

Downtown Cambridge Walking Tour

PHOTO BY JILL JASUTA



COURTESY HUBERT H. WRIGHT IV

The interesting
stories and
people behind
the buildings



Downtown Cambridge's Race Street in 1934.

COURTESY HUBERT H. WRIGHT IV

Welcome to Cambridge

Cambridge is among the oldest cities in Maryland, laid out in 1684. Throughout the years, it's served as a seaport, a major packing and canning center, and a vacation destination. At the height of its industrial boom around 1900, it was the largest community on Maryland's Eastern Shore, with more than 5,700 residents. Through the first half of the 20th century,

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downtown Cambridge was the place to be—both on Race Street and Pine Street and surrounding streets. Especially on a Saturday night, when the sidewalks were thronged with shoppers eager to find a new dress or suit at one of the department stores, pick up farming supplies, enjoy bowling or dancing, or indulge in a milkshake. While much has changed, a good number of downtown buildings remain from the late 1800s and early 1900s—and the people and stories of the past live on. This small downtown makes for a pleasant stroll, so use this brochure to walk through history, then sample the thriving dining scene, browse the art galleries and shops, and explore the museums.

Walking Tour Map



1 Josiah Bayly's Law Office

211 High Street

What looks like a tiny cottage is actually Cambridge's earliest surviving office building, built in 1800. Back then, lawyers weren't allowed to practice law from their homes, so Josiah Bayly built this structure on his property. He dealt with some high-profile cases: In the 1820s, he was defense attorney for the infamous Patty Cannon, who was involved in stealing and selling slaves and charged with several murders. He represented Betty Patterson in the annulment of her marriage to Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Jerome. Bayly also served as attorney general for the State of Maryland.



2 Dorchester County Courthouse

206 High Street

This place of justice has seen its share of action. The building dates to 1854, replacing an earlier courthouse thought to be destroyed by arson. Harriet Tubman's niece Kessiah and her two children made a daring escape from the slavery auction block here in 1850 and ended up reaching freedom in Philadelphia. This courthouse is also where Samuel Green, a free black preacher from East New Market, was tried and sentenced to 10 years in prison for owning a copy of the anti-slavery booklet *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A century later, the building was damaged by a bomb during the trial of H. Rap Brown, who had been indicted on arson and inciting to riot charges during racial violence in Cambridge in the 1960s. The bell on the courthouse's front lawn was cast in 1772 and hung in a Mexican monastery. It was brought to the United States during the Mexican War in 1846. In Cambridge, it served as a fire alarm for years, hanging at the former jail building on Locust Street.



SIDELIGHT

Up in arms over the end of a jail



It's not uncommon for a community to protest the construction of a jail. But in the 1990s, the Cambridge community was against the *demolition* of a jail. The Old County Jail was a Victorian stone structure designed by Baltimore architect Charles L.

Carson and built in 1882. When it opened, some criticized the local government for providing too comfortable a spot for lawbreakers. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. After a long and unsuccessful fight by preservationists, the "stone castle" was demolished in 1994 to make way for an expansion of Dorchester's County Circuit Courthouse at 206 High Street.

3 Christ Church & Cemetery

601 Church Street

This Episcopal parish dates back to 1692; the structure itself was completed in 1883. The altar window is a Tiffany window. In the early days, services were held in the courthouse before a church was built in Cambridge. The area around the church had been used for burials in unmarked graves, so there are likely bodies interred under the existing building.



Five governors of Maryland were communicants of the church; four of them are buried in the cemetery and a monument stands to the fifth; the graves of Revolutionary War patriots are here as well. The graves with the earliest dates, Magdalen Stevens (1678) and William Stevens (1684) were moved here from a farm in 1940 and have since been moved into the south transept of the church for safekeeping.

