

What's Happened to the Black Community in Cambridge

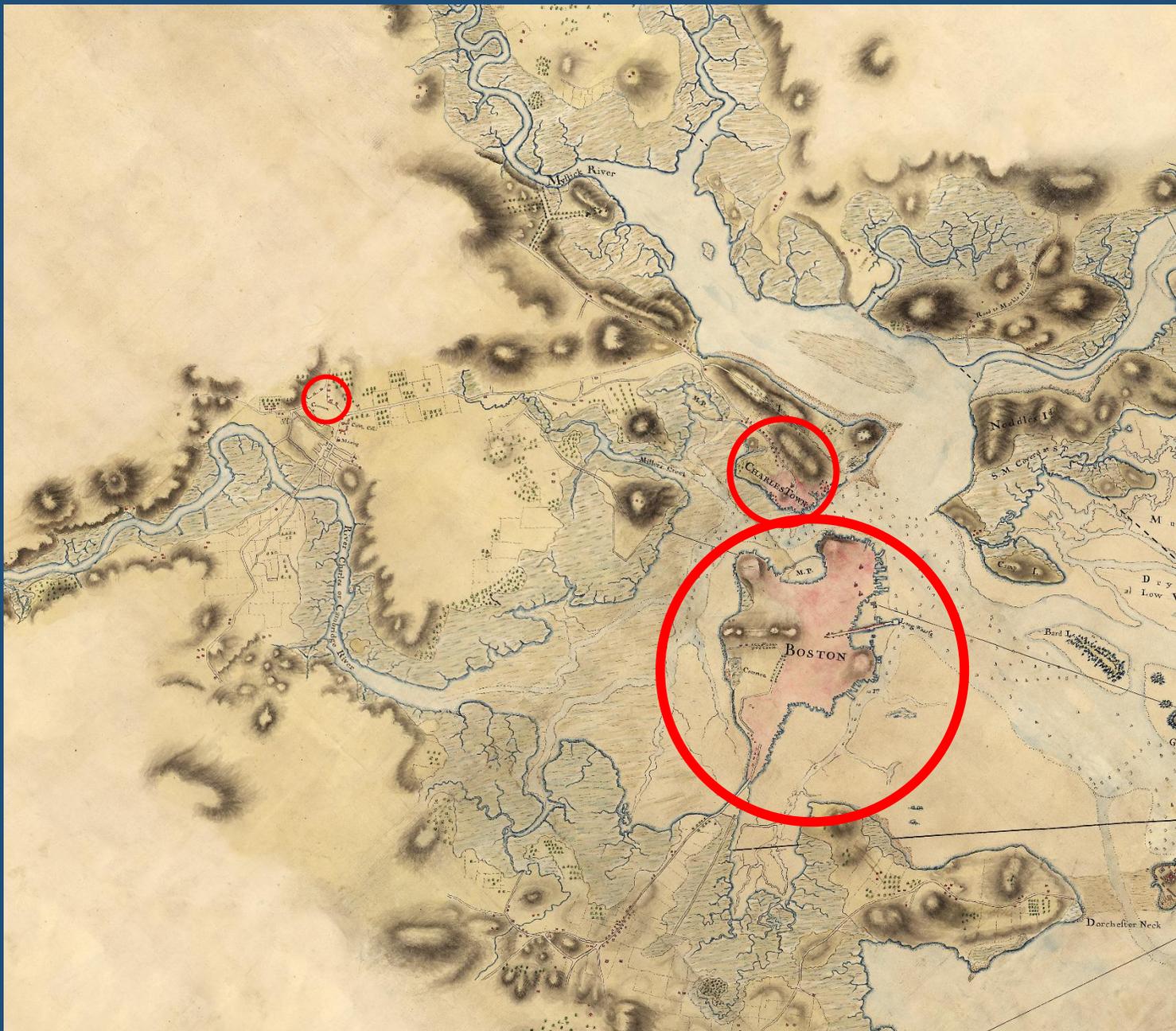
(prepared for a panel discussion sponsored by
Black History in Action for Cambridgeport)

Charles Sullivan, Executive Director
Cambridge Historical Commission

February 8, 2026

Threads in the Tapestry of Cambridge's Black Community

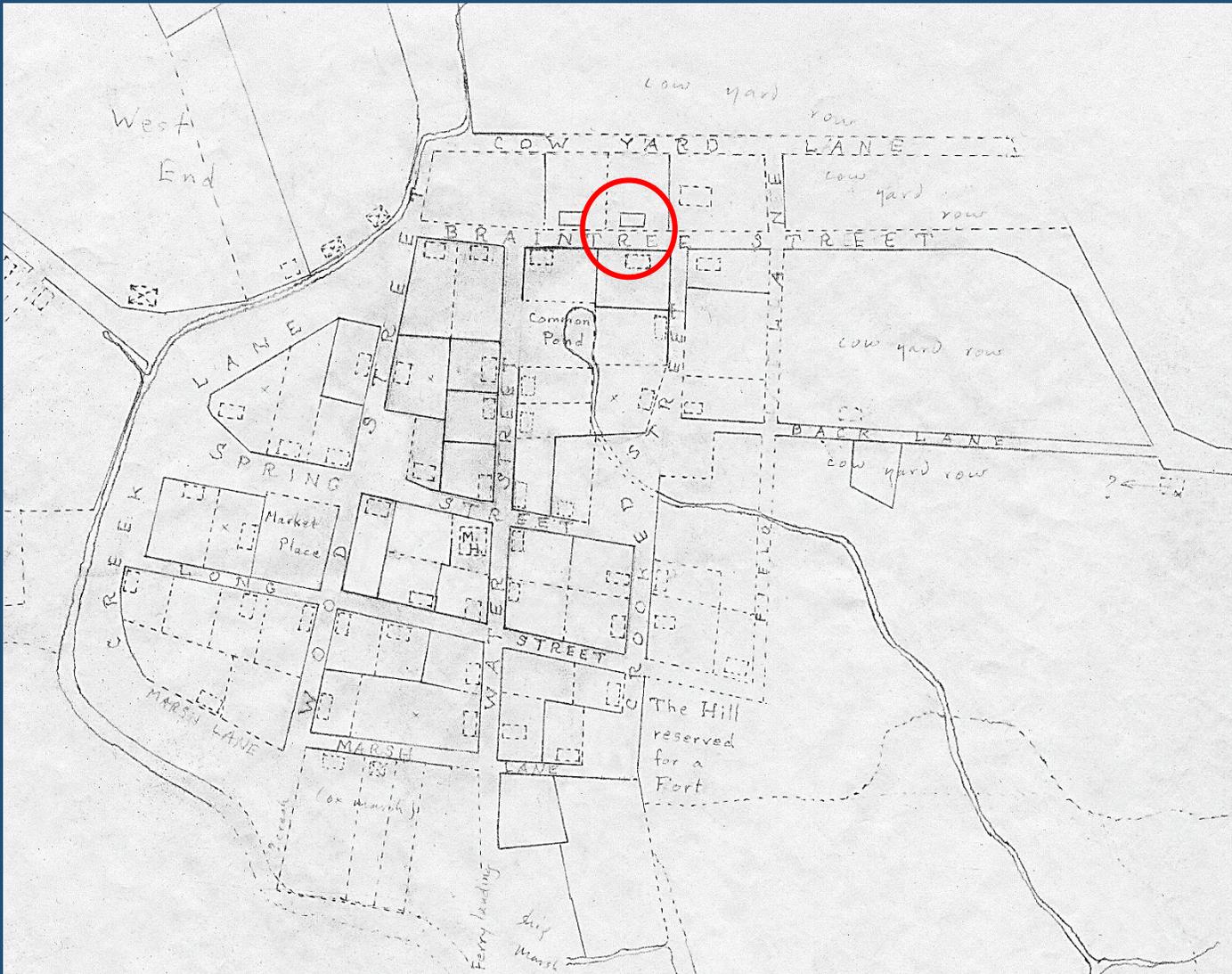
Before 1775	African slaves imported from the West Indies
After 1783	Former slaves form relationships with Black and Indigenous people around New England
1830-1870	Lewisville family compound
After 1840	Roberts Road (Baldwin Street) and West Street communities
1840s-1855	Black families relocate from Boston to Cambridgeport
After 1840	Harvard employs many local Blacks Escaped slaves from the South
After 1865	Harvard accepts Black students Howard Industrial School trains former slaves (1866-1871) West Indies migration Maritime Provinces reverse migration
1910-1930	The Great Migration
1941-1970	The Second Great Migration
After 1960	Black families relocate from Boston



Cambridge, Charlestown and Boston, ca. 1770

Population of Cambridge, Arlington and Brighton in 1765: 1,571, including 90 persons of color (5.7%)

	Total Population	Persons of Color	Percent
Cambridge	1,571	90	5.7%
Charlestown	2,048	136	6.6%
Boston	15,520	848	5.5%



Harvard Square in 1635; Eaton house circled



Bronze plaques marking the foundations of Harvard's Eaton and Goffe houses



The first recorded African in Cambridge was a “Moor” caught sleeping in a student’s bed in Harvard Professor Nathaniel Eaton’s house in 1638.

“Cicely, Negro, Late Servant of Rev. William Brattle”



Headstone of “Cicely, Negro, late servant of Rev. William Brattle, died April 8, 1714 being 15 years old”

William Brattle (1662-1717), Harvard College class of 1680, was a Tutor, Fellow, and Treasurer of Harvard College and minister of the First Parish from 1696 until his death.

Town of Cambridge Tax Valuation Sheet, 1749

A List of the Estate Real and Personal of the several Proprietors taken (pursuant to an Act of the General Court of the Rateable Estate of the Province, passed in the twenty-second Year duly elected and sworn, Viz.

