Newtown, America, a little local history

By Glenn Brownstein

Know old Cambridge? Hope you do. Below there I'll say as it was in the... Nicest place that ever was seen, - Colleges red, and Common green, Spotless blemish with ivies between. Sweetest spot beneath the skies Wherever the twine of winds don't rise, When the dust, that sometimes flies Into your mouth end ears and eyes, Be a guide-tvise; Not in the shape of unknotted meadows. Such barefoot children price. - D. W. Holmes (19th Century)

Those of us who see Cambridge as being a grimy, depressing city across the river from Boston might be interested to learn that it was not always like this. Dr. Holmes wrote of the dust that seemed to pervade 19th century Cambridge; indeed, the poet James Russell Lowell also spoke of his dusty hometown, “to me thy dust is dear, / In every grained, / A little of history.”

Cambridge was not always like it is today, however. Nor was it always a city. When this area was first settled in 1630, Governor John Winthrop and Deputy Governor Thomas Dudley set to work to establish a second settlement on the banks of the Charles River. The early settlers were led by the Reverend Thomas Hooker and Reverend Samuel Stone, two of the leading men of the colony who had received their education at the University of Cambridge in England. When this area was first settled in 1630, it was known as “Newton,” but it was soon renamed “Cambridge” after the town in England.

The following year, the settlers asked to be allowed to move their settlement to a spot on the Charles River, complaining of narrow city limits and not enough cattle grazing land. In 1630, their wish was granted, and the settlement of Cambridge was established on the north bank of the Charles River.

In the ensuing months, Indian relations became very sensitive, though, and Winthrop decided to move the colonial capital back to Boston and abandon Newton. Dudley stayed in the new settlement with Magna Gratia and began to develop Newton. In 1633, the Reverend Thomas Hooker and Reverend Samuel Stone were ordained as ministers of the new Church in Cambridge. The town of Cambridge was incorporated on March 28, 1633, and the name of the town was changed to Newton.

In 1655, 1679, and 1713, the town willingly gave up territory to form the new villages of Billerica, Newton, and Lexington. In 1660, Harvard College was established in Cambridge, and in 1638, the Massachusetts General Court approved Newton’s new name, Cambridge, in honor of the university.

The early development of the college was a source of great pride to the community, and in May 1638, the Massachusetts General Court approved the establishment of a college in Cambridge.

In many ways historical developments in Cambridge haven’t changed in 300 years. Cambridge is still looked upon as Boston’s poor relation (in terms of education). It’s still maligned, a place to move away from when one gets the chance. One almost never hears anyone say that they would like to live in Cambridge when they graduate—a student “would like to live in Cambridge when they graduate.” —A copy of this letter was written in The Tech.

Dear Dr. Rosenshine,

The January 14th issue of Tech Talk announced the formation of a Committee on Assessment of Biohazards at MIT, whose function is to review “investigations involving the use of infectious agents that might be regarded as hazardous. These include potentially pathogenic organisms as well as recombinant DNA molecules (hybrid DNA made from organisms of diverse origins).” It seems to me that this committee was formed hastily and irresponsibly in disregard of the growing concern in the MIT scientific community concerning proposed recombinant DNA experiments by these investigators in which the researchers have a need to perform laboratory experiments, potentially hazardous to the community as a whole.

On May 20, 1975, an interdisciplinary group of investigators led by Dr. Paul Berg of Stanford University who had met at Asilomar, California called a moratorium on the set of potentially hazardous experiments. The experiments involve the splicing of genetic information (DNA) from an organism of interest into the organism which is presumably toxic. The proposal of the current set of approved experiments could be formulated as: a proper set of guidelines assessing the safety and suggesting proper containment of these proposed experiments could be formulated. These experiments involve the splicing of genetic information DNA from an organism of interest into the genetic information DNA of an organism which is presumably easier to study, such as the bacterium, Escherichia coli.

A committee to prepare such guidelines would be approved by the various funding agencies, and at that time at Woods Hole on July 14, 1975, from this meeting emerged a set of guidelines calling for the establishment of local biohazards committees to function first as “a source of advice and reference” regarding the containment of potentially biologically hazardous materials and the suitable training of personnel, and second as a body to certify that “the proper containment conditions required for a given project were satisfied at the particular institutions such as MIT.”

In response to the drawing of these guidelines, I. Philip Youdan, graduate student in the Biology Department and student member of the Institute Laboratory Hazards Committee (ILHC) sent a memo to the members of the ILHC on July 23, 1975, requesting a meeting in early August to discuss what the influence of the guidelines would be on the Laboratory Hazards Committee. The official description of the Laboratory Hazards Committee follows:

The Laboratory Hazards Committee was established to develop MIT policy necessary to control the risks of potentially hazardous laboratory operations and exposures to hazardous materials. Specific laboratory activities involving recombinant DNA molecules and other hazardous biological material or exposure to physical agents are the Committee’s chief concern.

During July, a biology department working safety group, concerned with these and other biological safety problems, was organized by Kostia Bergman, Jonathan A. King, Vivian Muirhead, and Allen Silverstone. This working group met regularly throughout the summer and was well attended by members of the Biology Department, and representatives of the two unions at MIT (the TRDUC and the SEIU) and of the Institute Safety Office. One of the hopes of the group was to attain representation on such a biohazards committee, since they felt strongly that such a committee should represent all these groups who might come into direct contact with potentially hazardous materials; this was expressed at their first meeting on July 29. They also argued that the responsibility for regulation of such experiments should not be in the hands of those investigators whose interests, in any case, were confounded by their hopes of immediate personal scientific gains from doing these experiments.

On July 30, a biohazards committee, officially the Committee on Assessment of Biohazards at MIT, was formed without the knowledge or input of the Laboratory Hazards Committee. When the Laboratory Hazards Committee finally convened on October 14, Dr. Maurice S. Fox, appointed chairman of the Committee on Assessment of Biohazards at MIT, explained to the ILHC that, indeed, such a biohazards committee had been appointed and that its duties would be to implement the current set of approved guidelines at MIT.

It is not clear how this committee was formed, except that, like all Institute Committees, it was appointed by the Provost. When Dr. Salvador Luria, Director of the Center for Cancer Research (where most of the experiments involving recombinant DNA molecules would take place), was questioned by the ILHC concerning the meeting on July 29 by no, he declined comment. However, the committee was not formed with the input of either the working safety group nor the Institute Safety Office. Who requested such a committee by appointed?

I question the composition of the Committee, which reflects the biasness and irresponsibility with which it was formed. The chairman of the Committee, Dr. Fox, was on sabbatical then and, coincidentally, leave the coming year. The only other member of the Biology Department was a nonexpert who was directly involved with performing recombinant DNA experiments, and has stated the opinion that he believes such experiments are of little or no hazard. No effort has been made to include those members of the Biology Department who were available.