4 Dixon Block

303-309 High Street

Colonel W. Lee Dixon owned this two-story brick structure built in the late 1800s. A contractor and entrepreneur, Dixon was the namesake of the Dixon Hotel, which once stood across the street. He was also responsible for the construction of several other buildings in town. In the early 1900s, this building housed a bicycle shop, undertaker, cigar store and pool room. In more recent times, it's been home to the High Spot, a popular restaurant. After the restaurant was closed for decades, another version of the High Spot, this time a gastropub, opened its doors.



5 Dixon Hotel/1880 Bank

304 High Street

The corner of High and Spring Streets was once the site of the Dixon Hotel, one of the city's largest buildings with five stories, wide porcos, and a large two-story porch. The hotel was completed in 1902 at a time when Cambridge was reaching the pinnacle of its industrial success. It was known as the finest hotel on Delmarva. Maryland Governor Emerson C. Harrington had an office in the hotel in the early 1900s, while legendary sharpshooter Annie Oakley and her husband ate their meals here during the construction of their house a few miles away. The main character in John Barth's novel *The Floating Opera* lived in the hotel. The hotel later fell on hard times and was eventually demolished to make way for a parking lot and drive-through for the bank next door. That bank, formerly known as the National Bank of Cambridge and now 1880 Bank, was built after the fire of 1892. The bank was the only one on the Eastern Shore to do business as usual throughout the Great Depression.



6 Fletcher Mansion

308 High Street

Completed in 1888 as a private home, this building is said to be one of the finest Queen Anne-style houses in Cambridge. Now a funeral home, it was built by William Fletcher, who was well known as a watchmaker, jewelry, land speculator, and developer. The construction of an expensive brick home at that time attracted attention in the local papers, with stories highlighting its architectural details. Although the building was scorched in the devastating July 1892 fire, it survived thanks to its masonry walls and slate roof.



7 Democrat & News Building

313 High Street

This was the first structure to be completed on High Street after the 1892 fire. It was designed and built by local architect J. Benjamin Brown in record time—the fire happened on July 31, and the building was complete in October. Owned by the *Democrat and News* until 1965, it was especially designed for the newspaper printing business. The building was later owned by the Orem family for more than 50 years.



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8 Nathan's Furniture

317-321 High Street

Meyer Nathan started out as an itinerant peddler in the late 1800s, going door to door selling little necessities from his backpack. He eventually got a mule and a wagon. And with continued hard work, he went on to open a furniture store called Nathan's. Before he opened, most people ordered their furniture from Baltimore and had it shipped to Cambridge by steamboat or schooner. Nathan lost both his store and home during the fire of 1892. He rebuilt the store (now 317 High Street) and the townhome where he lived (now at 315 High). After he died in 1911, his son Milton expanded the furniture showroom into newer buildings at 319 and 321 High Street. He also opened 18 stores around Delmarva.



9 Dorchester National Bank Building

401 High Street

This building was originally built as a single-story structure in 1889 for the Dorchester National Bank. The bank's first president was former Governor Henry Lloyd; the bank was often referred to as "Governor Lloyd's bank." In 1908 a second story was added. The building is said to be haunted by the ghost of George Woolford, a prominent Cambridge oyster packer in the early 1900s. He died in October 1929—the same time as the Wall Street Crash. Some say Woolford hanged himself from the rafters in the bank's attic. In modern days there have been reports of unexplained noises, movements, and a presence.



SIDELIGHT

Ravaged by fire—again and again

One of Cambridge's most devastating fires happened on July 30, 1892 when a hayloft caught fire. Sadly, the fire company's usual equipment was out of service from an earlier fire, so by the time the fire was controlled, 15 buildings had burned to the ground, including two hotels, two newspapers, a bank, and a furniture store. Most of the buildings were frame structures and were rebuilt with more fire-resistant brick.

Almost 12 years to the day on July 31, 1910, another powerful fire wreaked havoc in downtown Cambridge. The fire started on Race Street from sparks from a merry-go-round engine. The fire destroyed several businesses, homes, and the historic Zion Church.

