2 Becoming Modern Cambridge, 1793–2016

Cambridge began to urbanize soon after the Revolution. The strategic position of the meadows and marshes east of the village had become apparent during the Siege of Boston, and returning prosperity revived old schemes to link Boston to its hinterland. The bridges built in 1793 and 1809 set off waves of speculation and road construction. The rapid growth of Cambridgeport and East Cambridge triggered a momentous realignment of political power among the villages. Deprived of the courthouse in 1816 and the meetinghouse in 1831, Old Cambridge tried to establish itself as a separate town in 1842, 1846, and 1855. The incorporation of Cambridge as a city in 1846 papered over neighborhood rivalries that still resonate today.

After the bridges opened Cambridge to suburban development, succeeding generations of "improvers" created parks, laid out streets and subdivisions, and established civic enterprises that provided transportation, water, and illuminating gas. At the end of the century the rapidly industrializing municipality secured the entire riverfront for public use. The completion of the subway in 1912, the forceful expansion of Harvard University under Presidents Eliot and Lowell, and the arrival of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1916 helped make Cambridge a modern city. At the beginning of the 21st century Harvard shifted its focus toward developing a new campus in Allston, opening another chapter in a vital but often tempestuous relationship with Cambridge.

VILLAGE TO CITY, 1793–1846

> It is generally conceded, that this town eminently combines the tranquility of philosophic solitude, with the choicest pleasures and advantages of refined society. (Abiel Holmes, *The History of Cambridge,* 1801)

Prosperity returned slowly to Cambridge after the Revolution. The First Parish, located between the Charles River and Alewife Brook and comprising all of present Cambridge, had approximately 1,000 people and 135 dwellings, about 90 of which were in the village. The parish included the college, some farms and homesteads along the Menotomy road (now Massachusetts Avenue toward Arlington), and "several elegant seats, which attract the notice, and delight the eye" on the Watertown road, now Brattle Street (ibid., 6). East of the village was the Neck, a vast expanse of pasture and marsh between the Charles and Millers rivers that contained only five farms. Cambridge was rural, but the soil was not naturally productive, and most farmers grew hay and raised cattle to fertilize their fields. In the absence of waterpower commerce was limited to cottage trades such as tanning and shoemaking. A few taverns catered to the public business of the town and served travelers on the eight-mile-long road to Boston over the Great Bridge via Brighton, Brookline, and Roxbury. Everyone lived and worked in the town, where a limited economic base meant that only the oldest sons could remain; the rest had to seek opportunities elsewhere.

The population of Cambridge was more homogeneous than it had been before the war. Only two of the sixty-two founders of Christ Church remained in town, and just a handful of the proscribed loyalists were allowed to return. The Committee of Correspondence had seized most of the loyalists' estates on the Watertown Road and all those east of the village. Some absconders left a trusted slave in charge, but only a few blacks remained after slavery ended in 1783. American war profiteers purchased several of the confiscated properties.

Harvard College was recognized as a university in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. The medical school was established in Cambridge in 1793 and the law school in 1817. The institution was still very small, however, with only twelve professors and 188 students in 1809–10. Between 1810 and 1820 the number of students from outside New England increased from 11 to 27 percent of the total, a measure of its growing national appeal. In the 1820s the faculty doubled in size, and the number of students rose to more than 400 (including medical students, who by then studied in Boston).

Most Harvard faculty and administrators had strong personal ties to Cambridge. From 1726 until 1849 presidents lived in Wadsworth House in the heart of the village, and until 1851 the Overseers included ministers from Cambridge, Boston, Charlestown, Watertown, Roxbury, and Dorchester. Faculty members were required to live in Cambridge, and the university provided house lots and mortgages to senior professors. In 1820 the legislature went so far as to adjust the boundary with Charlestown to accommodate one professor's purchase of a house there (see chapter 4). Most administrators and employees came from local families, and some positions were practically hereditary.

