the ground is not fit to put a brick building on, it isn't fit for a schoolhouse at all. Wood in the city buildings is poor economy.

More emphatically, the *Chronicle* of May 15, 1886 had this to say about the 1886 Gannett School:

We wish there was a law to hit on the head with a club the first member of the City Council who proposes to build another wooden schoolhouse. It is the height of foolishness, and we regret to learn that the present committee on Public Property is at it again, having decided to build the Jefferson School building of this material.

The Jefferson Street Gannett School, not surprisingly, turned out to be the last wooden school building in the city. Designed by George A. Moore, it lasted until the opening of the Harrington School in 1960. The Columbia Street Gannett School of 1865 and the Riverside School of 1868 lasted only until the first decade of the 20th century; the Tarbell School of 1882 still exists, serving now as the Cambridge Community Center (Fig. 215). James Fogerty was the architect of Tarbell, a two-story, hip-roofed wooden building with classrooms (two per floor) along the Callender Street side. Originally entered from Howard Street, the building now has a projecting entrance on Callender Street. Changes were made in 1948, when a brick gymnasium was added in back for the Cambridge Community Center (Thomas B. Epps, Inc., architects).

James Fogerty was also the architect of the first Wellington Training School, built in 1884 at the corner of Columbia and Lincoln Streets. The building was remodeled and expanded to the north in 1892 (C. H. McClare, architect), bringing it to the form shown in Figure 216. Because of its two stages of
construction, the many-dormered mansard roof was particularly exuberant. Though picturesque, the building was apparently not satisfactory, for it was almost completely rebuilt in 1906-1908 to plans by Edward T. P. Graham. The Fogerty section was demolished and replaced by a three-story structure of fireproof construction, and the McClare section was expanded and encased to match. A raised, pedimented, columns-in-antis portico dominated the Columbia Street facade. In this form, the building lasted until 1967. Figure 217 shows it shortly before demolition.

Turn-of-the-Century Schools

The next group of Cambridgeport schools, built between 1890 and 1904, are the direct antecedents of the schools now in use or under construction in the district. The Morse School of 1890 was replaced by the present Morse (1955); the Parker School of 1893 and the Roberts School of 1898 were replaced by the present Roberts (1929); the Kelley School of 1902 was replaced by the Harrington School (1959); and the Houghton School of 1904 is currently being replaced by the King School. Only the Fletcher School of 1903 is still in use.

George Fogerty, son of architect James Fogerty (who died in 1889), designed the 1890 Morse School (Fig. 218). Located on Brookline Street at the corner of Allston Street, it was a massive, three-story brick structure with a gabled projection at the center of each principal facade and with a high, dormered roof and a Richardsonian arched entrance. In size, style, and general appearance it was similar to James Fogerty’s Putnam School of 1887 in East Cambridge. The 1890 Morse School contained fourteen classrooms, each about 32 feet square, plus a hall 64 by 40 feet, a principal’s room, and a reading room. The school was named for Cambridgeport resident Asa P. Morse, who lived nearby on Magazine Street.

A school built in 1893 at the corner of Broadway and Sixth Streets replaced the Bridge School of 1836 in serving residents of the Lower Port. Known as the Parker School, it was a two-story, pitched-roof structure designed by C. H. McClare. Its students were eventually absorbed into the Roberts School of 1929, and the building was demolished. The site, now occupied by a gas station, is part of the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Area.
The first Roberts School, built in 1898 at the corner of Harvard and Windsor Streets, consisted of a pilastered three-story block and subsidiary two-story wings (Fig. 219). George A. Moore was the architect. For the first time in a Cambridgeport school, the roof was flat; subsequent schools in the district (except for the Kelley School of 1902) were all to dispense with an attic story. Windows in the old Roberts were grouped in threes or fours (although each was still a distinct unit); top-story windows were round-arched. The building served just thirty years before being demolished to make way for the present Roberts School, which is set back from Harvard Street and has its principal entrance at the corner of Broadway and Windsor Street (incorporating the former site of the first high school, Fig. 210). Designed by Charles R. Greco, the 1929 Roberts is a much larger structure than its predecessor – three stories high throughout and extending most of the blockfront along Windsor Street (Fig. 220). Its principal stylistic features are its two rounded corners, the one at Broadway containing a ground-level entrance. In principle (three stories of classrooms in a blocklike building on a raised basement) and even in style (red brick, limestone trimmed, vaguely neo-Georgian), it is comparable to schools of the preceding period. The real break in school design came after World War II, as evidenced by the Morse and Harrington Schools of the 1950’s.

The Kelley School on Willow Street was a predecessor of today’s Harrington School. Built in 1902 to plans by A. H. Gould, it was a U-shaped, three-story, hip-roofed structure. Figure 221 shows it just prior to its demolition in 1967. The Fletcher School of 1902, still in use, stands on Elm Street opposite Market Street (Fig. 222). Designed by Harry Dustin Joll, it is roughly square in plan, with projecting or receding center sections. Built along the same lines was the Houghton School of 1904 (Fig. 223), which stood on Putnam Avenue at the corner of Magee Street until January 1969. Architect George Fogerty here created a building not essentially different from his 1890 Morse School, except for the absence of a high pitched roof. An annex to Houghton fronting on Magee Street was added in 1923 to designs by Edward B. McGirr (Fig. 224). The Houghton School name came from Henry O. Houghton, long associated with the district through his Riverside Press (Fig. 298) and his house on Massachusetts Avenue (Fig. 122). The school that is replacing the Houghton will bear a new name – that of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose assassination occurred while plans for the new building were being prepared.
Postwar Schools

