



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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August 26, 2021

To: Members of the Cambridge Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director

Re: D-1585: 134 Massachusetts Avenue, Metropolitan Storage Warehouse (part), by MIT

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology filed an application to demolish portions of the Metropolitan Storage Warehouse on August 10, 2021. By virtue of its listing on the National Register of Historic Places the building is automatically significant for the purposes of the demolition delay ordinance. The staff so notified the Institute and scheduled a public hearing for September 2, 2021.



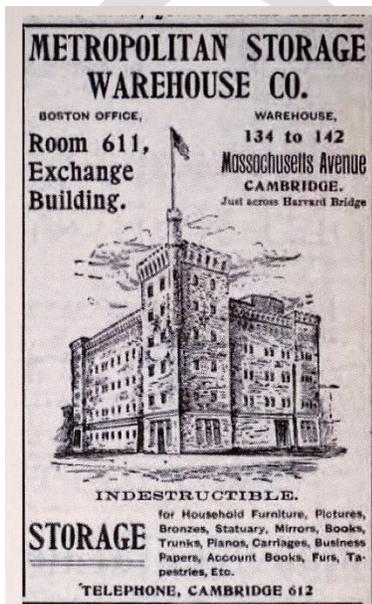
Site

The Metropolitan Storage Warehouse is located on the north side of Vassar Street on the west corner of Massachusetts Avenue. The MBTA's Grand Junction Branch rail line runs along the north side of the property. The 46,666 square foot lot (Map 56, Lot 4) has approximately 130' of frontage on Massachusetts Avenue and 533' on Vassar Street. The site is within Zoning District SD-6 in the MIT Overlay District.



The Metropolitan Storage Warehouse (1895 and later) is the oldest building in the vicinity and is one of three prominent castellated Tudor-themed buildings that predate the construction of MIT's Main Group in 1916. The Riverbank Court Hotel (now Masheeh Hall) followed in 1900 and Cambridge's former Armory, now MIT's Dupont Gymnasium, was constructed in 1902. Rockwell Cage and the Johnson Athletic building adjoin Dupont, while New Vassar, MIT's newest dormitory, abuts the rear of the building. The Massachusetts Avenue frontage opposite Metropolitan Storage is currently occupied by parking lots, while across the Grand Junction Branch are the MIT Nuclear Laboratory and a former industrial buildings. The closest academic building, MIT's Sloan Laboratory (Building 35), sits diagonally across Massachusetts Avenue.

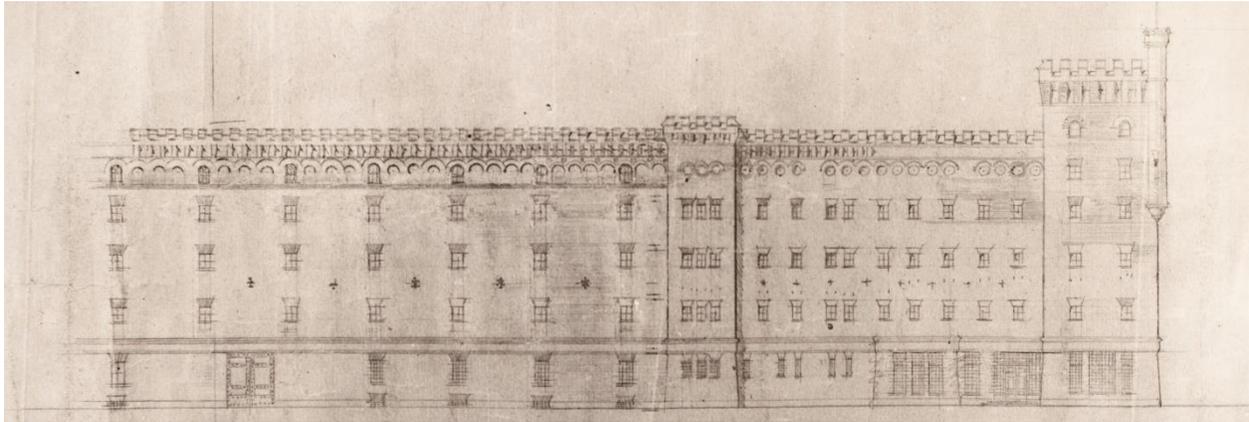
Description



The Metropolitan Storage Warehouse is a five story brick building over 500 feet long that was constructed in five phases beginning in 1894. The earliest section was built by Boston architect Fred Pope; four additional sections designed by Peabody & Stearns were added between 1896 and 1911. With two significant exceptions – the addition of a one-story storefront along Massachusetts Avenue in 1923 and the loss of a decorative turret – the building stands essentially as originally completed.