Other fires through the years, even up to the present day, have damaged or destroyed various other buildings.

SIDELIGHT

Groove City

Nearby Pine Street and the surrounding streets were part of a bustling African American community in the days of segregation. In the first half of the 1900s, people would travel from miles around for the music and dancing, and Cambridge became known as Groove City. They would come for concerts at venues such as Greene's Opera House, Greene's Savoy, and the Elks Home. They danced to the sounds of performers on the Chitlin' Circuit such as Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, and Billy Eckstine, Duke Ellington, and others. In 1967, a civil rights disturbance led to a fire that devastated the neighborhood.



ELLA FITZGERALD

10 Four Corners

543 Poplar Street

Built in 1886 and designed by local architect J. Benjamin Brown, whose handiwork can be seen all over Cambridge, this building once housed the Cambridge Masonic Lodge. It later became a real estate office, and then stood empty for many years. It was also home to the *Cambridge Record* newspaper.

11 Brewery/Rec Centre

504-506 Poplar Street

This building was home to a duckpin bowling alley, and in earlier years, Burch Paint and Glass. A microbrewery opened here in 2013 by two Cambridge natives who remember eating the famous “pool hall hotdogs” of their childhoods when the site was the Recreation Centre. In a nod to local nostalgia, they still have the same hotdog cooker and offer the dogs up on their menu.

12 501 Poplar Street

501 Poplar Street

Built between 1850 and 1870, this structure was one of a handful that survived fires in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the late 1800s, it was the site of an ice cream business run by John G. Hurley, where you could buy an ice cream soda for 5 cents or Coca-Cola for 5 cents a glass “for headache and exhaustion.” In the early 1900s, it was operated as the W.H. Meekins & Brother confectionary store. It then became the property of Dorchester Lodge No. 19 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, which owned it until the mid-1960s. It was restored to its historic splendor in 2010.



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POPLAR STREET IN THE EARLY 1900S. FROM A POSTCARD.

13 National Guard Armory

310 Gay Street

The former National Guard Armory was once the site of many of the community’s biggest events such as car shows, the National Outdoor Show, skating, and dancing. This three-story stone Medieval Revival building was built around 1910 and was home to the National Guard’s Company C. It closed in 1975 and now houses Dorchester County’s District Court.



14 Wallace Office Building

Gay and Spring Streets



Col. James Wallace built this small Greek Revival building next to his home in 1852 to serve as his law office. It was also used as a recruiting office during the Civil War. Wallace later opened Cambridge’s first full-scale oyster cannery, and from this spot known as The Hill, he could watch operations at his packing house down by Cambridge

Creek. By 1896, he was producing about 25,000 cans of oyster a day, making him one of the largest packers on the Eastern Shore. His home was razed in the 1970s to make way for the Dorchester County Public Library, just a few steps away at 303 Gay Street. The library’s front lawn includes marked graves of two very early Cambridge residents, John Woolford (1773) and Margaret Woolford (1772).

15 Hayward Building

400 Race Street

The existing building was constructed somewhere around 1870 and has survived several city fires. This site was home to the Brick Tavern in its early years. In the 1960s, it was a restaurant called Dizzyland and was the site of protests against segregation.

16 Brown Building/ Whitey's Candyland

405 Race Street (no longer standing)

This former candy shop and soda fountain was owned by Whitey Barth beginning in the 1920s. He was the father of National Book Award-winning author John Barth, who was born and grew up in Cambridge. Besides being known for dispensing rock candy, vanilla Cokes, milkshakes, and olive salad sandwiches, Whitey also served as an elected judge of the local orphans' court for a whopping 44 years and was a leading member of Cambridge's Rescue Fire Company. Candyland's building was originally located on Hollands Island, a community in the waters south of Dorchester County's mainland that was home to more than 300 people in the 1900s. Then wind, storms, and erosion forced residents to move back to the mainland—often bringing their houses and buildings with them and reassembling them piece by piece. The building was destroyed by fire in 1982.