Men's Names.	Number of Polls rateable.			Rent of Real Estate hired.	Superficial Feet of Wharffe, Mill Mills, Treading Mills, and Saw Mills.			Iron Works.	Coaches and Chariots.	Chaises.	Chairs.	Acres of Orchard.	Barrels of Cyster.	Tillage Land.	Bushels of Corn or Grain.	Warehou.	Pounds of Fla.	Mowings I.	Tops of Eng.	Tops of Mead.	Tons of Salt H.	Acres of Pasturage.	Number of Cow-Leaves.	Vessels failed to Foreign Part.	Slaves between 12 & 50 Years of Age.	Indian, Negro or Molatto for Term of Years.	Horses and Mares three Years.	Oxen.
	No.	No.	No.		No.	No.	No.																					
Frances Wells	1											2	30	2	40			24	10		40	non			1	2	4	
Thomas Harding	3	1										1	15	2	40			8	0	0	18				1	2	2	
Will ^m Fletcher	6	1										2	20	2	40			25	8	2	5	20			0	2	4	
W ^m Jones	0	1										1	15	5	80			39	10	2	7	122		1	2	4	10	
Nath ^l Cunnigham	1	1																26	10	3	3	40			3	0	1	
Daniel Dana	1	1										1	6	1	50			18	6	0	2	40			1	0	1	
Sam ^l Shippo	3	1										2	12	1	50			18	6	0	5	40			1	0	1	
Solomon Robbins	1	1										2	10	1	80			1	1			1				1	0	1
Joseph Aspinwall	1	1										1	10	1	80			1	1			1				1	0	1
John Cheney	1	1										1	10	1	80			1	1			1				1	0	1
Sarah Smith	0	1										1	8	2	30			2	1	1	19					1	0	1
Thomas Shoving	2	1										1	4	2	60			3	2	2	16					1	0	1
Dea Shoving	0	1										1	4	1	20			3	1	1	8					1	0	1
Abijah Leacher	1	1										1	10	3	80			22	3	10	32					2	0	1
Thomas Dana	1	1										2	30	3	80			01	6	3	3	20			1	1	1	1
Abraham Cutting	1	1																18	2	3	20					1	1	1
Will ^m Brown	1	1										2	25	2	50			2	0	0	0	20				1	0	1
John Brown	1	1										1	25	2	50			2	0	0	0	20				1	0	1
Noah Spashaw	1	1										3	30	4	70			20	5	5	30					2	2	5
Nathan Spashaw	1	1																21	5	3	2	26			1	2	2	
Ebenezer Smith	1	1										1	8	2	40			1	0	0	1					1	0	1
John Smith	1	1										1	8	2	30			3	1	1	16				1	0	1	1
Andrew Sever	1	1										1	30	4	70			10	4	4	40				1	1	2	4
Miriam Brown	1	1										1	40	2	60			6	1	1	15				1	0	1	4
Will ^m Dana	1	1										1	40	2	60						10					2	0	1
Abiel Richardson	2	1																			7					1	0	1
Edward Shoving	1	1										3	30	6	100			7	3	30					1	2	5	

Pasturage.

Vessels failed to Foreign Part.

Slaves between 12 & 50 Years of Age.

Indian, Negro or Molatto for Term of Years.

Horses and Mares three Years

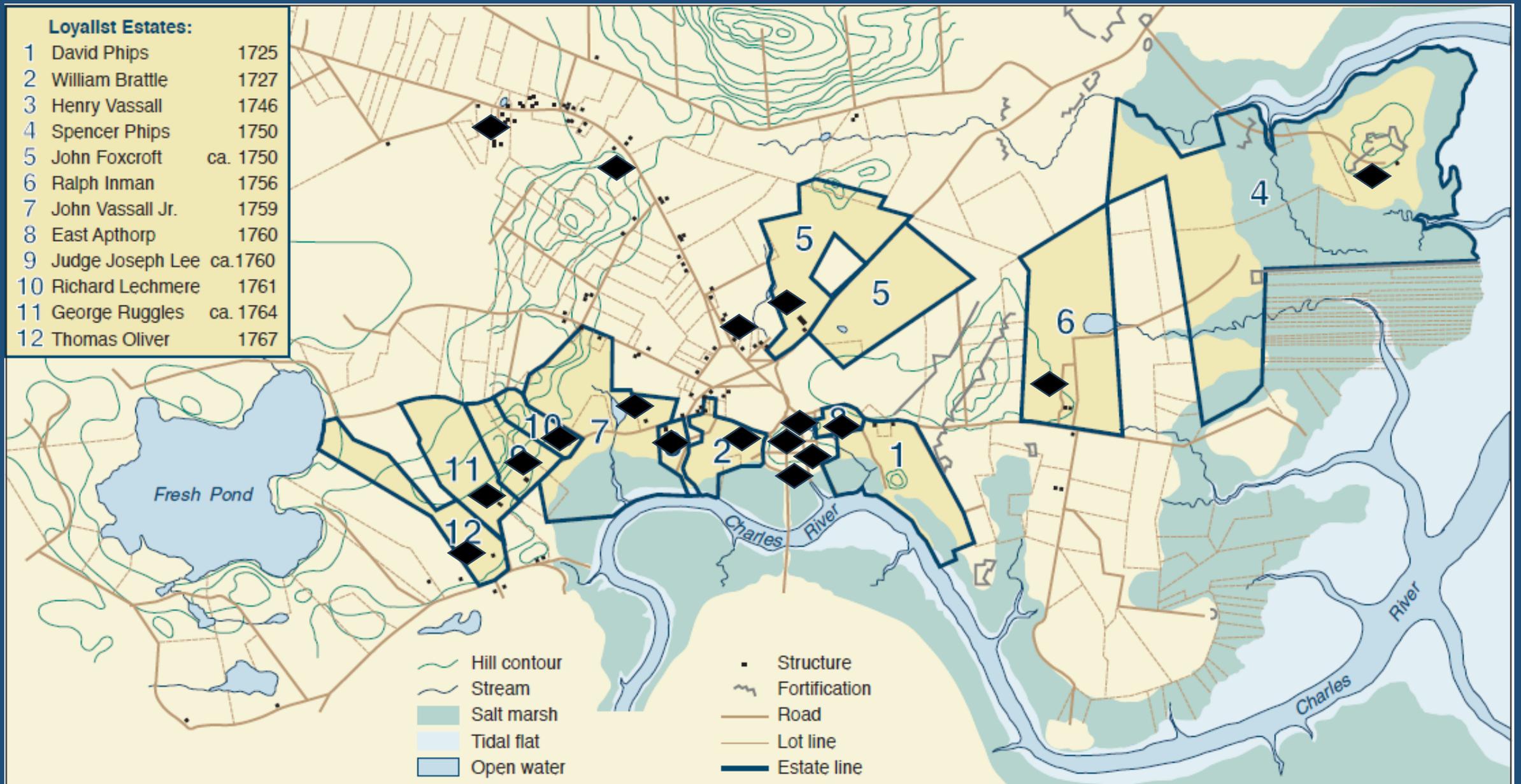
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SLAVE OWNERS IN THE FIRST PARISH OF CAMBRIDGE, 1749

		<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Slaves Aged 12–50</u>
Patriots	William Angier	tanner	1
	Moses Bordman Jr.	tanner	1
	Elizabeth Nutting	unmarried	1
	Stephen Prentice	cordwainer	1
	Jonathan Sprague	?	1
	Lieut. [Ebenezer] Stedman	innkeeper	1
	Edmund Trowbridge	judge	1
	Abraham Watson	tanner	1
	Deacon [Samuel] Whittemore	storekeeper	1
Tories	Francis Foxcroft	judge	1
	Henry Vassall	merchant	4
	[Mrs. John] Vassall	widow	1
	Total		15

Sources: Town of Cambridge Tax Valuation Sheet, 1749; Paige, *History of Cambridge*, 1877; Massachusetts Vital Records



Loyalist Estates in 1775, with Slave Owners in 1749

Slave Owners in Cambridge



Samuel Whittemore house, 64 J.F. Kennedy Street, ca. 1725; demolished 1900

Slave Owners in Cambridge



Henry and Penelope Vassall house
94 Brattle Street (1746)



John Vassall Jr. house
105 Brattle Street (1759)

John Vassall's claim to the British government after his holdings were confiscated in 1778 reported an annual income of £150 from his farm and itemized its "sundry stock:"

A Negro woman, Cuba £40

A Mulatto Man, Malcolm £50

A Mulatto Boy, James £30

A Negro Man, William £20

A Negro Woman, Dinah £30

Two small Boys £30*

Two yoke of oxen £50

Six cows £24

A Pair Steers £6

Two heifers £5

Two Yearlings £3

A Bay Mare paid sheriff for £40

A Bay Mare £10

Two horses from England £100

Four colts £25

***One of these boys would have been Darby Vassall (1769-1861)**

The Aftermath of Slavery in Cambridge



Captain Thomas Lee Jr. house, 153 Brattle Street

“In those days most wealthy families had one or more black servants who had formerly been slaves, but who, unwilling to accept their freedom, preferred living with the masters and mistresses from whom they had ever received kindness. The black serving man at Capt. L[ee]’s was called “Old Jube” ...

Anne Stone Orne (born 1792), “Reminiscences of Childhood.”
Cambridge Chronicle, Aug. 29, 1850

African Americans as a Percentage of Cambridge Population*

Year	African American	Total Population	Percent
1749	32**	1,580 (est.)	2.0%
1755	56***	not reported	3.7% (est.)
1765	90	1,571	5.7%
1776	not reported	1,586	-
1790	60	2,115	2.8%
1800	25	2,453	1.0%

* Cambridge included present-day Arlington and Allston-Brighton until 1807.

** Slaves aged 12-50. In 1749 there were 16 slaves in present-day Cambridge and an estimated white population of 608.

*** Slaves over 16 years old.

Beginning in 1790, federal censuses enumerated all persons regardless of age.

