



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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April 28, 2026

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director

Re: Case D-1818: Longshaw House, 78 Otis Street, by 78 Otis Street Realty Trust

A demolition permit application to partially demolish the existing three-story structure at 78 Otis Street was received on April 8, 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 before the Cambridge Historical Commission for May 7, 2026.

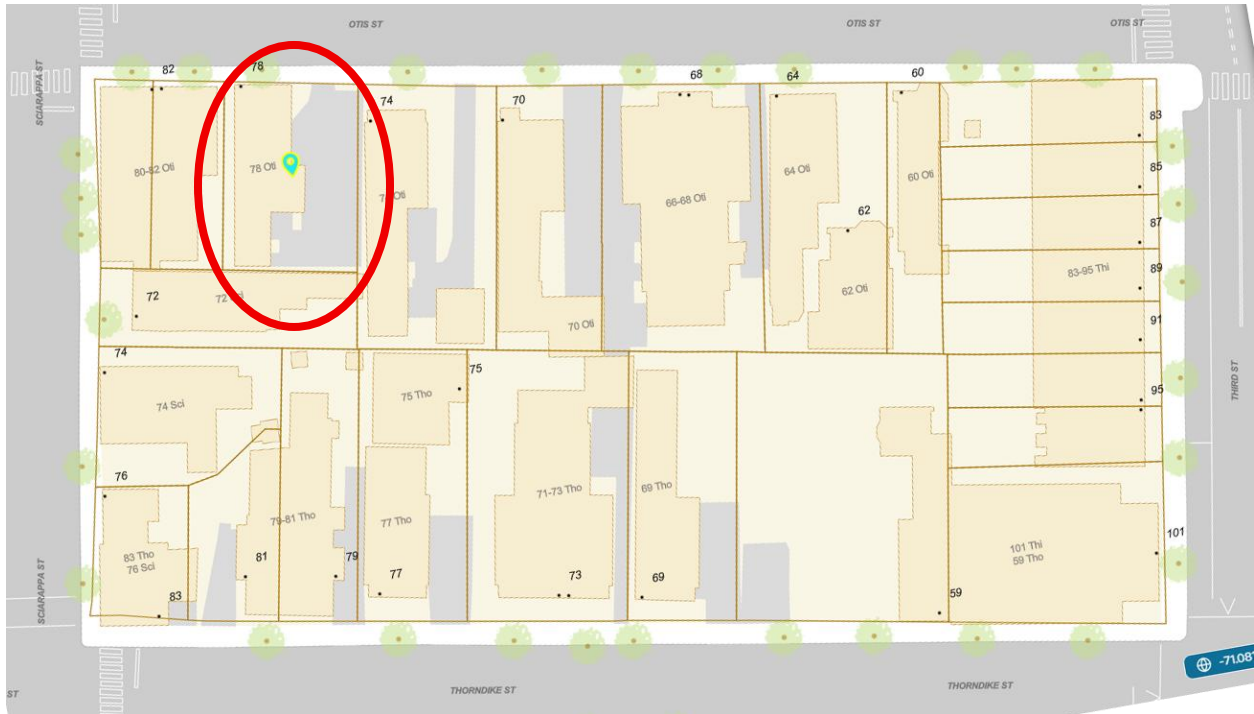


78 Otis Street in the East Cambridge National Register District,
flanked by 74 Otis (1840) and 74-76 Otis (1860)

Site:

The site is located on the south side of Otis Street between Third and Sciarappa streets and is across from Silva Park, a 0.3 acre pocket-park at the northeast corner of Otis and Sciarappa streets. The three-unit residence is located on a 3,500 square foot lot with the building located on the western half of the property and open space/surface parking located on the eastern half.

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. The house is also included in the East Cambridge Historic District, a district listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.



78 Otis Street

Cambridge GIS



East Cambridge National Register District and individually listed properties nearby

CHC, 2021

Description:

The Longshaw House at 78 Otis Street is a detached, three-story, side-hall residence with three-story rear ell. The façade is three-bays with the westernmost containing the primary entry within a recessed, paneled doorway. The property is covered with vinyl siding apart from a shingled portion below the first-floor windows at the façade. The vinyl siding largely covers wood and asbestos siding. It is unclear if the original wood clapboards remain underneath. The Longshaw House lacks ornament, with nearly all trim and detailing either covered by later siding or removed entirely. The roof is covered in a rubber membrane roof and is nearly flat, but has a gentle slope. All windows are one-over-one vinyl replacements. A small, one-story enclosed porch extends off the rear ell on its east elevation. The east side yard is largely enclosed by a chain-link fence and is largely paved as an asphalt driveway with curb-cut at the street.



78 Otis Street façade and entry, April 2026.



78 Otis Street façade and east side elevation, April 2026.

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 property at 78 Otis Street was constructed in 1860 for William Longshaw (1811-1877), an English-born druggist, who emigrated to the United States in 1842 with his wife, Margaret, and son, William Longshaw, Jr. The family arrived in Lowell, Massachusetts and had their second son, Luther M. Longshaw there in 1843. The family eventually moved to Cambridge and moved into the new house at 78 Otis Street in 1860.

