



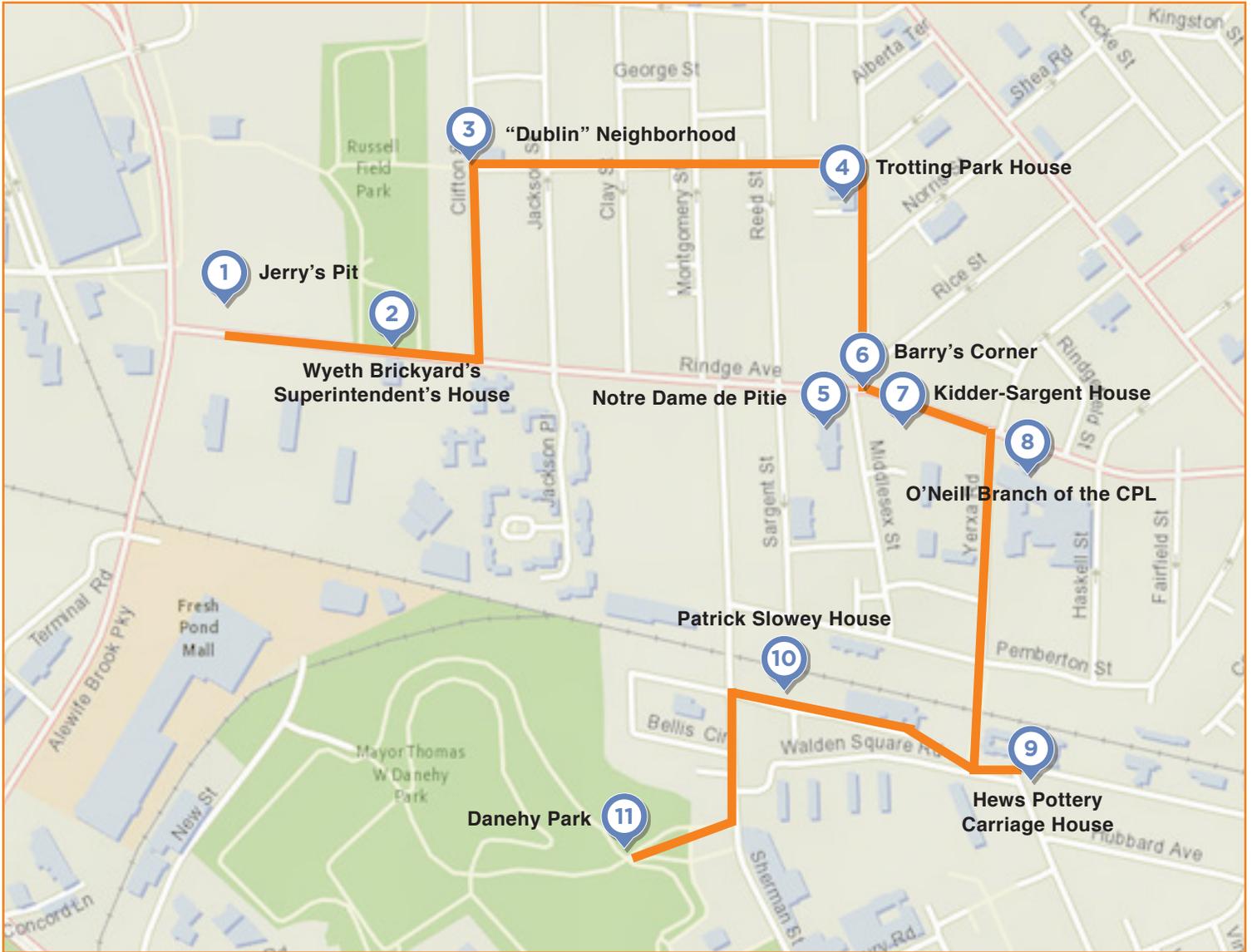
Clay, Bricks, Dump, Park

A Walking Tour of North Cambridge



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Walking Route



Overview and History

If you were standing in North Cambridge 10-12,000 years ago—the end of the last ice age—you would be under about a mile of ice. As the glaciers advanced, they ground the rock into sand and gravel and as they retreated, they left behind hills—Observatory Hill, Strawberry hill, Avon Hill; glacial moraines (or large accumulations of rock); and vast deposits of clay.

The Alewife region was the Great Swamp. Garden Street was the Great Swamp Way. These marshes acted as a giant sponge for seven square miles that included Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge. Native Americans used the marshes for fishing and foraging.