Beginning with Reverend Samuel Webber (1806–10), Harvard's presidents for many years were both Unitarians (religious liberals) and Federalists (political conservatives). John Kirkland (1810–28) solidified the university's association with Boston's mercantile elite and brought the first European-trained professors to Cambridge. Kirkland and his chief administrative officer, college steward Stephen Higginson, landscaped the Yard and supported civic improvements such as the enclosure of the Common. Former Boston mayor Josiah Quincy (1829–45), the first lay president, commissioned the first accurate survey of Old Cambridge and completed the acquisition of the Yard (see figure 3.3 and chapter 10).

Bridges, Turnpikes, and Speculators

The new Massachusetts elite were ambitious men who belonged mainly to the dominant Federalist Party. Many had profited handsomely from their service to the republic and now speculated in land, the country's most abundant natural resource. Massachusetts offered many opportunities for gain. Connected to the mainland by a narrow neck, Boston was isolated from Middlesex and Essex counties by the Charles and Mystic rivers, which were crossed by ferries to Charlestown and Winnisimmet (Chelsea). The rivers had originally been important links to surrounding settlements, but after the Revolution they began to be seen as barriers to overland commerce.

Reverend Abiel Holmes, writing in 1814, recalled the Cambridge shore opposite Boston as "sort of an insulated tract, detached from any other … chiefly valued for the abundance of hay and forage, which the salt marshes furnished. These marshes, extending far out from the banks of the river, comprised the principal part of those lands. The situation was very uninviting. The grounds lay low. There were no roads. Access could not be had to the capital, except by boats, only by the circuitous route of Roxbury or Charlestown" (*Memoir*).

The possibility of a bridge between Boston and Charlestown was discussed in 1713, but it was difficult to find investors for such an expensive project; Harvard feared the loss of income from the ferry, which the General Court had granted it in the 1650s. In 1738 Harvard blocked a proposed bridge between Cambridge and Boston, claiming:

> that any nearer and more ready Passage, over s^{d} River and especially by a Bridge, will cause such an increase of Company &c at the College, that thereby the Scholars will be in danger of being too much interrupted in their Studies and hurt in their Morals. (quoted in Tourtellot, 233)

In 1785 the General Court received petitions from Thomas Russell, a wealthy Boston merchant, to build a bridge to Charlestown and from Andrew and John Cabot, speculators who had purchased many Cambridge estates, to build a bridge to Lechmere's Point. The Charlestown party prevailed after the legislature granted Harvard a share of the tolls, and the Charles River Bridge opened in 1786. The new bridge diverted traffic away from Cambridge and motivated local interests to pursue their own charter.

Chief Justice Francis Dana played a key role in bringing a bridge to Cambridge. Dana had inherited about 100 acres east of today's Ware Street in 1772, bought additional acreage after 1777, and built a mansion on Dana Hill with a commanding view of Back Bay in 1785 (see figure 4.242). He continued to accumulate property and eventually owned much of the Neck south of Massachusetts Avenue. Colonel Leonard Jarvis of Boston, who bought Ralph Inman's estate in 1792, became Dana's informal collaborator in the development of Cambridgeport.

On November 30, 1791, the *Columbian Centinel* published a notice that John Cabot and a group of Boston men planned to construct a bridge from Boston to Lechmere's Point. Five weeks later, on January 7, 1792, Justice Dana and some associates announced a rival proposal in the same paper.

> WEST BOSTON BRIDGE.
>
> As *all* citizens of the United States have an *equal* right to propose a measure that may be beneficial to the publick or advantageous to themselves, and as no body of men have an *exclusive* right to take to themselves such a privilege, a number of gentlemen have proposed to open a new subscription, for the purpose of building a BRIDGE from West Boston to Cambridge—at such place as the General Court may be pleased to direct.

The promoters alleged that the route by way of Pelham's Island (the present Main Street and Longfellow Bridge) would "shorten the travel from the western part of the state to Boston [by] one mile and one hundred and forty-six rods." Opponents charged that a few rich gentlemen would destroy the trade of Charlestown and the North End just to gain access to their Cambridge estates. One predicted a decline in the morals of the Harvard students: "that [the city] is already too near, has been a serious complaint" (ibid., Jan. 21, 1792).