West Boston (Longfellow) Bridge, 1793, makes Cambridge a suburb of Boston



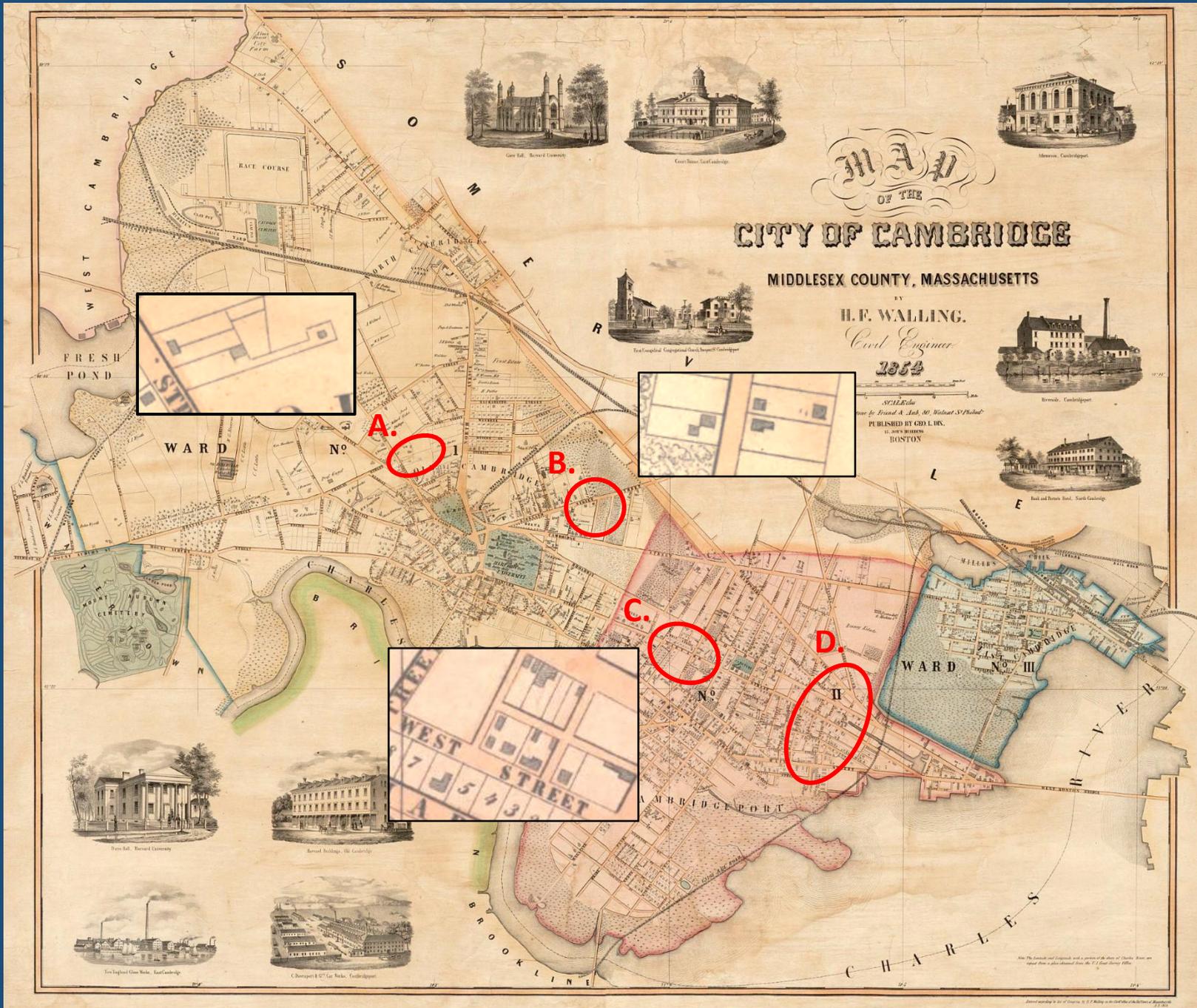


Three villages connected by new roads, 1830

African Americans as a Percentage of Cambridge Population*

Year	African American	Total Population	Percent
1800	25	2,453	1.0%
1820	53	3,295	1.6%
1840	77	8,409	0.9%
1860	354	25,706	1.4%

*Cambridge included present-day Arlington and Allston-Brighton until 1807

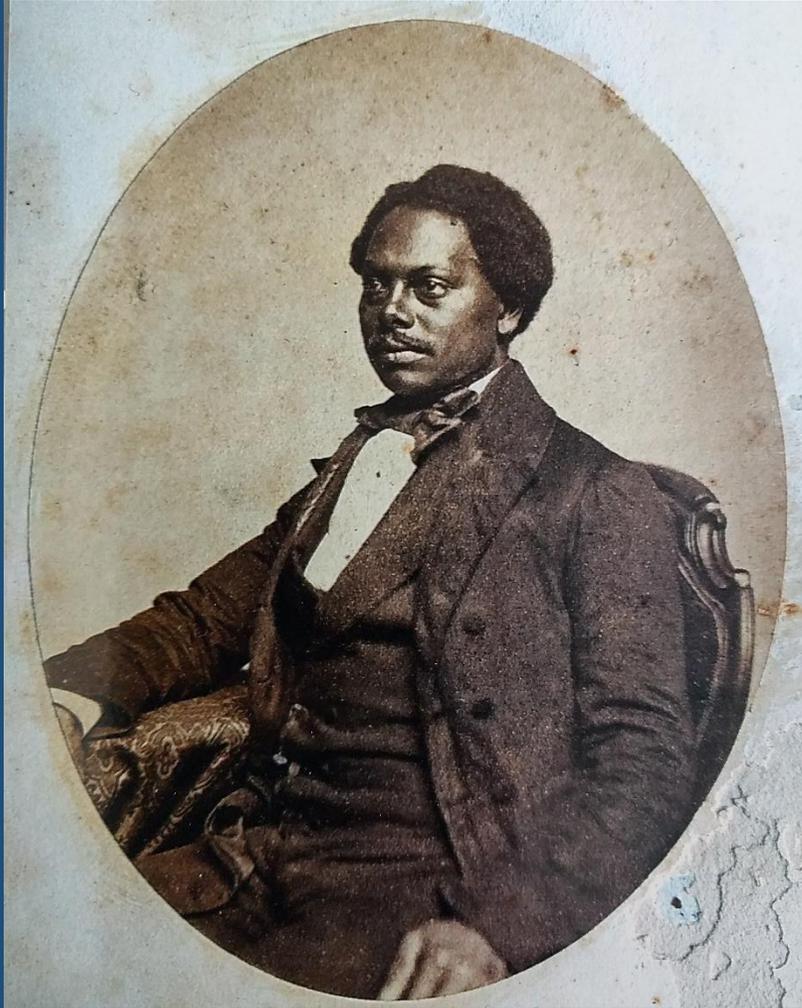


Known Black communities,
ca. 1830-1860

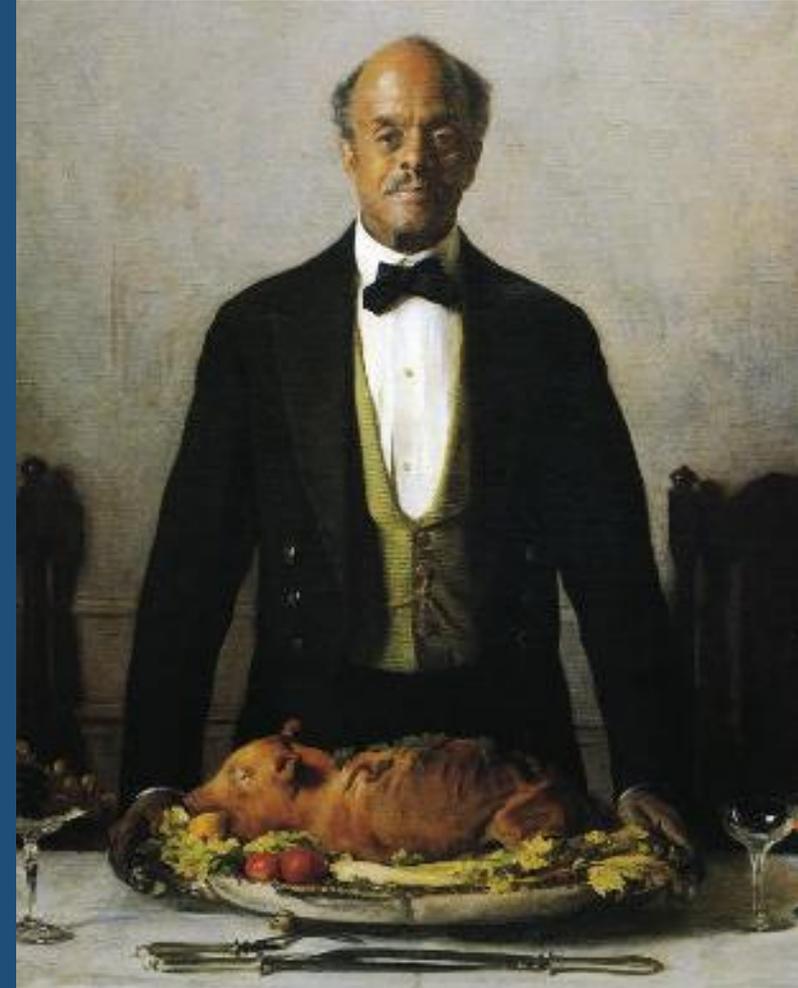
- A. Lewisville
- B. Roberts Road (Baldwin Street)
- C. West Street
- D. Lower Port