When the colonists descended, starting in 1630, they tried to farm this area but the marshland was high in salt content, which meant that the surrounding soil did not produce very well. When they found the clay, the colonists used it for small-scale building and pottery.

Two-hundred years later, in the mid-1840s, when the industrial revolution was in full-swing, there was a huge demand in New England for non-flammable building material. The problem with wood construction is that coal fires tend to burn it down. So, New Englanders turned to brick to build their factories, mills, workers housing, and their fancy new Harvard buildings.

There were clay pits and brickyards all over this area. The most extensive brick plant was in North Cambridge. The pit spanned 30 acres and the drying sheds spanned upwards of 90 acres. In 1858, around 187,000 bricks were produced each day in North Cambridge. That's a grand total of roughly 24 million bricks in one season! An average size house (around 1,200 square feet) would require somewhere in the neighborhood of 8-9,000 bricks. That means the bricks in North Cambridge could have been used to build over 2 ½ thousand homes each and every year.

Initially, a lot of small companies enjoyed success but, by World War I, in large part due to the Panic of 1893, most of the smaller brick companies had been consolidated into the New England Brick Company (or NEBCO for short). NEBCO's brickyards were mostly laid out along Rindge Avenue and down Sherman Street. The brick industry survived and prospered in North Cambridge for a little over a century.



Stop 1: Jerry's Pit/Pond

Jerry's Pond, which some know better as Jerry's Pit used to be a fairly large clay pit, named after Jeremiah McCrehan, an Irish immigrant who came here in the 1840's or 50's, and found work in the claypits and brickyards. In the early days of the brick-industry, most of the workers immigrated here from Ireland, pushed out of their homes by the Irish Potato Famine.

McCrehan started out as a worker in the brick industry and by 1867 saved enough money to partner with a man named Garret Neagle to establish their own brickyard on Sherman street and lease this pit. In three years, the pit had been exhausted of its clay. It filled with water and became the neighborhood swimming hole. But the water was polluted, and drownings were common.

Local lore tells of children getting tangled in the weeds, unable to extricate themselves. Horses drowned while dumping broken, unusable bricks into the water and a Boston College student drowned in Jerry's Pond in July of 1920. Despite the danger, people continued to swim in the Pond until 1961 when the city built a pool nearby named after Jeremiah's grandson, Frank J. "Cheese" McCrehan, a local Boston College Baseball star.



Stop 2: Wyeth Brickyards Superintendent's House

This house was built in 1848, one year after Nathaniel Wyeth began operating his own brickyard, and he built it for the superintendent of his brickyard. Rindge Towers were built right on top of the site of the old clay pit, and the brickyards were right behind that. The pit and yards ended up in the hands of the Sands family, who dominated the brick industry in North Cambridge. They started here, and in 1900, they joined forces with other Cambridge producers to form the New England Brick Company.



Stop 3: “Dublin” Neighborhood

Imagine walking through this neighborhood in the mid-late-1800s. Men are trudging down into Jerry’s pit and using pick axes and shovels to loosen the dense, sticky clay and loading it into wheelbarrows. Then, they push the heavy wheelbarrows up a steep dirt ramp. The clay is pressed into bricks, and laid out in long sheds to dry before being taken to domed kilns, heated by wood or coal where the bricks are stacked and fired. Imagine the smoke from those kilns billowing out over this entire neighborhood.

After their long day hauling clay and bricks, the immigrants go home to crowded workers cottages or boarding houses, many of them right here in this neighborhood, referred to, often derisively, as “Dublin” or “New Ireland.” Many of these streets had Irish names-- Sherman Street was Dublin Street back then. A man named William Dean Howells, a playwright, editor of the Atlantic Monthly, contributor to Harper’s Magazine, and self-proclaimed Christian-socialist, took a stroll through this neighborhood back in 1875 and this is what he had to say about it:

".. I take my way up through the brickyards towards Dublin, the Irish settlement on the north, passing under the long sheds that shelter the kilns. The ashes lie cold about the mouths of most, and the bricks are burnt to the proper complexion. On that loveliest autumn morning, the swollen tide [of Alewife Brook] had spread over all the russet levels and gleamed in the sunlight a mile away. As I moved down the street, luminous on either hand with crimsoning and yellowing maples, I was so filled with the tender serenity of the scene, as not to be troubled by the spectacle of small Irish houses standing miserably about on the flats ankle deep, as it were, in little pools of the tide, or to be aware at first, of a sluggish movement of men through the streets, and a flying of children through the broken fences of the neighborhood, and across the vacant lots on which the insulted sign-boards forbade them to trespass. Here and there abandoned hoopskirts defied decay and near the half-finished wooden houses, empty mortar beds and bits of lath and slate were strewn over the scarred and mutilated ground, adding their interest to the scene."