17 Grand Opera House

409 Race Street



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This theater opened in 1914 and seated 600. Its ornate front was dismantled in 1948, when Philip Frankel (father of actress Bea Arthur of *Maude* and *Golden Girl* fame) modernized the building for his department store. The building later became a drug store.

18 F. W. Woolworth Company Building

420-422 Race Street

This broad structure was built in two distinct sections during the mid- to late-1920s. The national department store F. W. Woolworth occupied the space for decades until 1996, when the company suffered from lagging sales across the country. The building was sold and became a restaurant. The distinctive storefront sign with Art Deco stylistic finishes dates back to the 1930s and extends the entire length of the building.

19 Harriet Tubman Museum

424 Race Street



This is the last survivor of the late 19th-century frame buildings that once defined the central business district. Built around 1880, the building had been used as a jewelry shop. Since 1992 it has been the Harriet Tubman Museum and Education Center, run by volunteers dedicated to sharing the legacy of the Underground Railroad's most famous "conductor" Harriet Tubman, who was born a few miles away.

20 Phillips Hardware Building

447 Race Street

Phillips Hardware was started in 1904 by the founders of the Phillips Packing Company, which grew to include more than nine factories and was the area's largest employer for years. The hardware business was originally located across the street until a fire destroyed it in 1910, when it was rebuilt here. The tablet with the Phillips Hardware name at the top of the building remains. In addition to hardware, buggies, wagons, stoves, paints, and such, Phillips Hardware also sold toys. It later became a Dollar General Store, and has since been an art gallery and performance venue.



21 Grace United Methodist Church

501 Race Street

One of the best examples of late 19th-century Gothic Revival design on the lower Eastern Shore, the church was completed in 1884—and was borne of strife. In the mid-1800s, the Methodist Episcopal Church was split nationally over the issue of slavery. In Cambridge, the dissenters split from Zion M. E. Church a few blocks over and formed Grace M. E. Church (South) in 1865; the name was changed to Grace United Methodist Church in 1968.

22 Arcade Theater

504 Race Street

Over the years, Cambridge had several movie theaters, including the Arcade Theater, whose Saturday morning cartoon shows were popular with local children. The theater was open from at least the 1920s through 1961, when it reopened as the Dorset Theatre with a showing of *Gone with the Wind*. The building now houses small businesses and apartments.



23 Simmons Center Market

600 Race Street

The oldest continuously running retail operation in downtown Cambridge, Simmons opened in 1937. Jimmy and Elizabeth Simmons introduced the idea of self-service shopping to the Eastern Shore and were known for their marketing genius. But self-service shopping did not appeal to everyone: Their employees had to push shopping carts for some of the more difficult male customers, who refused to do anything that might look like pushing a baby carriage. The market is still owned by the Simmons family today.



COURTESY SIMMONS CENTER MKT

The downtown Cambridge area is filled with interesting buildings and stories. Here are a few worth noting that are off the main path of this walking tour.

24 E. G. Webster & Son

810 Race Street

Opened in 1939, the store still has many of its original fixtures. It's always a highlight in the winter when the sign comes out advertising fresh muskrat, an area delicacy.

25 Sycamore Cottage

416 High Street

The structure itself was built as early as 1765; the core of the cottage was originally the front part of a house a few blocks away and was moved to this location after 1840.

The Women's Club bought the building in 1922. The organization started in 1898 as a literary study group. The members went on to establish the Dorchester County Historical Society, the county library, the hospital auxiliary, the Red Cross chapter, and the local garden club. When they moved in to the cottage, they used part of the space for books, serving as the community's first library. The cottage was used extensively during World War II when knitted garments and surgical dressings for the war effort were produced here.



