



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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February 28, 2025

To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Case D-1728: 37 Brookline St., by 37 Brookline Landowner, LLC c/o Just-A-Start.

An application to demolish the three-decker at 37 Brookline Street was received on April 7, 2025. The owner, 37 Brookline Landowner LLC, was notified of an initial determination of significance based on its association with artist-philosopher Peter Valentine (1942-2022) and with an epic mid-20th century development controversy, and a public hearing was scheduled for May 1.



37 Brookline Street, 2024

Assessing Dept. photo

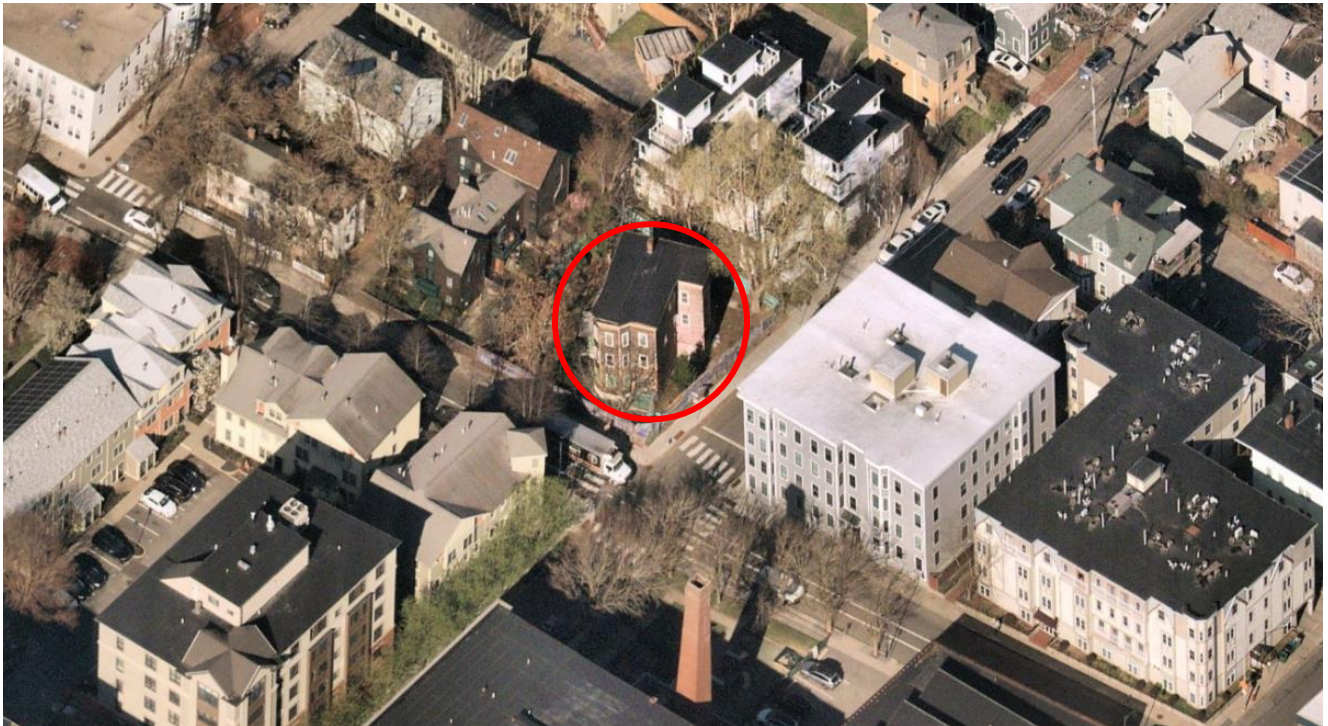
The building at 37 Brookline Street is a three-story frame house on a concrete foundation. It occupies a 6,582 square-foot lot (93/115) on the southwest corner of Brookline and Franklin streets. The zoning is Residence C-1, a multi-family district that allows a four-story building as of right, or six stories with inclusionary affordable housing. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the Assessors' database, is \$1,876,400 - \$620,400 for the house, and \$1,876,000 for the land.



