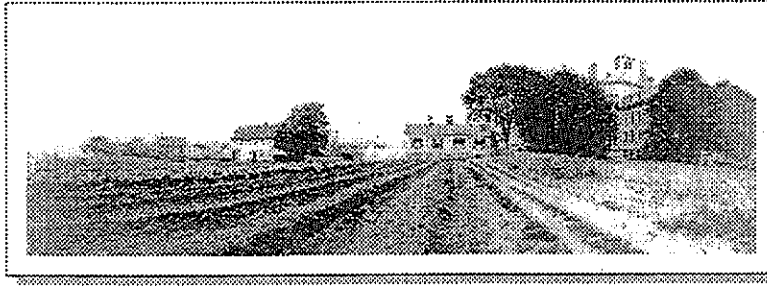


# Cambridge Poor Farm



The Cambridge Poor Farm in about 1890, looking toward Clarendon Avenue past the rear of the almshouse.

In 1851, the inmates of the city almshouse in Riverside were relocated to "Poverty Plain," the most remote corner of Cambridge. The fifth facility of its type in Cambridge as well as the largest, it is the only one to remain.

The care of orphans, paupers, the elderly, and the insane was a vexing issue in colonial New England. Until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, each town was responsible for its own dependents, and no community willingly gave relief to outsiders.

Cambridge's needy were boarded out to families at town expense until 1779, when the selectmen purchased a building near Harvard Square to serve as a "poorhouse." All able-bodied inmates were required to work for their keep, either by raising food or by making objects for sale.

The city acquired a 32-acre farm here in 1849. To make the almshouse

self-supporting, the inmates quarried stone for the building from a ledge nearby. They cultivated a variety of crops, raised pigs and cattle, and netted fish in Alewife Brook.

The Almshouse was designed by Rev. Louis Dwight and the architect Gridley J. F. Bryant of Boston, who were influenced by the American prison reform movement. It included a central octagon for supervised activity, separate wings for women and men, a chapel, a schoolroom, and "punishment rooms" which could be completely darkened. Here the elderly and the "deserving poor" lived among the sick and the insane until public pressure forced the state to establish separate facilities for orphans, delinquent minors, and the incompetent.

By the 1920s the Almshouse was known as the City Home. State orphanages and mental hospitals, along with cash grants for the poor,

replaced the almshouse system. In 1927 the city sold part of the property to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and the rest was sold for development. Streets and house lots were laid out across the fields, and the almshouse became a convent and elementary school. The remaining elderly were moved to the Cambridge Home for the Aged and Infirm, a new city facility on Concord Avenue now known as Neville Manor.

#### Sources:

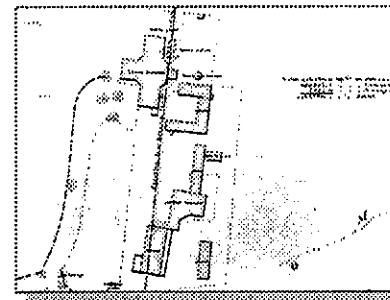
Boston Prison Discipline Society. *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report*, 1851.

*Cambridge Chronicle*, July 2, 1898.

Cambridge Historical Commission. *Report Five: Northwest Cambridge*. Cambridge, 1977.

City of Cambridge Engineering Department (map)

Luclus R. Paige. *History of Cambridge*. Cambridge, Mass., 1877.



In 1877, the Poor Farm extended from Broadway in Somerville to Alewife Brook, and included 15 acres of fields, an orchard, a stone quarry, a piggery, and fishing rights.

