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REMINISCENCES
OF
OLD CAMBRIDGE

BY
CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

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REMINISCENCES OF OLD CAMBRIDGE

BEING IN PART THE REPORT OF AN INFORMAL ADDRESS TO THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY ON THE EVENING OF OCTOBER 30, 1905.

By CHARLES ELIOT NORTON.

WHEN the pleasant invitation to speak this evening came to me, I hesitated to accept it, but on reflection, I put doubt aside and welcomed the opportunity to express my piety for my native town, and to say how dear a privilege I count it to have been born in Cambridge and to have spent here much the greater part of my life, and how deeply I reverence the ancestors who have bequeathed to us the blessing of their virtues and the fruits of their labors. Few

towns have had a more notable succession of worthies than Cambridge, and, as a result in large part of the character of these men and women, the story of the town contains the record of many events not merely of local interest, but such as connect it with the history of the country and with the progress of civilization during the last two hundred and fifty years.

Dr. Paige, in his trustworthy "History of Cambridge," says that "for nearly two hundred years after its foundation Cambridge increased very slowly in population and wealth." It was just about two hundred years after the foundation that my recollections of Cambridge begin. I was three years old in 1830, and the town and the townspeople then were in many respects more widely different from what they are to-day than they then were from what they had been during any part of the preceding one hundred and fifty years.

Old Cambridge was still a country village, distinguished from other similar villages mainly by the existence of the College, concerning which Dr. Paige says with dry humor: "The College gave employment to several professors, mechanics, and boarding-house keepers;" and one may add that it separated Old Cambridge, in its social characteristics, from the other sections of the town further than its mere local distance from them would justify. Wide spaces of wood and swamp and pasture divided Lechmere Point, as East Cambridge was then termed, from Cambridgeport, and parted both of them from Old Cambridge, — and this physical separation was a type of the wider division of interests and associations.

So great are the changes in the town since my childhood that the aspects and conditions of those days seem more than a lifetime away. I have the happiness of passing my old age in the house in which I was born. It has always been my home; but when I was a boy, it was in the country — now it is suburban and in the heart of a city. Kirkland Street was a country road with not a single house on its southern side, but with a wide stretch quite over to Harvard Street of marsh land and huckleberry pasture, with channels running through the thick growth of shrubs, often frozen in the winter, and on which we boys used to skate over the very site of the building in which we have met to-night. Down as far as to Inman Square the region was solitary, while beyond Inman Square,

toward Boston, was an extensive wood of pines with a dense underbrush, the haunt, as we boys used to believe, of gamblers and other bad characters from the neighboring city, and to be swiftly hurried by if nightfall caught us near it. The whole region round my father's house was, indeed, so thinly settled that it preserved its original rural character. It was rich in wild growth, and well known to botanists as the habitat of many rare wild-flowers; the marshes were fragrant in spring with the azalia and the clethra; and through spring, summer, and autumn there was a profuse procession of the familiar flowers of New England. It was a favorite resort of birds, but there is now little left of it fit for their homes, though many of them still revisit in their migrations the noisy locality where their predecessors enjoyed a peaceful and retired abode.

But even a greater change than that from country village to suburban town has taken place here in Old Cambridge in the last seventy years. The people have changed. In my boyhood the population was practically all of New England origin, and in large proportion Cambridge-born, and inheritors of Old Cambridge traditions. The fruitful invasion of barbarians had not begun. The foreign-born people could be counted up on the fingers. There was Rule, the excellent Scotch gardener, who was not without points of resemblance to Andrew Fairservice; there was Sweetman, the one Irish day-laborer, faithful and intelligent, trained as a boy in one of the "hedge-schools" of his native Ireland, and ready to lean on his spade and put the troublesome schoolboy to a test on the Odes of Horace, or even on the *Arma virumque cano*; and at the heart of the village was the hair-cutter Marcus Reamie, from some unknown foreign land, with his shop full, in a boy's eyes, of treasures, some of his own collecting, some of them brought from distant romantic parts of the world by his sailor son. There were doubtless other foreigners, but I do not recall them, except a few teachers of languages in the College, of whom three filled in these and later years an important place in the life of the town,— Dr. Beck, Dr. Follen, and Mr. Sales. But the intermixture of foreign elements was so small as not to affect the character of the town; in fact, everybody knew not only everybody else in person, but also much of everybody's tradition, connections, and mode of life. It has been a pathetic experience for me to live all my life in one community and to find myself gradually becoming a stranger to it, and

with good but new neighbors, some of whom do not know that I am not as recent a comer to the town as themselves.