The Morse School of 1955, designed by Carl Koch and Associates with The Architects Collaborative as consultants, is radically different from all preceding Cambridgeport schools. Rather than being a three-story blocklike structure on a raised basement, it is a series of connected one-story glass-walled buildings at ground level (Fig. 225). Natural light is introduced not only through the glass of classroom walls but also through plastic skylights in the ceilings. The different classroom wings are designed for different age levels – Kindergarten, Grades 1 to 3, Grades 4 to 5, and Grades 6 to 8. Each unit has its own outdoor play area. The core of the complex consists of facilities used not only by the school but also as a community center – auditorium, gymnasium, cafeteria, and other special-purpose rooms. The entrance is on Granite Street, toward the residential district, although the site also fronts on Memorial Drive. Through attention to scale, careful choice of materials, controlled use of light and color, and planned relationship to the out-of-doors, the architects made the Morse School a warm and inviting environment for its students and for the surrounding community.

A similar intent was behind the design of the Harrington School of 1959, located on Cambridge Street between Berkshire and Willow Streets (Fig. 226). The more built-up neighborhood, the need not to infringe too much on Donnelly Field, and the larger number of students to be accommodated (1150 compared to 550) made the solution at Harrington somewhat different from that at Morse. Harrington has two main classroom blocks at right angles to each other, each two stories high and flat-roofed; connected along the Willow Street side are the auditorium, cafeteria, and gymnasium. A branch of the Cambridge Public Library is housed in a separate one-story structure entered both from the school and from Cambridge Street; elsewhere on the site is a one-story, pitched-roof kindergarten wing. A swimming-pool facility on Berkshire Street is a 1948 design by Anderson and Beckwith, not part of M. A. Dyer Company’s designs for Harrington.

Both Morse and Harrington were built on existing city-owned park land, the open space of which had to be sacrificed to accommodate the low, spread-out design of the buildings. The newest Cambridgeport school – the Martin Luther King, Jr. School on Putnam Avenue – is being built on the former Houghton School site and on additional land taken through eminent domain. During construction, which is underway as this report goes to press, classes are being held in a temporary school on DeWolfe Street. Architects of the King School are Sert, Jackson and Associates – an appropriate choice, since Sert, Jackson and Gourley’s Peabody Terrace (Figs. 61-62) stands directly across Putnam Avenue. A preliminary model of the King School (Fig. 227) shows it to consist of a courtyard-oriented classroom building at the corner of Magee Street and a series of community facilities extending through to Kinnaird Street.
Private and Parochial Schools

Besides public schools, Cambridgeport has had a number of private and parochial schools. The school attended by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., in the early 1820's was typical of the private schools of the first half of the 19th century. Generally one-man (or one-woman) enterprises, they were more important for the character of their master than for their architecture. Dana's published recollections (quoted in part above) are vivid in their description of his master, a young minister named Samuel Barrett, and of the methods of punishment inflicted on the students. Another private school, quasi-public in nature, was the Hopkins Classical School, which existed from 1838 to 1854 on Massachusetts Avenue opposite Dana Street (the site where Henry Houghton subsequently built his house, Fig. 122). Income from a fund left to the town in 1657 by Edward Hopkins paid the tuition of nine Cambridge students at this school, which was a preparatory school for Harvard College.

During the last century, parochial schools have played an important educational role in Cambridgeport. The oldest in the district (indeed in the entire city) is St. Mary's at Harvard and Essex Streets, founded in 1875. Its predecessor at the same location was St. Joseph's Select School for Girls, which was in operation from 1869 to 1875. St. Mary's 1875 school building was a three-story wooden structure with a projecting wing crowned by a cupola (Fig. 228). Subsequent construction included, in 1893, the four-story brick building still in use at the corner of Harvard and Essex (Fig. 229) and, in 1914, its three-story companion on Essex Street (Fig. 230), which replaced the wooden schoolhouse of 1875. The 1893 building was designed by P. W. Ford, previously responsible for St. Paul's School (1890) on Mt. Auburn Street and for Sacred Heart Church (1874) in East Cambridge. Architect of the 1914 building was Edward T. P. Graham, a St. Mary's graduate. A high school has been part of St. Mary's educational program for most of its history, and St. Mary's High has long been the only secondary school in Cambridgeport.

Other parochial schools have existed or still exist in the district, occupying church basements or other non-schoolhouse quarters. Besides St. Mary’s (and St. Paul’s, which is oriented more toward Harvard Square than toward Central Square), the only Cambridgeport parish to have a specially designed school building is Blessed Sacrament. Located on Cpl. McTernan Street, Blessed Sacrament School (Fig. 231) is a three-story brick structure built in 1924 to designs by Edward B. McGirr, whose Houghton Annex (Fig. 224) of the previous year is comparable in style.

Cambridgeport has seen a wide range of school architecture between the one-room Boardman Schoolhouse of 1802 and the many-faceted King School of 1969. Changing ideas about education, occurring with almost generational frequency, have combined with changing styles in architecture and new developments in building technology to make schools one of the most shortlived of building types. Probably the only thing all the Cambridgeport schools have in common is the desire of those who built them—parents, School Committee members, teachers—to have the best possible facilities for the education of their children.