

Howard Neighborhood

If you travel along Dean and Howard Streets on a rainy night, you can still get a feel for what Easton was like in earlier times. Trees overarch the dark narrow road, and it seems that Elijah Howard could step out of the fog at any minute. Many places in Easton claim to have their ghosts, but no neighborhood can give one the eerie feeling of stepping back in time as can the Howard neighborhood on a stormy night.

In one sense, this is Easton's oldest neighborhood because on property owned by the Easton Rod and Gun Club, archaeologists have found a hearth used by Indians of the Archaic Age. Those people were living here when the pyramids were new or perhaps even before. The family for which the neighborhood is named is a late comer by those standards, and even by the standards of European settlement; the Howards are relatively late arrivals in Easton.

The Howard family has been such a prominent one in Easton for so many generations that it is hard to believe they were not among the very earliest settlers. John Howard of Bridgewater acquired many tracts of land in the North Purchase which were divided among his children, but the first Howards to settle in Easton were his grandsons Joshua and Henry Howard. These brothers moved to Easton after 1733. Joshua lived on Prospect Street near the site of Pine Oaks golf course, and Henry built his home on the high ground just above Alger's Corner (the junction of Foundry Street and Turnpike Street). Joshua had seven children, but neither of his two sons survived to adulthood. Henry Howard and his wife Mary had ten children including two boys to carry on his name. The younger of these two sons, Elijah, was born in 1744 and spent much of his youth with his Uncle Joshua. It was Elijah who would be the first Howard to move to the neighborhood that now bears the family name.

The Howard neighborhood is that section of Prospect Street east of the Bay Road and west of Pratt's Corner on Foundry Street and including within its bounds Howard and Dean Streets. In the mid-Nineteenth Century the town considered this neighborhood and the nearby Hayward-Pool neighborhood to be one unit. Hayward and Pool children attended school on Howard Street. However, the development of the two districts have always proceeded along somewhat different lines, so each gets separate attention in these pages.

The Town laid out Prospect Street between 1697 and 1699 to get travellers from Eastondale to Bay Road. At that time the road continued over Purchase Street to connect with Church Street near the original meeting house. The present route of this road was only established in 1852. A mix of swamp and hills with no major source of water power, the neighborhood was not particularly attractive for the first generation of Easton's hardworking settlers.

One exception was apparently John Austin of Taunton who, according to Chaffin, bought land and built a house "not far from the No. 3 schoolhouse [36 Howard Street]" about 1709. This Austin was a "rough character" who earned a living as a shoemaker. He had three wives within fourteen months due to the deaths of his first two wives; this is certainly still a record in Easton at least without benefit of divorce. Chaffin notes that in 1739 he was convicted of "prophaine cursing" and in 1740 "indicted for a far worse offence." Whatever the offense, Austin continued to live in Easton until the mid-1750's.

It is difficult to determine who Austin's neighbors were. Chaffin's 1750 map notes a

house just west of Howard Street called “Wittoms old House,” but who Wittoms was he does not tell us. A William Wittoms and family did live in Easton beginning as early as the 1730’s, so he is probably the mystery resident. Who built “Wittoms old House” is unknown. It appears in the correct location for John Austin’s 1709 house which could explain both its designation as “old” in 1750 and the absence of Austin’s home from Chaffin’s map.

The house at the corner of Howard and Prospect Streets (now 2 Howard Street) is also mysterious. Tradition says that Elijah Howard built it himself, but some of the style features seem older than his arrival in the neighborhood as a newlywed in 1768 or 1769. Howard Street itself was laid out in 1753 from the Norton line to Prospect Street, and this seems about the time when second generation settlers would have begun to move into the area.

In 1771 Howard moved his new family further along Howard Street to what is now 109 Howard Street. The home which he built on this site burned in 1985, but his descendants rebuilt and still live there. Two hundred and twenty-one years by a single family on one site is close to the current record in Easton. No wonder the neighborhood is named for them!

The second Howard to own this house was Edwin Howard who took care of his mother and father Elijah, and his wife's parents in their old age. The old folks plus Edwin and his wife and three children must have crowded the little Cape. In the words of his grandson George, Edwin Howard was:

rather a gentleman farmer, as we think, but carried the farm successfully, until he turned it over to my father Edwin Dwelly Howard about Civil War times. He improved the land, raising all the usual crops and animals. He set out two orchards and nut trees and shade trees. He gave some land to his daughter Sarah and sold outlying woodland so that his conveyance to father was about 40 acres. He was a good mechanic and made many useful things for farm and house of the convenient wood. In his later years he engaged in hunting and trapping. Ben Dean of Taunton called every spring to buy his skins of fox, mink, etc..

