

CAMBRIDGE
Historic Districts





CAMBRIDGE HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Our Historic Past

Cambridge has two historic districts, the Old Cambridge Historic District and the Fort Washington Historic District, which recognize and protect the city's early history. On Brattle Street, the famous "Tory Row" mansions form the core of the Old Cambridge Historic District, one of America's finest collections of residential architecture. The Fort Washington Historic District, on Waverly Street in Cambridgeport, includes the sole remnant of the earthwork fortifications that protected Cambridge during the Revolutionary War. Together, these districts are among the city's most precious historic assets.

Historic District Protection

Historic districts are areas in which historic buildings and their settings are protected by public review. Historic district ordinances are

local laws that are adopted by communities using powers granted by the state. Cambridge's historic districts are governed by the provisions of the state's enabling legislation for historic districts, Chapter 40C of the Massachusetts General Laws. The purpose of this legislation is:

to promote the educational, cultural, economic, and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history [or architecture] of the commonwealth and its cities and towns . . . and through the maintenance and improvement of settings for such buildings and places and the encouragement of design compatible therewith.

Chapter 40C became law in 1960; since then, more than a hundred communities across Massachusetts have adopted its provisions to protect their historic and architectural heritage.

Cambridge established four small, scattered districts around the Common and along Brattle Street in 1963. In 1976, they were consolidated and expanded to take in nearly all of Brattle Street, from Mason Street to Fresh Pond Parkway. Berkeley and Follen streets were added in 1986 and Arsenal Square in 1998. The Fort Washington Historic District was established in 1982.

The Public Benefit

Historic districts comprise the city's finest historic and architectural resources. Inclusion in a historic district signifies that a property contributes to an ensemble that is worth protecting by virtue of its historic importance or architectural quality. Historic districts deserve special protection because they enhance our shared quality of life.

The country's first historic districts, in Charleston, South Carolina (1931), and New Orleans' French Quarter (1937), recognized that the protection of unique historic areas was necessary to ensure that they would be preserved for all to enjoy. Nantucket and Beacon Hill, the first

historic districts in Massachusetts, were adopted in the 1950s and were upheld by Massachusetts' Supreme Judicial Court in 1959.

The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of protective designations in a 1978 case concerning Grand Central Station. Such designations are constitutional if they do not deny reasonable use of a property and if they serve a substantial public purpose.

The Effect of Designation

The Cambridge Historical Commission is empowered to regulate changes that affect the publicly-visible features of properties within historic districts. Such features are those that are open to view from a public way. However, before an applicant can undertake any work on

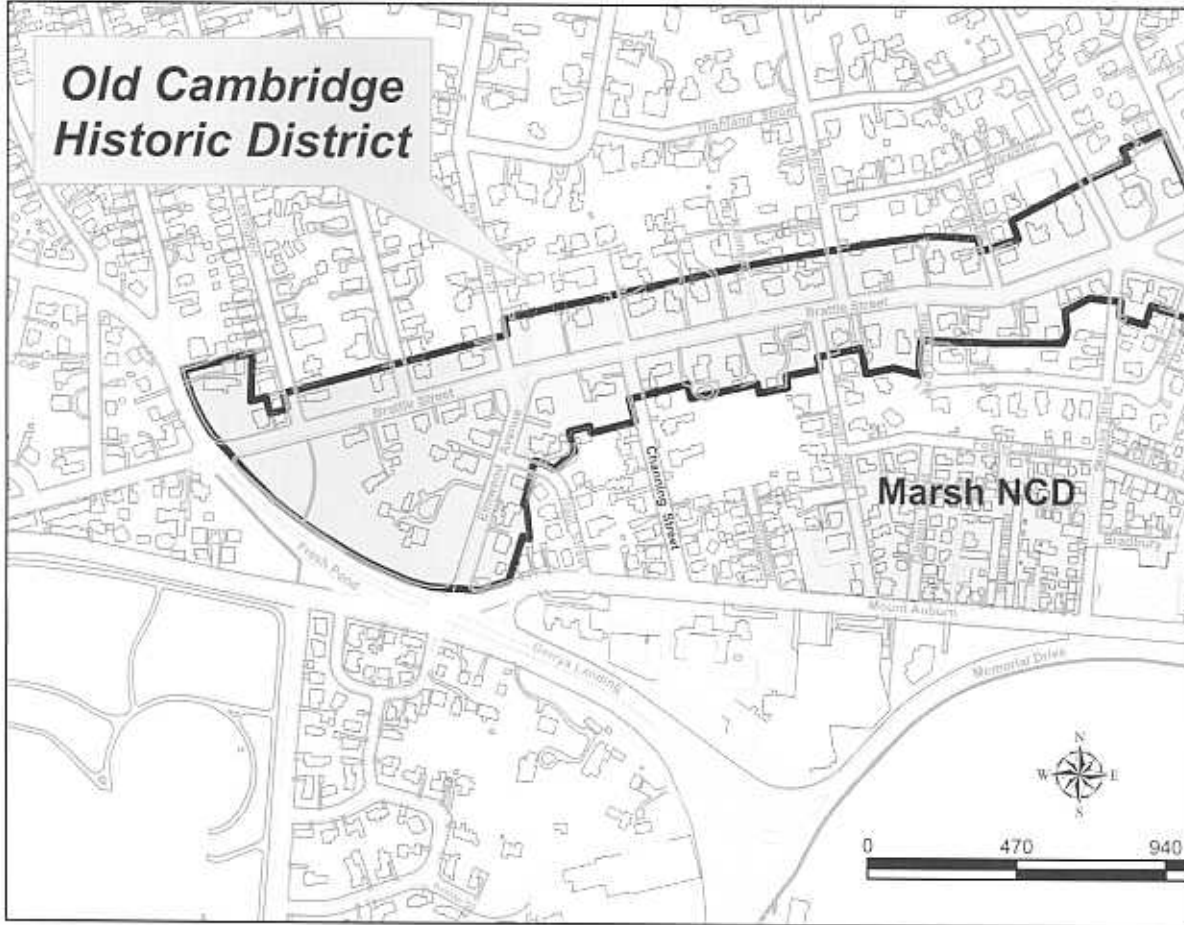
a property in a historic district, the Commission must first issue a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship, or Non-Applicability.