26 Market Street Businesses

Market and Academy Streets (no longer standing)

Before urban renewal swept Cambridge in the 1960s, this section of Market Street at the west end of the Cambridge Creek bridge was where Joseph Brocato Sr. (and his son after him) had a blacksmith shop. But they never shoed a horse. Instead, they used their skills mostly on oyster dredges, a metal contraption dragged along the seabed to harvest oysters.

In the same short block was the Camper Sisters bakery. Opened by six sisters in 1919, the business catered to oystermen. They became famous for their

baked goods, especially beaten biscuits, which they made using a hammer and block and a lot of elbow grease. Or at least that's how they did it until one of the owner's sons, Ed Watkins, created a machine to do the work, allowing the bakery to prepare 200 dozen beaten biscuits a day. (You can still see the machine at the Heritage Museums & Gardens of Dorchester in Cambridge.) They were also famous for their pies; on holidays they made 200 pies a day. Their descendants still occasionally prepare baked goods for events.



J. M. CLAYTON COMPANY

PHOTO BY JILL JASUTA

27 Train Station

200-202 Trenton St.

The station was built some time after 1869, about the same time that the railroad was completed between Cambridge and Seaford, Delaware, providing easy access to regional and national markets for Dorches-



CAMBRIDGE MEMORIES FACEBOOK PAGE

ter County's seafood and farm produce. When rail passenger service declined in the mid-1900s, the station served for a time as a bus station. In more recent years it has been a real estate office. Today the caboose that sits to the side of the building features a mural that's part of the Chesapeake Country Mural Trail.

SIDELIGHT

Tomato Capital of the World

Phillips Packing Company was formed in Cambridge in 1902 and quickly grew to become the world's largest packer of tomato products, rivaling companies such as Campbell's Soup. Cambridge's largest employer for years, the company shipped Phillips Delicious brand tomatoes, tomato soup, vegetable soup, tomato juice, and more. During World War II, the Phillips plants produced C and K rations for the armed forces. Phillips canned goods were also carried by Admiral Richard Byrd during his Antarctic expedition. Phillips shut down in the early 1960s, devastating the local economy.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PHOTO

28 J. M. Clayton Seafood Company

108 Commerce Street

The world's oldest crab factory has been run by the same family since 1890. J.M. Clayton's was one of the first on the Chesapeake Bay to pick crabs and shed soft crabs. Right after World War II, Clayton's was operating at full capacity with 125 crab pickers, 95 oyster shuckers, and a support crew of 30. What is now the steam room and cooling room is one of the oldest examples of packinghouse architecture in the area. Today crab pickers work hard through the crabbing season, from April until November. Clayton's has a small retail operation where you can pick up live or steamed crabs or fresh or pasteurized crabmeat under the brand name "Epicure."

SIDELIGHT

Big business on Cambridge Creek

From about the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, the creek was a bustling place all about the maritime and seafood industries. Shipbuilders constructed huge whaling ships and schooners. Lumberyards supplied the wood for the boats. Sailmakers sewed with abandon. By 1890, the heyday of the oyster business, crowding the creek were more than 700 boats, including pungies, bugeyes, bateaus, schooners, and skipjacks. Tradition has it that you could walk across the creek just by stepping from boat to boat. Today only a handful of maritime-related industries remain—but excellent local oysters and crabs can still be found in local restaurants.



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POPLAR STREET TODAY

PHOTO BY JILL JASUTA

Learn more stories about the downtown Cambridge area:

- Join the Historic Cambridge Walking Tour, which focuses on High Street. Tours happen Saturdays at 11am from April through October. Meet at Long Wharf Park. Call 410.901.1000 to reserve.
- Take part in an evening Ghost Walk, also on High Street, said to be the most haunted street in Maryland. For the schedule and to register, visit ChesapeakeGhostWalks.com.



For visitor information:

- For more about downtown Cambridge, visit CambridgeMainStreet.com.
- For more about Dorchester County, go to VisitDorchester.org, call 410.228.1000, or stop by the Visitor Center at 2 Rose Hill Place, Cambridge. Open daily 8:30am-5pm.



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