



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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February 27, 2026

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Case D-1801: 76 and 78 Thorndike St., by 76-78 Thorndike Street LLC.

A demolition permit application to remove the roofs and remodel the buildings at 76 and 78 Thorndike Street was received on February 9, 2026. The owner was notified of an initial determination of significance required by the buildings' location in the East Cambridge National Register District and a public hearing was scheduled for March 5, 2026.



76 (rear) and 78 Thorndike Street, 2018

Google Streetview



76-78 Thorndike Street

NearMap.com

Site

The site is located on the south side of Thorndike Street between Third and Sciarappa streets. The Henry S. Hills house at 78 Thorndike fronts on the street, while William Kelly house at 76 sits at the rear of the 4,500sf lot.

The property is located within a C-1 residential zoning district, which allows single to multi-family dwellings with a four-story, 45-foot height limit for residential uses. The minimum front yard setback for C-1 zone is 10-feet, and the minimum side and rear yard setbacks are 5-feet. Both houses are contributing buildings in the East Cambridge National Register District.

Description

The Henry S. Hills house may have been constructed in 1830 but achieved its present form in 1844. It is a center-entrance, five-bay wide, 2½- story Greek Revival style house with a gable end facing the street.

The Hills house is an example of a vernacular worker's cottage with a side-facing center-hall plan similar to the 1838 Leighton house formerly at 24R Winter Street. These houses originated in the 18th century and were constructed in East Cambridge from the 1820s until the 1840s. Exterior details in this case represent characteristic features of the period, with a pediment, frieze and (probably) pilasters at the corners, in contrast to the much simpler detailing of the Federal period houses that preceded it. The Hills house was covered with asphalt siding in the mid-20th century, and then with vinyl. Doors and windows have been replaced. Original exterior details are obscured but expected to be present under the siding. The porch with turned columns was added in the 1890s.



78 Thorndike Street, 1980.

CHC photo

The William Kelly house at 76 Thorndike Street is a two-story (two-decker) double house with a flat roof constructed in 1894. The paired entrances are flanked by bay windows. The house also has multiple layers of siding and replacement windows and doors. The porch with turned columns and brackets is original to the house.



76 Thorndike Street, 1976

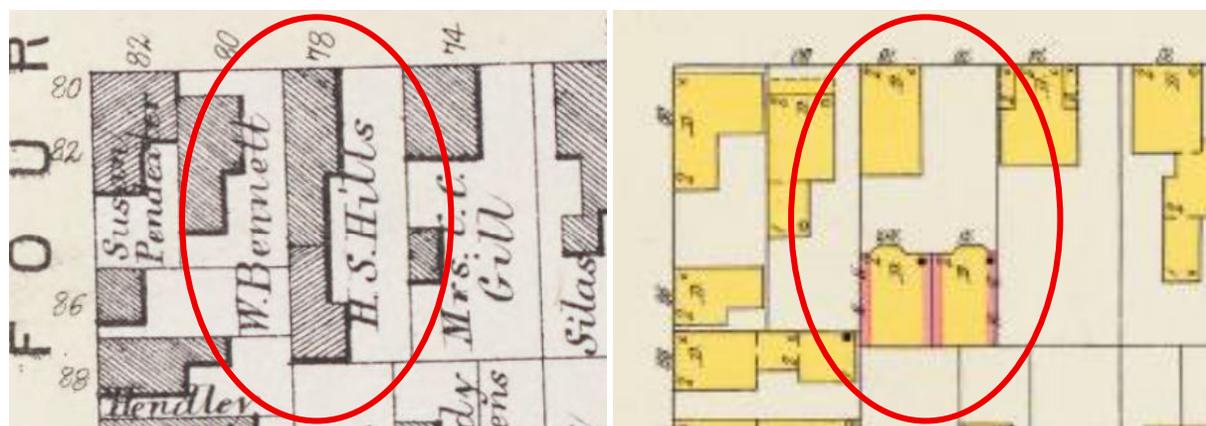
CHC photo

History

East Cambridge originated as a speculative real estate development at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1811 a grid of streets was laid out on the salt-marsh island known as Lechmere's Point, and residential construction began near the top of the hill along Otis and Thorndike Streets. Early industry developed along the Miller's River, and the marshes to the south and west remained undeveloped until after the Civil War. Residential streets close to the factories, like Winter Street, filled with workers cottages, while managers and professionals lived on Otis and Thorndike streets.

Much of the development of East Cambridge was undertaken by corporations and trusts, rather than individuals. Andrew Craigie, the speculator who conceived of East Cambridge and who secretly purchased much of the Lechmere estate, organized the Lechmere Point Corporation as a means of attracting other investors. The expense of filling large tracts of marsh land and building streets and utilities was beyond the resources of most individuals, and companies such as the Canal Bridge Corporation and the Cambridge Wharf Company undertook these projects with varying success in the first half of the 19th century.

The early history of the Thorndike Street parcel is unclear. One of the original Lechmere Point Corp. investors, Edward Munroe, owned land on the south side of Thorndike Street that was subdivided into 35' lots by 1824. In 1829 Samuel Parker of Boston sold the parcel to two masons, Nathaniel Frost and Francis Bates, who put up a house in 1830. In 1844 Henry Hills, who owned a furniture business in Boston, built a second attached house and remodeled the original building, where he lived until 1887.



76-78 Thorndike Street in 1873 (left) and 1900 (right)

In 1894 a subsequent owner, William Kelly, took down Hills' addition and built the present two-family house at the rear of the lot.

Significance and Recommendation

The Hills and Kelly houses at 76-78 Thorndike Street are automatically significant for the purposes of the demolition permit review ordinance as a contributing buildings in the East Cambridge National Register District.

The demolition delay ordinance, Cambridge Municipal Code, Ch. 2.78, Article II, requires CHC review of applications to demolish buildings fifty or more years old (2.78.090.A). Demolition

permits are required by the Inspectional Services Department under the following conditions:

- Relocating a building, or
- removing 50% or more of the area of the exterior walls or roof (framing), or
- removing a roof (including but not limited to raising the overall height of a roof, rebuilding roof to a different pitch, or adding additional stories to a building), or
- removing 50% or more of floor framing, or
- removing 50% or more of the foundation, or
- removing 25% or more of the volume above grade of a building

The current owner intends to remodel both buildings by adding a story in the case of 76 and raising the roof in the case of 78. ISD has ruled that these actions require a demolition permit. CHC staff has met with the owner and his team to discuss ways in which the remodeling could preserve the character of the buildings and minimize adverse effects on the National Register district.

Staff recommends that the Commission consider finding the existing buildings “not preferably preserved” in the context of the proposed remodeling plans.

cc: Peter McLaughlin, Inspectional Services Department Commissioner
Scott Zink, 76-78 Thorndike LLC
Alison Hammer, Hammer Design & Development LLC