Questions and Answers for Property Owners

What is a Certificate of Appropriateness?

A Certificate of Appropriateness is a document issued by the Historical Commission permitting alterations to publicly-visible exterior architectural features of properties in a historic district. It certifies that the alterations are "not incongruous to the historic aspects or the architectural characteristics of the surroundings and of the historic district."

The certificate incorporates plans and specifications submitted as evidence of the proposed



work and forms the basis of the Commission's agreement with the applicant on how changes can be made to the property. Certificates are valid for six months from the date of issue. They can be extended once for a further six months, on the written approval of the Commission chair.

Do I need to get a certificate for interior work?

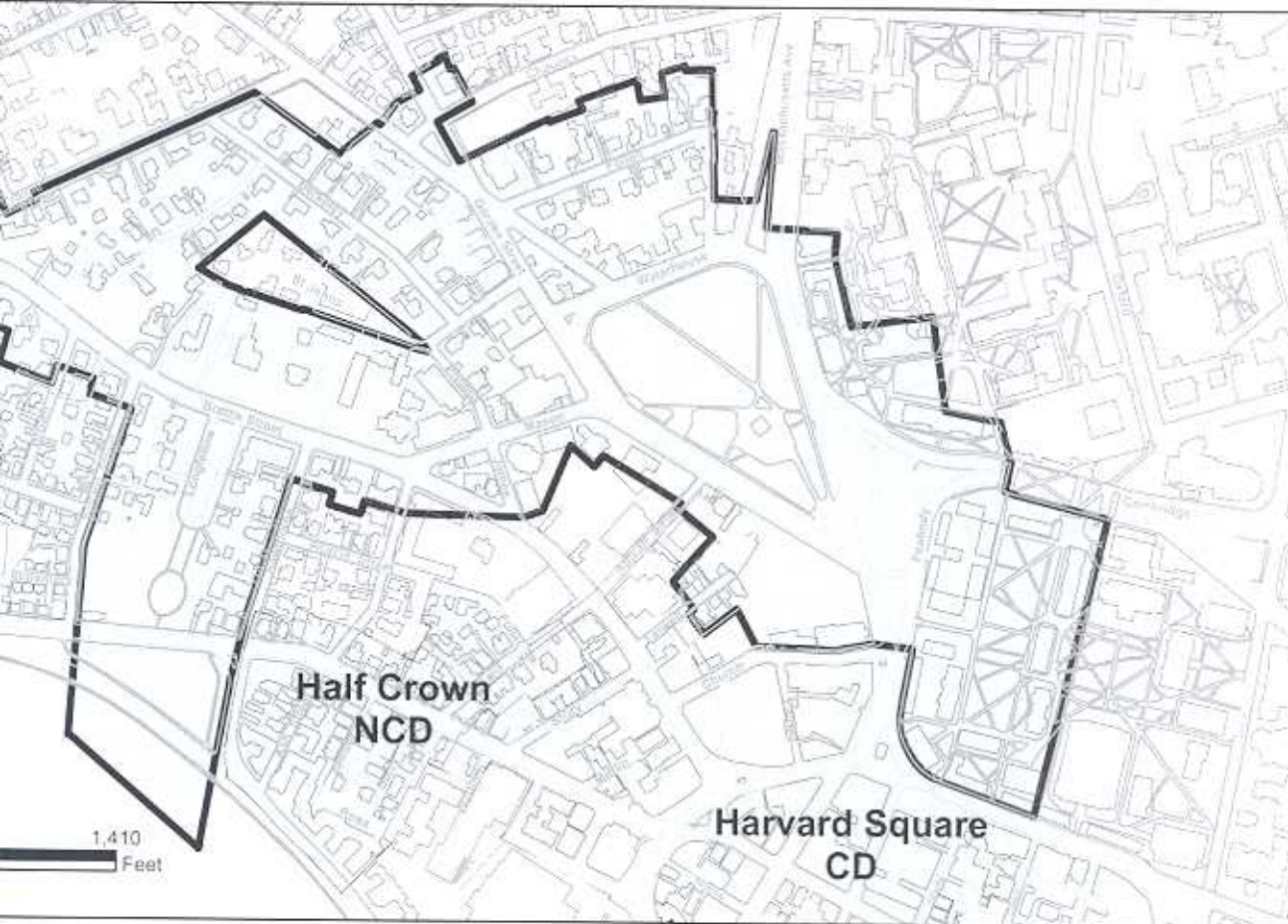
A certificate must be obtained from the Historical Commission before the Inspectional Services Department will issue a building permit. A Certificate of Non-Applicability will be issued for changes that affect interiors or exterior architectural features not visible from a public way. This signifies that the Commission's jurisdiction does not apply to the kind of work proposed. No certificate is needed for interior work that does not require a building permit.