I have the pleasure of seeing before me an old friend, one of the most honored sons of Cambridge. He and I are now two of the oldest of the native-born inhabitants of the town. We were born, respectively, at the opposite ends of what is now Kirkland Street, and was then known by the more characteristic name of Professors' Row. The pleasant house in which Colonel Higginson was born still stands, — the last in the row toward Harvard Square, facing the Delta and the Yard. Between the house of Colonel Higginson's father and that of my father, when the Colonel and I were little boys, there were but four houses on Professors' Row, each of them occupied by a professor, the last toward my father's house being that on the corner of Divinity Avenue, lately occupied by Mr. Houghton, then by the Rev. Dr. Henry Ware, Sr., a venerable man, whose numerous descendants give evidence that among them the doctrine of original sin finds no support. Professors' Row, or Kirkland Street, was a part of what was known as the Old Charlestown Road, — the oldest and most interesting road in the Commonwealth. When Winthrop's company of immigrants arrived in 1630, and part of it settled at Charlestown, and part went up the river, to make their new home at a place on its bank which they called Watertown, in order to establish communication between the two settlements a path was cut through the five or six miles of woods which lay between them. By degrees, as the country became peopled, this path became an open road, and to distinguish it from other thoroughfares it was called "the Old Charlestown Road." If the names of the people who have travelled over it were written out, the record would be a list of the chief worthies of the Commonwealth from its beginning to the present day, at first on foot or on horseback, or with ox-teams, later in one-horse chaises, and later still in the chariots of governors or notables who had established their homes along that part of the line which we know as Brattle Street. Few feet have travelled the Kirkland Street part of the road oftener than mine, and many an otherwise dull and commonplace walk has had its dulness relieved by the silent and invisible companionship of some one of these old travellers.

Professors' Row would deserve fame even if the record of emi-

ment men and women who have lived for a longer or shorter time upon it extended no farther back than my own memory, for it would include two Henry Wares, three Presidents of the University (Sparks, Felton, and Eliot), many distinguished professors, among them that admirable scholar and delightful man, my classmate and dear friend, Francis James Child. A little earlier than he was Longfellow, who on his first coming to Cambridge, in 1836, took rooms in the house of Professor Stearns, which has only lately been moved to give place to the New Lecture hall. That large, square, three-story house afforded several suites of pleasant rooms, and has probably been the home for a time of more men whose names are well known in the annals of the College and the Commonwealth than any other in Cambridge. My earliest recollections of Mr. Longfellow are of the time when he was living there, and nothing but my later recollections of him could be pleasanter than those which I have of his kindness, — he a man of thirty to a boy of eight or ten years old. I still preserve among my treasures gifts he made me in those days for the enrichment of my little museum, — precious objects which he had brought home from Europe, the most interesting of all of them, perhaps, being a seventeenth century medal of the three kings of Cologne, whose legend and names are familiar to the readers of his “Golden Legend.”

Twenty years later (Oxford Street had been laid out meanwhile) Lowell took up his abode in the next house to the west, then owned and occupied by his brother-in-law, Dr. Estes Howe, now occupied by Professor Peabody; and here he lived for four or five years. Kirkland Street grew to know him well. No one ever loved his native town better than he, or was more familiar with it; and when I recall the innumerable walks we had together for many and many a year, not only when he was resident at Dr. Howe's, but during the longer period when his home was at Elmwood, one of the tenderest stanzas that Cowley wrote comes into my mind as curiously appropriate to them, alike in word and in sentiment:—

“Ye fields of Cambridge, our dear Cambridge, say
Have ye not seen us walking every day?
Was there a tree about which did not know
The love betwixt us two?”