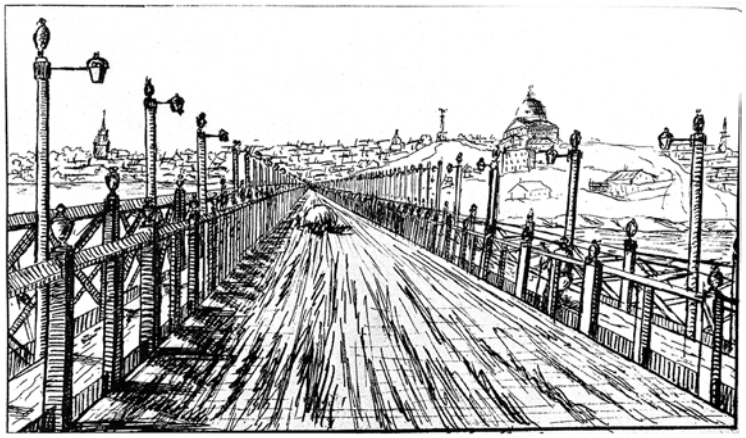

FIGURE 2.2 The West Boston Bridge in 1797, looking toward Boston. The State House is on the right and the North Church on the left.

The subscription for Dana's bridge was filled within three hours. Only nine of the 112 shareholders were Cambridge residents, but they provided 25 percent of the capital. The General Court incorporated Dana, James Sullivan, and Mungo Mackay of the West Boston group and Oliver Wendell, Henry Jackson, and William Wetmore of the Lechmere's Point party as the Proprietors of the West Boston Bridge. Of the twelve directors, only Dana and James Winthrop were Cambridge men; the rest were Boston merchants, entrepreneurs, and politicians.

Construction began in July 1792, and the completed timber-pile structure, which extended 3,500 feet across the river and continued another 3,300 feet on a causeway across the marsh to Pelham's Island, opened for travel on November 23, 1793. The bridge reduced the distance from the State House to the Cambridge meetinghouse from eight to a little over three miles. Reverend Holmes noted in 1801 that "the erection of this bridge has had a very perceivable influence on the trade of Cambridge, which formerly was very inconsiderable. By bringing the travel

from the westward and northward through the centre of the town, it has greatly invigorated business there" (*History,* 4).

The bridge spawned many new roads, all of which bypassed the old village center and dampened its brief burst of prosperity. Between 1803 and 1810, the legislature chartered ten turnpikes in Middlesex County; four (Hampshire Street, Concord Avenue and Broadway, River Street, and Western Avenue) passed through Cambridge to reach the West Boston Bridge. Other investors built Cambridge and Harvard streets to open their lands for development. Towns and counties also built roads, and rival parties struggled to elect selectmen and delegates to the Court of Sessions (county commissioners), seeking to shortcut or block their competitors. The boom ended with the trade embargos that preceded the War of 1812.

The federal government sold Colonel Jarvis's property in 1798 to satisfy a judgment against him, and some of the new owners tried to enhance the value of their property by building Harvard Street as a more direct way from the meetinghouse to the West Boston Bridge. Justice Dana, concerned that the road would intrude on his privacy and bypass the nascent village he was promoting at Lafayette Square, built the "Opposition House" on his property line to block the intended route. Although the house was soon moved to its present site on Hancock Place, the climb over Dana Hill discouraged travelers, and the new road never became a major thoroughfare (see figure 4.243).