Henry F. Walling,
"Map of the City of Cambridge ...
Massachusetts," 1854

Lewisville Community



George Washington Lewis Sr. (ca. 1824-1876)
1852-1876



George Washington Lewis Jr. (1848-1929)
1876-1920

Stewards of the Porcellian Club



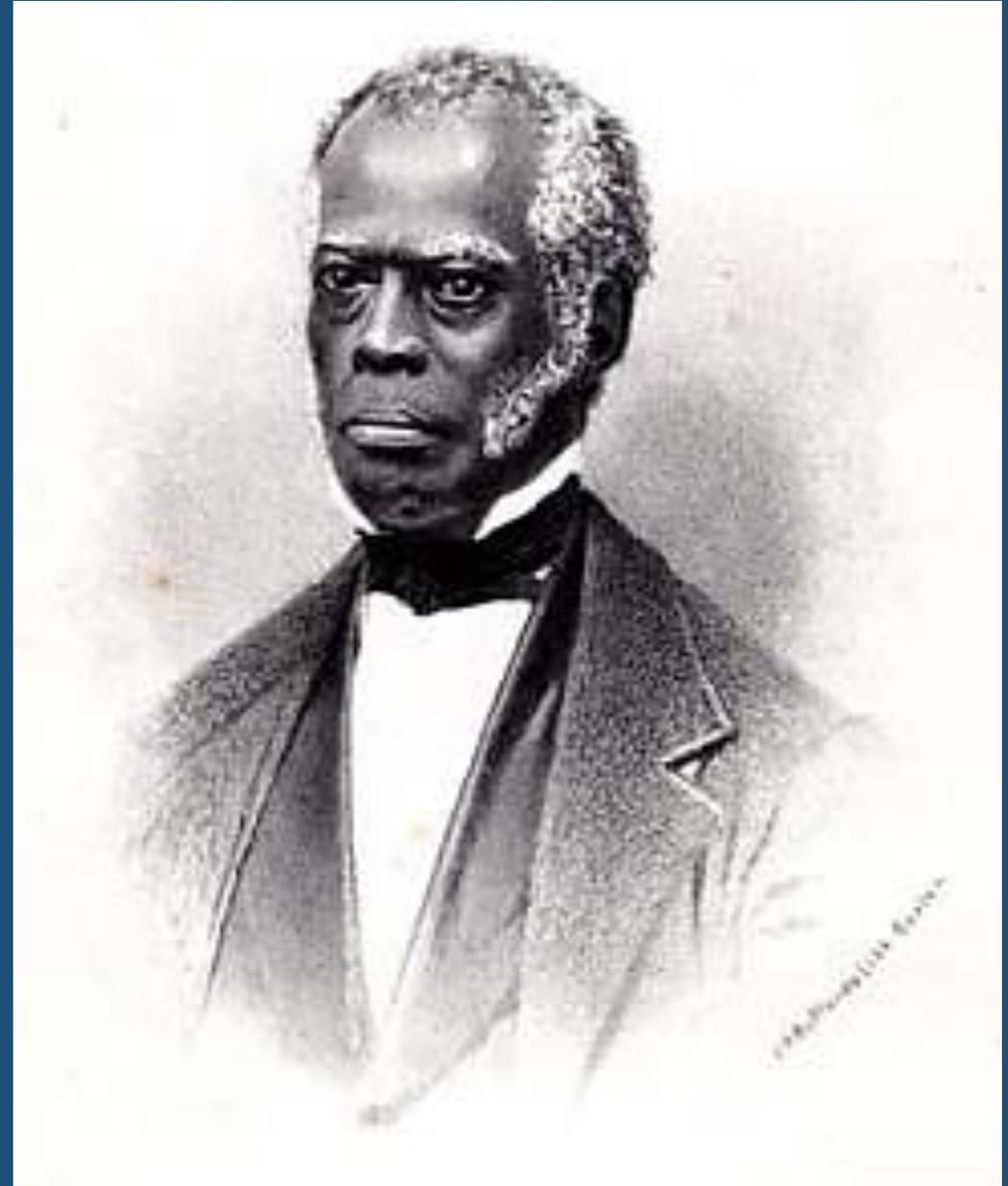
George Washington Lewis Jr. family at 47 Parker Street (1890).
Photo ca. 1900

Antebellum Newcomers to Cambridge

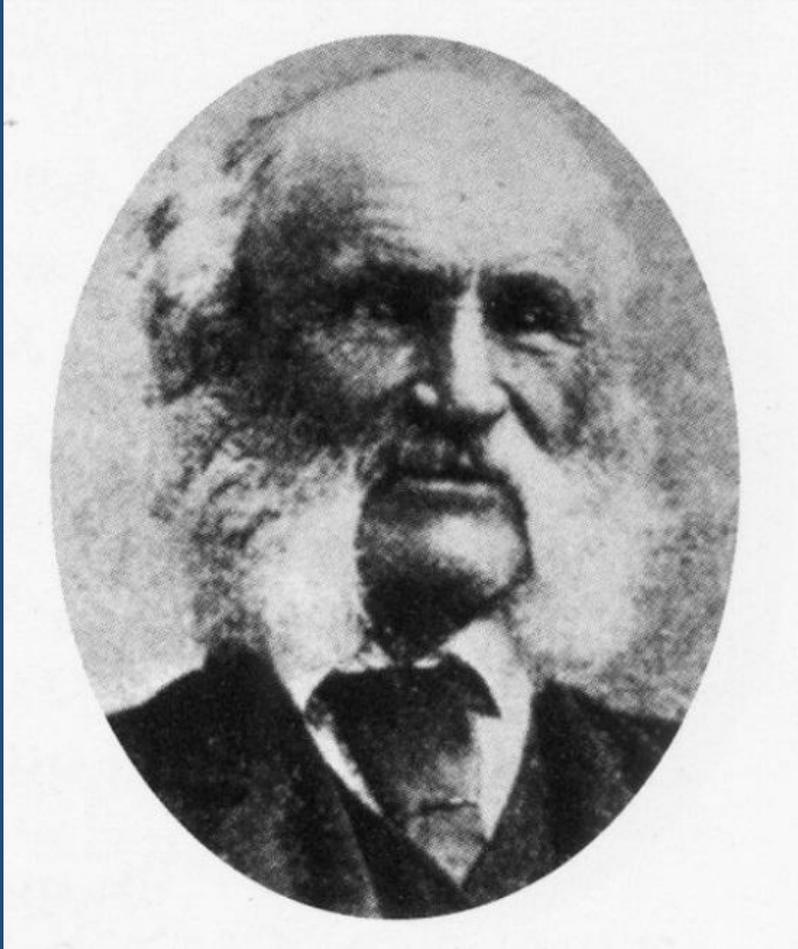
Lunsford Lane (1803 – 1879),
born in Raleigh, N.C.

Former slave, businessman, author
44 Webster Avenue, 1844-1860

Moved to Cambridge when Boston
segregated its schools



Antebellum Newcomers to Cambridge



Lewis Clarke (1818 – 1897)
J. Milton Clarke (1820-1902),
born in Madison County, Kentucky

Former slaves, authors and lecturers

2 Florence Place (off Norfolk Street),
1851-1902

Common Councillor J. Milton Clarke

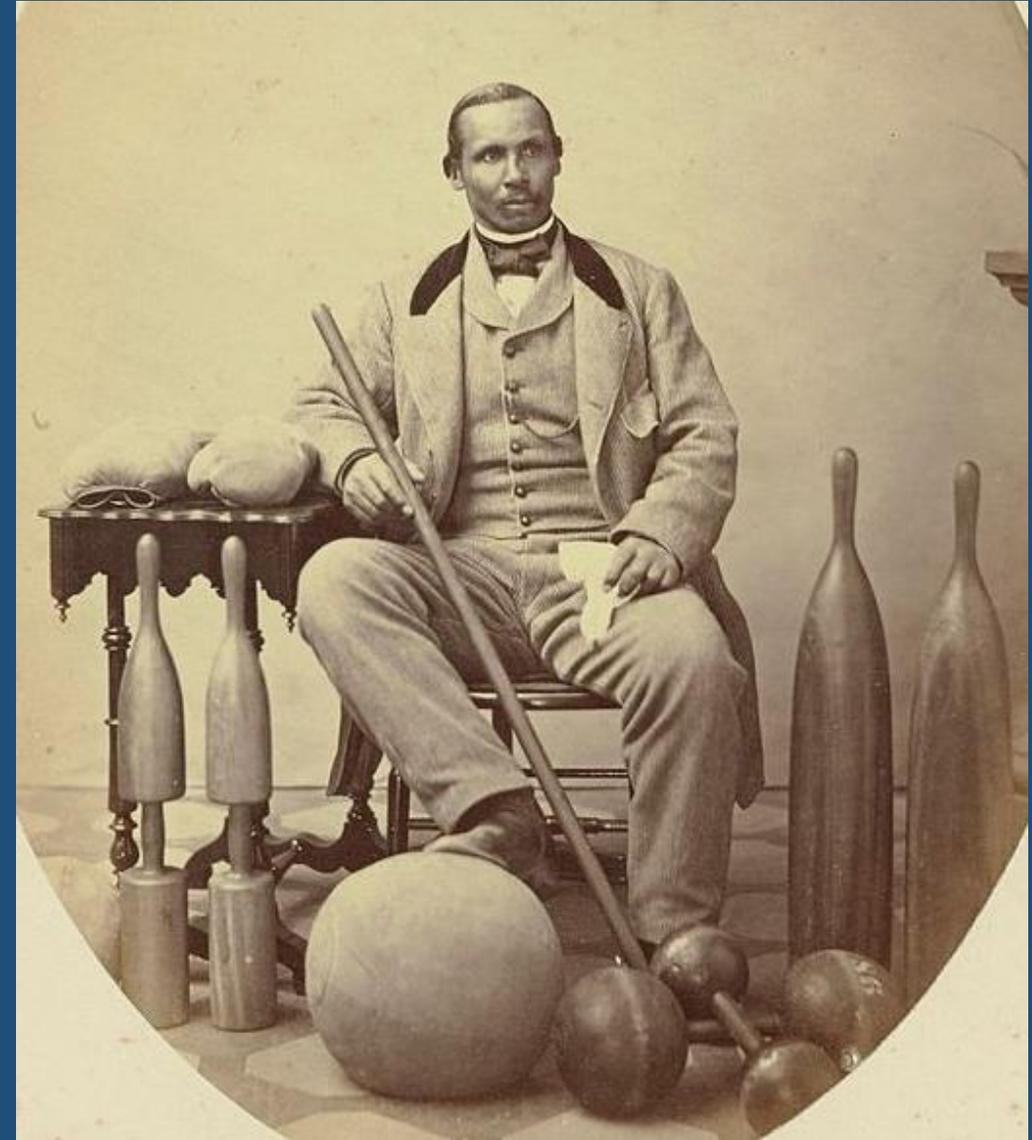
First African American elected to public office in Cambridge, 1870

Antebellum Newcomers to Cambridge

Aaron Molyneux Hewitt (1819-1871)
Born in Queens County, N.Y.