The fields, alas, grow scantier and scantier. In my boyhood, the whole space between Elmwood and the old Brattle House, now standing squeezed and rather disconsolate at the corner of Brattle and Hawthorn streets, was open field, mainly pasture-land, while on the other end of the way between Elmwood and Shady Hill, almost the whole space between Divinity Avenue and the Middlesex Turnpike, which ran behind my father's house, was similar open ground, stretching, wood and swamp, sandpit and field, along both sides of the willow-bordered Turnpike, far up, nearly to the then noted Porter's Tavern, which gave its name in later days to Porter's, or North Cambridge, Station.

But I must return to Professors' Row, in order to speak of the occupants of the house next on the east to that of Professor Stearns, — the home of Professor and Mrs. John Farrar. The house has recently come into the possession of the University, and has been this very year transformed and improved by changes made in it. But in the transformation it has lost the historic and quaintly monumental character given to it by its lofty wooden columns, so that the ghosts of its former occupants, should they pass along this way, might gaze with some bewilderment on its changed appearance. Professor Farrar was a noted mathematician in his day, a kindly, good man, but socially a less considerable person than his wife, Mrs. Eliza Farrar, who was a figure of real importance in the Cambridge circle for more than thirty years. Mrs. Farrar was a daughter of Mr. Benjamin Rotch of New Bedford. Soon after his marriage her father had gone to England and established himself there in good business and pleasant social relations, and there her childhood and youth were passed. She was essentially of English breeding and an excellent representative of the cultivated and intelligent women, English or American, of the first half of the last century. I might describe her to one of my own generation as being like what one might imagine the mother of Harry and Lucy to have been; but I fear the actual generation is not so familiarly acquainted with Miss Edgeworth's admirable characters as to know for what their names stand. It is for something very good at its time, but which, at least in America, has almost disappeared. In such a woman as Mrs. Farrar it might perhaps be defined as a mingling of English Utilitarianism and American Unitarianism, with an English tradition of good manners and an

American freedom from purely conventional standards. Having no Harry or Lucy of her own to bring up, she turned her gifts to the service of the children of the community. She wrote a volume which I remember as of absorbing interest for those for whom it was intended called "The Child's Robinson Crusoe;" another of her excellent books was "The Youths' Letter-Writer," and another still, "The Young Ladies' Friend," full of good sense and plain counsel, each of which would be as useful to the present generation of girl-undergraduates as it was to their grandmothers, for whom the doors of the home had not been opened that they might go forth for good or for ill to seek entrance into the Women's College.

Another professor's wife with literary gifts and of motherly warmth of heart was the American wife of the excellent Dr. Follen, who, coming to Harvard from his native Germany, in 1825, not only quickened by his ardent enthusiasm zeal for the study of the German language and literature, but roused interest in gymnastics, and was instrumental in introducing the intelligent practice of them after the German method among the students of the College. The Delta, then an unoccupied field, was the exercise ground, and bars and poles and other gymnastic apparatus were erected upon it, remnants of which existed for many years. Mrs. Follen was a writer of charming verses for the nursery and of pleasant stories for elder children, one of which, called "The Well-Spent Hour," was a great favorite.

Other ladies belonging to the same social circle, as the two I have mentioned, possessed similar cultivation and literary taste, and made part of the group of men and women around the College which formed a society of exceptional pleasantness and of pure New England type. Few artificial distinctions existed in it; but the progress of democracy had not swept away the natural distinctions of good breeding and superior culture. The best traditions of the older days of New England were still maintained, and formed a common background of association and of mutual understanding. Its informing spirit was liberal and cheerful; there was general contentment and satisfaction with things as they were; there was much hopefulness and confidence that in the New World, in New England at least, men had entered not merely upon a land of promise, but one in which the promise was already in considerable measure fulfilled. There were evils, no doubt, but

they were not threatening of disaster. The most perplexing problems of society seemed to be in large measure solved; the future, though not absolutely cloudless, wore, for the most part, a fair aspect.

