1. Squirrel Brand Park
2. George Close Building
3. Roberts School
   (Fletcher Maynard Academy)
4. Washington Elms / Newtowne Court
5. Boardman School
6. Goddess Bra Factory
7. Christian Mission Holiness Church
8. Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House
9. Pentecostal Tabernacle
Overview and History

One thing you need to know about The Port is that the neighborhood has historically had a strong community. Sarah Boyer, former Oral Historian for the City of Cambridge, said:

“The Port’s greatest strength has always been in the ability of its families and institutions to work together to nurture their children and help them become good citizens, caring neighbors, and successful in their chosen careers.”

—Sarah Boyer, We Are The Port, 363.

To understand why The Port has a reputation for having a strong community we need to talk about why immigrants began coming to this neighborhood from the Caribbean. And, to understand this history we need to talk about Brattle Street in West Cambridge. Many of the Loyalists - people loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolution - on Brattle Street made their fortunes from family-owned plantations in the Caribbean. The well-established trade routes between the Caribbean, New York, Boston, and Nova Scotia later became migratory routes.

So, that’s a big reason why Caribbean immigrants came to this neighborhood - established trade routes. But, why did they leave their homes in the Caribbean? The simple answer to that question is economics. The Caribbean economy was mostly based on the sugar industry. Between 1840-1900, sugar prices plummeted. Cane sugar in Brazil and Cuba flooded the market and beet sugar from Europe combined to drive prices down. On the islands where the sugar industry survived, it was only because of the oppressiveness of colonial rule, which affected the working and middle-classes. Limited upward mobility, fewer chances for a good education, and plummeting sugar prices, drove many Caribbean people to choose immigration as an option.

But, how does all of this explain why The Port has historically had such a strong community? We would argue that one big reason is that Caribbean immigrants knew just how important community was to economic and social mobility - especially for future generations. They knew that the church was important, obviously for religious and spiritual purposes, but also for networking and community service. Work and education were both very important to the Caribbean community as well. And, the fact that many people could work in the same neighborhood in which they lived, allowed them to emphasize the importance of education to their children. It gave them the flexibility to make sure their kids got to school on time. You can see these important institutions from the past, present, and future in the neighborhood today and it is at these institutions that this tour will be looking. We’ll be looking at places of worship, places of education, places of outreach and community engagement, and places of work, starting with this place of work right here at Squirrel Brand Park.
Stop 1: Squirrel Brand Park

Marian remembers Sugar Daddies, Nut Zippers, Charleston Chews, and more being made in the neighborhood. Squirrel Brand began in Boston in 1877 and later moved to Cambridge because there were many other candy companies here as well. Main Street was often referred to as ‘Confectioners Row.’ Marian’s mother moved to Boston in the 1940s. She said that you either worked for Lever Bros. (who was headquartered in The Port neighborhood of Cambridge) or candy companies. She liked to say you had “clean clothes and rotten teeth.” Most manufacturers back then offered shift work and many had round-the-clock operations, so they were always running.

In the late 1980s, Squirrel Brand was moving and a group of people in the neighborhood fought for the building to be turned into housing. Marian speculates that if this were happening today there would be developers waiting in the wings. The City ended up buying the property and the Area IV coalition put up $200,000 for the design that was reviewed for moderate and Section VIII housing for people in the neighborhood. This was a great example of the community coming together for a common purpose and it was a big win for the community. The Area IV Coalition still meets at the Area IV Youth Center.

Housing is a common theme when talking about the struggles of this neighborhood. The only reason Marian’s parents decided to stay - a lot of their friends were moving to Brockton or Randolph - was because of the ease of transportation. Marian attributes her ability to afford Cambridge to her parent’s decision to stay.
Stop 2: George Close Building

Even though they were candy manufacturers, the George Close Company was known for their baseball cards. On one side they had a player and on the other they advertised their company. One of their cards is now worth thousands of dollars. This building is another story of a former manufacturing building turned into moderate and Section VIII housing for the neighborhood.

Marian notes that a lot of people came to Cambridge via the Panama Canal - by way of Barbados. The collapse of the sugar industry hit Barbados relatively hard compared to some other Caribbean islands. Jamaica, for instance, had the rubber industry to fall back on while many Barbadians had to leave to find work. Construction on the Panama Canal was a common choice. At one point in the early 1900s, roughly half the men of Barbados were working on the canal. After working on the canal, many of them continued on to Boston and Cambridge. Marian attributes some of this to the similarities in culture because of Barbados’ long history - 300 years - under British rule. Their educational system closely resembled the British system. They even called their police officers “Bobbies.”
Stop 3: Roberts School