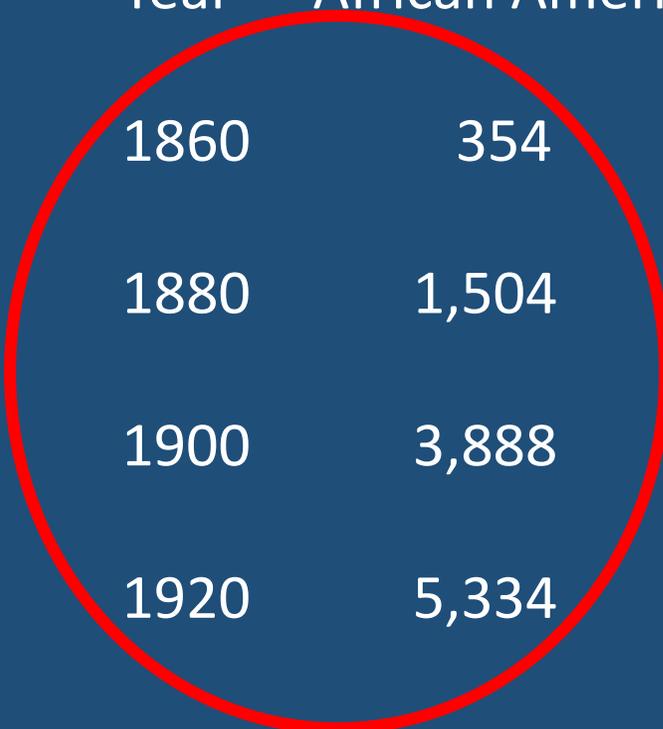
First African American instructor at Harvard University
Superintendent of the Gymnasium, 1859-1871

69 Dunster Street, 1859-1871



African Americans as a Percentage of Cambridge Population

Year	African American	Total Population	Percent
1860	354	25,706	1.4%
1880	1,504	52,669	2.8%
1900	3,888	91,866	4.2%
1920	5,334	109,694	4.9%
1940	4,858	110,879	4.4%



Postwar Participants in Community Life



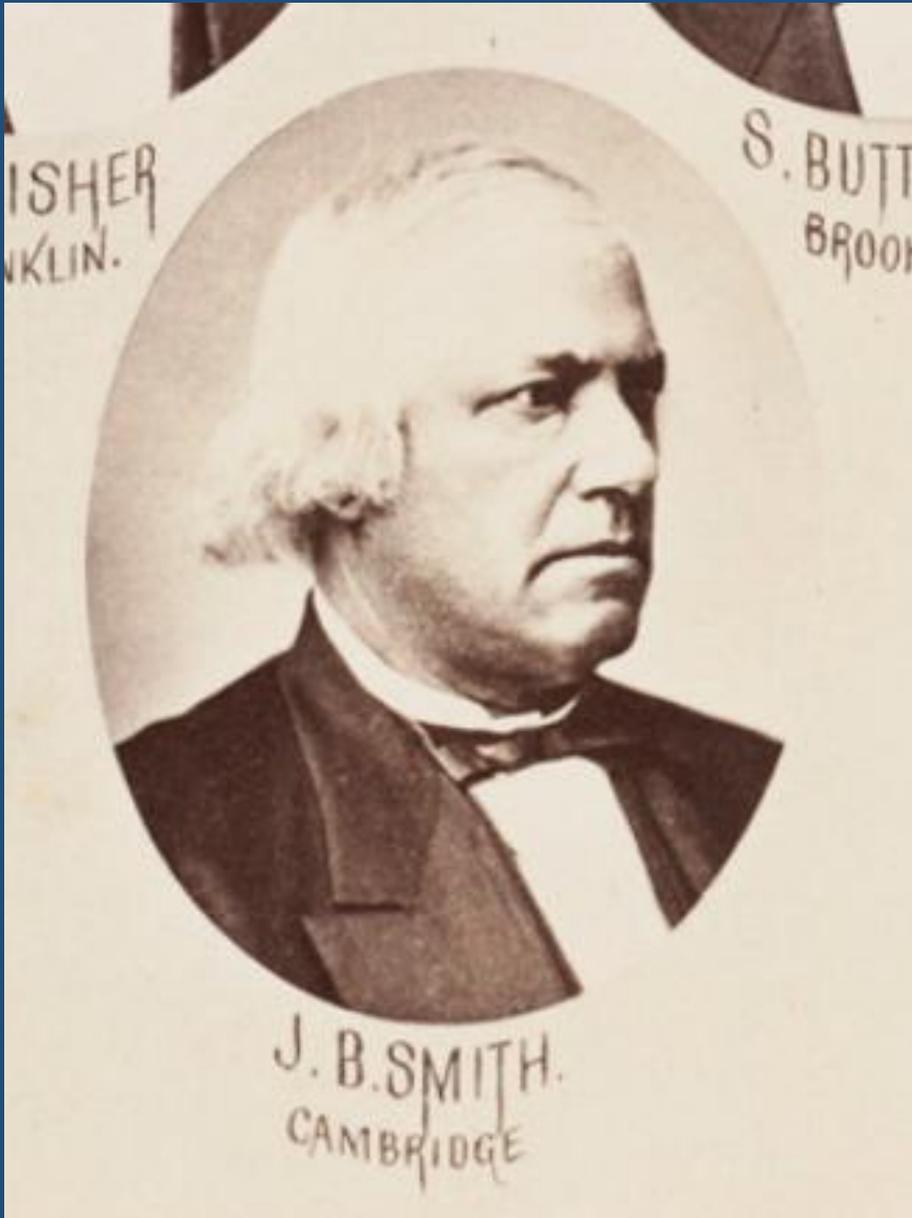
Harriet Jacobs (1815-1897)
born in Edenton, N.C.

Former slave, author of
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)

10 Trowbridge Street, 1869-1873
17 Story Street, 1873-1876



Postwar Participants in Community Life



Joshua Bowen Smith (1813 – 1879),
born in Coatesville, Pa.

Businessman, abolitionist,
State representative, 1873-1875

79 Norfolk Street, 1852-1879

Postwar Participants in Community Life

Maria Baldwin (1856-1922)

Born in Cambridge of Haitian Descent

Graduate of Cambridge High School and
teacher training program

Teacher and master, Agassiz School, 1889-1922

196 Prospect Street

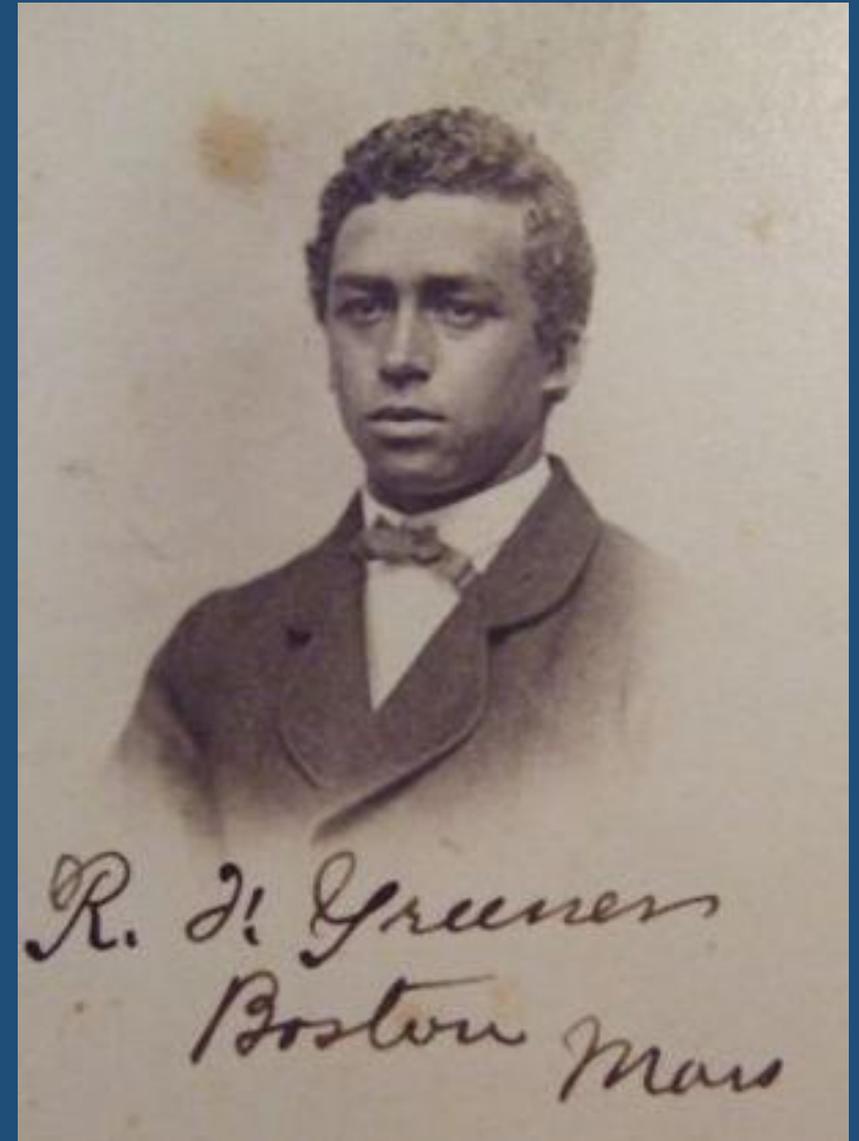


Postwar Participants in Community Life

Richard T. Greener (1844-1922)
Born in Philadelphia, Pa.