Grandpa Edwin lived for his last 15 years with son and daughter-in-law and the children—usefully and happily. It is on record that he said of his daughter-in-law that she was nice—and good to him and a good mother. (But it is said she did not like his tobacco chewing.)

Grandpa Edwin died in the parlor of the old house April 1, 1877. It is said he, on his last day, called for his oldest grandson, Heman, gave him his final word and his big jackknife. Jonathan Pratt had charge of the funeral. Cousin Celestine placed some green posies on his coffin. Nelson Soule dug his grave, He was buried in the Elijah Howard cemetery [on Prospect Street] beside his waiting predecessors.

During the second half of the Eighteenth Century, the neighborhood grew as more and more farms started. About 1793 the first school building was built in this area. Before 1793 school was held in private houses, sometimes in an unfinished chamber at Elijah Howard's and sometimes in his corn-house.

In the following description Heman Howard tells of his grandfather Edwin’s school days:

The inhabitants of District No.3 raised twenty-four pounds and nineteen shillings to build the new school, and it was painted red. The school-building was 20 or 25 feet in length and 15 feet wide. There were six small windows high above the floor. The inside of the room was never painted. The seats were wooden benches around three sides of the room. The scholars faced toward the center of the room. One row of desks with openings

in the center of the rows and a row of long seats for small scholars was built around in front of the desks. When a scholar whose seat was not near the opening had occasion to come forward, the others would lean over and he would walk behind them on the seats, and sometimes over the tops of the desks in front. One teacher had a rod long enough to reach any scholar in the room from where he sat

This school never had a stove. A brick fire-place occupied the middle of the south end of the room. At one side there was a small closet for the girls' hats and wraps and dinner pails and on the other side a small entry for the boys where about one half a cord of wood was kept. The school boys were expected to cut and split the wood and make the fire

The winter term commenced the first Monday after Thanksgiving and continued for ten or twelve weeks. The summer term began the first Monday in June and was about the same length.

On very cold days one-half the scholars would be standing in a semi-circle around the fire and when they were somewhat warmed would give their places to the other half who were shivering in their seats.

The summer term of 1845 was the last one in the old building. James Howard of West Bridgewater was the last teacher in the old building and the first in the new building across the street. At the close of the last term in the old building, Oliver Ames, Jr. visited and pronounced it Number One in the town.

The new school across the street was occupied at the beginning of the winter term of 1845-46. This building was in use until 1926. It is now a private residence at 36 Howard Street. In later years after the High School opened in North Easton, students wishing to complete their education walked two and a half miles to the train depot at Easton Center and then took the train to North Easton. Thus they walked five miles a day, over an hour, rain or shine, to get a high school diploma!

Edwin Howard was not the only son of old Elijah to attend school in the old building. His older brother Elijah, Jr. attended also and went on to make his old neighborhood proud. The boys' father Elijah had risen to prominence despite the "wilderness" location of his home. In 1775 the elder Howard had served as Ensign in the company of ninety-seven Eastoners who marched to Boston on the Lexington alarm. Later, when he served as a trial judge, Eastoners beat a path to Howard Street where Elijah Howard, Senior held court in the east room of his home. This certainly was a stimulating environment for Elijah, Jr. who continued his father's commitment to public service while leaving farming for a career in business.

The story of Elijah Howard, Junior's business ventures must be told in other chapters because the Howard neighborhood had no water power to turn a mill. With his business growing in other parts of town, Elijah finally moved from his home neighborhood probably in 1815 when he built a beautiful Federal style house with brick ends on Washington Street. At that same time his younger brother Edwin reaffirmed his family's commitment to the Howard neighborhood by building a nearly identical home near the family farm on Howard Street

Throughout its history the Howard neighborhood has remained first agricultural and then residential. History notes only three industrial activities. Some time during the Nineteenth Century Barzillai Drake cut wood and made charcoal in the woods off Prospect Street west of Howard Street. During that time Asa R. Howard had a small hoe making shop on the corner of Howard Street opposite Elijah Howard's first house. Asa Howard made hoes to supplement his farming income. When he completed a load of hoes,

he would take them to South Easton to be polished in Calvin Brett's mill. Finally, residents Charles Wade, Edwin Dwelly Howard, and perhaps others made shoes at their homes. Howard, who learned the trade from Wade, bought mostly boot uppers from a Tisdale in West Bridgewater and completed the boot bottoms in a small shop on his farm. He and the others were successful until the 1870's when competition from factories in Brockton running the new heavy duty bootmaking machines made hand labor obsolete.