A broad statement of conditions such as this requires modifications to make it correct in particulars; but it at least indicates the prevailing temper of the time as it was manifest in the little circle of Old Cambridge society. The change was soon to come, but in the days of which I am speaking, there was simplicity of life in its best sense. The households were homes of thrift without parsimony, of hospitality without extravagance, of culture without pretence. The influence of the College gave to the society a bookish turn, and there was much reading,—much more of the reading which nourishes the intelligence than in these days of newspapers, magazines, and cheap novels. Everybody in the Cambridge circle was interested, for instance, in the quarterly numbers of the *North American Review*, each of which was likely to contain more than one article by a friend or neighbor. The standard of literary judgment set up in England was generally respected, and the *Edinburgh Review* was hardly less commonly read than the *North American*, and its verdicts were even more readily accepted.

Pleasant and cultivated as was the little circle of Cambridge society, it did not escape the defects incident to its conditions of comparative isolation. The neighborhood of Boston was, indeed, of advantage to it, for though the animating spirit of the little city was in many respects still characteristically provincial, yet its varied interests and active intelligence exercised a generally liberalizing influence. At the time of which I am speaking, the relations of city and College had become more intimate than ever through the election to the presidency of the College of Josiah Quincy, who had just rounded out by a term of five years as Mayor of Boston a long and distinguished career of public service. He was, in truth, as Mr. Lowell termed him, “a great public character,” and he had the aspect of one—he stood erect, a fine, commanding figure of six feet of vigorous manhood. He possessed the bearing which we attribute to the gentlemen of distinction of the early days of the Republic, a bearing of dignity, combined with scrupulous courtesy. He and his admirable wife occupied the first place in the little world of Old Cambridge, and kept it in touch with the

bigger world of Boston, for, in becoming President of Harvard, Mr. Quincy did not give up all business in the city, whose affairs he had administered so well. It was his habit to drive himself to town in his high-hung chaise, and, after attending to business there, to drive out in time for dinner at two or three o'clock. Often he held the reins loose, and closing his eyes, let his steady horse, unguided, bring him out along the comparatively little frequented road. After passing the old West Boston toll-bridge, which Longfellow has eternized in his lovely little poem, "The Bridge," and getting beyond the few brick houses at its hither end, there was a bleak, solitary stretch across the salt marshes before one reached the thickly settled centre of Cambridgeport, with its numerous big taverns and great, square stores mainly filled with country produce and West India goods. On the outskirts toward Old Cambridge stood the fine old Inman house with its long, elm-bordered avenue stretching back as far as to the Middlesex Turnpike at the point which we now know as Inman Square. After passing this house there was a half-mile of road, with hardly a house on either side, till you came to the mansion of Judge Dana, which, set on a terrace, crowned the height, far higher than now, of Dana Hill. Beyond this was a short, solitary strip of road through rough pastures on either hand, as far as the Bishop's house, which stood where it still stands on the left, with the Old Parsonage facing it on the right hand, and then, passing on the same side the famous old Wigglesworth house, you came to the President's house at the very entrance to Harvard Square, or, as it was then called, the Market-place, — plainly, the whole way was a tolerably safe road for a trustworthy horse to travel without much guidance from his master's hand.

The President's house, known now as Wadsworth house, and so named after its first occupant, President Wadsworth (from 1725 to 1736), is little changed in outer aspect, save by the deplorable cutting off in recent years of the lilac-filled front courtyard which separated it from the narrow street. At the back it had a pleasant garden, surrounded by a high board fence, stretching into the present College Yard so far as to include a part, at least, of the site of Gray's Hall. The President's office was in the upper story of the annex to the main house, still standing but moved from its original position.

The relations of President Quincy to the students through his whole administration, 1829 to 1845, were excellent. The number of undergraduates was still small enough to admit of his having some personal acquaintance with most of them. The *esprit de corps* was strong in the College, and the President's relations to the students were much like that of a colonel to the men of his regiment who feel that, though he commands them, he is still one with them in interest and in sympathy. President Quincy was wise enough to be patient with the students' faults, and had humor enough to smile at their follies. They regarded him with a respect which his force of character and his distinguished career and personal bearing naturally inspired, together with a certain affectionate pride as the worthy head and representative of the famous institution in whose honor they themselves had share. More still, he interested them as a personage already vested with historic dignity, — he connected the modern time with the heroic past, he had been born four years prior to the Declaration of Independence; in his youth he had known the great men of the great time, and while alike in principles and in manners he maintained the traditions of that period, he kept abreast of the conditions of the later day. He often put the shy student at his ease by saying to him, "I knew your grandfather, sir, and I am happy now to know you." His numerous cares and many avocations did not interfere with his sympathy in small matters, nor with his kindly thoughtfulness for the petty interests of "his boys." I had an experience of this, so characteristic and so pleasant that I am led to tell it, though it relates to myself.

