

Cambridge in 1846: The City Seal

The official seal of Cambridge has perplexed the public and confused graphic designers for many years, but in the 19th century it was considered an important matter that reflected on the prestige and stature of one of the Commonwealth's newest cities. The symbolism of the successive seals adopted in 1846 and 1896 was carefully thought out, while the motto reflected the attainments of one of Harvard's most prominent scholars.

When Cambridge was incorporated in 1846, one of the first acts of Mayor James D. Green was to commission a seal for the city. This task was undertaken by Edward Everett, who had been installed that year as President of Harvard University. Everett, who received his B.A. degree in 1811, was among the first Harvard graduates to earn a European doctorate. He was forced to resign from the faculty when he was elected to Congress in 1825, but returned to serve "three most wretched years" as President of the University, during a career in which he also held office as Governor and U.S. Senator from Massachusetts and Secretary of State during Abraham Lincoln's administration.

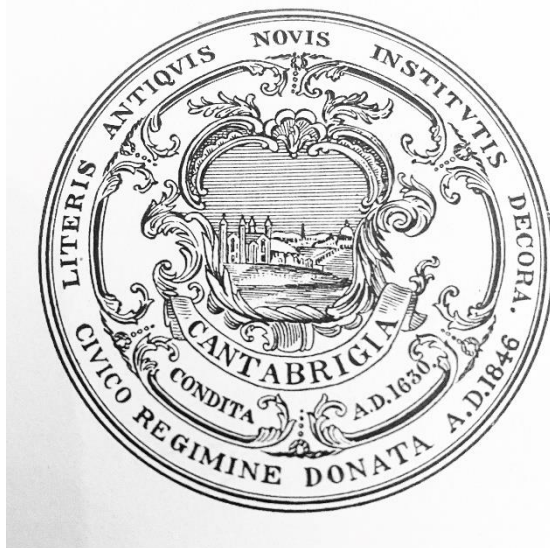
Everett remained interested in local affairs, however, and considered Cambridge home for much of his life. While president of Harvard, he addressed four graduating classes of the Cambridge High School, designed the new city seal, and composed its motto, *Literis Antiquis Novis Institutis Decora* ("Distinguished For Classical Learning And New Institutions").

The seal that Mayor Green sent to be engraved in Boston in 1846 is rich in municipal symbolism. A foreshortened scene illustrates the relationship of Cambridge to Boston. In the left foreground the recently-completed Gore Hall, a romantically-designed Gothic building that served as Harvard's library until it was demolished for Widener in 1913, symbolized the prestige and knowledge of the university. Beyond Gore, Cambridgeport rises along the approach to the West Boston Bridge, which leads across the Charles toward Beacon Hill, crowned by the Massachusetts State House. In the background lies Bunker Hill and its monument, commemorating Cambridge's role as headquarters of the American Army during the Siege of Boston.

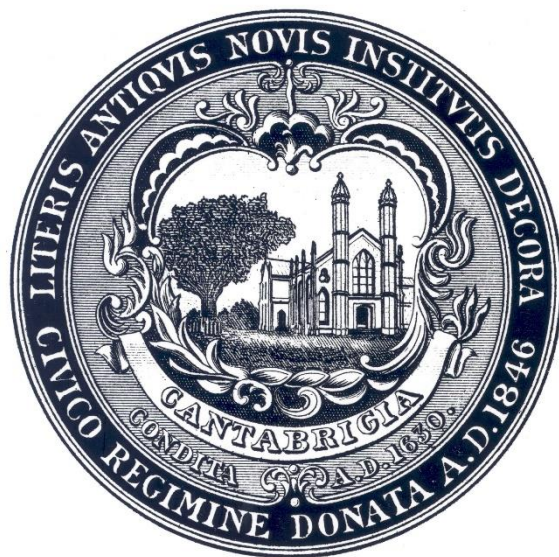
This seal served until 1896, when the design was revised. The rendering of Gore Hall was enlarged and clarified, while all references to the world outside Cambridge were removed. The Washington Elm, which was added to the design "to represent the union of town and gown," depicts a recently-publicized myth of extraordinary power.

A fictitious Revolutionary journal published in 1876 called *The Diary of Dorothy Dudley* purported to be an eye-witness account of General Washington taking command of the American Army under an elm tree that then stood in the middle of Garden Street at the intersection of Mason. In the patriotic fervor of the Centennial, this tale became identified to a great degree with Cambridge's historic role in the Revolution. Nativistic feelings only intensified as European immigration grew towards the turn of the century, so that when a hapless city worker pulled over the diseased trunk in 1923 one Boston paper cried that it was a Red plot. The myth was convincingly debunked later in the 1920s, but the elm remains a symbol of patriotism in Cambridge.

In 1964, the Cambridge Planning Board designed a new seal, which retained the motto with Gore Hall and the Washington Elm. This simplified design, however, rapidly became dated and fell out of use during the 1970s. While some current versions of the 1896 seal are crude reinterpretations, this remains the official seal of the City.



1. The 1846 seal, as designed by President Edward Everett



2. The current city seal, as adopted in 1896.

Cambridge Historical Commission
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