First African American graduate
of Harvard College, 1870

25 Washington Street, after 1859
College House, after 1865

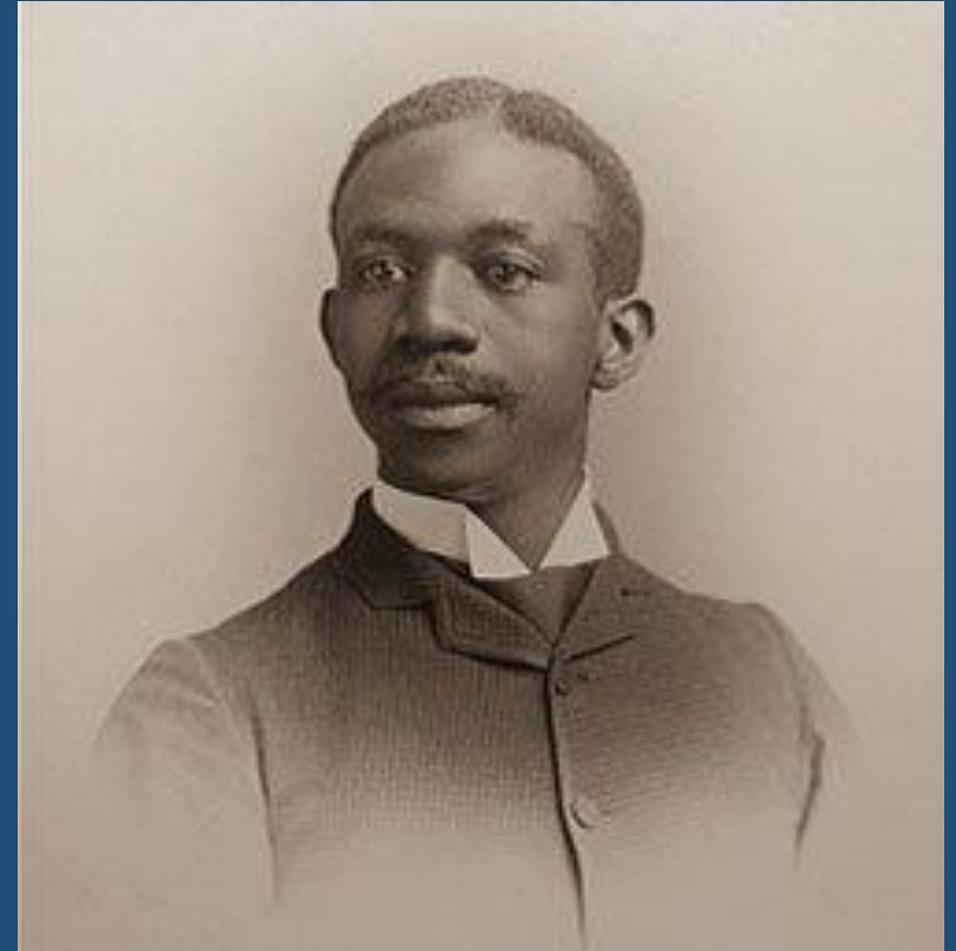


Postwar Participants in Community Life

Clement Morgan (1859-1929)
born in Virginia

Harvard College 1890, Law School 1893
First African American Cambridge Alderman, 1897-1899

265 Prospect Street, 1898-1922



Postwar Participants in Community Life



1906 Niagara Movement Conference in Harper's Ferry, Va.

Gertrude Wright Morgan (1861-1931)
Born in Springfield, Illinois
Married Clement Morgan in 1897

Prominent in the Niagara Movement,
the establishment of the NAACP, and
the suffrage movement to adopt the
19th amendment

265 Prospect Street, 1898-1922

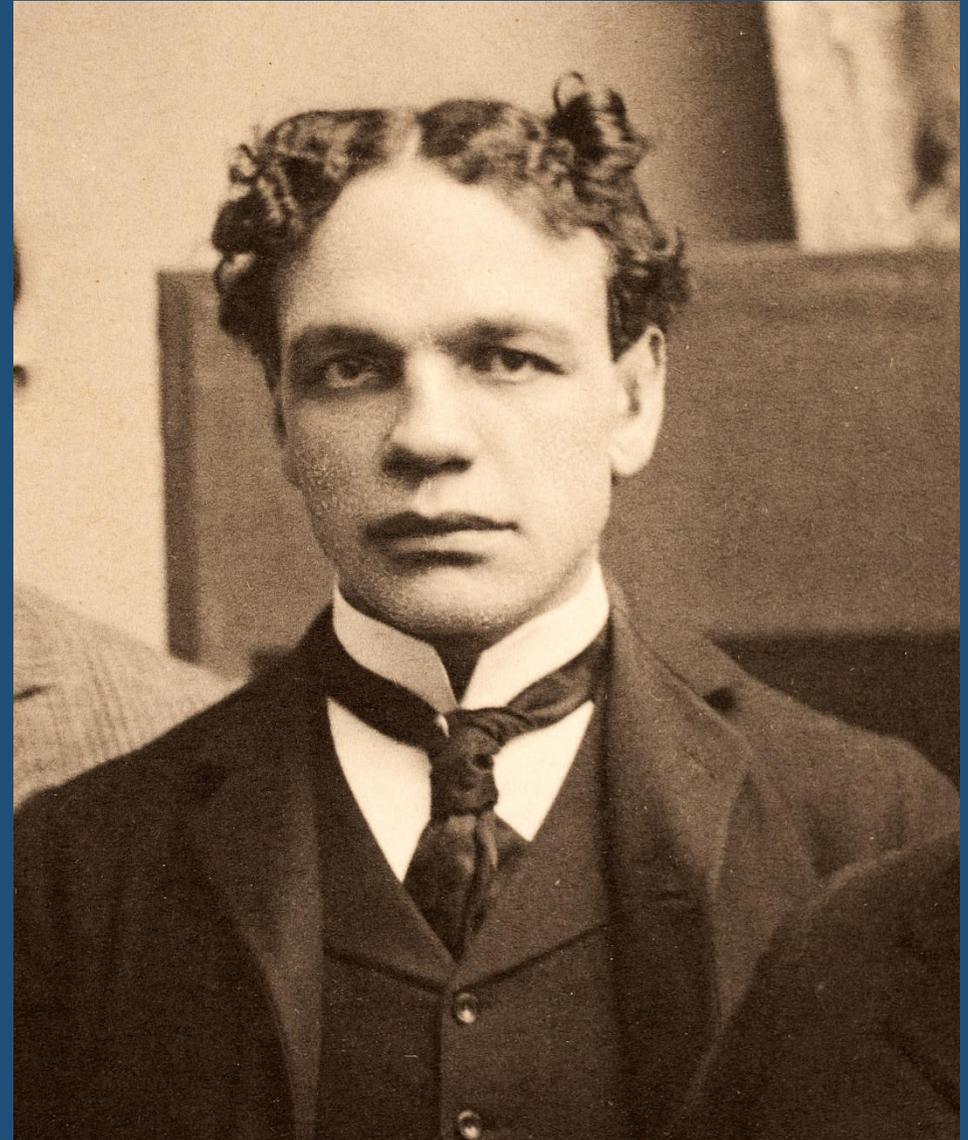
Postwar Participants in Community Life

William H. Lewis (1868-1949)
Born in Berkeley, Virginia

Amherst College, 1892
Harvard Law School, 1895

Cambridge Common Council, 1899-1901
U.S. Attorney, 1903-1913

226 Upland Road, 1902-1930



Members of the Cambridge
Common Council, 1899 (detail)

"Color Line Not Drawn," 1903

COLOR LINE NOT DRAWN AND MERIT RECOGNIZED.

Cambridge Voters and Institutions Accord Honor to Prominent Negroes — Many Positions of Trust Have Been Held by Members of Colored Population.

The following interesting and thoroughly comprehensive story of the part



JOSHUA B. SMITH,
Representative.



JOHN J. FATAL,
Common Councilman.



P. H. RAYMOND,
Chief Engineer.



HORACE J. GRAY,
Past Comamnder Post 30.



ARTHUR ROBINSON,
Patrolman.

Do you know any American city where there is now or has been within a few years—

A black alderman, sitting in a board with 10 white colleagues and elected by voters 96 per cent. of whom were white?

Two negro representatives in the Legislature, chosen by constituencies in which the colored vote was relatively small?

Seven members of the common council of African descent?

A negro chief of a fire department in which he was the only man of color?

A black policeman, patrolling streets occupied mostly by white residents, for 19 years in succession?

A negro at the head of the city department of bacteriology?

A negro member of the public library trustees, with all white associates?

A black commander of a white post of the Grand Army? And—

A woman of nearly pure African blood acting as principal of a grammar school in a fashionable district, with six white teachers and several hundred white pupils under her charge?