During my freshman year, I was obliged to be absent from College for two or three months, owing to trouble in my eyes. I returned to my class at the beginning of the sophomore year, but the absence had deprived me of the hope of receiving a Detur, — that is, one of the books given out in the autumn to such students as have done well during their first year. It was a disappointment, for the Detur, in its handsome binding, bearing the College seal, is a coveted prize. On the morning after the Deturs had been given out, the freshman who served the President as his messenger came to my room with word that the President wished to see me at his office. Even to the most exemplary of students, such a summons is not altogether welcome, for "use every one after his desert and

who should 'scape whipping?" I went accordingly with some trembling, knocked, entered, and was received with the President's usual slightly gruff salutation, "Well, Sir, what's your name?" Then, as he looked up and saw who it was, "Ah, yes, Norton. Well, I sent for you, Norton, because I was sorry that under the rules I could not present you yesterday with a Detur. It was not your fault, and so, as a token of my personal approbation, I have got a book for you which may perhaps take the place of the Detur," — and he handed me a prettily bound copy of Campbell's Poems in which he had written his name and my own with a few pleasant words of approval. I have received many gifts in my long life, but hardly one which aroused a stronger sense of personal gratitude to the giver, or which has afforded me more pleasure. It was no wonder that President Quincy established a firm hold upon the affection as well as the respect of the students.

Harvard Square, on the edge of which stands Wadsworth house, had not received its present appellation in President Quincy's day. It was known then as the Market-place. Here was the general market of country produce, especially of wood and hay, loads of which drawn by oxen were brought in almost every morning for the village supply, taking their stand under one of the two noble elms which gave their beauty to the Square. The market proper was a small building near the middle of the Square, but I have no recollection of it; and in my early days the meat market, or butcher's shop, was in the basement of the old Court House which stood till 1840 on the site since then occupied by Lyceum Hall, and, so far as dignity of design and picturesqueness of effect are concerned, was vastly superior to the ugly building that usurped its place. Indeed, Harvard Square is far inferior in pleasantness of aspect to the village Market-place which it has superseded.

