

The Streets of Cambridge
An Engineer's Passion

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Cambridge Historical Commission

The Forgotten Street Histories

In 2012 transcriptions of the histories of Cambridge streets, some dating back to the 18th century, were discovered in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet at the City Engineering Department. The histories had been compiled by Lewis M. Hastings, the legendary City Engineer, who served from 1889 to 1932.

The files were found and rescued by George Stylianopoulos, the department's Geographic Information Specialist, who turned them over to Charles M. Sullivan, executive director of the Cambridge Historical Commission. Sullivan saw them as the basis of an important research project. The histories were edited, updated, and augmented by street histories compiled by the late Christopher Hail (available on the Harvard-Radcliffe Online Historical Reference Shelf), and other sources. The updated street lists have recently been published by the Cambridge Historical Commission.

Hastings's records provide a street-level history of the development of Cambridge from the colonial village clustered around Harvard Square into a vibrant and busy city. Comments by Sullivan and Kathy Watkins, the current City Engineer, provide a link between the city which Hastings knew and the city today. The text was edited with care and insight by Kathleen (Kit) Rawlins, the Commission's assistant director. The role of "first reader" was assumed by Sara Kenney. Any errors of fact or interpretation are the responsibility of the writer.

Curiously, there are few images of Hastings. A studio portrait of Hastings and several of his colleagues is reproduced here—a copy hangs in Watkins's office. Also included here are maps of the city drafted by Hastings, courtesy of Steven Beaucher of Ward Maps.

The fascination which Hastings had with such matters as the laying out of city streets and how they got their names is clearly evident in the anecdote which begins this biographical monograph.

Michael Kenney

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Prologue

One day, probably in 1900, two young women called at the Brattle Street office of the developer R. Currie Grovestein, perhaps to inquire about renting an apartment.

During their visit, Grovestein mentioned that he was building houses on a new road off Eustis Street and was searching for a name for the street. After some discussion, one of the visitors said that she had recently been traveling and stayed at a very nice place (most likely in Atlantic City) called the Traymore. The name struck Grovestein as being just right-Traymore Street it would be.

The next time Grovestein saw City Engineer Lewis M. Hastings, he recounted the conversation, which Hastings included in his detailed notes: “Mr. Grovestein, who laid out this street, was casting about for a name that would be unlike any other in Cambridge.” When the Traymore Hotel was mentioned, it “filled the bill and was at once accepted.”

This was certainly not the only time someone shared an interesting street-naming story with Hastings. During his tenure as City Engineer, he compiled a remarkable record of the city’s streets, including dates, dimensions, and sources of names. Hastings attributed many of the namings to the developer and civil engineer W.A. Mason; for example, Hastings noted that Bellevue Avenue had been named by Mason as “expressive of his opinion of the landscape as seen from this street.”

Lewis M. Hastings, “greatest of the City’s engineers”

The Historical Commission’s Charles Sullivan describes Lewis Hastings as the “greatest of the City’s engineers.” Hastings joined the Engineering Department in 1871, became Chief Engineer in 1889, and retired in 1932. He died in 1936.

Kathy Watkins, Hastings’s present-day successor, notes that she is “always impressed by the quality of the drawings done under his leadership [and by] the amount of infrastructure expansion and the long-term impact he left on this community.

“I have a picture of him and his engineering division in my office,” Watkins says, “and find it amazing to think about how much work they did with such a small team. The photo is of four engineers. We now have a staff of twenty people in the engineering division, with a wide range of specialties.”

Lewis M. Hastings was born in Weston, Massachusetts, on April 17, 1853, the son of Francis and Mary Hastings. He attended local schools then took what was described as “a scientific course” at Comers Commercial College, a well-regarded professional school in Boston at the corner of Washington and School streets.

After completing his studies in 1870 at the age of 17, he joined the Boston civil engineering firm W.B. Barbour. The following year Hastings began his long career with the Cambridge Engineering Department, working under City Engineer J.G. Chase and with colleagues such as E.F. Bowker and George L. Cade. Bowker left in 1872 to start a private practice, while Cade remained until he retired in 1877. The Commission recently acquired a collection of 19th century engineering documents, including street histories attributed to Cade. They match, almost word-for-word, the reports formerly attributed solely to Hastings. It now seems likely that Hastings made use of the Cade histories, but any authorship distinctions were lost when the records were transcribed.