The design of Section One established the presentation of the whole. The investors in the company commissioned Pope to create a design that would convey the greatest possible sense of security, including structural stability and protection from loss from theft or fire, and that would advertise itself to potential customers in the Back Bay. To accomplish this program, Pope designed a brick-bearing-wall structure 115' long with battered walls on the ground floor and a sheer façade that terminates in a heavily corbelled and crenellated cornice 66' high. Small windows (heavily barred on the lower

level) have iron sash with coarse glass lights, as do the round windows just under the cornice. The six-story tower 77' high that projects from the southeast corner once featured a turret with slit windows that resembled firing positions for archers, but this was removed at some point in the 20th century. A secondary tower terminates the façade at the southwest corner.

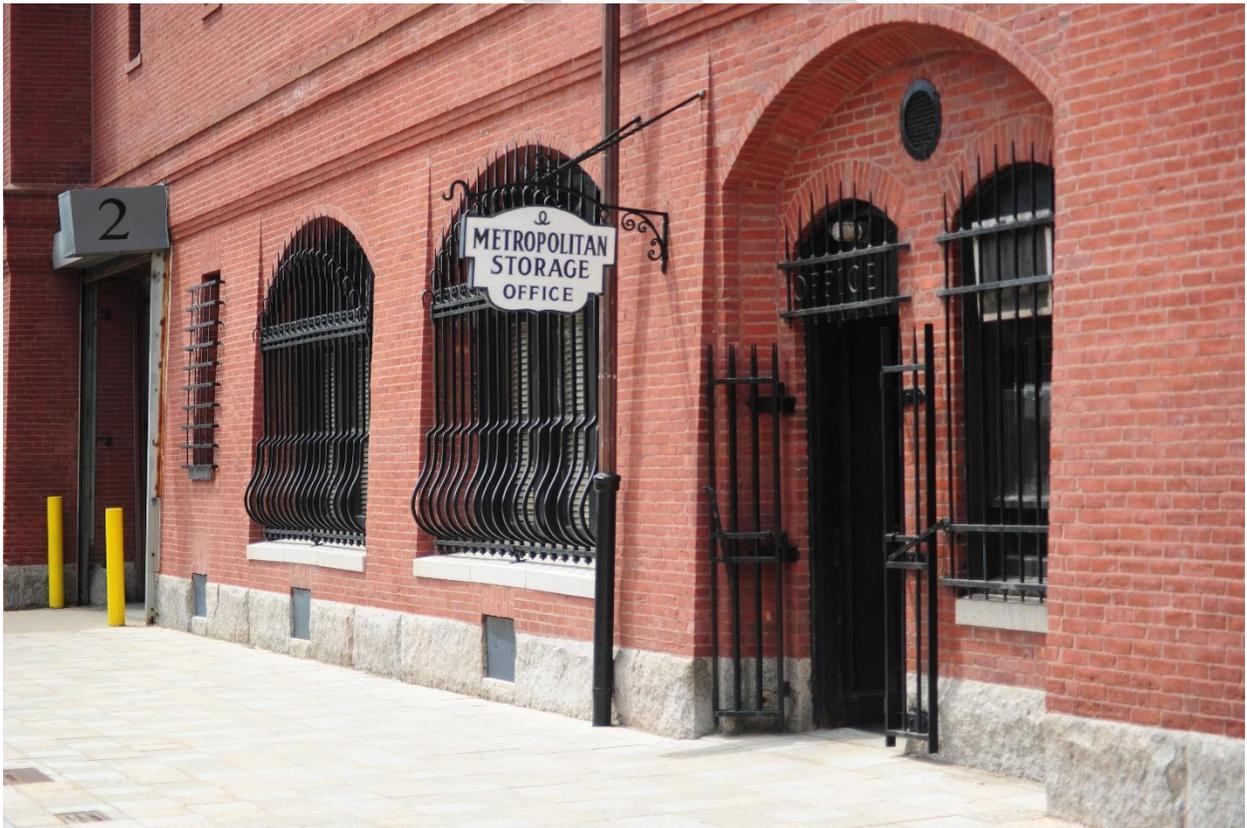


Section Two, designed by Peabody & Stearns in 1896, perpetuated Pope's theme in a simplified manner. This and later sections maintained the battered masonry foundation, sheer walls, and castellated cornice, but the windows are smaller and more widely spaced, and all are rectangular. This section includes arched openings at ground level that marked the public reception room and offices of the storage company (replacing a smaller entrance at the base of the tower near Massachusetts Avenue). A large roll-up door allows access from the street. Subsequent sections Three (1898), Four (1904), and Five (1911) maintain the theme with alternating setbacks that break up the mass. The west and north facades lack many of these details, but have similar windows and some larger openings (most now bricked up) that allowed access to railroad shipments. A one-story addition on Massachusetts Avenue has wooden storefronts and a crenellated cornice.