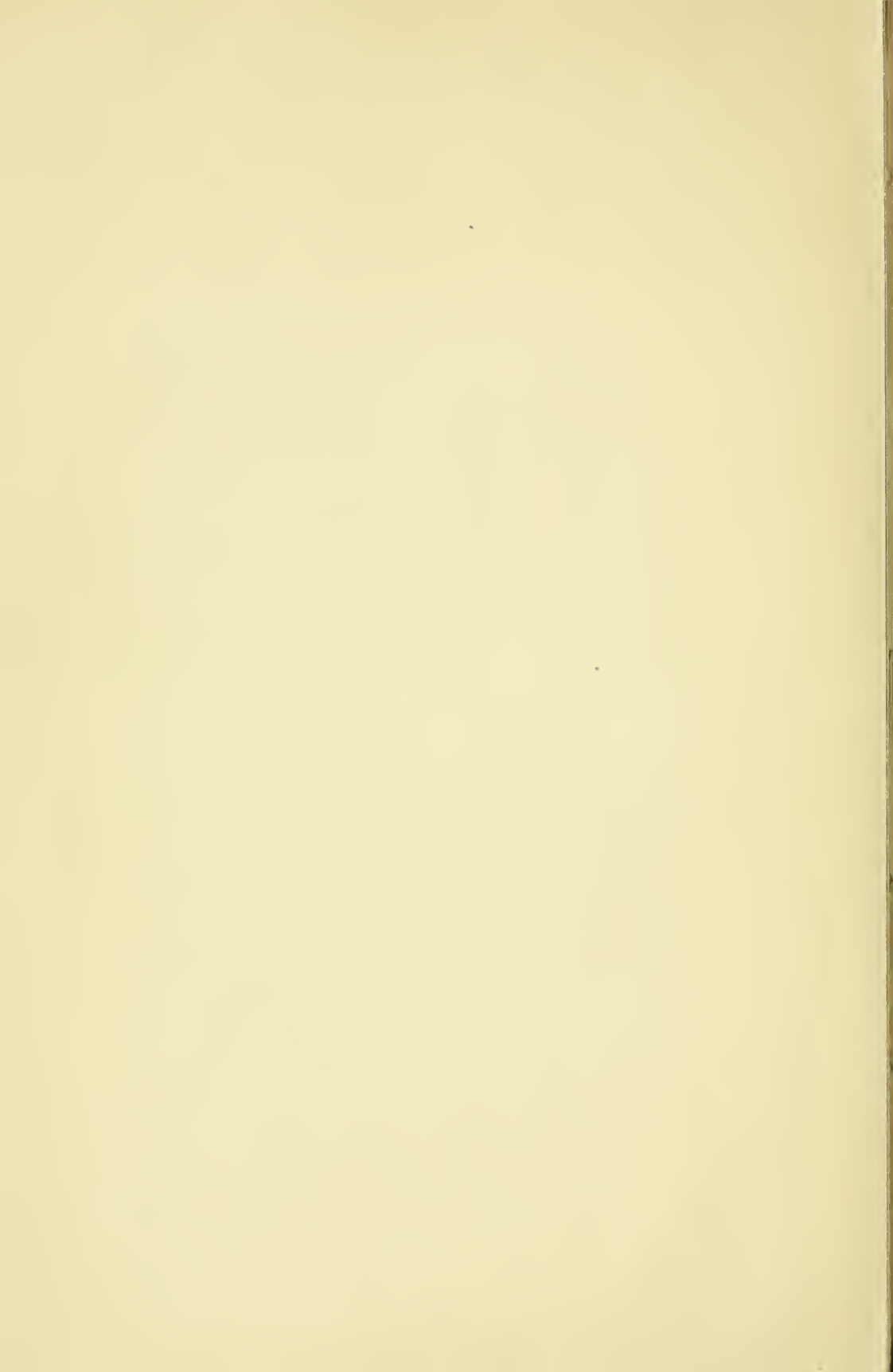
Here was the centre of the active life of the village. Where the car station is now was Willard's Tavern, in front of which the primitive omnibus awaited passengers before starting on its journey, then an hour in length, to Boston. I do not recall when the trips began to be made hourly, but I think there were only four round trips the day at the earliest of my recollections. The road during the winter and spring was apt to be very heavy, with frequent mud holes into which the wheels might easily sink to their hubs. Scarcely any of the residents in Cambridge carried on business in