Hastings was promoted to first assistant when his former boss, W.B. Barbour, succeeded Chase as chief engineer; he stepped into the top job when Barbour died in 1889. All three men were skilled draftsmen, producing both contemporary and historical maps of the city. In addition, Hastings produced detailed drawings of city projects, including a

seawall along what is now Memorial Drive, furniture designed for his office at City Hall, and a plumbing system for his new house on Centre Street.

In its 1896 special edition, the *Semi-Centennial Souvenir*, the *Cambridge Chronicle* described some of the workings of the City Engineer's office during Hastings's tenure.

High up [at a window in City Hall on] some bright, sunny day, you may perhaps notice a big cylinder revolving slowly around and around. ...
A young man is waiting [at the window] for something to be done—
in fact, he is photographing by solar heat, and the result will be a beautiful blue-and-white printout of a plan for our city engineer's office.

There was also a “giant fire-proof safe” containing plans dating back to 1792. The *Chronicle's* reporter noted that some 4,500 plans were “all systematically indexed by a patent method of the engineer.” (Similar plans may now be found in the climate-controlled vaults at the Engineering Department on Hampshire Street.)

The old Engineering Department office on the upper floor of City Hall is now occupied by the Purchasing Department but is still lit by the skylight used in making sun prints. Some of Hastings's original furniture also remains. Measured drawings and special blueprints are preserved at Hampshire Street.

Hastings initially lived on Inman Street, close by the department's offices in City Hall and was still there in 1878 when he married Hattie E. Gault, of Albany, New York. Four years later, the couple purchased a narrow plot of land on Centre Street from Linn Boyd Porter, the publisher and editor of the *Cambridge Chronicle*. The Hastings built a two-and-a-half story Queen Anne-style house that still stands today.

Hastings and his wife were living on Centre Street when their children, Florence and Arthur, were born. Florence graduated from Radcliffe College in 1903 and in 1906 married Charles Ellery Gilbert, a Harvard graduate, who taught at the Browne & Nichols School. She died in 1932. Arthur graduated from MIT in 1905 and two years later married Ruth Foxcroft at the home of her father, Frank Foxcroft, who was a leading political figure in the city, championing the “No-License” anti-saloon movement—and

whose account of the naming and renaming of Foxcroft Street found its way into Hastings's street histories. Arthur Hastings was a banker and died in 1949.

By the time the children were married, Hastings, in addition to his duties at the Engineering Department, had become a real estate developer. In 1897 he built rental properties at 25 and 27 Dana Street and in 1909 a single-family residence at 26 Dana. In the same year, he developed Huntingdon Court, a brick apartment complex in a neo-Georgian style which the Cambridge Historical Commission's architectural survey describes as "vaguely Elizabethan."

Hastings had been elected the city's Chief Engineer in 1889 as the old colonial village was expanding outwards with new housing and commercial developments at the northern and western ends of the city. When Hastings joined the department as a clerk in 1871, there were 39,634 people living on 355 streets in Cambridge. By 1890, there were 70,028 on 547 streets. And in 1930, two years before he retired, 113,643 resided on 804 streets.

A corresponding development was topographical.

Writing in the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society* (Volume 39) the historian Wendell D. Garrett noted that as the population "soared" in the late 19th century, "men, surrounded by tidal basins and enormous marshes were cramped for space and began filling the marshes and flats, first for commercial, and then for residential, purposes." The result is that "the shape of the land is buried under endless streets and so patched together that the casual observer cannot orient himself in a landscape larger than a block or two." The city "became a curious blend of old conditions and old ways overlaid with new ideas and new engineering, the old transportation paths of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, set as they were by the topography, continued to influence the development of the town and to discipline the movement of its later inhabitants."

As the city expanded beyond its colonial and early 19th century limits, it found a historian of its cobblestone and asphalt development in Hastings. The street listings compiled by Hastings and found in the Engineering Department's files go far beyond mere records of widths and lengths and dates. For many of the streets developed during Hastings's tenure, there are anecdotes like the one about Traymore Street.

For the older streets, those dating back to the town's earliest years, Hastings drew on accounts from contemporary records, many of which described how the footpaths and wagon tracks of the early landowners developed into the city's streets. There is, for example, the entry for Garden Street. "There is no record of the laying out of this street by the town, but it is supposed to be one of the ancient 'highways to the Great Swamp.'" He also highlights a vote by the Selectmen in September 1796, ordering "that Dr. Aaron Hill and Mr. E. Stedman be named a committee for carrying into effect a vote of the Selectmen ... relative to making some alterations in the road leading from Capt. Freeman's farm to Noah Wyeth's."

