



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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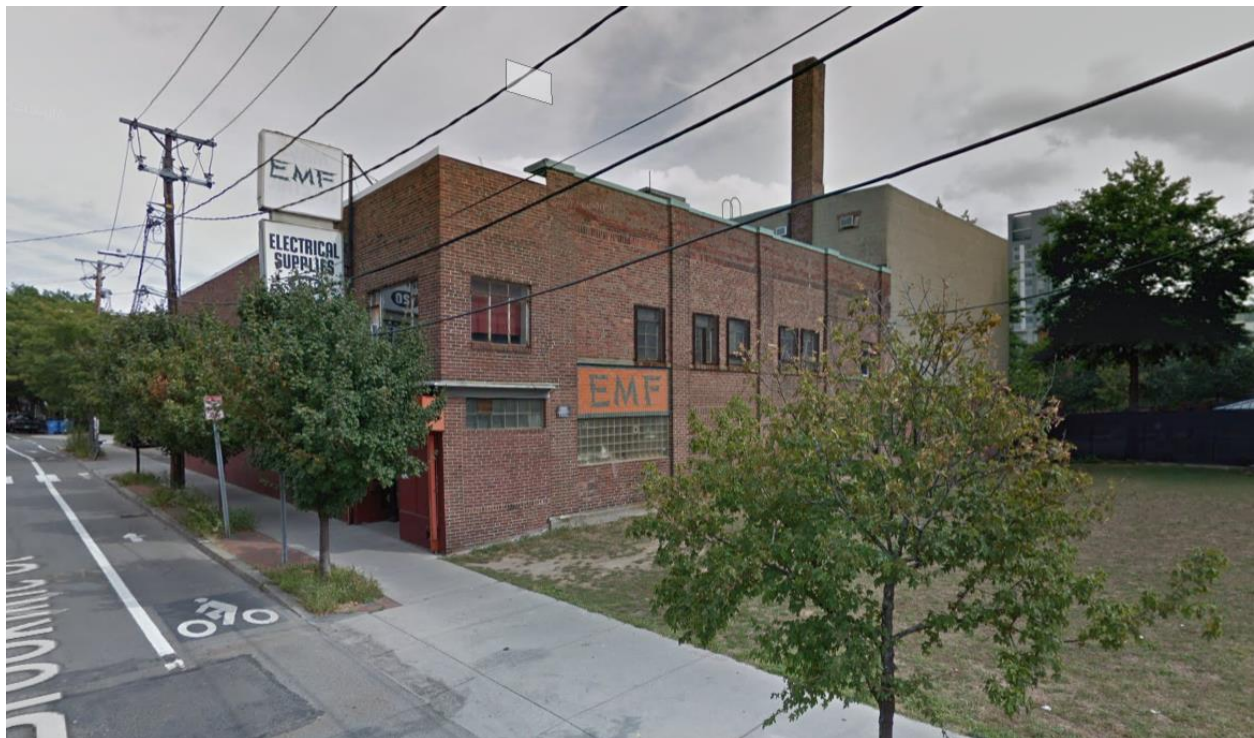


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July 27, 2018

To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Charles Sullivan
Re: 116 Brookline Street Evaluation for Landmark Designation Study

