



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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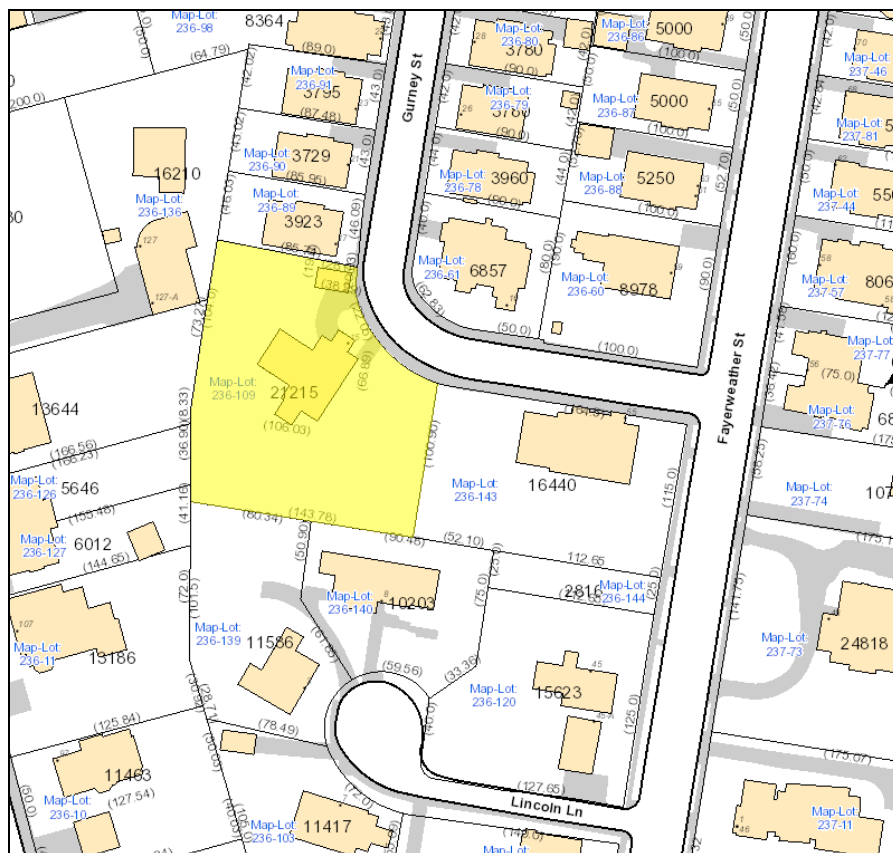
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Date: February 5, 2020
To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission
From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner
Re: Case D-1548: 15 Gurney Street (Hoar House, 1922)

Current Conditions

An application to demolish the house at 15 Gurney Street was received on January 8, 2020. The applicant, 15 Gurney Street LLC, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for February 5. The adjacent garage was determined to be not significant.

The house is located on the southwest corner of Gurney Street on a 21,215 square-foot lot (236/109). The house, built in 1922, is a two-story, frame, two-family residence. The zoning is Residence A-1, which allows for single-family residential construction. The Floor Area Ratio limit in this zone is .50 and the height limit is 35 feet. The assessed value of the land and building on this property, according to the online assessor's database listing, is \$3,854,400 (\$734,100 of that being the value assessed for the building).



The grade drops from the corner of Fayerweather Street along Gurney Street. Mature trees are located around the back and sides of the house on this large lot. The condition of the building appears to be very good.



The applicants propose to demolish the house and construct a new single-family residence and detached garage. The plans by Maryann Thompson Architects are on file and have been distributed to the Historical Commission.

Description

The house was designed by Richard Arnold Fisher in 1922 for Steadman B. Hoar and his wife, Elizabeth Potter Hoar. The lot was subdivided from that of Elizabeth's parents' property at 55 Fayerweather Street. The eclectic design features Colonial Revival elements such as a five-bay façade, small divided-light windows, cedar shingle siding, and a vertical plank door and also includes more craftsman elements such as exposed rafter tails, a low-pitched roof with wide eave overhangs, and cedar shingle siding. The façade is oriented to the east toward Fayerweather Street rather than directly facing Gurney Street.



15 Gurney Street, Cambridge Assessor's Department
East (front) elevation



15 Gurney Street, Cambridge Assessor's Department
North side view

Fisher's design for 15 Gurney Street was very different and far less formal than the design he made for 55 Fayerweather Street (1905), which used masonry construction and classical forms such as the columned loggia on the garden side. Materials and labor were in short supply following World War I, and architectural tastes were changing. Number 15 Gurney has a cottage quality in comparison with the Potter House. The garage pre-dates the house and was built in 1909 as part of the Potter estate.



55 Fayerweather St, 2007, Sarah Burks
View of garden elevation, looking northwest.

History

Thomas Fayerweather, a Revolutionary-era landowner, purchased the Ruggles house at 175 Brattle Street and the accompanying land that reached north to Vassal Lane. Much of the 45-acre Fayerweather estate was subdivided by William Stearns between 1847 and 1852. Fayerweather Street and Reservoir Street were laid out at this time. Gurney Street was laid out and subdivided into smaller house lots in 1904. It was named for Ephraim W. Gurney, a Harvard history professor who lived at the corner of Fayerweather and Reservoir streets.

Gurney Street was laid out by the heirs of Edward W. Hooper in 1904. Although its intersection with Fayerweather was marked by two substantial houses -- including 55 Fayerweather Street, which continued the tradition of a formal elevation facing south -- the rest of Gurney and Fayerweather down to Huron was filled between 1909 and 1916 with closely spaced, almost identical two-family houses by builder Bernard A. Rice, who broke a covenant to build a community garage that decades later became the Fayerweather School. (*Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development*)

Richard Arnold Fisher, the architect, practiced in Boston from 1902-1932. He studied New England architecture of the colonial period and contributed articles on the same to architectural journals. His commissions were largely residential, though he did design the Little Harbor Chapel (Swedenborgian) in Portsmouth, New Hampshire for Arthur Astor Carey, the design for which he modeled after Harvard's Holden Chapel.

Elizabeth Potter Hoar was the daughter of Edith and Alfred Potter who lived in the adjacent home at 55 Fayerweather Street. Her parents' home had also been designed by Fisher and was constructed in 1905. Alfred Potter was an assistant librarian at Harvard and was promoted to the senior librarian position there in 1928. Steadman Hoar, Harvard class of 1914, served in the U. S. Army in WWI in France. Elizabeth Potter Hoar did relief work in France between 1917-1919. The couple married in 1920. After the war, Steadman Hoar started a business selling advertising novelties. He later worked as a patent agent. He died in 1961 in California.

Later owners of the house included Kathrin and Otto Oldenberg (1888-1983), atomic physicist at Harvard and with the Air Force Cambridge Research Laboratories. The Oldenbergs purchased the house in 1954 and sold it to Monique and Oakes Spalding in 1967. Monique Chamberlin Spalding grew up in Cambridge, graduated from Radcliffe College, and worked as the director of Music for the Lesley Ellis School. The Spaldings built additions in 1981 and 1987. They sold the property in 2019 to the current owner.



Cambridge Chronicle, 12 Sept. 1963 "Dr. Oldenberg, Noted Scientist, Retires From U.S. Research Lab."

Significance and Recommendation

The house at 15 Gurney Street is significant for its association with the successful Boston architect, Richard Arnold Fisher who designed the house with specific relationship to his earlier commission of 55 Fayerweather Street. The house is also significant for its important association with Otto Oldenberg, noted Harvard physicist.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services
 Katrine S. Bosley, 15 Gurney Street LLC
 Martha Foss, Maryann Thompson Architects