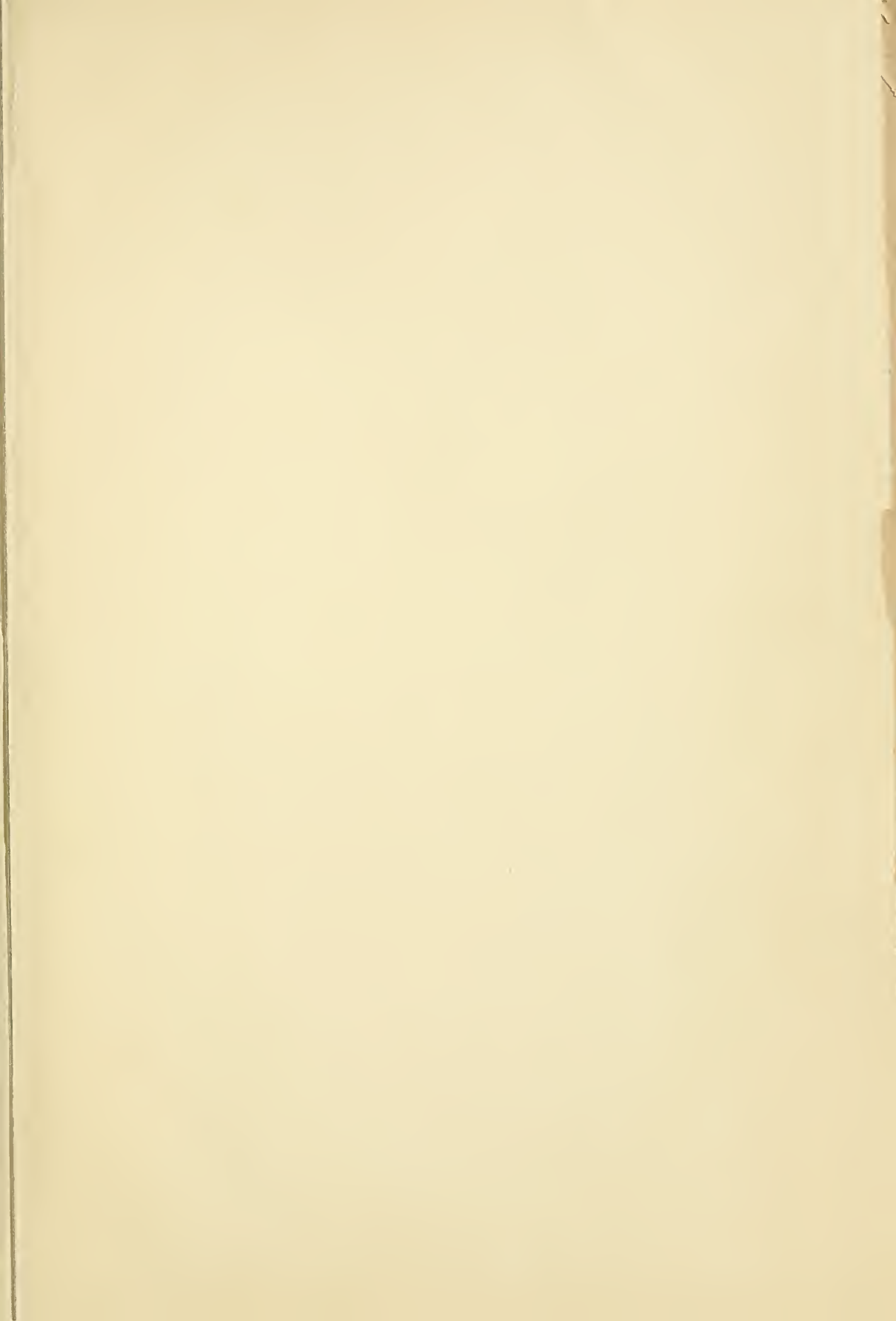
Boston or had daily employment there. An occasional trip to the city was all that was needed by Deacon Farwell to keep up the stock of goods in his excellent dry-goods shop, at the corner of the Market-place, and the road to Brighton; nor was Deacon Brown compelled to go often to Boston by the requirements of his old-fashioned store of West India goods and groceries, at the corner of Dunster Street. Hilliard and Gray, the University booksellers and publishers, occupied the corner store on Holyoke Street in the brick block which had recently been erected, and next them was the post-office, with a postmaster whose first commission dated back to the first administration of Washington. A little way down Holyoke Street, on the western side, stood the University Press, then, or soon after, under the management of the cultivated gentleman and scholar, Charles Folsom, whose admirable taste controlled the issues of the Press and secured for them a high reputation.