Hastings was wont to include bits of local lore, as in his entry for Gore Street. He notes that it was named for Christopher Gore, the Federalist governor from 1809-1810, and owner of several houses built on the street in 1821. He adds wryly that "in the neighborhood of Gore Street the impression seems to prevail that it was named with reference to the slaughter houses located there."

And then there is the whimsical (and possibly apocryphal) account from 1902 describing the renaming of Foxcroft Street by Frank Foxcroft (Arthur's father-in-law). "I found it inconvenient to try to pronounce the name twice over," as in Mr. Foxcroft of Foxcroft Street. So "I got the signature of the abutters to a petition asking the city fathers to call it Hillside Street. They went me one better-if I know what that means-and called it Hillside Avenue, which is perhaps unnecessarily imposing for so short a thoroughfare."



CITY ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT.
George Davis, L. M. Hastings, Theo. L. Pike, A. W. Cain.

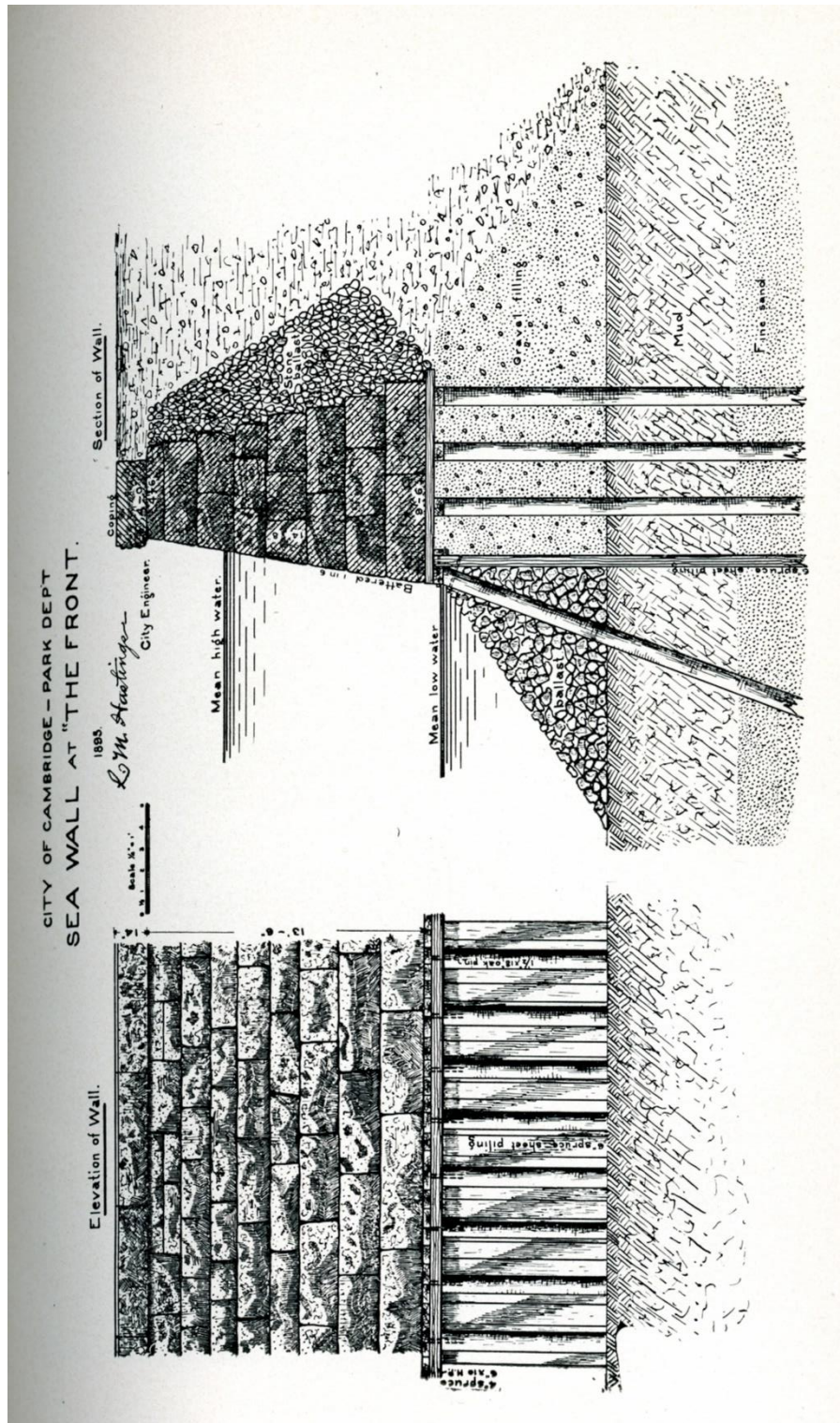
Lewis Hastings (second from left) with Engineering Department officials, ca. 1905. This is a rare photograph of Hastings: either he avoided photographers or any photographs they had taken have been lost or destroyed.