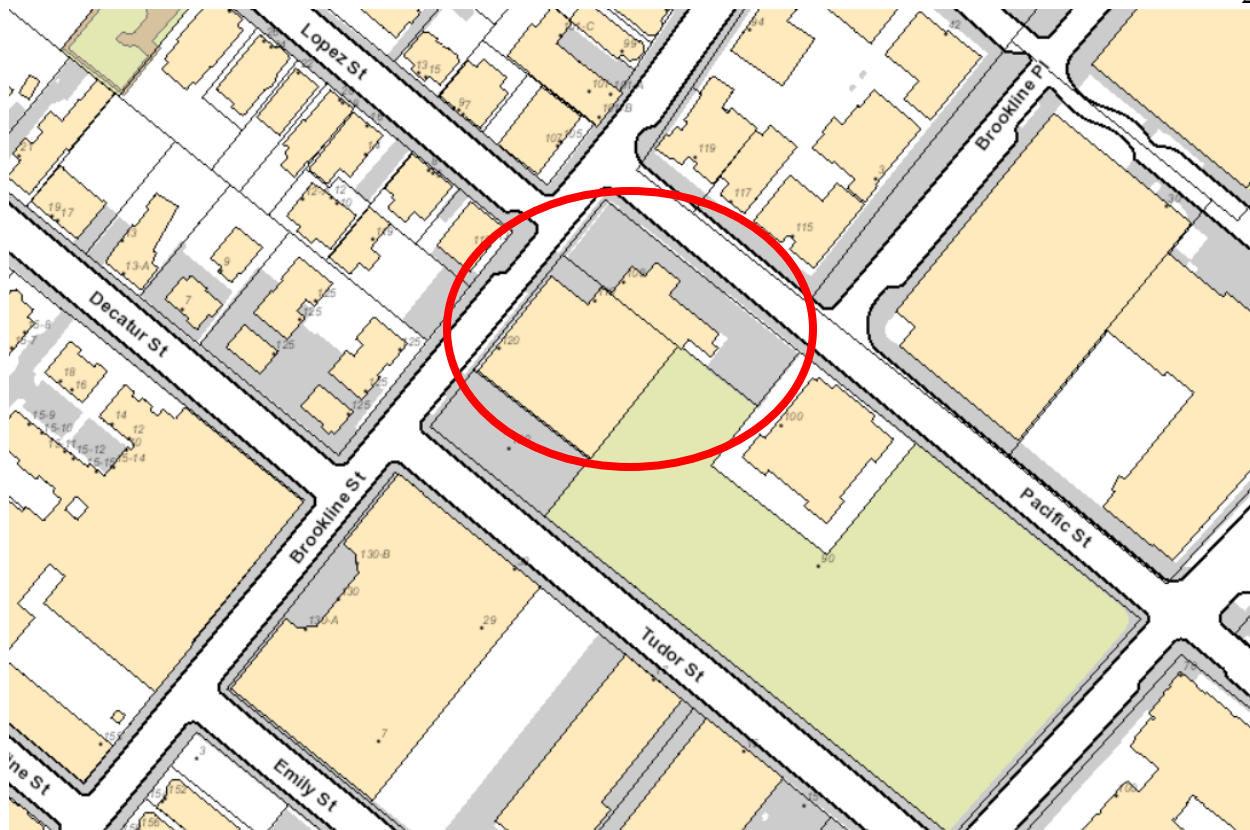
On July 17, 2018, the Commission received a petition with 16 signatures requesting the initiation of a landmark designation study of the EMF Building at 116 Brookline Street. The staff placed the matter on the agenda of the August 9 meeting of the Commission, and the Election Commission confirmed 14 of the 16 signatures as representing registered voters.