Colonel Jeduthun Wellington, a farmer in the Second Parish and a Cambridge selectman, organized the Cambridge & Concord Turnpike Corporation to construct Concord Avenue as a toll road in 1803. The other investors were farmers and merchants in outlying towns. Like turnpike promoters everywhere, they were obsessed with creating the shortest possible route. In 1805 the legislature authorized the company to extend the road from Garden Street across the Common to the West Boston Bridge, on the condition that Broadway stay 90 feet from Stoughton Hall, creating a slight detour and establishing the northern boundary of Harvard Yard (see chapter 10). Both this toll-free extension and Hampshire Street, which the Middlesex Turnpike Corporation laid out in 1805 to reach the Second New Hampshire Turnpike at Tyngsborough, dampened commercial activity in the village by sending traffic directly to the bridge (figure 2.4).

FIGURE 2.3 The milestone was rescued from a stone crusher by antiquarian William A. Saunders and placed in the Old Burying Ground about 1900. Carved by Abraham Ireland in 1734, it indicates on one side, accurately, "Boston eight miles" via the road over the Great Bridge and through Brookline and Roxbury. In 1794 the reverse side was misleadingly inscribed "2½ miles" to Boston via the West Boston Bridge; the actual distance is 3.4 miles. Photo 1938.

The success of the West Boston Bridge prompted another old revolutionary, Andrew Craigie, to begin a vast speculation at Lechmere's Point that ultimately deprived Old Cambridge of its status as a county seat (see *East Cambridge*). Craigie, a Boston