Source unknown

City Hall under construction, 1889. The skylight in the Engineer's office used for making sun prints is circled in red.

Postcard Collection, Cambridge Historical Commission





Hastings’s measured drawing of the seawall to be constructed at “The Front,” along the Charles River. Hastings honed his skills as a draftsman during his apprenticeships in engineering offices.

Annual Report of the City of Cambridge, Engineering Department, 1895



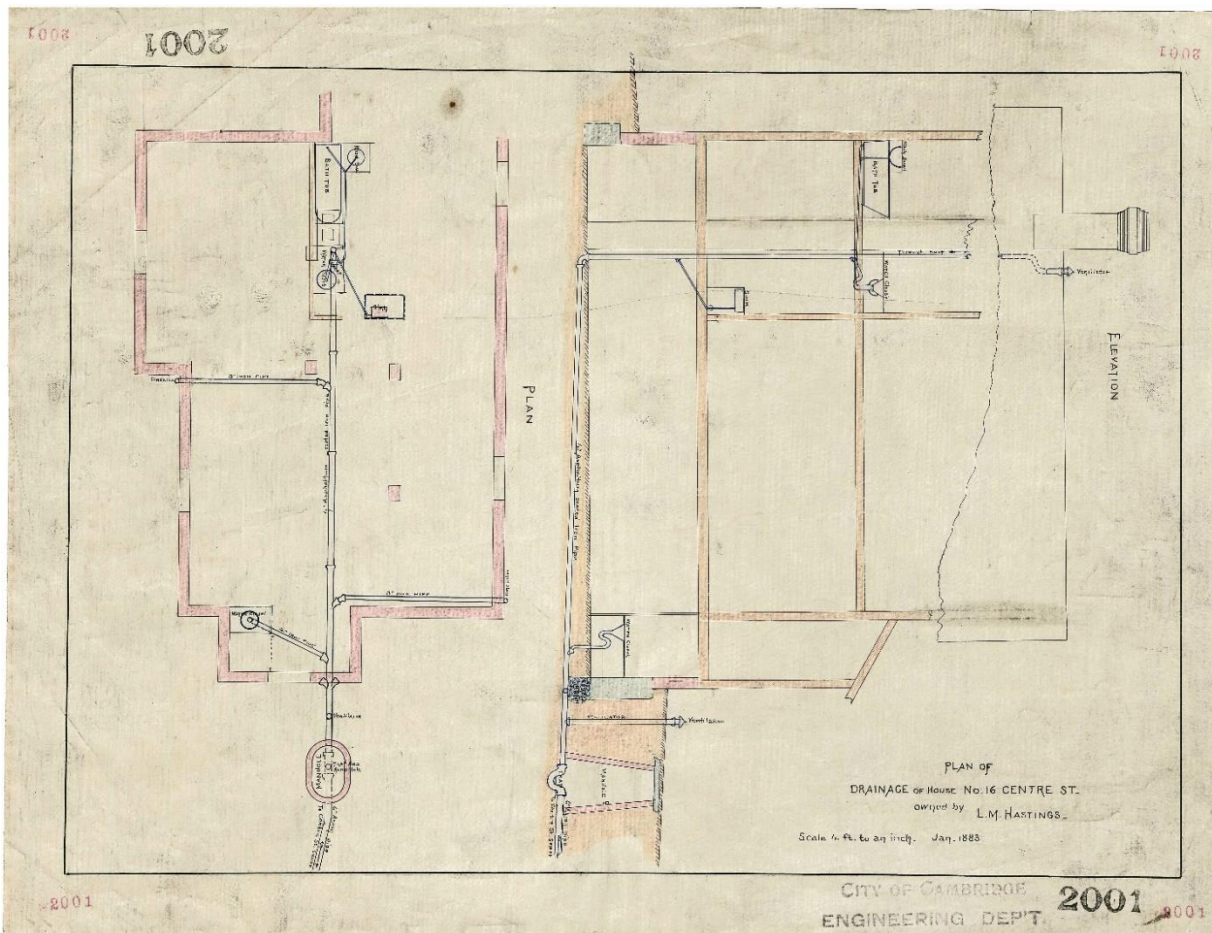
16 Centre Street, built 1883. Photo April 30, 1965
R.B. Rettig photo, Cambridge Historical Commission



Centre Street in 1894. The Hastings house at no. 16 is in the red rectangle. The owner is Hattie Hastings (Mrs. Hastings).