116 Brookline Street

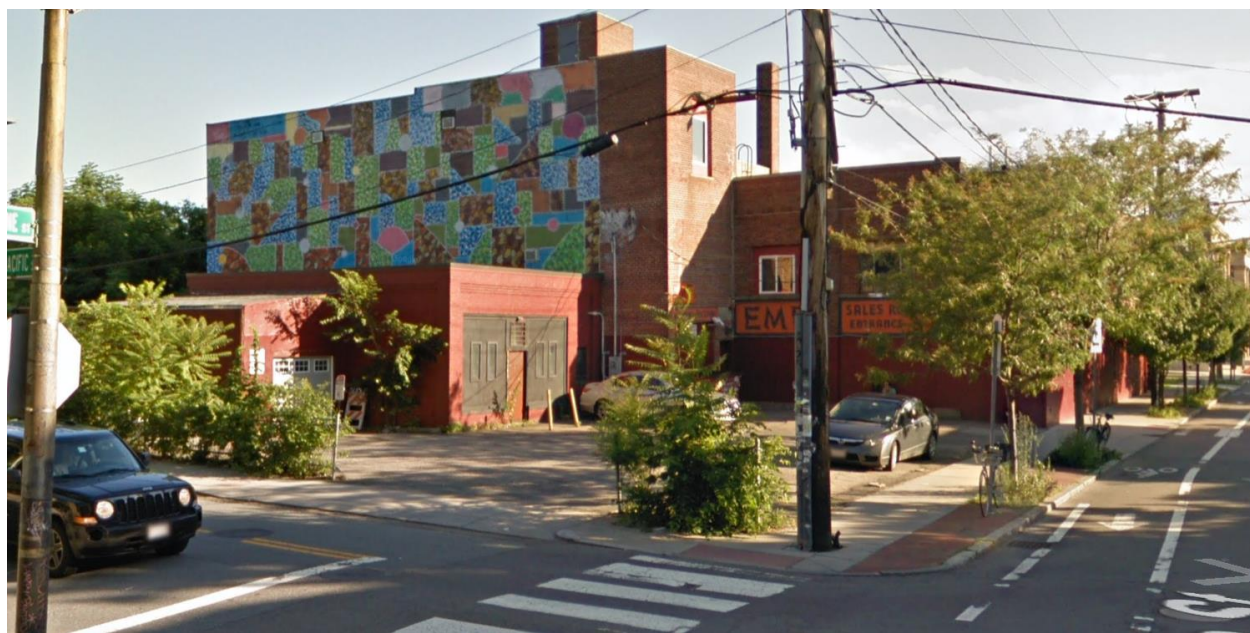
Google Streetview photo

The petitioners refer to the premises as 110-120 Brookline Street. This includes two parcels. The EMF building proper is a two-story structure on a 9,999 square foot lot at 116 Brookline Street. A former filling station at 112 Brookline occupies an 8,709 square foot lot at the corner of Pacific Street. The adjoining vacant lot at the corner of Tudor Street is owned by the City of Cambridge, as is the dog park and playing field to the east.



112-116 Brookline Street

Cambridge Assessors



112 Brookline Street (foreground) and 116 Brookline Street

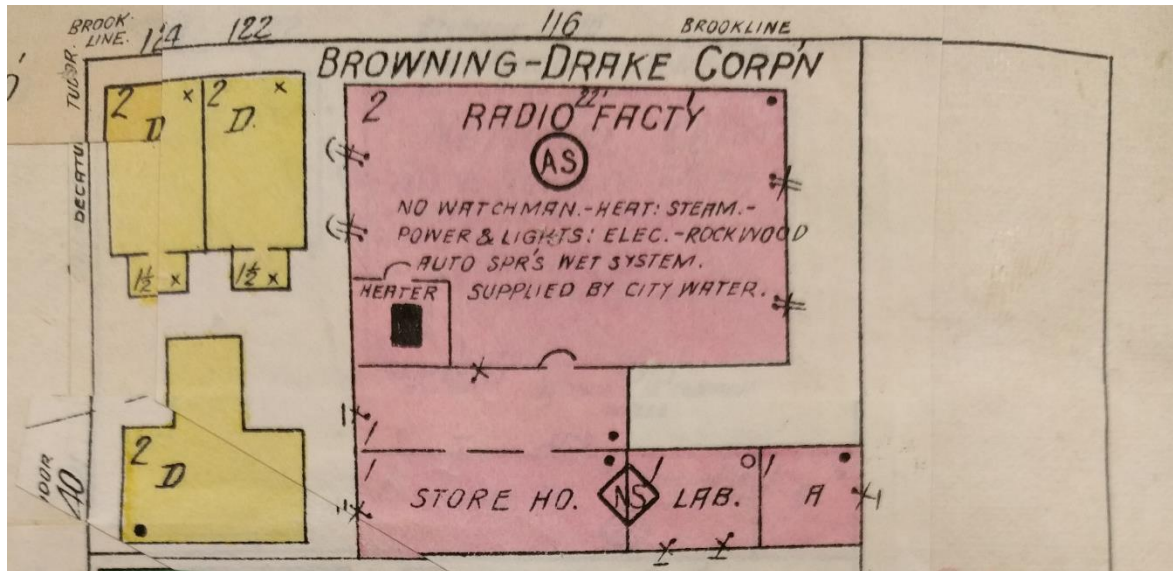
Google Streetview

EMF Building, 116 Brookline Street

What is known today as the EMF building was built in 1920 as a factory for the National Company, a manufacturer of “mechanical specialties.” These were initially toys and household items, but also included mechanical components of radios. The company soon focused on production of short-wave radio receivers. National and a related electronics company, Browning-Drake, occu-