The Roberts School, built in 1899, was one of The Port’s first educational institutions. The children of many Caribbean immigrants went to this school. Bertine Brown, who taught at the school for twenty years remembers: “When I first came to work, a lot of the people in the school were of Barbadian descent. The kids on this side of Columbia . . . went to the Roberts School. On the other side of Columbia, they went to the Fletcher School.” (We Are The Port, 118) This quote can be a little misleading because it primarily mentions Caribbean immigrants. But, it’s important to remember that The Port was a very diverse community which, of course, led to a very diverse school population. Walter Bartlett - a longtime resident of The Port - remembers: “In Cambridge there was such a mixture of races and people - black, white, Puerto Rican, Spanish, Polish, and Jewish. We had neighborhood schools. By having pride in our neighborhood, we had pride in our school.” (We Are The Port, 209) Eventually the Roberts School became the Maynard school, and then the Fletcher-Maynard Academy when the Fletcher and Maynard schools merged.

Marian’s mother - a seamstress - actually made Mrs. Brown’s wedding dress. Marian remembers the Brown’s living in Washington Elms and then moving to Columbia Street. She remembers Lau’s Laundry on the other side of Cherry Street and a candy shop across the street where she would buy candy on her way home from school. Marian’s kindergarten class was very large - she remembers a lot of Italian and Irish names. The neighborhood was very diverse, but Marian remembers everyone getting along. Many of the parents were first-generation immigrants and the workforce in the factories reflected the diversity in the neighborhood - all different cultures working side-by-side.
Stop 4: Washington Elms/Newtowne Court

Newtowne Court was built as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA - renamed Work Projects Administration in 1939). It was finished in 1937. Because it involved federal money, they were required to create housing boards, which is where the Cambridge Housing Authority, established in 1935, came from. Prior to the construction of Newtowne Court and Washington Elms, there were originally tenements with one bathroom per floor for 6 or 7 families on this land. Washington Elms was completed in 1942. During the Depression there was a real need for jobs so the creation of the WPA helped get the economy growing. Most of the housing development, however, happened after WWII.

Over time, more and more immigrants from the Caribbean began living here. The first big wave was in the early 1920s. Then, the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed. The Act instated quotas that strictly limited the number of people that could come from any one island in the Caribbean. One of the islands went from 10,000 immigrants to 300 in one year. Immigration from Barbados, however, was facilitated because of its status as a British colony until 1966.

In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act, abolishing the earlier quota system, was passed. This opened the door to immigration from the Caribbean again. In the late 60s and early 70s, amidst the infamous dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier’s (aka “Papa Doc”) rise to power, many Haitians immigrated to the United States. And, of course, another wave of immigration from Haiti occurred because of the horrible earthquake in 2010.

Marian notes that immigration law was based on people’s racist and biased thoughts about others. She mentions that the Irish were initially scorned because of their red hair and because it was believed they were wild and untamed. When the tenements were torn down in 1929 and the housing board was established, they wanted to decide what kind of people should live in the new housing. When people were kicked out of the tenements to make way for the developments, they were promised that they could move back once the buildings were completed. But, there was a discussion in City Hall where it was decided that people of color should not live in these buildings. So, one development became housing for white people, and the other for people of color.
Stop 5: Boardman School

The Boardman School was originally a one-room schoolhouse built in 1802. It was the first public school to serve the neighborhood. The building, roughly as it exists today, was completed in 1868 and is the oldest standing schoolhouse in Cambridge. As such, many first-generation Caribbean immigrants received their education at the Boardman School. Lucille Bourne Holford - lifelong resident of The Port - was born at this end of Windsor Street after her parents made the journey from Barbados to Cambridge. This is how she remembers the neighborhood:

“The Greeks were on Main Street. The Italians were on one end of Windsor Street. It was pretty well mixed on the other end of Windsor Street, but it was all colored people...I went to the Boardman School first. I remember Miss Fair, our first grade teacher, because she had long fingernails... Our house, one of seven three-deckers on Windsor Street, was located between Front Street and State Street... Every time I go by that street I say to my daughters, ‘Bow three times, this is where your mother was born.”

— We Are The Port, 28-31

The School was converted into a recreation center in 1940 containing a social services office and a library. It was later converted into a clinic in 1972, which has since closed. Currently, the building is vacant. The City has tentative plans to completely restore the building and repurpose it to benefit the community in some way. Marian remembers getting her first library card in this building. She used to go there for story hour. Later, after the end of rent control, half the Latino population of Cambridge left because they could no longer afford to live in the City. This building became home to the non-profit Concilio Hispano, which held classes for Latinos, many of whom lived in Chelsea and Everett.
Stop 6: Goddess Bra Factory

Marian’s mother worked at the Goddess Bra factory when Marian was growing up. Since the factory was based on piece-work, rather than hourly pay, and since Marian’s mother was exceptionally skilled at being a seamstress, she was able to negotiate coming in later to make sure that she got her kids to school first. So she was able to go to work at 8:30 in the morning and leave at 3:00 in the afternoon. Marian remembers getting the lecture: “I’m doing this for you.”