Atlas of the City of Cambridge, Bromley, 1894

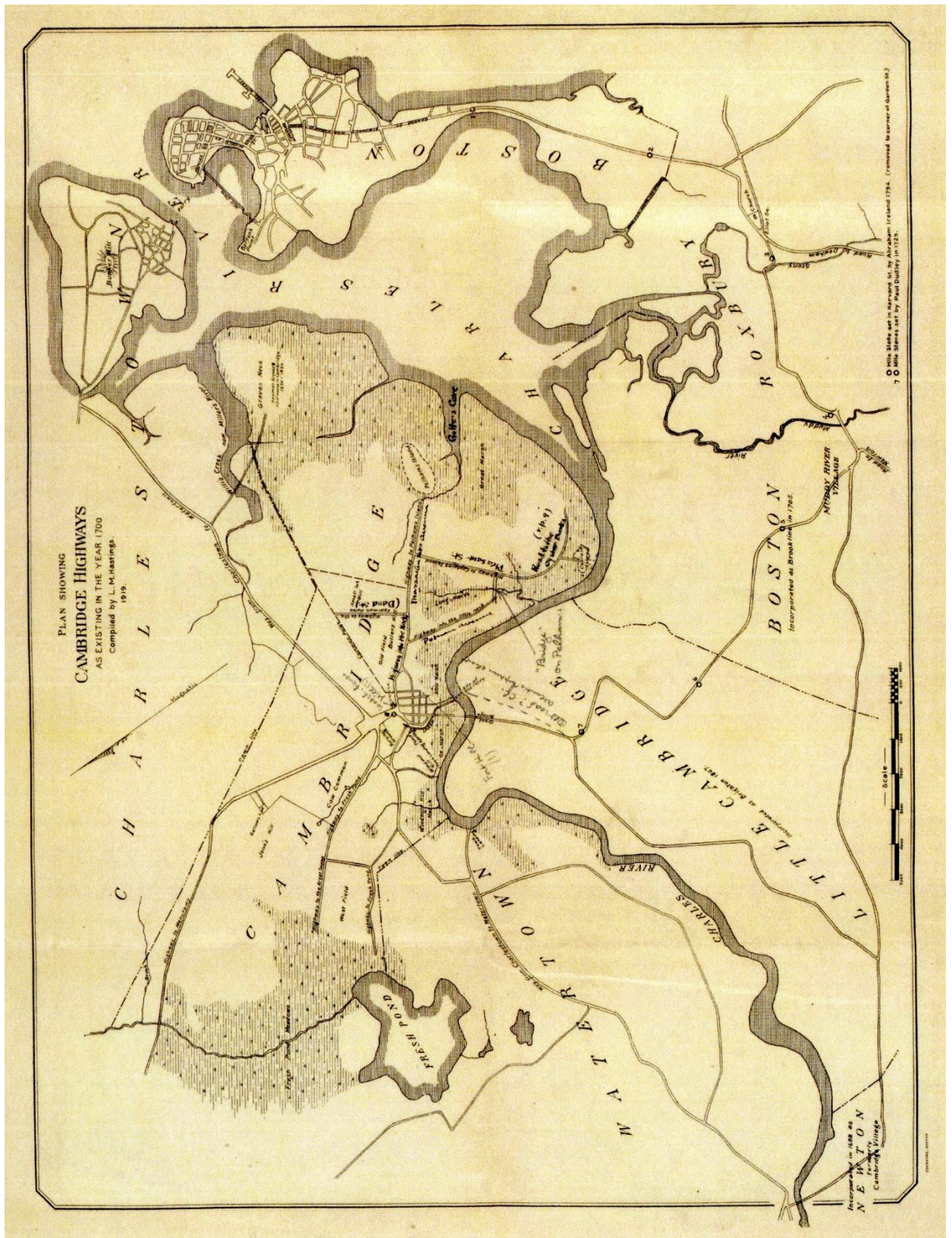
Another example of Hastings's skill. He drew these plans in 1883 for the drainage system at his Centre Street house.
Cambridge Engineering Department





Huntingdon Court, 3 Dana Street, developed by Hastings in 1909
Cambridge-Busy and Beautiful, [1909], Cambridge Historical Commission





Cambridge highways in 1700. Hastings researched and drew this map, which was published in 1919.

Cambridge Engineering Department