If the work proposed in an application clearly lies in an area not regulated by the Commission, Certificates of Non-Applicability can be issued by the staff on receipt of an application and without a public hearing.

Are there other kinds of certificates?

Yes. The Commission may issue a Certificate of Hardship for work that is otherwise inappropriate if it determines, at a public hearing, that failure to approve an application would entail a substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, and that the work would not be a significant detriment to the district.

Regardless of the type of certificate needed, Chapter 40C states that no property in a historic district can be constructed, altered, or demo-





lished until the Historical Commission has first issued a certificate for the work. In Cambridge, all aspects of exterior changes to historic district properties are reviewed, regardless of whether a building permit is required. This includes paint and roof color, temporary signs and structures, walls, fences, driveways, replacement windows, and new window air conditioners.

The Historical Commission does not require a hearing or Certificate of Appropriateness for storm windows and storm doors that match the underlying window or door in shape, configuration, and color.

How do I apply for a certificate?

Applications for certificates are available at the Cambridge Historical Commission office or on its web site, www.ci.cambridge.ma.us/~Historic. Instructions for completing the application and a list of required attachments are included on the form. Completed applications should be returned

to the Commission office. Deadlines for submitting applications may be obtained on the web site or by calling the office.

How does the Commission conduct its review?

The Historical Commission meets monthly. All but the most inconsequential projects are reviewed in a public hearing, which provides an open forum for discussion. Abutters to the property, the Planning Board, the City Clerk, and any others the Commission deems to be affected are notified of the hearing. The Commission is also required to advertise its hearings in a newspaper of general circulation 14 days in advance.

What are the standards for the Commission's review?

The Commission considers each application individually to determine what sorts of changes are appropriate. The historic development patterns, architectural characteristics, and visual

qualities of the district form the basis of the Commission's decision on what constitutes appropriate changes. Chapter 40C directs the Commission to review applications in view of "the historic and architectural value and significance of the site, building or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture, material and color involved, and the relation of such features to similar features of buildings and structures in the surrounding area."

Does being in a historic district mean I can never change the appearance of my property?

No. Properties in historic districts are not frozen in time. Historic district protection is designed to ensure that when changes occur, they do not destroy the unique qualities that make the district a special place.

Who serves on the Historical Commission?

The Commission is made up of district residents and professionals in architecture, landscape architecture, law, real estate, and history. Commission members are appointed by the City Manager and confirmed by the City Council. The Commission's professional members often work with a property owner to develop design solutions that respect both the historic qualities of the district and the needs of the property owner. In addition, the staff is available to discuss proposed alterations informally.

Other Forms of Protection

In addition to the historic districts, parts of Mid Cambridge, Avon Hill, Harvard Square, the Half Crown and the Marsh neighborhoods are protected by neighborhood conservation districts, and many individual buildings are designated as landmarks. Every building in Cambridge more than 50 years old is subject to demolition review, and about 2,000 buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Call the Commission office for information about any property in Cambridge.

Longfellow House, 105 Brattle Street, 1759. Photo, 1908. (Boston Elevated Railway Collection, Cambridge Historical Commission)

Brattle Street Horsecar. Photo, ca. 1890. (Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities)

Bell view of the Cambridge Common. Watercolor, ca. 1808 - 1809. (Harvard University Archives)

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