Present and former locations of the Peter Valentine house

Cambridge GIS

The lot at 37 Brookline Street has 78' of frontage on Brookline Street and 80' on Franklin Street. The house is placed at a seemingly random angle on the lot and does not align with other houses on the street. The adjacent buildings include 2½ story houses next door on Brookline Street, a three-decker across Franklin, and contemporary townhouses adjoining on Franklin and across Brookline. The former F.A. Kennedy (Nabisco) bakery stands across the intersection.



37 Brookline Street context, April 2024

NearMap.com

Cambridge Assessors

Description

The house at 37 Brookline Street was built in 1907 at 55-57 Blanche Street and moved to its present location in 1991. As originally constructed it had a rectangular plan 23' wide and 40' deep, with a 7' by 10' stair tower on the right side and porches on the rear. A high brick basement reflected its location close to a tidal river. The façade indicated a side hall plan with a double entrance on the right and a full height bay window on the left. The building was clad with clapboards (later covered with asphalt siding) and appears to have had no architectural detailing or embellishments whatever. The owner, Asa C. Lamson, was a real estate developer whose two-dozen multifamily properties provided inexpensive housing in working class neighborhoods in eastern Cambridgeport. The architect and builder, William Parker, worked on several similar projects for Lamson.



37 Brookline Street at its original location, 55-57 Blanche Street, 1989 CHC photo

When 55-57 Blanche Street was moved to Brookline Street it was placed in the same orientation to the compass as it had on its original site. The asphalt siding was removed and wood clapboards were replaced. The rear porches were not rebuilt, and the roof over them was supported by a diagonal brace. New 1+1 windows replaced the original 2+2 sash. The siding remained for the most part unpainted, except for accent colors and slogans that Peter Valentine added periodically.



37 Brookline Street, 2024

Assessing Dept. photo



37 Brookline Street, north and west elevations, 2024

Assessing Dept. photo

Valentine also enclosed the property with a brightly painted board fence that he decorated with cartoons and sayings. The fence became a cultural landmark of Cambridgeport.



Valentine house and fence, 2012

CHC photo



Franklin Street elevation (above) and Brookline Street (below)