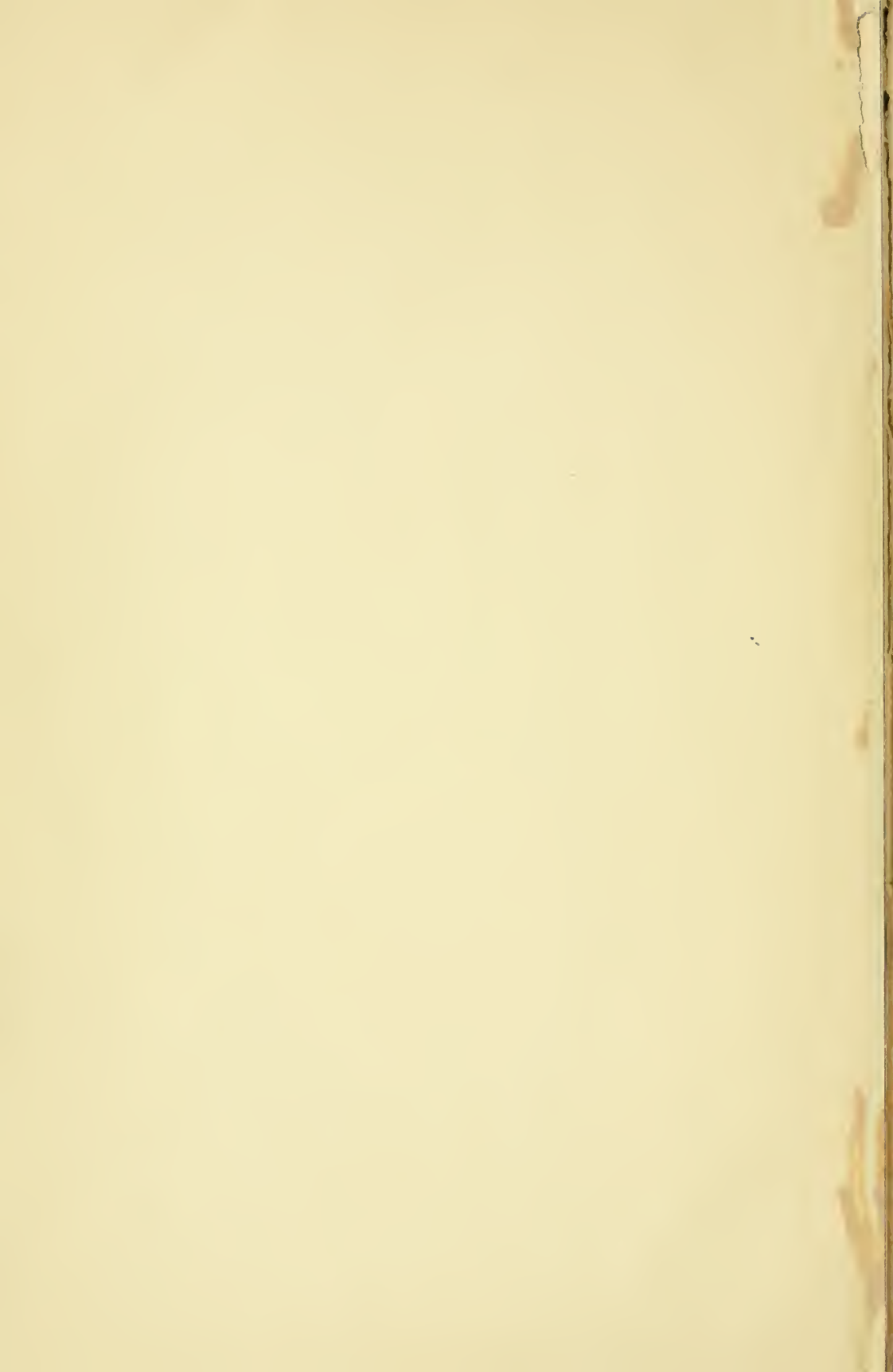
The stores I have mentioned, with a few others of hardly less note, and some pleasant small shops kept by women, supplied most of the modest wants of the village, and with the strong attraction of the post-office and, perhaps to not a few, the still stronger attraction of Willard's bar-room, drew almost everybody on every week day to the Square. Here one would meet most of those village and College characters whom Mr. Lowell has commemorated so delightfully in his "Cambridge Thirty Years Ago." Fifty years have passed since that admirable essay was written. Even then, the original Old Cambridge had almost vanished, and now not one of those characters to whom it gave happy literary immortality survives in the flesh. The last to go was that sweet humorist, John Holmes; and with him the last light of the real Old Cambridge was extinguished. The village traditions, all of which he had inherited and improved, ceased with him;—so long as he lived, the legends of two hundred years still survived as if contemporary stories: with his death, many an Old Cambridge ghost, whom he had tenderly cherished, was laid away, never again to be summoned from its dim abode. No son of hers was more loyal to Old Cambridge than he, and it would have pleased him to be assured that his memory would become, as I believe it has become, part of the cherished tradition of his native town.

The Old Cambridge of to-day is a new Cambridge to us of the elder generation; and I can form no better wish for its children

than that they may have as good reason to love and to honor their native city as we of the old time had for loving our native village.









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