There were other manufacturing plants along this whole row as well. Biscuit makers needed shapes for their biscuits so there was a company that just made the different shapes who had contracts with different companies so that no other company would have the same shape. Technology Square - where Lever Bros. was - developed after the company left. It was a big employer so it left a void to be filled.

In the late 1950s, there was a plan for the inner-belt that would have split Cambridge in half. It would have been roughly where Columbia Street is and would have met up down by Mass General. There is still a turn-off that you can see up there. They didn’t continue with the plan because of the activism of City and neighborhood residents. Even though the Beltway never went through Cambridge, it still left its mark on The Port. Speculation surrounding the expected development of the Beltway led to a lot of people waiting to develop property in the neighborhood. You can still see the lag in development relative to the rest of the City.
Stop 7: Christian Mission Holiness Church

This church was purchased by the mostly Barbadian congregation in 1916 from the City. It used to be a Fire House. It was built in 1852, which makes it the oldest intact fire station in the city of Cambridge. The Church was founded by Reverend Alfred E. Cragwell, a Barbadian immigrant, in a basement on Harvard Street.
Stop 8: Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House

The Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House was built in 1807. Margaret Fuller - a prominent teacher, author, philanthropist, and women’s rights advocate - was born here in 1810. After her death in a tragic shipwreck in 1850, the house took on a life of its own. In 1902, the Cambridge Young Women’s Christian Association rented rooms to provide recreation, clothing, food, health services, and employment assistance to women in The Port. Myra Goodridge Rodrigues - the daughter of Barbadian immigrants who came to Cambridge in 1921 - remembers childhood days spent at the neighborhood center:

“I remember going to the Margaret Fuller House, which was just down the street. We played games, they had plays, and they used to take us on day trips. They kept us busy, especially during the summer, which was very important... I think growing up in Cambridge, you had a feeling of being protected, because you knew everybody and everybody knew you. You felt like you had parents all over the place.”

— We Are The Port, 103-104

In the 1960s and 1970s the house expanded even further. It became a teen center, and even had a community radio station. The Black Panthers even used the space to run a breakfast program for families and children out of the house for a short time. Marian notes that, before the Health Clinic in the 1950s, nurses would bring the babies to the Margaret Fuller House to be weighed. They also held citizenship classes and provided mutual assistance for immigrants and other residents of the neighborhood.
Stop 9: Pentecostal Tabernacle

Originally the Swedish Baptist Church, built in 1903, this building is now home to the congregation of the Pentecostal Tabernacle Church. The mostly Caribbean congregation first met on Austin Street (now Bishop Allen Drive) when the congregation was founded in 1927. By the 1940s, the church had outgrown its space, so they purchased this building in 1947. In the 1990s the Church founded a children’s ministry called “Children’s Haven,” which lasted for 13 years. Since then, the church has been involved in many community service outreach programs. They recently hosted the 4th annual “Safer Homes, Safer Community: Cambridge Gun Buy-Back.” They host free community events just across the street in Clement Morgan Park and they also host a summer soccer clinic and the Pentecostal Tabernacle Youth Olympics.

Marian recalls meeting with a woman who went to this church as a child. She told Marian that the church initially stopped at the top of the brick portion of the building and there was a small steeple. You can still see evidence of this when you enter the building as when you walk in you walk down a short flight of stairs. Marian’s congregation originally met on Mass. Ave., but once the Swedish Baptist congregation left in the 1950s, her congregation moved to this building. One of the founders of the church came from Barbados by way of Panama. This church is very similar to other Barbadian churches in the neighborhood. It is no longer a Barbadian church - it is now very diverse. Roughly 60% of the congregation comes from outside of the United States. A more transient group, mostly graduate students, makes up roughly 20% of the congregation. There are roughly 30 different countries of the African continent represented and some of them stay because of marriages and family. The church is very active in the community, providing mutual assistance and helping each other with their children.
The Tabernacle’s involvement in the community is fairly typical of churches in The Port. First Holiness on Columbia Street sponsors the Annual Port Fair in Sennot Park on Broadway. St. Bartholomew’s on Harvard Street delivers a community meal for 50-100 people every Wednesday evening - just to name a few.

Many people come back to visit their home church because they had to move away from Cambridge. Many people who are members of the congregation no longer live in Cambridge. Many left because of the inner-belt scare, the idea of the suburbs and the American Dream was appealing, and because it was easier to get a loan out in places like Brockton and Randolph.
**Sources:**