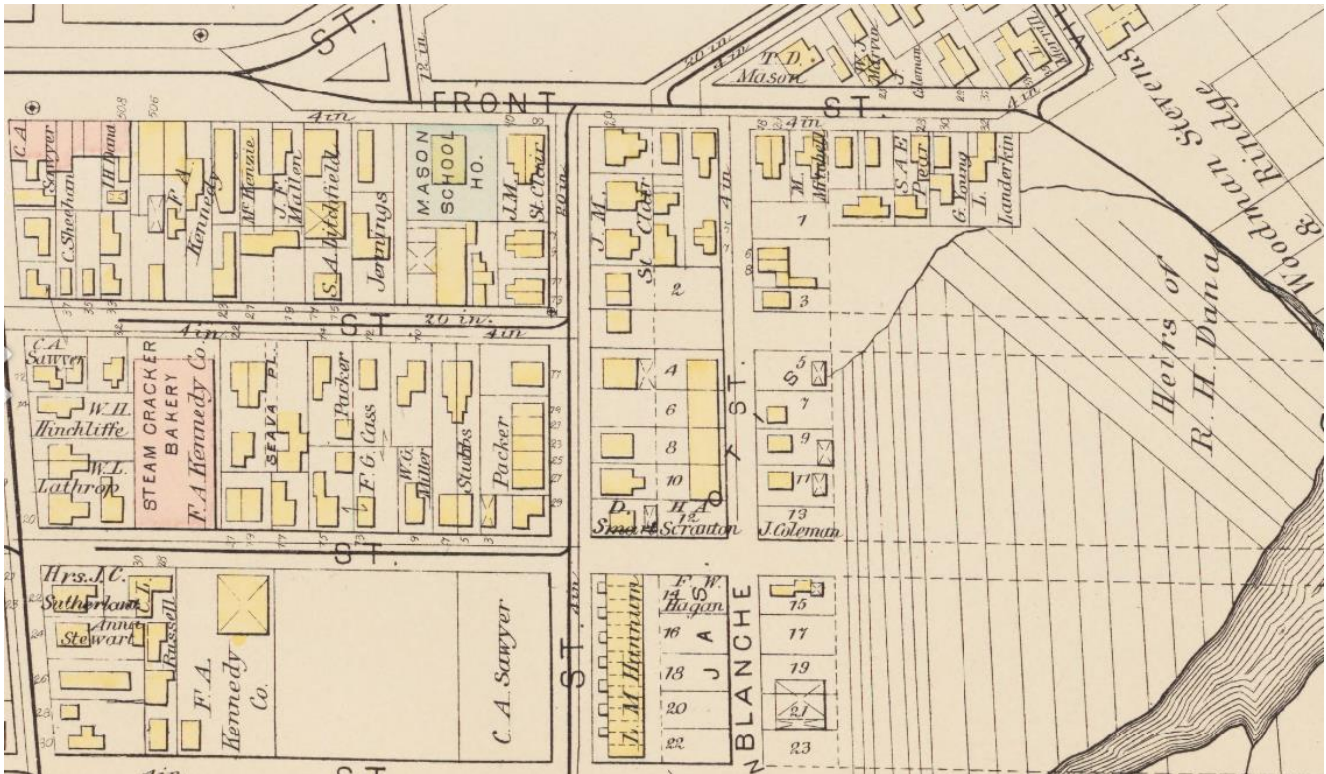


History

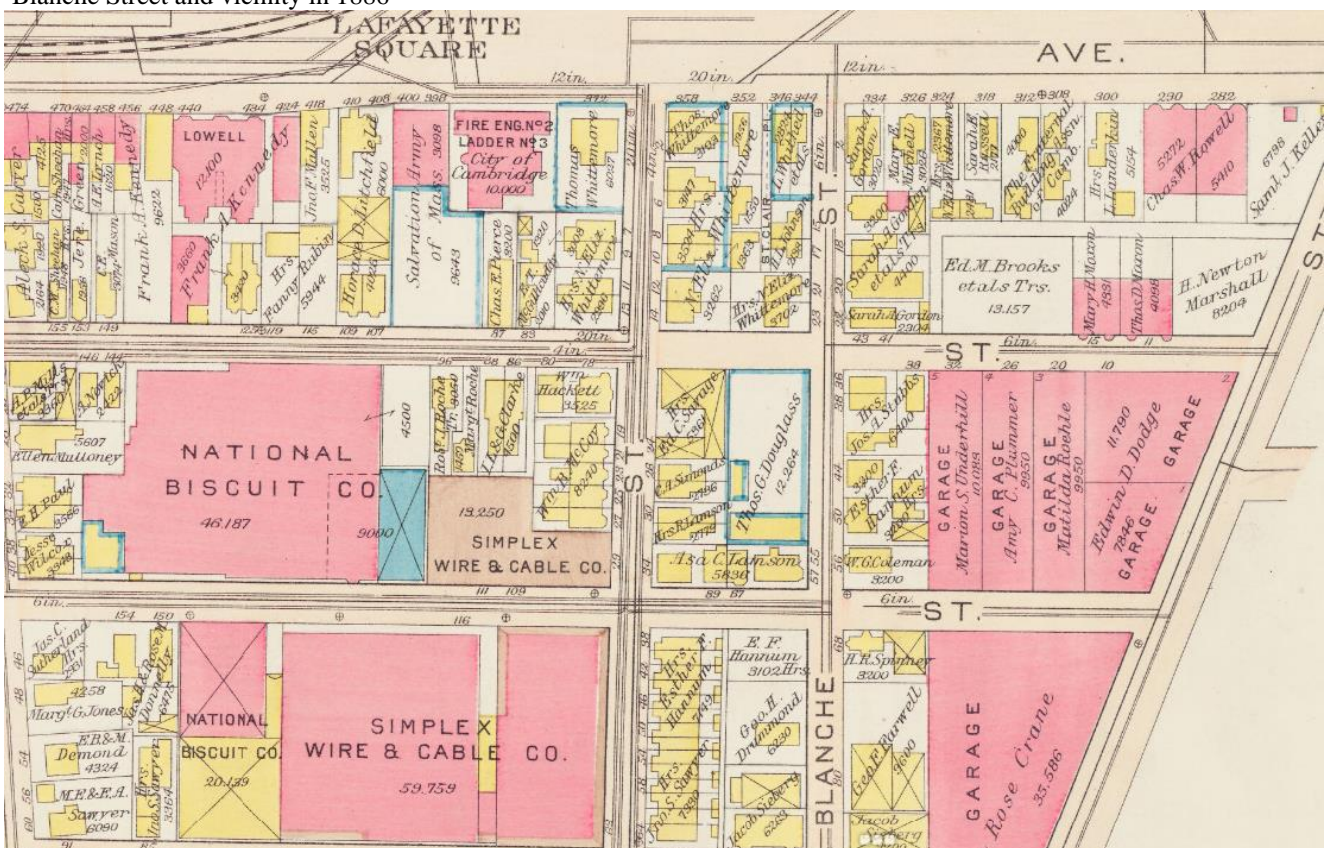
The Blanche Street neighborhood east of Brookline Street and south of Massachusetts Avenue was originally waterfront property. Before the Civil War the salt marshes bordering the Charles River ran up to Brookline Street. Massachusetts Avenue (then called Front Street) ended shortly beyond Lafayette Square and would not be extended to the river until about 1890. Sidney Street existed in two segments separated by marsh, and Blanche Street had been planned but not laid out.



