

Brick Manufacturing

"Cambridge has achieved an enviable reputation for many thriving industries, and among the number that of manufacturing the best brick deserves a word of special mention."
George Howland Cox, in *The Cambridge of Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Six*

Receding glaciers left vast clay beds beneath the marshes bordering Fresh Pond. Small pits near Harvard Square and in East Cambridge once served local builders, but by the 1840s the demand for new houses in Boston, combined with strict laws that

outlawed most wood construction there, created a broader market for fireproof building materials. At about the same time, immigrants arriving from Ireland provided a labor force eager for work.

In 1844, several North Cambridge farmers sold or leased their land to brickmakers, who hired Irish laborers to extract the clay. The North Cambridge brick-making landscape was

soon marked by muddy claypits, smoky kilns, and vast drying sheds. The clay lands stretched from Walden Street and Huron Avenue to Rindge Avenue and Alewife Brook. Throughout this poorly-drained territory, where cellars could not be excavated and floods were frequent, immigrants built the high-basement worker's cottages that still characterize the area. Later, French-Canadians and Italians replaced the Irish in the brick yards and left their own stamp on the community.

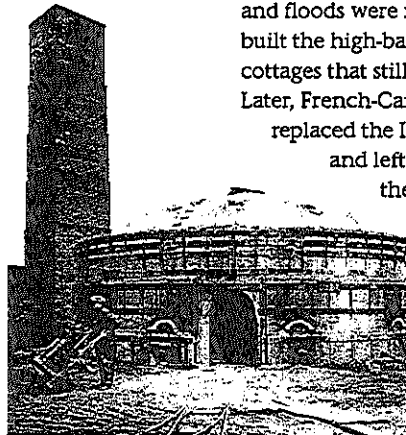
The Sands family dominated the Cambridge brick industry for almost a century. In the 1830s Ivory Sands worked claybeds near the Miller's River in East Cambridge,

and in 1839 he built a brick house that still stands at 145 Elm Street, near Inman Square. In the 1840s Hiram Sands opened new pits on the Charles River near Flagg Street, and in 1848 built the brick house at 22 Putnam Avenue. John Sands purchased an old claypit off Garden Street in 1845 and founded a firm that in 1900 joined other Cambridge producers to form the New England Brick Company.

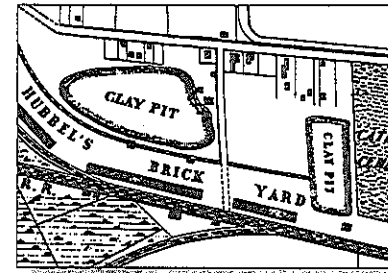
By the time the last yard closed in 1956, the brick industry had helped establish North Cambridge as an industrial neighborhood on Boston's urban fringe. Some pits were filled in for development; others became parks, such as Russell Field, Raymond Field, St. Peter's Field, and Danehy Park. Today, the clearest evidence of this once-prominent Cambridge industry can be seen in Boston's brick sidewalks, which often bear the NEBCo stamp of the New England Brick Company.

Sources:

Cambridge Historical Commission. *Report Five: Northwest Cambridge*. Cambridge, Mass., 1977.
Arthur Gilman, *The Cambridge of Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Six*. Cambridge, Mass., 1896.
New England Brick Company collection, Cambridge Historical Society (photo).
H.M. Walling, "Map of Cambridge," 1854.



This oil-fired kiln near Rindge Avenue operated from about 1916 until brick making ended in 1956.



North Cambridge brickyards in 1854. Rindge Towers and Jefferson Park now occupy this tract between Rindge Avenue and the Fitchburg Division of the Boston & Maine Railroad.