Two brothers with an interesting business resided in the neighborhood around the time of the Civil War and after. They were Simeon and Otis Bradford Dean. These men were "braid peddlers." This meant they carried straw braid from the factories to women's homes to be sewn into straw hats. This was a good way for an industrious woman to make extra money for her family or herself. The country nature of the straw hat trade seems to have prevented abuses, but it is the same system of labor that exploited many poor urban women and immigrants in the garment industry.

As mentioned, the Howard Neighborhood was primarily agricultural. Interestingly, a Nineteenth Century farmer in this neighborhood experimented with a crop which was soon something of a fad around town. This was hops, a quick growing vine, which is a necessary component of beer. The American hops growing business began towards the end of the Revolutionary War in Middlesex county, Massachusetts, but apparently no one in Easton bothered to learn about this potentially valuable crop.

Cyrus Howard married Joseph Hayward's daughter Elizabeth and moved to Hamilton, New York in 1799. Coincidentally, around 1825 farmers in Howard's part of upstate New York began to grow hops and after a decade their competition severely hurt the business in Middlesex County. One of Cyrus Howard's sons, Eliphalet Smith Howard, returned to Easton and settled on the east side of Howard Street directly south of the school house. He soon began to grow hops on his farm and built a hop kiln for drying this popular beer flavoring ingredient. The Hayward family quickly adopted the crop in their neighborhood, and other hop kilns sprang up in other neighborhoods as well. Thus, while hops production in the rest of Massachusetts was declining, Easton farmers were able to keep it as a cash crop until many years after the Civil War.

History too often focuses on famous individuals or important political or economic events. Historians fail to mention how life was lived in the past. George Howard has left us a description of growing up in the Howard Neighborhood during the 1880's and early 1890's that is a window into the life of people like ourselves a century ago:

We boys could be very useful and were kept busy, as all boys should be, at study, work and play. We were to keep the wood box full, help feed the animals and help plant and harvest the crops. The middle-sized boy was to ride the horse for plowing and cultivating. We picked apples and blueberries, and hops, etc., etc., etc.. We set the table and wiped dishes and made our own beds at times. We worked "on the road" at times for a little money in "breking out the rud" after a snow storm and otherwise. We went swimming on occasion although we had to go a mile to the "swimming hole" in the big meadows. We liked to go barefoot in summer—who would not? We played ball and all the games, and all the neighborhood slid down the hill by our house in winter, and we went skating. We and all the neighbors hung "May baskets" in season. We once in a while had an affair at the school house, a picnic, and perhaps a husking bee. We went to the "cattle show" at Taunton in the Autumn. We played the harmless card games.... Bicycles were just coming into use, but we boys had them a little later.

We had the St. Nicholas magazine and the Youth's Companion, Sunday-school papers, the Watchman, books from the library and the weekly Traveler.... We

sometimes walked two miles to the post-office but usually got mail once a week via the groceryman. Tramps occasionally visited us going from Brockton to Taunton. We had tin peddlers and fish peddlers and occasionally quack-doctor peddlers. We went to Taunton to buy clothes and "women's and girl's things." We boys all had accounts in the Bristol County National Bank—our own—but planned and helped upward by our parents. The accounts were made up and accelerated by sale of a couple of sheep, a co-operative cow, chickens carefully raised and tended, a little from snares set for partridge and rabbits and from some work done outside.

How about the girls? My sister Annie says they played croquet, ball and other games with the boys and went skating. She mentions our Thanksgivings at Grandmother Hunt's which were pleasing occasions and Christmas affairs and presents—one a rocking horse. She says they played "house" under the pines and assiduously. She speaks particularly of Lottie Heath, our neighbor and teacher, who was always good to the girls, teaching them how to make Christmas presents, etc. as well as school book learning. She says she and twin sister Alice were always called on for recitations. They sang school songs particularly going over the hill with the Dailey girls to sing to Aunt Sylvia Hayward [the spouse of George Washington Hayward]. Which all reminds me that while the girls were not so numerous as the boys they were of consequence—sister Annie noting that three of the lot became "schoolmarms."

Although once one of Easton's least populated old districts, the Howard Neighborhood more than holds its own in interesting stories. Today, the neighborhood has become residential, but for the most part development has been limited to the original streets, so one can still see the layout of the old farms. With the Easton Rod and Gun Club at its southwestern edge providing undeveloped space, the neighborhood retains the characteristics that other neighborhoods lost with the building boom of the 1970's and 1980's. A life like George Howard describes is not so far away in his old neighborhood.