Blanche Street and vicinity in 1854



Blanche Street and vicinity in 1886



Blanche Street and vicinity in 1916

After the Civil War Cambridgeport's population boomed in response to increasing industrialization, and even marginal sites were developed. The Blanche Street area was especially risky, not only because of intrusion from sewage-laden tidewaters but also from mosquito-borne diseases. Nevertheless, upper Sidney and Blanche streets developed into a densely populated working-class neighborhood dominated by industries such as the National Biscuit Co. and Simplex wire and Cable.

As Cambridge's industrial sector ebbed after WWII the Blanche Street neighborhood declined along with it. In 1969 Simplex closed its plant, costing the area 350 jobs. MIT purchased the 19-acre site and cleared all the buildings for future development. After Polaroid decided against constructing a new factory there, MIT began to buy additional land, amassing 29 acres by 1980.



Blanche Street houses in 1989

CHC photo

In 1979 MIT announced plans to evict the remaining ten tenants of its residential properties on Blanche Street to clear the land for development. This effort would be complicated by the city's recent passage of an ordinance that sought to prevent removal of units from the housing stock by means of eviction, condominium conversion, or demolition. MIT tenants Peter Valentine and Bill Noble, supported by activists such as Mike Turk and Bill Cavellini, director of the Alliance of Cambridge Tenants, initiated legal proceedings against the Institute that would consume the city for the next twelve years.



Peter Valetine, Bill Flynn, and Bill Noble on Blanche Street. Boston Herald American, Nov. 10, 1979

The major issues in contention were the ability of Cambridge's Rent Control program to resist attempts to remove units from rent protections, the provision of affordable housing in existing buildings and new construction, and the future of the Simplex site. In 1985 MIT development partner, Forest City Rental Properties Corp., announced plans to construct 1 million square feet of R&D and light industrial space, 890,000 square feet of offices, a 350-room hotel, parking for 3,250 cars, and 110 units of new housing in a development to be known as University Park. All that stood in the way was Peter Valentine, the last resident in the four otherwise abandoned buildings on Blanche Street, his supporters, and a group of activists who occupied a nearby 'Tent City' during the winter of 1987-88.

Valentine was committed to staying at 55 Blanche Street because the house had "good vibes":

Valentine says he does not intend to leave the house he has lived in since 1969 because "Blanche Street is the first place in my life where I have been able to find and have peace of mind." ... Valentine cited 'Kirlian photography', which depicts energy fields around matter, as fundamental in his fight to remain on Blanche Street. "I am sensitive to these energy fields", he said.

Valentine claims that before moving to Blanche Street his life was "like a nightmare" because of negative energy fields and that living in his current house has changed that."