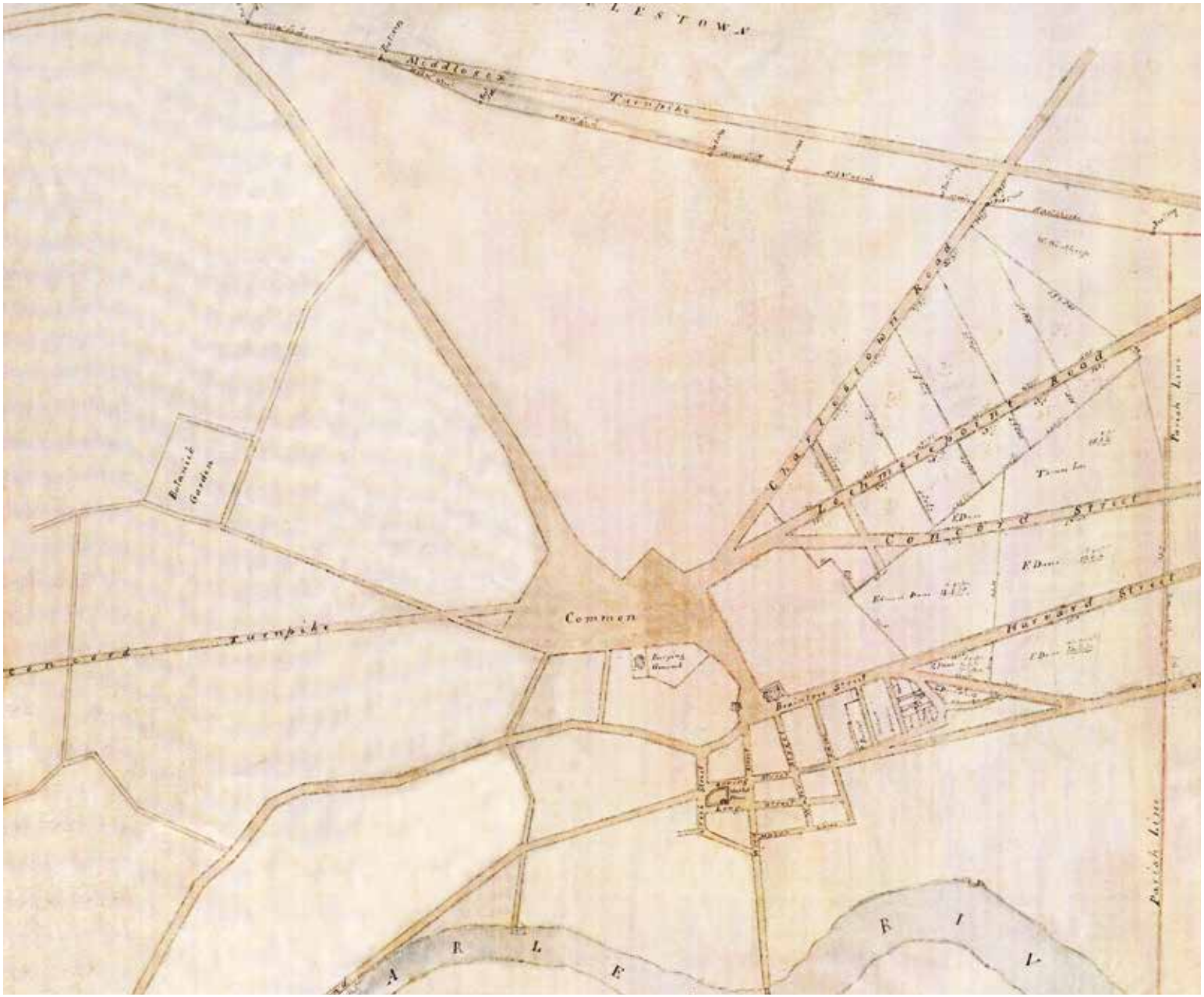

Figure 2.4 Peter Tufts's 1813 "Plan of the First Parish in Cambridge" was the first accurate survey of Old Cambridge. Mt. Auburn Street (labeled "New Brattle Road") offered a convenient short-cut for travelers. The new roads entering the village from the east—Cambridge Street ("Lechmere Point Road"), Broadway ("Concord Street"), and Harvard Street—already show real estate activity.

native, served as apothecary general of the American army before acquiring the Vassall estates on Brattle Street and moving to Cambridge in 1792. While the West Boston Bridge and the development of Cambridgeport were to some extent local ventures, Craigie and his investors had no strong ties to Cambridge, and his Federalist Party connections often enabled him to prevail against the wishes of the town.

Beginning in 1795 Craigie secretly acquired nearly all of Lechmere's Point, as well as large tracts east of Fayette Street and north of Broadway. He received a charter from the General Court in 1805 and opened the Craigie Bridge on August 30, 1809. His extension of Cambridge Street to Cambridge Common triggered another episode of strategic road building.

In 1805 the selectmen petitioned the county court of sessions to "establish [a road] from the garden of the Hon. Elbridge Gerry to the garden of the late Thomas Brattle, Esq." (Mt. Auburn Street from Elmwood Avenue to Brattle Square) in order to bypass Brattle Street and shorten the distance from Watertown to the West Boston Bridge (Paige, 203). Craigie proposed an alternate route leading to his bridge at Lechmere's Point by way of Mason and Cambridge streets. His offer to pay part of the cost persuaded the selectmen to approve his plan in 1807, but the next town meeting reverted to the original proposal, which favored the Cambridgeport faction. Craigie continued to file petitions to block the new road, and on May 16, 1808, he and thirty-five others so violently protested the laying out of Mt. Auburn Street that the town meeting authorized the selectmen to prosecute "Andrew Craigie and others, for trespasses committed … upon the road" (ibid., 204). Mt. Auburn Street opened for travel in 1809, but in 1812 Craigie's Federalist friends on the court of sessions evened the score by extending Brattle Street from Fayerweather Street to Mt. Auburn, short-cutting the circuitous route through Gerry's Corner and Elmwood Avenue.

So great was the public interest in these matters that in 1821 surveyor John G. Hales published an evaluation of the major highways within 15 miles of the Old State House. There were only trivial differences between the competing Cambridge roads:

Table 2.1 Distances from the Old State House in Boston to Old Cambridge

	Miles	Furlongs	Rods	Total
West Boston Bridge via:				
Main St. and Massachusetts Avenue to Cambridge Meetinghouse	3	3	9	3.40
Harvard Street to Cambridge Meetinghouse	3	2	20	3.31
Broadway to N.W. corner Harvard Yard	3	2	9	3.28
Craigie Bridge via:				
Cambridge Street to N.W. corner Harvard Yard	3	3	23	3.45

Source: John G. Hales. *A Survey of Boston and its Vicinity, Showing the Distances from the Old State House … to All the Towns and Villages Not Exceeding Fifteen Miles Therefrom …* Boston, 1821.