W. D. Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 1875



Source: Google Earth

Stop 4: Trotting Park House

This was the Trotting Park House Hotel. Back in 1837, Francis Kidder, whose family owned much of the area around here, opened a trotting racecourse that spanned 50 acres of land bounded by Rindge, Harvey, Cedar, and Clifton Street, one full mile loop. It was the principal racing venue in the Boston area from 1837 to 1855. Turns out that clay soil is an excellent surface for a hard, smooth, and level track.

In 1847, Kidder and a new partner, Samuel Reed, erected this hotel next to the grandstand. In 1855, the racing ended and Kidder's racecourse was subdivided into 275 house lots, the largest subdivision in the history of Cambridge. Samuel Reed continued to operate the Trotting Park House as a boarding house for brickyard workers until 1870 when it was remodeled as a tenement for the French Canadians who were immigrating to North Cambridge, taking over work in the brick industry from the Irish, who had moved on to better things.



Stop 5: Notre Dame de Pitie

If you're a North Cambridge local then you probably remember Masse's Hardware, a local institution on the corner of Walden and Sherman streets that sadly closed up shop a few years ago. If you were interested in learning more about the French Canadian immigrant experience, like I was, you would be well served to speak with the last owner of this store, David Masse. He would tell you how his Grandfather came to North Cambridge in 1862 from a large farm family in Southern Quebec, a typical story for many French Canadian immigrants at the time. Many of these men had little professional prospects on their family farms and saw the post-civil war economic boom in the U.S. as an opportunity.

They came to North Cambridge to work in the brick industry and were met with harsh discrimination. Even though both groups were Catholic, the Irish shunned the French Canadians and refused to let them into their churches. Here, you have to consider the historical context. These were the days before the New Deal Era. In those days, there were no state institutions to help people. The church often filled that need. So, by denying French Canadians access to the church, the Irish were also denying access to one of the few communal safety nets.

The French Canadians had to band together and Masse's Hardware became a center for their community. Most of these men spoke only French so they went almost exclusively to Masse's for what they needed. In 1892, they banded together and self-funded a church on Harvey Street called Notre-Dame de Pitie, sadly, that was torn down in 1970. But, in 1920, they built this church on Rindge Avenue, which still stands today.



Stop 6: Barry's Corner

Barry's corner, the convoluted intersection of Rindge Avenue, Cedar, Rice, and Middlesex Streets, was named after a family that lived around here. The Barry family owned a two-story home and rented the commercial space on the first floor to various businesses over the years.

A ragtag mix of mostly Irish, French Canadian, and Italian boys whose families all lived in North Cambridge used the space as a clubhouse. They called themselves the "Barry Gang." They all had parents or grandparents that worked in the clay pits and brickyards. One of the kids was Tip O'Neil.

Tip O'Neill's grandfather and his two brothers came to North Cambridge during the potato famine in 1845 and found work in the brickyards. His father started as a laborer, was later active as a union organizer, and eventually was elected to the Cambridge Common Council, the lower of two legislative bodies of the City Government. In Tip's own words "as you did well, you left. Everyone wanted to get out of the brickyards."

Two generations after his grandfather arrived in Cambridge, the close knit community of almost exclusively immigrants and their children and grandchildren, banded together behind Tip O'Neill to take control of their community. So critical was their support that O'Neill claimed that "the only election [he] ever lost was when [he] didn't ask Mrs. O'Brien, who lived across the street from [him] for her vote."



Stop 7: Kidder-Sargent-McCrehan House

This is the Kidder-Sargent-McCrehan House. Built in 1792, it is the oldest North Cambridge home still on its original site. The Kidder's (a name I hope you remember from the Trotting Park House earlier), originally a farming family, sold this house to Solomon Sargent in 1835. Sargent was one of the earliest people to get involved in the brickmaking business and in 1846 he turned this farmhouse into a boarding house for brickyard workers, sold his orchards for, you guessed it, more housing lots, and eventually, in 1867, sold the house to none other than Jeremiah McCrehan, of Jerry's Pit/Pond fame, the same year that McCrehan and Neagle opened their own brickyard and began leasing Jerry's Pit.