"I believe it is the combination of the energy fields in the structure of the house, the land, the location on the earth," he said. "A lot of people may read this and think it is ridiculous, but I'm dealing with my life." (*Cambridge Chronicle*, February 6, 1986)

Valentine and his supporters stymied MIT and Forest City for several more years. The Rent Control Board granted removal permits that would allow five rent-controlled buildings containing 12 apartments to come down, but its action was overturned in court. Negotiations continued until the developers agreed to relocate two houses, 55 Blanche Street and 38 Green Street, and replace the units



38 Green Street (1887) in 1989, and as relocated to 188 Franklin Street.

CHC photos

to be demolished with new affordable units elsewhere. The Historical Commission agreed to the moves in March 1989, but legal maneuvers continued until 1991. MIT agreed to move 38 Green Street, occupied by Bill Noble, Lucy Sloan and Jacquelyn Stevens, to 188 Franklin Street. The three-decker occupied by Peter Valentine at 55 Blanche Street would be moved to the corner of Franklin and

Brookline streets and converted to a single-family house placed in the exact orientation as its former site. MIT also moved a tree and some landscaping, and on completion transferred ownership to Valentine. The Institute and Forest City then went ahead with development plans

Cambridge Day summarized Peter Valentine's life after his passing:

Peter Valentine, the artist and eccentric whose Cambridgeport home became a landmark for its bright colors and otherworldly wisdom, died Tuesday within its walls, according to Michael Monestime, former executive director of the Central Square Business Improvement District.

"Our beloved Peter Valentine has transitioned to the cosmos," Monestime said.

Valentine, 80, has literally colored Cambridge's culture for years – not just by maintaining his Franklin and Brookline streets home as a public art project known as Moose and Grizzly Bear's Ville, but by his presence, appearing around the city in patchwork homemade clothes of clashing hues, fabrics and patterns on various missions: One day setting up a fake wooden laptop to work on, blessing the merchandise in Cambridge Bicycles on another, as residents recalled on a 2020 thread on Reddit.

He attended City Council meetings regularly, speaking during public comment with abstruse messages such as "we need to stop using numbers" or "we are at the moment of the birth of the immortality of the United States of America – if what I just stated wasn't true, I couldn't have thought of it." (As mayors came and went, he was the only person allowed to speak on topics not on a given night's agenda.)

Among the memorials appearing online Wednesday were those from Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui, who said Valentine was "a bright light in Cambridge" and said City Hall would be lit up pink in his honor; councillor Marc McGovern, who bid Valentine to rest in peace, "Travel the stars, my friend, and keep an eye on us from above"; and former councillor Jan Devereux, who called the death sad news. "I always thought if anyone was going to prove immortal it would be Peter. He will be greatly missed and fondly remembered," Devereux said. The Central Square Business Improvement District tweeted in acknowledgment of losing "an inspiration," and residents mourned as well. ...

Valentine built the fence [around his property] in 1991 to present what he was interested in and provoke passersby to contemplate not what he considered "the boring news media and advertising images and designs that are projected at people as they go about living their lives." It features wildlife, including the moose – so big and awkward and rich in cosmic knowledge. What especially captures visitors are the philosophical morsels that adorn the fence, along with spiritual insights and universal aspirations.



The site put Cambridge on the map with Atlas Obscura, a compendium of worldwide curiosities worth visiting. The site praised Valentine’s “unstoppable will to create [a] burst of inventive punk rock spirituality in an otherwise bland neighborhood landscape.” Virtual visits from Seen Around Boston are online [here](#) and [here](#). Others have filmed it extensively as well.

At Valentine’s request, the Cambridge Historical Commission met in 2012 to consider landmarking the fence – tabling the request because it would have frozen the work in time; Valentine would have needed to consult the commission each time he wanted to change it. But during the process, support for recognizing its importance was heard from Leslie Umberger, curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and Rebecca A. Hoffberger, founder and director of the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. In 2014, Cambridge Arts celebrated Valentine’s fence at the annual River Festival. (August 11, 2022)

After Peter’s death his family worked diligently to determine an appropriate future for Peter’s property. In July 2023 they sold the house to Just A Start, Inc., which proposes to erect a fully affordable thirteen unit building on the site. CHC staff worked extensively with JAS and its architects to communicate the history of the site and Peter’s artistic vision. Meanwhile, community activists led by Cathie Zusy of Cambridgeport salvaged the fence and stored it under controlled conditions in anticipation of permanent preservation.

Recommendation

The Peter Valentine house should be found significant for its associations with the artist and community activist Peter Valentine and with the twelve-year fight to preserve affordable housing in Cambridge.

I recommend that the Commission hear testimony from the community and carefully review the plans for replacement construction before making a further determination.



Original and current location of the Valentine house.

NearMap.com