The interior of the Metropolitan Storage Warehouse contains about 1,500 storage units in varying sizes. The floors are of brick and concrete with cast iron supports, and partition walls are mainly terra cotta masonry units. Two large freight elevators access all floors.

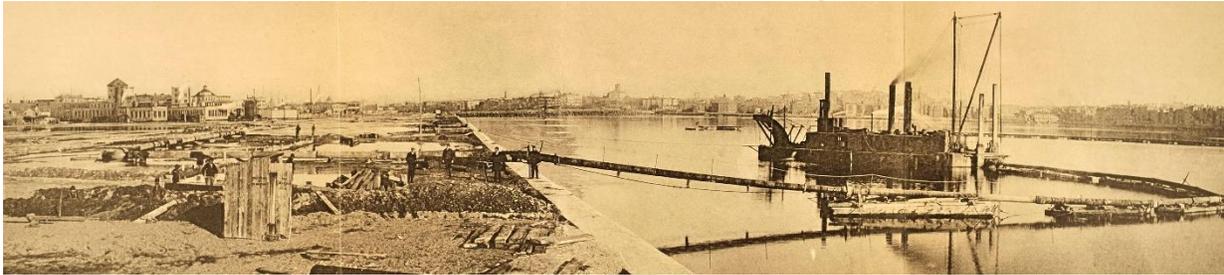




History¹

All of present-day Cambridge east of Brookline Street and south of Main Street was originally tideland consisting of salt marshes, mudflats, and the open channels of the Charles River. Reclamation and filling was carried out by the Charles River Embankment Company, which was chartered in 1881 by Charles Davenport and some Boston investors to create a neighborhood that would mirror Boston's Back Bay.

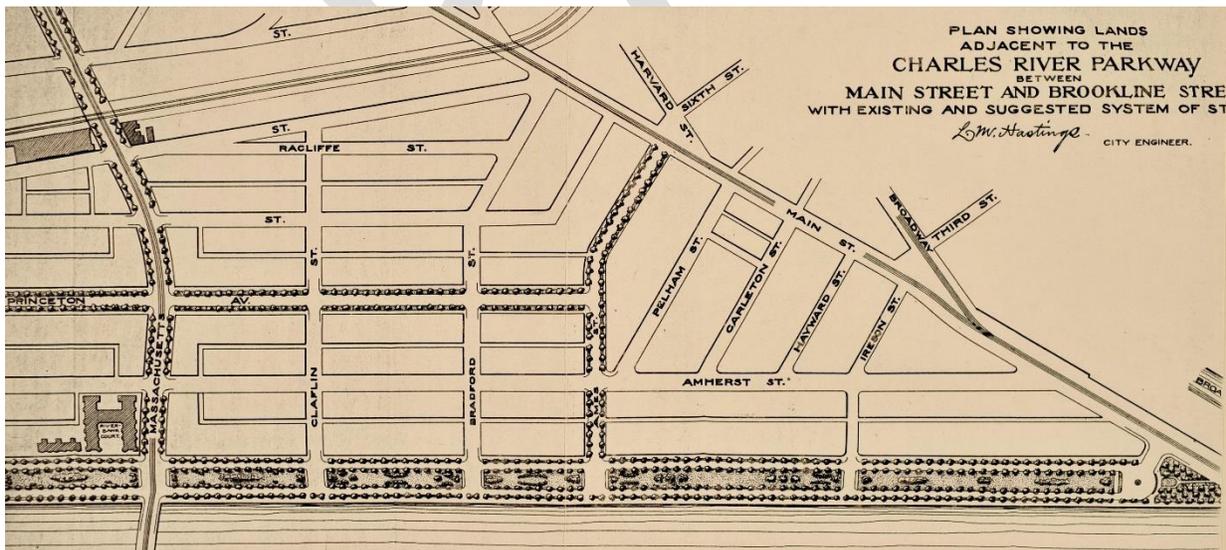
In 1883 the company received a license to build a seawall along the Harbor Commissioners Line and fill in the tidelands between the West



Suction dredge filling the flats, 1893

Cambridge Park Commission Report, 1893

Boston (Longfellow) and Cottage Farm (Boston University) bridges, provided that they build a 200' wide public esplanade along the basin. Suction dredges pumped sand from the bottom of the Charles to make new land, and the company laid out a network of streets named for colleges and Massachusetts governors. The Harvard Bridge was authorized in 1885 and completed in 1892, connecting West Chester Park in the Back Bay to Main Street in Lafayette Square. The company faltered during the Panic of 1893, and the City of Cambridge completed the seawall and parkway.



