

Harvard University: Bringing Cambridge to America (Part Three of the University Cities Series)

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

In this third and final part of articles looking at some of the most famous universities amongst visitors, as well as students, we move away from Britain and the dreaming spires of Oxford and Cambridge and follow much the same journey as the first settlers did, by heading for **Harvard University in Boston**.

In the same way that Cambridge University was started by scholars who left Oxford after a fight with local townsmen, **Harvard University** owes its roots to a similar situation.

The first English immigrants to settle in Boston arrived in 1629 and just seven years later, a **college was founded in the city**. But it was thanks to a Cambridge graduate that the place grew to become one of the most prestigious universities in the world.

John Harvard was born and raised in south London and studied at Emmanuel College, gaining his degree when he was just 20. Ten years later, he emigrated to Charlestown in Boston, following in the footsteps of many of his classmates, but after just 16 months working as a clergyman he contracted tuberculosis and died. His name lives on to this day, thanks to his donation of 400 books and around £800. In today's money, that would be about £75,000 or \$140,000. And that was enough to set Harvard on its way.

But there were to be none of the dreaming spires of Cambridge and Oxford for this new university. Instead, more functional, red brick buildings, still with a beauty of their own, emerged over time around **Harvard Yard**, which today, is home to 13 of the 17 freshman colleges at the University. As you walk 'round the yard, you can't help but think what a great place this must be to spend your first year at college. I was fortunate to live on a campus university in my first year away from home, but nothing as beautiful and historic as this.

Today, the oldest of those buildings is Massachusetts Hall, dating from 1720, which was designed as a residence for students. Although some lucky freshmen are still housed on the upper floors, the first three floors now house offices of the President of the University, its Provost, Treasurer and Vice Presidents.

The Hall's colorful history also saw it housing 640 American soldiers during the siege of Boston, and it isn't the only hall at Harvard Yard to have military connections. Just a few steps away, **Hollis Hall** was used as a barracks by George Washington's troops during the American Revolution.

Of course, the colorful history of Harvard continues to this day. We were fortunate enough to be shown around by a friend of mine, who's a professor there, and he shared one or two tales about what the students get up to. Perhaps the most common pranks involve the **John Harvard** statue. Commemorating the man who started the university, he sits overlooking Harvard Yard, but often finds himself with some additional decorations, such as leis. Tradition suggests that if visitors to Harvard rub one of the feet of the statue it will bring them good luck, and that's exactly what many do. Let's just say, from what I heard from my professor friend, it may not be a good idea.

Other superb buildings worth a visit in Harvard Yard include the **Memorial Church**. If you think it looks familiar at first glance, there's a good reason for that - it copies earlier styles, and its steeple is based on the Old North Church in Boston's North End.

Directly opposite the Memorial Church is **Widener Library**, Harvard's main library. With more than three million books and 65 miles of book shelves, it's one of America's biggest libraries and it's also one of the country's most secure. Unless you're a Harvard student or member of staff or perhaps a visiting scholar, you won't get in and even if you can get inside, you'll be subject to bag checks on the way out just to ensure that you haven't taken anything out that you're not entitled to. From outside, it's certainly a dominating building.

Although **Harvard Yard is at the heart of the University**, just like Oxford and Cambridge, Harvard sprawls over a far wider area. Head north and you'll find a number of faculty buildings -- some of which are exceptionally traditional and obviously date back many years, such as the Law Library and the Memorial Hall complex. Housing the Sanders Theater, which hosts a calendar of performances throughout the year, the real jewel here is Annenberg Hall. Unfortunately, its opening hours for visitors are exceptionally limited, but first year students dine here and enjoy what is probably Harvard's greatest hall, inspired by the great halls of Oxford and Cambridge. Again, what a great way to enjoy your first year at college!

New buildings are being added to Harvard all the time, and some of the newest additions are also pretty impressive. For example, the entrance of the Maxwell Dworkin computer science building, opened in

1999, has some very unusual angles to it.

Other places worth visiting are the **various museums at Harvard**. Our tour took us to the Harvard Museum of Natural History, home to hundreds of examples of animals, all of them stuffed -- many still with us today, but some now long extinct. Although some look decidedly odd and others are just downright eerie, it's still a fascinating collection and gives you a good idea of the size of many beasts that you normally can't get close to.

The highlight here is the **collection of glass flowers** with 3,000 models representing 850 species. When you see them, you'll immediately understand why it's no surprise that the most commonly asked question is "are they real?" That was certainly the question that first popped into my head when I saw them.

If you're in Boston over a weekend, visit the **Natural History Museum** on a Sunday morning, as entry is free until midday. The same applies to the neighboring Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. The name of this museum may sound dull, but it's got some fascinating exhibitions about American Indians and excavations in Peru.

If art appeals to you, then another museum you shouldn't miss is the **Fogg Art and Busch-Reisinger Museums**, based around an Italian Renaissance courtyard. Its galleries trace the history of art from the Middle Ages to the present day.

If all of this sounds a bit too academic for you, then rest assured, **Cambridge is also a thriving town**, with Harvard Square at its center. It's a fascinating place to watch students going around their business. If books are your thing, then unsurprisingly, you'll find bookstores with an amazing collection of titles, covering just about every subject you can think of.

Harvard Restaurants here are cheap -- and good -- perhaps because they're trying to attract the students. We found a particularly good Indian restaurant here and enjoyed a superb buffet for only \$10 per person.

While **Harvard may differ considerably in looks from both Oxford and Cambridge**, all three university cities share a lot in common. They all have a range of buildings and museums to explore and there's history awaiting you around every corner, but there's more to them than that. With thousands of students in each university, you get the sense of walking into a large community and if you can, it's always best to visit during term time, as it gives you a real idea of what it might be like to

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study at one of these prestigious institutions.

Having been to each of these cities out of season, don't discount the idea of a visit to **Harvard University in the winter**. The weather may be cold, but if you're lucky enough to have a dry day with clear skies, then that can make for some superb photos and you won't find yourself amongst thousands of other visitors.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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