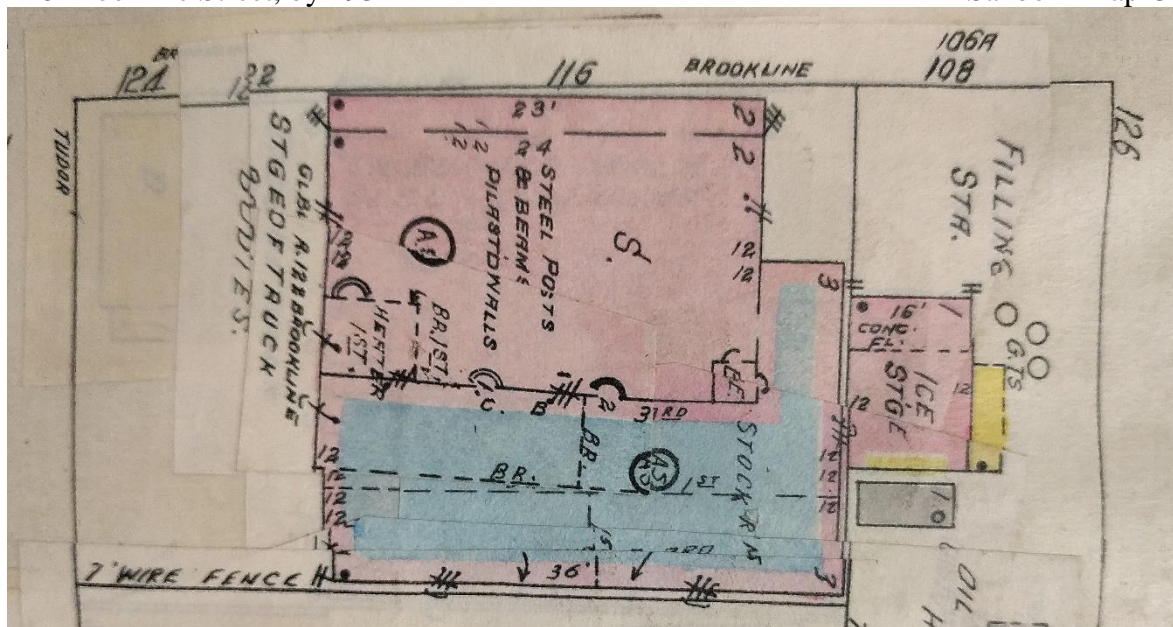
ped the Brookline factory until the late 1920s, when it was purchased by Devices Corp., a manufacturer of exercise machines that entered bankruptcy in 1934. Later in the decade it was occupied by a manufacturer of oil burners and heating oil tanks.

Abraham Katz (1904-1997), who had been operating an electrical supply and camera store at 438 Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square, acquired the former National factory in 1938. Katz's retail store, EMF Electrical Supplies, expanded into home appliances after WWII and became the kind of discount business that was later operated at a much greater scale by Lechmere Sales. The company eventually focused on industrial sales and in 1971 the showroom windows were bricked up.



116 Brookline Street, by 1934

Sanborn Map Co.



108 (now 112) and 116 Brookline Street, by 1962

Sanborn Map Co.

The original National Company factory was a two-story brick building with steel factory sash designed by architect A.E. (or possibly C.E.) Nichols, about whom nothing is known. The building measured 84 by 50 feet and was set back eight feet from the sidewalk, as required at the time to

allow the future widening of Brookline Street. By 1934 several one-story appendages for storage and laboratory use had been added at the rear.



116 Brookline Street, before the 1950 addition.

Cambridge Sentinel, January 4, 1947

Abraham Katz initially used the building as a warehouse, but sales grew and in 1950 he retained Cambridge architect William L. Galvin to design an 8'-foot-deep addition with plate glass windows for retail displays. This was possible because the city had abandoned its early 20th-century plan to widen Brookline Street. The parapet of the original facade is still visible. The dates of several later additions have not been determined.



116 Brookline Street, 1970

CHC photo

The adjacent one-story structure at 112 Brookline Street was built by the Metropolitan Ice Company in 1931. The premises were also used as a filling station.

The Katz family owned 116 Brookline Street through a real estate trust, the Robert Management Trust, which in 2016 sold the property to Ledgemoor LLC. In the spring of 2018 the tenants, who were primarily artists and musicians, were evicted and the building is currently empty. Former tenants and other community members consider the building to be culturally significant as one of the few affordable opportunities for studio and practice space remaining in the city. According to press reports, Cambridge ISD determined that the building had been legally occupied but would require extensive upgrades for future occupancy. The owner has not announced any plans for the building.

The Cambridge Historical Commission has no current jurisdiction over the EMF building. It is more than fifty years old, and staff would consider it “significant” for the purposes of reviewing a demolition permit application under Ch. 2.78 Art. II of the City Code. The former Metropolitan Ice Co. building at 112 Brookline Street is not considered significant by this standard.

Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible properties as:

any property within the city being or containing a place, structure, feature, or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures... (2.78.180.A)

The purpose of landmark designation is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

Relationship to Criteria

The EMF building could be considered to meet criterion (1) for its associations with the economic and social history of Cambridge. However, the staff does not consider it to meet criterion (2) as “architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures.” The

former Metropolitan Ice Co. building at 112 Brookline Street meets none of the criteria for landmark designation.

Staff Recommendations

The EMF building at 116 Brookline Street is a modest example of early 20th century factory construction. Its significance derives from its adaptation for a once-active retail use. Its most distinctive features are the orange and blue 'EMF' signs visible from Brookline Street.

The petitioners and the owner are engaged in a controversy about the future use of the building. This is not a matter that should engage the Historical Commission, which is prohibited from considering matters of use in the administration of designated properties.

The Commission should consider whether initiating a designation study would be effective in accomplishing the long-term preservation of the building.