> The most preferable of these roads as to bottom is that of Craigie's [Cambridge Street] though the greatest in point of length, yet its other advantages are more than a compensation for the trifling difference in distance. Next to Craigie's the one most used is that through Cambridge Port [Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue], but some part of this road is soft and muddy after rain, and in dry seasons so dusty, as to make the traveling very unpleasant. The Concord Turnpike [Broadway] is sandy and often out of repair. (Hales, *Survey,* 31)

The decrepit state of the 1756 courthouse provided Craigie and his investors another opportunity to promote East Cambridge at the expense of Old Cambridge. The voters of Middlesex County had recently decided to move the court to Concord, which was more centrally located, while the court of sessions preferred to remain in Cambridge. Craigie's Lechmere Point Corporation offered to help the county build a new courthouse and jail in East Cambridge, but the townspeople argued that they had paid a third of the upkeep of the courthouse for more than a century and should have a say in any new location. A Federalist victory at the polls and a $24,000 donation from the Lechmere Point Corporation won over the court of sessions in 1813. When the new courthouse and jail were completed in

1816, James Winthrop, the register of probate for forty-one years, resigned rather than move to East Cambridge. The old building then became the town hall (see chapter 7).

The result of all this activity was a radical shift in the balance of power among the villages. After the Second and Third parishes became West Cambridge (now Arlington) and Brighton in 1807, Old Cambridge was surpassed by the growing settlements in Cambridgeport and East Cambridge. In 1816 Abiel Holmes contrasted "the old town, the inhabitants of which are principally husbandmen, or gentlemen who have retired from business, and live on their income," with Cambridgeport, where "trade and manufactures unitedly flourish."

> In 3 years, from 1804 to 1807, more than 120 houses and stores, many of them brick, were constructed in that village. It now contains 195 dwelling houses, … 29 large stores and warehouses, generally 3 stories high, and principally occupied in the sale of West India goods, iron, salt, crockery ware, and all kinds of heavy merchandize, together with beef, pork, butter, cheese etc. There are also about 30 shops and other buildings occupied by various mechanics [and] one druggist and apothecary. Soap and candle manufacturers, leather dressers, cabinet and chair makers, hatters, shoe makers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, book binders and harness makers; also 2 manufacturers of printers ink, which furnish a large supply to this and the adjacent states, as nearly to exclude importation. There are 3 lumber wharves, which are supplied with timber, boards, shingles, clapboards, lime etc. from the eastward, and furnish the towns, for about 25 miles to the westward, almost entirely, with these articles. … Cambridgeport is very advantageously situated, as a place of trade between the capital and the country, and is already a place of much business and resort. (Holmes, "Description")

For some years, Old Cambridge men like Levi Farwell remained active in Cambridgeport enterprises such as the First Baptist Church and the Cambridge Bank, but the new villages quickly became self-sufficient. Old Cambridge became ever more dependent on the university as a source of distinction and economic opportunity.

Figure 2.5 Cordwood on a cart passing Cambridge Common and the Hastings-Holmes house (right), ca. 1850.

