

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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November 1, 2019

To: Members of the Historical Commission
 From: Charles Sullivan
 Re: D-1542, 56-58 Walden Street (1888)

An application to demolish the Mary Nevins house at 56 Walden Street was made on October 17, 2019. The applicants, Alfred Accardi and Carl Accardi acting on behalf of 56-58 Walden Street Ventures LLC, were notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for November 7, 2019.

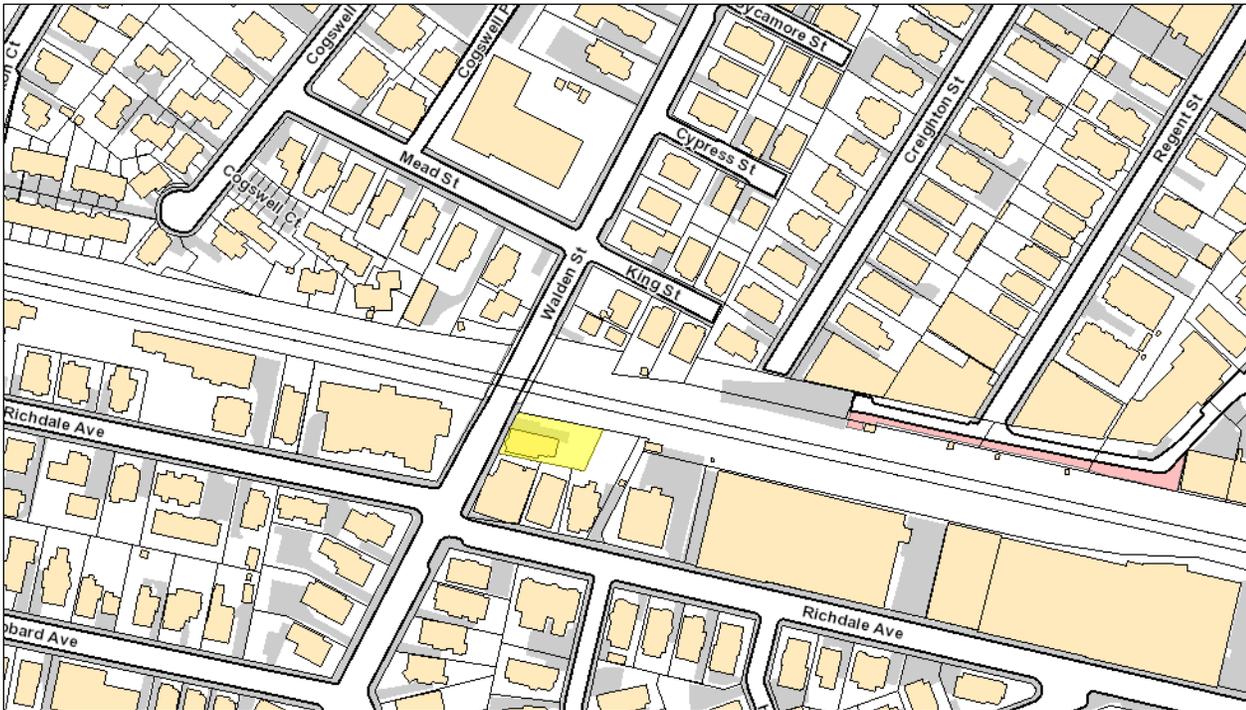


56-58 Walden Street

Assessors photo, 2015

Site

The Mary Nevins house is located on Walden Street near Richdale Avenue, immediately adjacent to the MBTA Fitchburg Division rail tracks. The house is sited on a 4,825 square foot lot in a Residential C-1A zoning district. This is a multi-family residential district, which permits an FAR of 1.25 and has a height limit of 45 feet. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the online assessor's property database, is \$1,164,600, of which \$806,500 is attributed to the land (Map 201/Parcel 1).