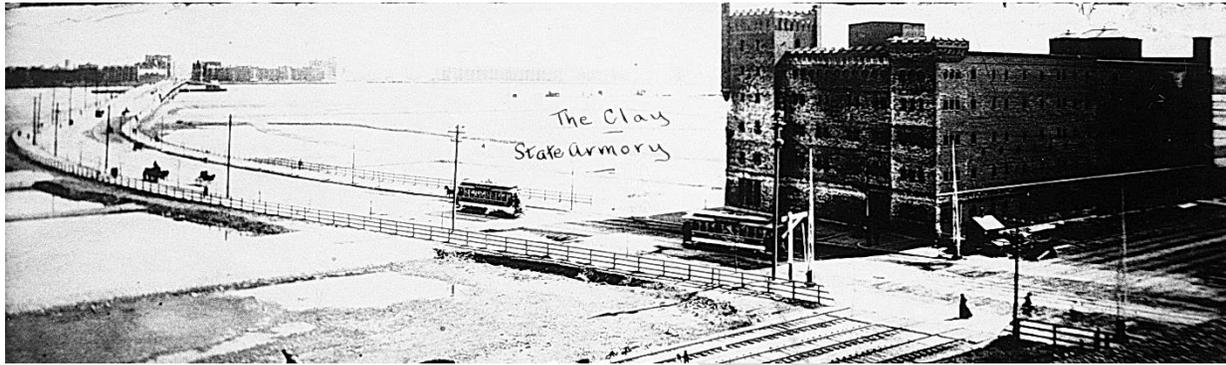
Streets as accepted by the City Engineer, ca. 1905

CHC

In the aftermath of the panic residential development largely failed to materialize, and only one

¹ This section adapted from a Dec. 31, 2014 CHC memo regarding the demolition of Bexley Hall.

structure – the Metropolitan Storage Company warehouse (1894) – was completed before the end of the century. The company managed to sell all of its land east of Massachusetts Avenue to small investors, but still entered bankruptcy in 1899.



Metropolitan Storage Warehouse, looking south toward Boston

Photo ca. 1895

The bondholders took over and established the Embankment Land Company to market the 1,000,000 square feet of unsold land west of Massachusetts Avenue. They erected the Riverbank Court Hotel in 1900 in an effort to stimulate development. On the strength of this project, investors took six lots on the esplanade 1901 and erected as many row houses, of which two (311-312 Memorial Drive) survive. The city put up an armory (now DuPont Gymnasium) on Massachusetts Avenue in 1902, but sales stalled again and little else was built for the rest of the decade.



Riverbank Court Hotel

Library of Congress photo, photo ca. 1910



Cambridge Armory, 1902

Library of Congress photo, ca. 1910

In 1911 the Embankment Land Company agreed to sell 108,000 square feet of land along Massachusetts Avenue to the Riverbank Trust, a new investment group headed by Forris Norris, a Cambridge realtor. (This amounted to one block bounded by Princeton Avenue, Amherst Street, and Danforth Street, about 10% of the land still held by the company.) Norris's group agreed to erect a 48-unit apartment building (Bexley Hall) on the avenue and two smaller eight-unit buildings on Amherst Street. These and another sixteen buildings the property had the potential to hold would be designed in "the Elizabethan [style of] domestic architecture" by architect William L. Mowll, an assistant professor of architecture at Harvard (*Cambridge Tribune*, March 25, 1911).