After the clay ran out at Jerry's Pit in 1870, McCrehan and Neagle continued to operate their brickyard, sourcing their clay from elsewhere, until 1878 when they lost their property to foreclosure. I assume this was related to the Panic of 1873. The brickyard that McCrehan and Neagle lost was reopened by the Derosay family, French Canadian immigrants. The house remained in the McCrehan family until the 1940s. Tip O'Neill recalls he and his pals cheering for Frank "Cheese" McCrehan whenever he would walk out of the house.



Stop 8: O'Neill Branch of the CPL

The O'Neill branch of the Cambridge Public Library was actually named for Speaker O'Neill's wife, Mildred ("Millie"). The west facing wall showcases a mural in Speaker O'Neill's honor. All the various items on the mural are significant in some way. You might notice the popular phrase "All politics is local," for instance. Although Speaker O'Neill popularized this phrase, he actually got it from his father.

After Tip lost his first election, he received two valuable pieces of advice that stuck with him throughout his life and career. Mrs. O'Brien, the neighbor who Tip forgot to ask for her vote, told him: "people like to be asked for their vote." His father told him "all politics is local." Tip took both those phrases to heart and put them into practice. The image of Tip getting his hair cut illustrates this perfectly. The barbershop is where Tip went to get his news about the neighborhood. The barber saw and talked to everyone and relayed their concerns to Tip every time Tip came to sit in his chair.



Stop 9: The Hews Pottery Carriage House

Now repurposed for condominiums, you can still see where the old carriage doors of the Hews Pottery Carriage were located, now these giant windows, and you may still see the stone footings where the edges of the doors would have met the ground. Abraham Hews first established the pottery in Weston in 1765. His grandson, Horace, moved the factory to North Cambridge in 1871 to take advantage of the close proximity to the clay pits and railroad lines.

Across the street from the Carriage House was the site of the old factory. Condominiums have since been developed on the land. In addition, Hews Pottery had another shop on Sherman Street on the other side of the claypit, where the Cambridge Friends School is today.

By the early 1890s, Hews was the largest manufacturer of pottery in the world. They produced as many as seven million flowerpots a year. Masse's Hardware sold some of them. Hews continued to produce pottery here until 1934.



Stop 10: Patrick Slowey House

This is one of the best-preserved workers' cottages in North Cambridge. It was built in 1852 for a laborer named Patrick Slowey. Notice the high brick basement to combat the flooding that W.D. Howells alluded to in his recollections of his walk through North Cambridge in 1875.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Stop 11: Danehy Park

The land that is now Danehy Park was opened to clay excavation in 1847, right at the beginning of the brick-making industry and was used by NEBCO until 1952 when a landslide buried the last remaining operational steam shovel. The clay was excavated to a depth of around 80 or 90 feet in the deepest places and was nearly exhausted by WWII. After NEBCO shut down its operations, the city used the pit as a trash dump until the early 1970s when the City agreed to let the MBTA use it as a construction staging area for the Red Line extension to Alewife. During that project they covered the 50 acre landfill with anywhere from 4-40 feet of fill from the tunnel excavation. In some places, the ground/trash settled over 14 feet during the filling operations. At present, the site is experiencing long-term settlement.

You may be asking yourself, what about the trash underneath this giant mound of dirt, sand, and gravel? Isn't it decomposing and contaminating the surrounding water and soil and leaking methane gas into the air? Actually, not as much as you would think. There is still a thin layer of clay beneath the entire site that acts as an impervious liner, minimizing contamination. The city has also placed both gas and groundwater monitoring wells throughout the park. And, a vent trench goes around the entire park that vents the methane gas. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that initially, the methane gas venting was aflame for some years after filling the dump.

Minus the methane fires, this story is typical of the life cycle for the clay pits in North Cambridge. After they were exhausted of their clay, most of the pits were filled with trash. There were around a dozen trash dumps in North Cambridge over the years and all of them were former clay pits. Some were turned into parks like this one and others turned into housing like Rindge Towers, and still others are now the sites of familiarly named schools in the neighborhood, like the Tobin School on Vassall Lane near the Fresh Pond Parkway. The ones that weren't filled with trash were flooded and left as ponds, like Jerry's where this tour began.

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