56-58 Walden Street

Cambridge GIS, 2019

A driveway is located on the north side of the house, accessed by a curb cut on Walden Street; a concrete retaining wall protects the property from the deep cut of the Fitchburg Division tracks. To the south of the property is a multi-family building that contains the Thistle & Shamrock convenience store. Opposite 56-58 Walden Street is a three-story residential condominium erected in 2006. Other buildings in the vicinity date from the 1870s through the first decade of the 20th century.

The prospective purchasers intend to erect a four-story building containing four residential units, although a variance will be required since the dimensional standards for the district require a minimum lot size of 5,000 square feet and a minimum width of 50 feet.





56-58 Walden Street as seen from the north

Cambridge GIS, 2014



56-58 Walden Street as seen from the west

Cambridge GIS, 2014

Architectural Description



The Mary Nevins house is a side-hall plan 2½ story two-family house with a street-facing gable roof. The façade is organized into two bays, with the entry doors located on the left and a two-story bay on the right. The doors are sheltered with a hip-roofed hood supported by elaborate brackets. The fenestration consists of 1-over-1 replacement sash, and the exterior has been covered with aluminum siding. The house sits on a fieldstone and brick foundation that accommodates the grade that slopes downhill behind the house. The rear of the house exhibits a two-story enclosed porch attached to the ell.

Stylistically, the Nevins house is a throwback to the Italianate period. While most details have been covered up or removed, the door hood exhibits elaborate jig-sawn brackets characteristic of the 1860s, leading to the conclusion that it represents the work of an especially conservative housewright.

History

This section of North Cambridge was among the last to be developed for residential purposes. While Massachusetts Avenue was laid out in the earliest years of settlement as a highway from Newtowne to the western settlements of the colony, the shady, poorly drained north slope of Avon Hill remained undeveloped well after the Charlestown Branch Railroad was constructed past it in 1842. The slope was occupied in part by the stockyards and pastures associated with the cattle market behind Porter's Hotel, but construction of the railroad isolated the area until Walden Street was laid out in 1857. A few houses were constructed on Walden close to Massachusetts Avenue and Mt. Pleasant Street in the 1870s, but the lots along the railroad saw no activity until the 1890s, and then only for such industrial activities as Hews Pottery, a lumber yard, and, in the early 20th century, the Hathaway Bakery.



56-58 Walden Street site in 1886 (left) and 1894

The larger parcel occupied by the Nevins house remained undeveloped until the late 1880s, when it appears to have been taken by the city for non-payment of taxes. The city sold the property in 1883 to William D. Martin, a non-resident, who subdivided it into four lots along Walden Street and Richdale Avenue. S.A. Smith, a builder, put up the two-family at 93-95 Richdale in 1887; Mary Nevins put up 56-58 Walden in 1889; and William England, a contractor and builder, put up 60-62 Walden in 1889 and 97-99 Richdale in 1890.

The Nevins house was built for Mrs. Mary (Sullivan) Nevins, a native of Ireland born about 1840 who arrived in Cambridge in 1853. In the 1880 Census Mary and her husband Philip, a carpenter, are listed as living on Railroad Avenue (Pemberton Street) with three children. According to the Chronicle, their house there burned in 1888. The City issued a building permit to Mary for 56-58 Walden Street in 1889. There is no record of his living there, however, and subsequent directories list her as Mrs. Mary Nevins (and after 1897, as widow of Philip). Mary died in 1900, and her sons Thomas, a plumber, and William, an oil worker, sold the property almost immediately.

Later owners or occupants of the property included Thomas Daniels, a custodian; Lionel Curtin, who ran a lumber and trucking business from his home; Felix and Eugenie Raiche, whose son Francis was a WWII casualty; and Ercole and Ruth Accardi, whose descendants still own the property. Ercole Accardi (1914-2006) was born in Watertown and worked at the A.H. Hews pottery and the Payne Elevator Co., both neighborhood businesses that no longer exist

Significance and Recommendation

I recommend that the Nevins house at 56-58 Walden Street be found significant for its associations with the residential development of North Cambridge and for its associations with the broad architectural, economic and social history of the city. The Commission should hear testimony from the applicants and neighbors and review the plans for the replacement structure before making a further determination.