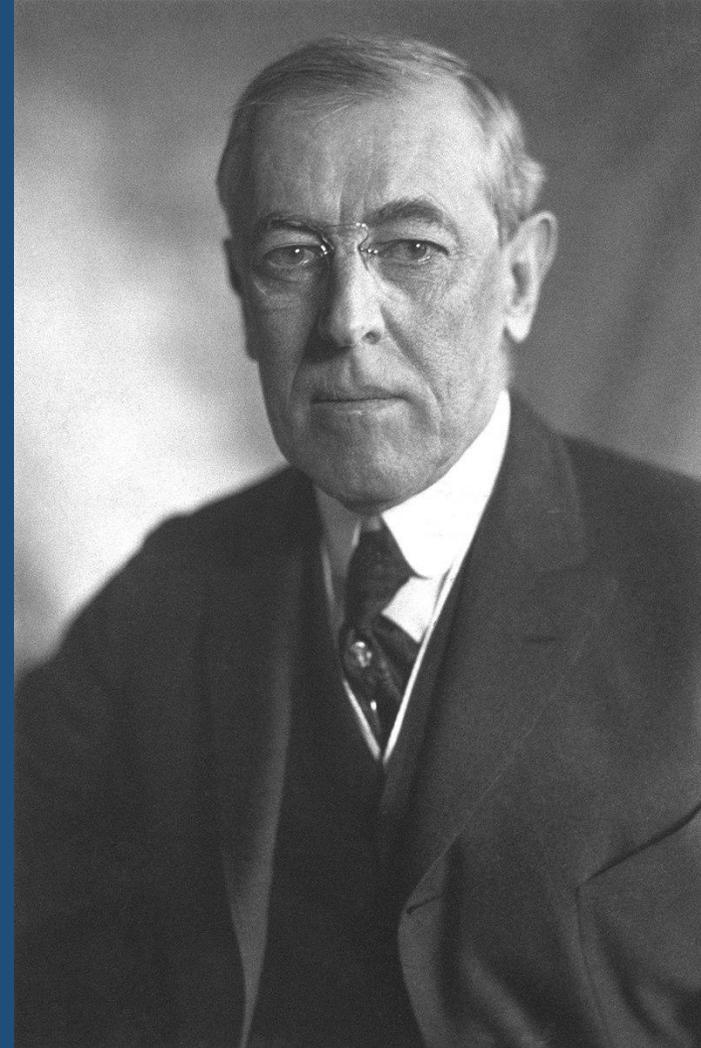
This remarkable record is that of Cambridge, Mass., and nobody has seemed to think it worth making a special article about until now.

Cambridge Chronicle, August 29, 1903

Color Line Drawn, 1902-1913

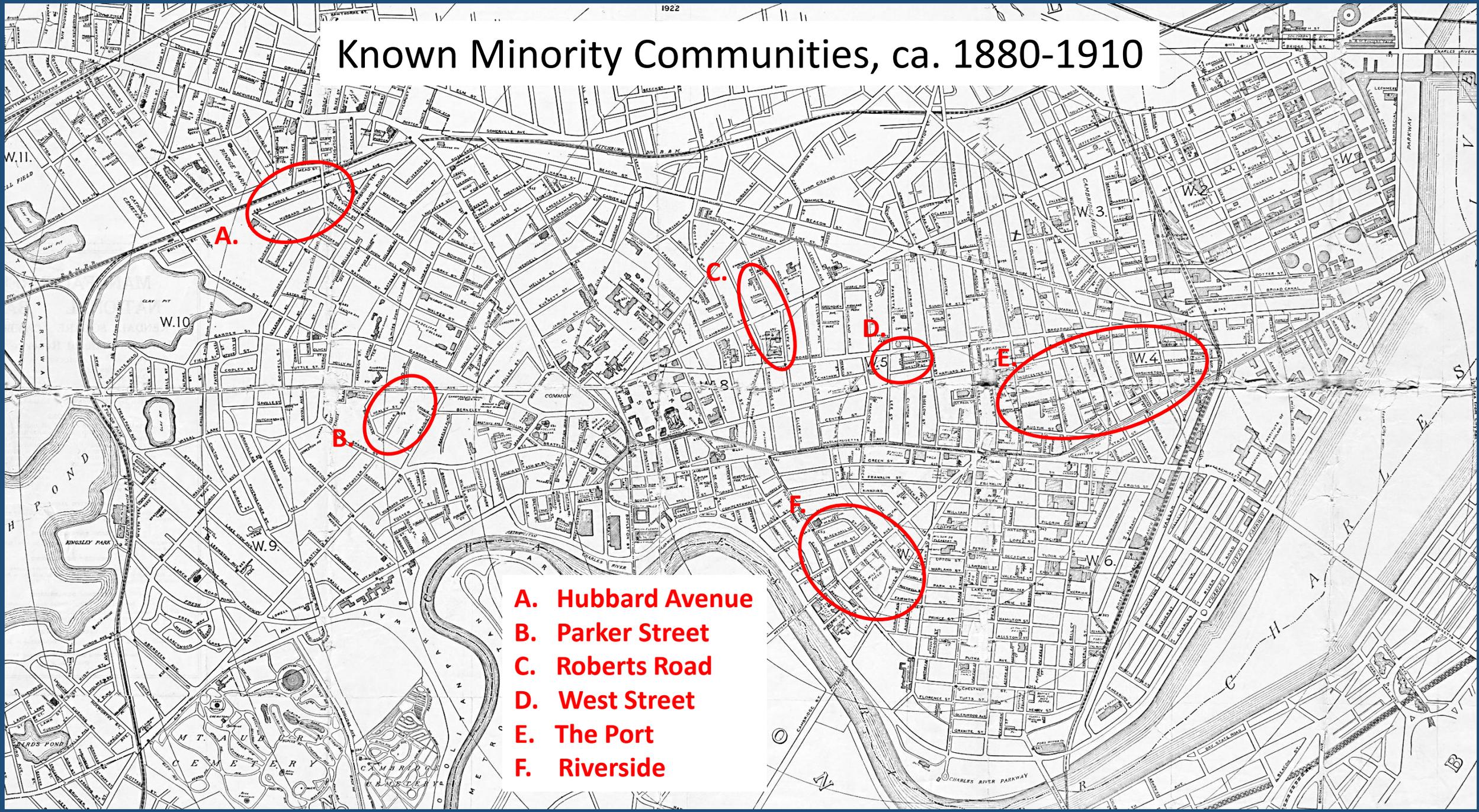


John H.H. McNamee (1853-1936)
Cambridge's first Democratic mayor, 1902-04



Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924)
U.S. President, 1913-1921

Known Minority Communities, ca. 1880-1910

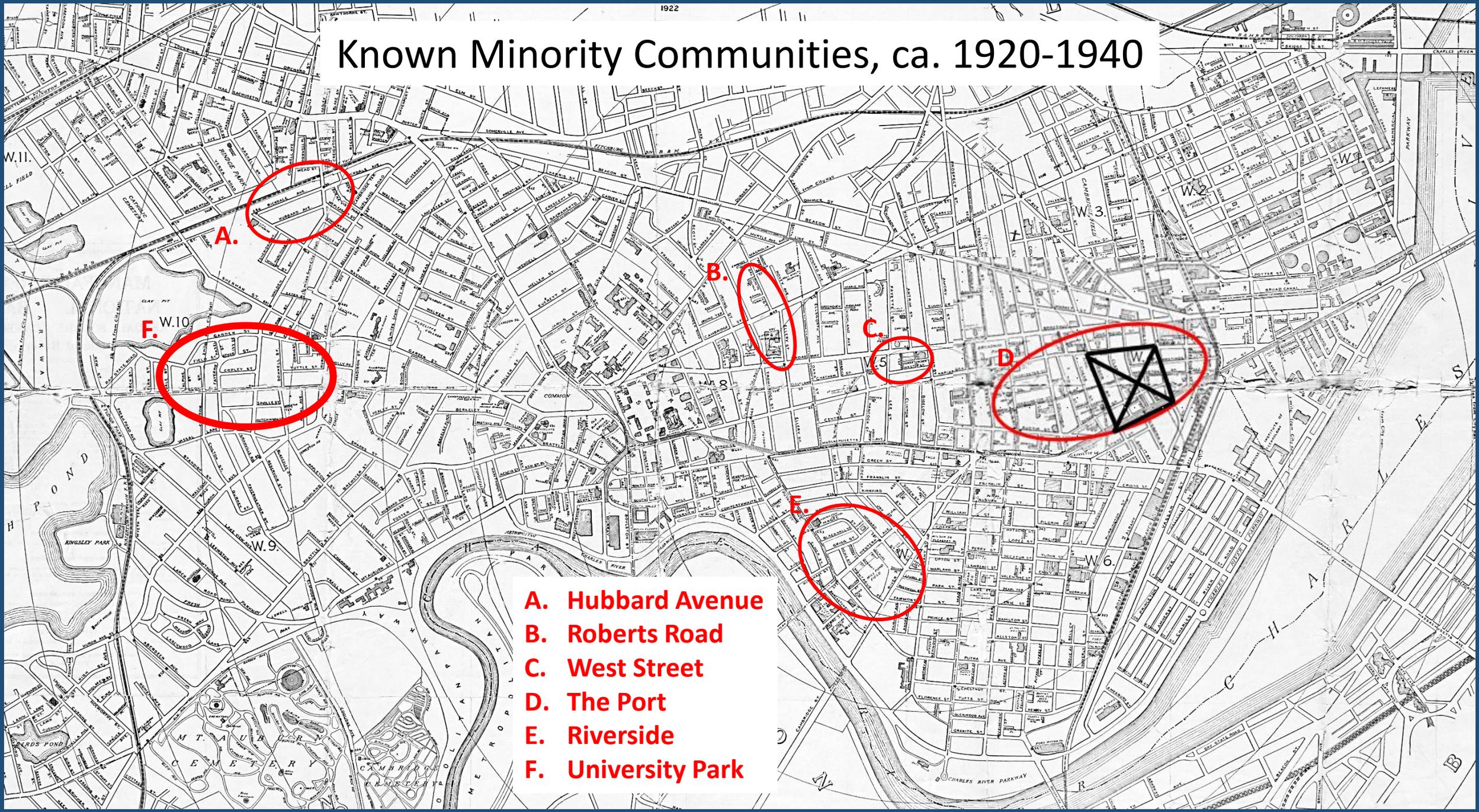


- A. Hubbard Avenue**
- B. Parker Street**
- C. Roberts Road**
- D. West Street**
- E. The Port**
- F. Riverside**



