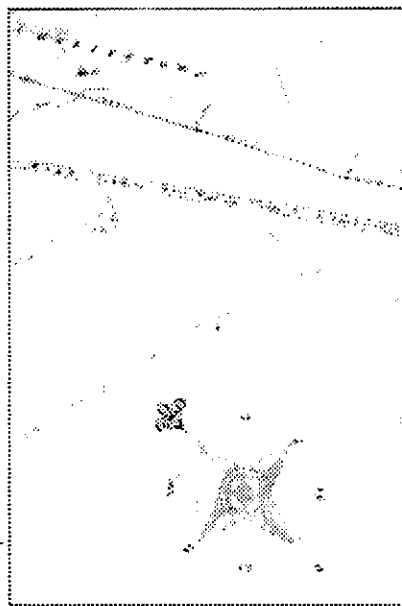


# Second Town Poorhouse

In colonial New England, each town took responsibility for its orphans and its penniless or incompetent adults, and every congregation took care of its own members. Newcomers had to demonstrate that they would not become a financial burden to the town, and vagrants were strongly discouraged.

Orphans and paupers came under the jurisdiction of the selectmen, who functioned as “overseers of the poor.” With no welfare payments to support them in their homes, the penniless were often thrown into poorhouses together with the drunk, the delinquent, and the insane. Such places also functioned as almshouses, where the poor were supported at the expense of the town, or work-houses, where the able-bodied were made to labor for their keep.

For the first century and a half, Cambridge provided for its orphans and poor by boarding them with families who were compensated by the town. In 1779 the selectmen acquired a building in the village near Harvard Square to serve as both an almshouse and a workhouse. This proved unsatisfactory, however, and in 1786 the town purchased a house



The earliest detailed map of Cambridge, made in 1813 by surveyor Peter Tufts, shows the second poorhouse at the corner of Cedar and Harvey Streets.

and five acres of land in rural North Cambridge. The new site was midway between the villages at Harvard Square and Arlington, which were then Cambridge’s First and Second parishes, but far from any settled area.

For over thirty years, the warden of the poorhouse tried “to form the paupers under his care to habits of economy, frugality, temperance,

sobriety, and industry” through “such useful and profitable labors as they may be respectively able to perform.” The inmates’ earnings went into a fund kept by the city treasurer to defray the costs of running the establishment.

The poor labored here until 1818, when a new almshouse was built on Norfolk Street in Cambridgeport. In 1851, the inmates were moved back to North Cambridge, this time to a thirty-two acre farm and an imposing stone building that still stands on Clarendon Hill. The poorhouse was not forgotten, however; Harvey Street was called Poor House Lane into the 1850s, and until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this part of North Cambridge was known as Poverty Plain.

#### Sources:

Cambridge Historical Commission, *Report Five: Northwest Cambridge*. Cambridge, 1977.  
Lucius R. Page, *History of Cambridge*. Cambridge, 1877.  
Peter Tufts, “Map of Cambridge,” 1813. City of Cambridge, Engineering Dept.



The only known view of the second poor house appeared on an 1813 plan of Cambridge.