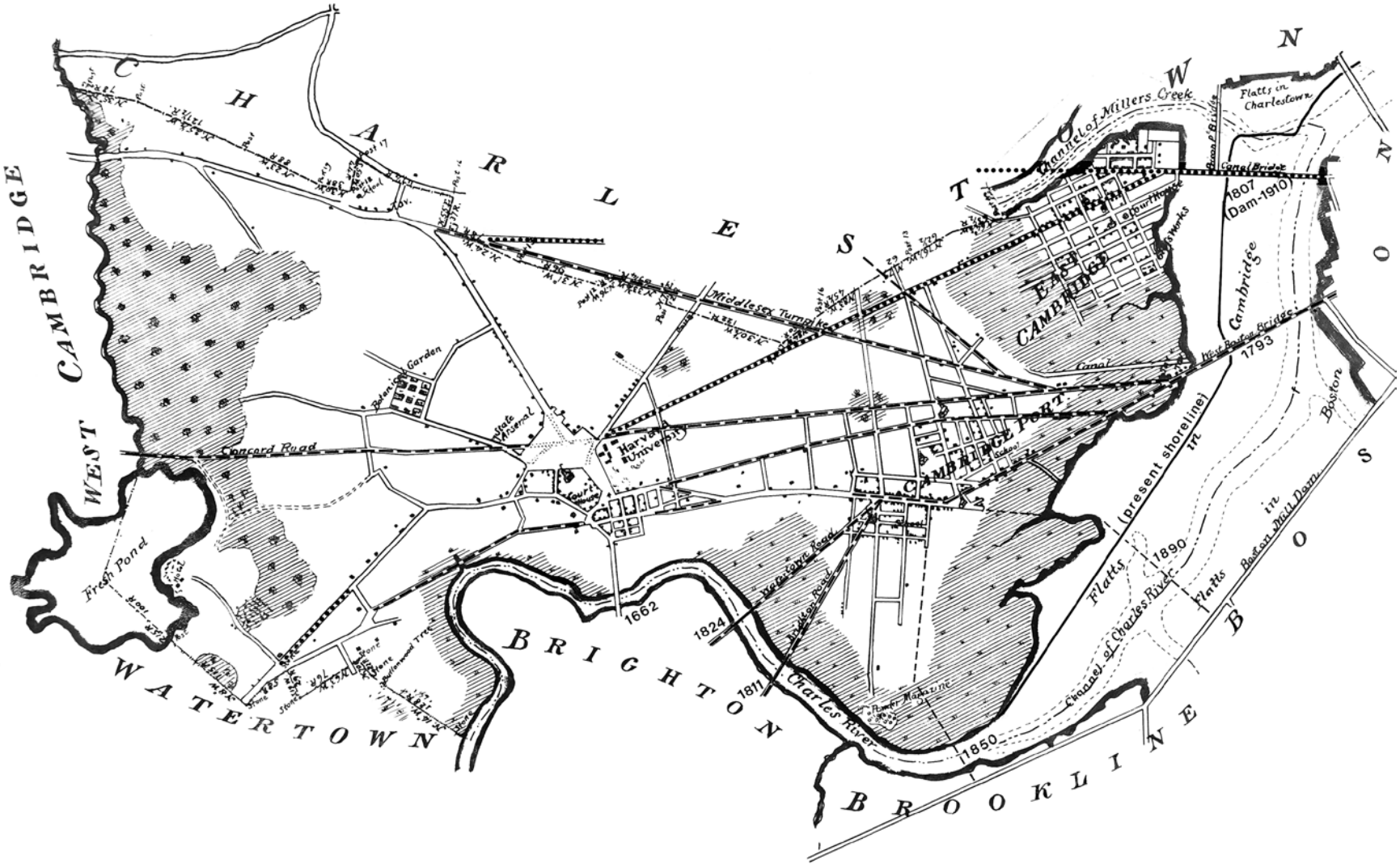

FIGURE 2.6 Cambridge in 1830, showing roads built in conjunction with the West Boston Bridge (dashed lines) and the Craigie Bridge (dotted lines). The arrow-straight turnpikes radiating from Boston were superimposed on a colonial landscape where roads typically wound through the countryside along the gentlest grades. With the exception of Kirkland Street and parts of Massachusetts Avenue and Pleasant Street, all the roads east of the village were constructed after 1793. The modern shoreline and dates of the bridges have been superimposed on the original map.

Figure 2.7 Cambridgeport about 1825, looking east toward the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street. A tavern, blacksmith shop, watering trough, and hay scale served travelers on the road to Boston. The substantial residence of Nathaniel and Isaac Livermore (1800), the First Universalist Church (1822), and Francis Dana's brick South Row (1806) all faced Lafayette Square.