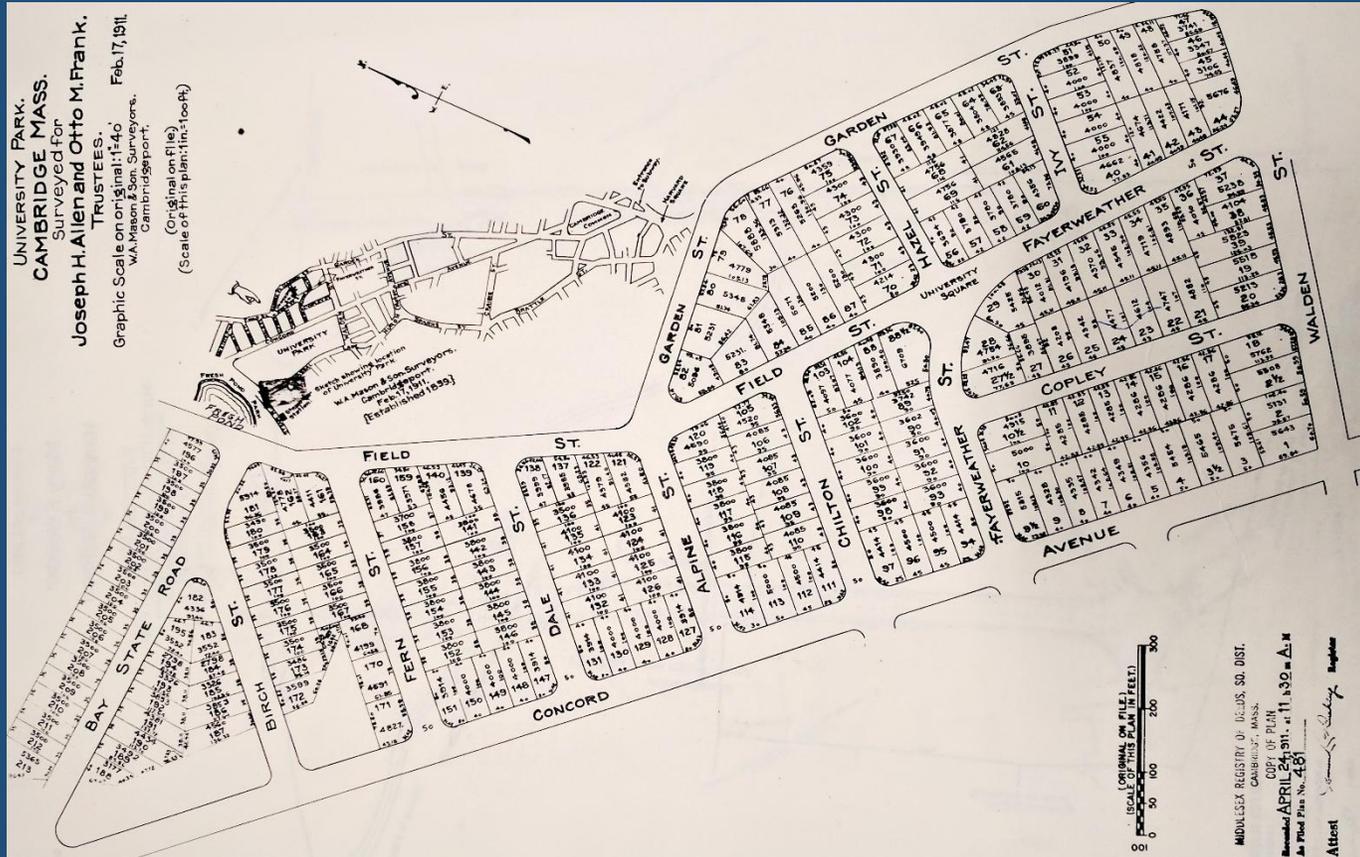
Newtowne Court
Federally-funded
public housing,
1938

Known Minority Communities, ca. 1920-1940



- A. Hubbard Avenue**
- B. Roberts Road**
- C. West Street**
- D. The Port**
- E. Riverside**
- F. University Park**

Housing Opportunities in West Cambridge after World War I



1911 Subdivision plan of University Park, 1911

Good People of Cambridge, Wake Up!!!

and select your house lot at **UNIVERSITY PARK**, Cambridge, Mass., before they are all sold to the people of Boston and of other nearby cities, who realize the importance of the HARVARD SQUARE SUBWAY. We are offering "subway values" at "horse-car" prices.

Do you realize that the SUBWAY will enormously increase the values above Harvard Square?

Do you realize that it will bring **UNIVERSITY PARK** WITHIN 13 MINUTES of PARK STREET, Boston?

Do you realize that those who wait until the subway is in operation will have to pay the profits to those who buy now? Over 40 lots sold.

Title Insured by Massachusetts Title Insurance Co.

Streets in and accepted. Sewers in and paid for. Proper restrictions. Prices \$280 upwards. Easy terms, if desired. Discount for cash. Building has started. Now is the time. NOW! NOW! NOW!

Office on ground open daily. Take Huron Avenue car and get off at corner of Huron and Concord Avenues.

UNIVERSITY PARK LAND COMPANY

JOSEPH H. ALLEN and OTTO M. FRANK, Trustees
Cor. Concord Ave. and Walden St., Cambridge, Mass.
Tel. Cambridge 2112-M

BOSTON OFFICE, 1053 OLD SOUTH BUILDING Tel. Main 6193

1911 advertisement for lots in the University Park subdivision
Cambridge Chronicle, May 6, 1911



204-206 Fayerweather Street (looking east toward Walden Street), 29 April 1935.
The children are presumed to be Grayce, Eugene Jr., and Harold Thompson.

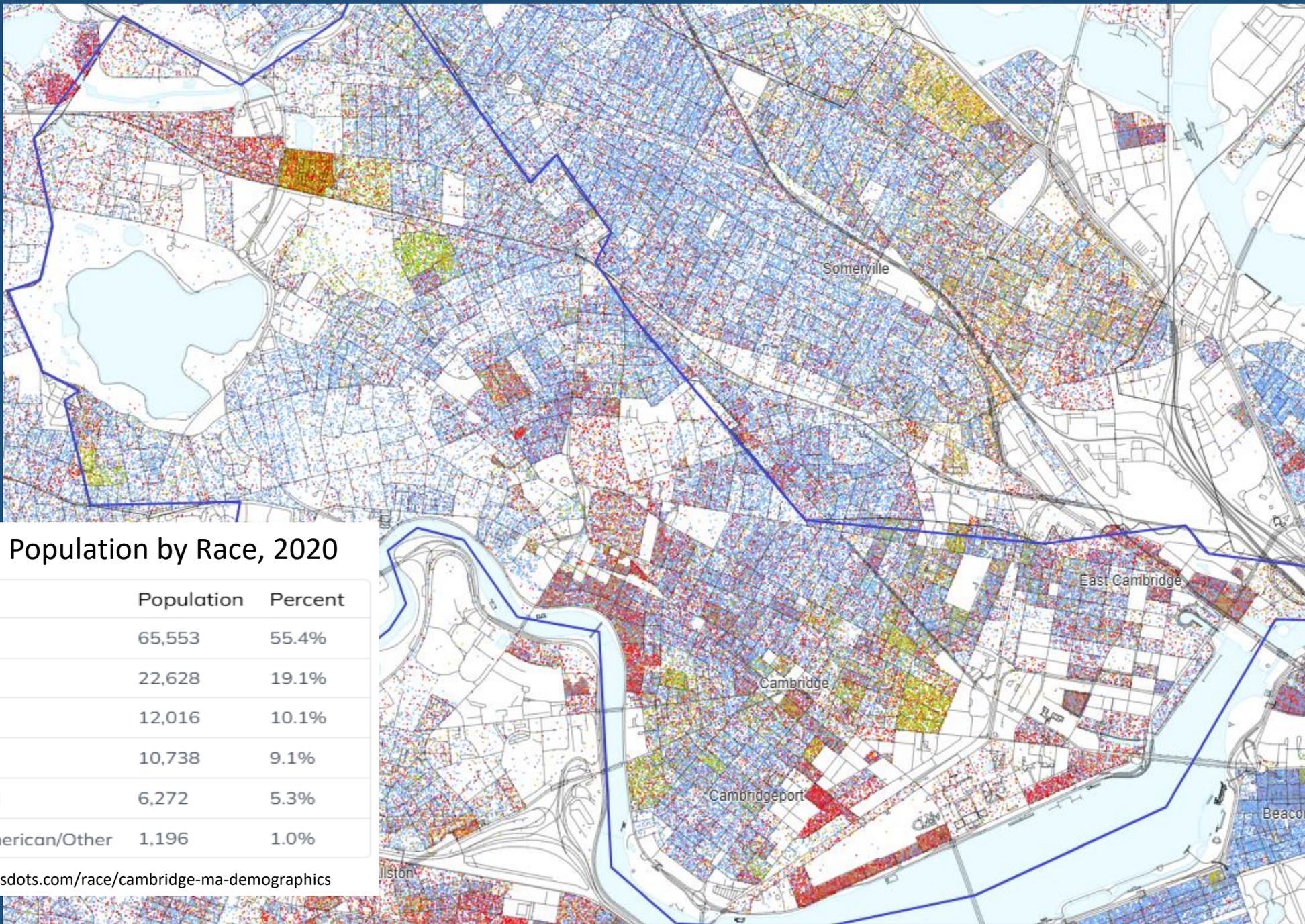
Cambridge Engineering Dept. photograph

African Americans as a Percentage of Cambridge Population

Year	African American	Total Population*	Percent
1940	4,858	110,879	4.4%
1960	5,671	95,778	5.9%
1980	10,418	82,888	12.6%
2000	11,182	88,156	12.7%
2019**	11,472	100,277	11.4%

* Excludes persons in group quarters (dormitories) after 1950

** 2019 estimate from Cambridge Community Development Department



Cambridge Population by Race, 2020

Race	Population	Percent
● White	65,553	55.4%
● Asian	22,628	19.1%
● Black	12,016	10.1%
● Hispanic	10,738	9.1%
● Multiracial	6,272	5.3%
● Native American/Other	1,196	1.0%

<https://www.censusdots.com/race/cambridge-ma-demographics>