By early 1911 it was well known that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was considering a riverfront site east of Massachusetts Avenue for a new campus. Hopes were high that the Riverbank Trust would be able to "control the architectural and moral character of the neighborhood," fulfill the vision of a generation of promoters that the undeveloped area west of the avenue would become a high-class residential district, and prevent the expansion of factories which had taken much of the filled land east of Ames Street (*Tribune*, April 8, 1911). Construction of Bexley began in May, and the apartments were advertised on October 7, 1911, almost simultaneously with M.I.T.'s announcement that the Institute would build on fifty acres of land directly across the street. On October 11, the *Cambridge Chronicle* announced that "a sharp demand" had developed recently and the building was nearly full. Nevertheless, the Riverbank Trust completed only one of the eight-unit buildings ("Seymour Hall") it had promised to put up on Amherst Street before WWI halted all development activity.



M.I.T. Main Group, with the Tech Block, Bexley Hall, and Riverbank Court Hotel in foreground, ca. 1935 CHC

In 1916 Bexley was joined by the three-story Tech Block at 76-94 Massachusetts Avenue, which contained stores on the ground floor; a roller skating rink and apartments somehow coexisted upstairs. With this project the entire frontage of the avenue from Memorial Drive to the Boston & Albany Railroad had finally been completed. The Tudor style became the norm for this entire section; notable buildings still standing include the E&R Laundry at 209-211 Massachusetts Avenue (1904) and the Lamson Apartments at 511-513 (1907, both by Charles H. McClare).

M.I.T. inaugurated its campus in 1916 and in 1925 purchased 32 acres west of Massachusetts Avenue, which represented all the remaining undeveloped property of the Embankment Land Company. The Institute purchased the Riverbank Court Hotel in 1937 to accommodate 350 graduate students and acquired Bexley for married students and staff in 1939. The hotel became Ashdown House, and then Maseeh Hall; Bexley retained its original name. The Harvard Cooperative Society erected a store on the site of Seymour Hall in 1936, and the Institute razed the Tech Block in 1961.

Adaptive Reuse

M.I.T. purchased the Metropolitan Storage Warehouse Company's property in 1962 (Middlesex Registry of Deeds, Book 10048, Page 532), but the company continued to operate out of the building until 2015, when M.I.T. terminated its lease. The Institute's initial plan was to convert the building into an undergraduate dormitory, but resistance from students as well as from the Cambridge Planning Board led to a reconsideration of that plan and construction of new dorms elsewhere on Vassar Street.

The Metropolitan Storage Warehouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986, and CHC staff had been in regular communication with M.I.T. about the maintenance and future of the building for many years (including a complete masonry restoration in 2012-13). These discussions included the type of alterations that would be necessary for dormitory conversion in 2014-15. When that project was abandoned M.I.T. assigned the building to the

Department of Architecture and Planning, and in 2017 staff began an intensive series of meetings with Dean Hashim Sarkis and the Institute's project management staff. These meetings were conducted according to the 2015 protocol between M.I.T. and the Historical Commission under which the Commission agreed to delegate review of alterations to M.I.T. buildings on the National Register of Historic Places to its staff.

During the course of many meetings in 2017-2018 the Executive Director advanced the principle that rigorous preservation of the Massachusetts Avenue and Vassar Street facades could be balanced by greater flexibility on the north and west facades. Accordingly, early planning focused on removing portions of the building on the railroad side and adding one or more floors on the roof.

In the fall of 2018 M.I.T. held a public competition for a designer, which was won by the New York firm of Diller Scofidio + Renfro. CHC staff met repeatedly with DS+R and M.I.T. staff beginning in mid-2019 to work out aspects of the design and grapple with the difficulties of adapting a building designed for security and privacy into contemporary offices and teaching spaces.

The proposed design meets function and historic preservation goals in several ways.

- Removing large portions of the structure in five locations on the less sensitive north and west elevations allows light and air into the structure and allows greater flexibility for circulation and creation of functional spaces.
- Creation of new windows on the Vassar Street elevation was accepted as a functional necessity. These occur only at Sections One, Two, Four and Five. The windows at the two towers of Section One and at Section Three will be restored or replicated. The new openings are designed with minimal jambs and flush glazing to avoid visual competition with the existing openings.
- Restoration of the office windows and entrances at the tower and in Section Two, along with associated iron grilles.
- Removing brick from the eleven round windows under the Massachusetts Avenue cornice and installing replica sash.
- Reconstruction of the missing Massachusetts Avenue cornice.

Significance and Recommendation

The Metropolitan Storage Warehouse is automatically significant by reason of its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Commission needs only consider whether the building is preferably preserved in the context of the proposed project. The Commission should hear testimony from the applicants and public and review the plans before making a determination. I strongly recommend that the building be found "not preferably preserved" in the context of the proposed project, which meets significant preservation goals in adapting an uncompromisingly difficult structure for continuing use.