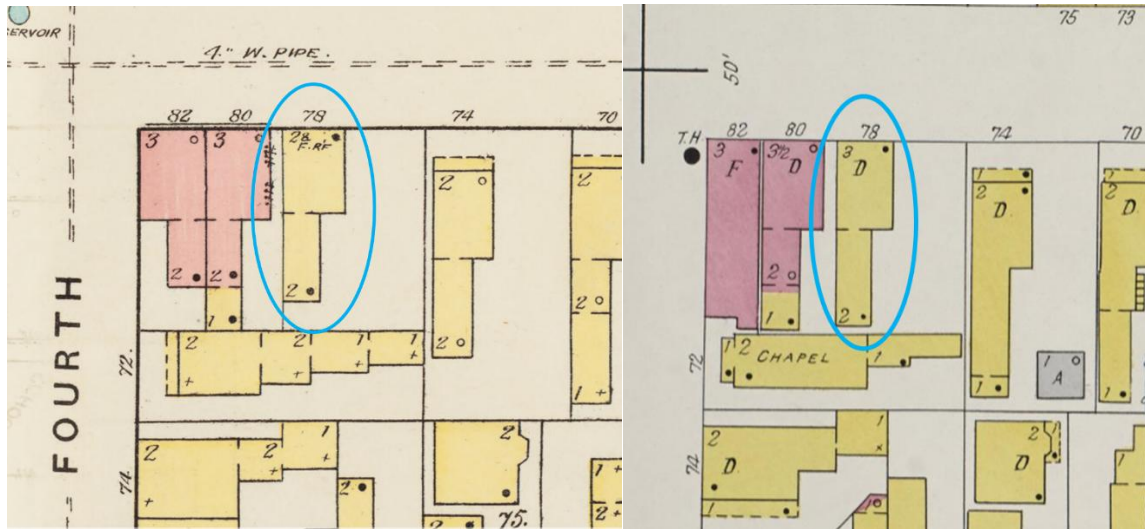
That same year, 21-year-old William Longshaw Jr. (1836-1865), who recently graduated from the University of Michigan with a medical degree, was invited to embark as surgeon and naturalist of the 1860 polar expedition led by Isaac Israel Hayes, to discover the North Pole. Like other expeditions before them, their journey was eventually terminated due to the terrain, harsh climate, and dwindling food supplies. The ship sailed back to Greenland where they learned that the United States had descended into a civil war. Longshaw enlisted as an Assistant Surgeon with the Navy and was stationed at the Boston Navy Yard in Charlestown, a short distance to his parent's home in East Cambridge. After multiple deployments, Longshaw died in battle at Fort Fisher in 1865. Naval Officer Thomas O. Selfridge, later chronicled:

"While kept under the walls of the fort, I was an eyewitness to an act of heroism on the part of Asst. Surg. William Longshaw, a young officer of the medical staff, whose memory should ever be kept green by his corps, and which deserves more than this passing notice. A sailor, too severely wounded to help himself, had fallen close to the water's edge and with the rising tide would have drowned. Dr. Longshaw, at the peril of his life, went to his assistance and dragged him beyond the incoming tide. At this moment he heard a cry from a wounded marine, one of a small group who, behind a little hillock of sand close to the parapet, kept up a fire upon the enemy. Longshaw ran to his assistance and while attending to his wounds was shot dead. What made the action of this young officer even more heroic was that on the very day he had received a leave of absence but had postponed his departure to volunteer for the assault."



William Longshaw Jr., c.1862.
United States Naval Medical
Bulletin, October 1913.

Back in Cambridge, the Longshaw House was occupied by William Longshaw Sr. until his death in 1877; Margaret, his widow, until her death in 1896; and their surviving son, Luther, who sold the property by 1897. 78 Otis Street was purchased by Jeremiah T. O’Leary, a letter carrier with the United States Post Office, who rented another unit in the building. In 1897, O’Leary hired local East Cambridge architect/builder, John Muldoon, to enlarge the house, converting the former mansard roof into a proper third floor. Later owners of 78 Otis Street include Joseph Chebator (1875-1935), a Lithuanian-born steamfitter, and Aniello Imperato, a laborer born in Campania, Italy. Aniello Imperato had the property renovated in 1937, adding a third floor to the rear ell, also covering the building in shingles with wood shingle siding on the front and east side elevations and asbestos on the west side and rear. In 1986, the building was covered in vinyl siding and at this time, the windows were replaced and Victorian door hood was removed.



78 Otis Street in Sanborn maps dated 1885 (left) showing “two-story French Roof” and 1934 (right) after full third-story conversion.



78 Otis Street.

CHC Photo, 1967.

Significance and Recommendation:

The Longshaw House at 78 Otis Street is automatically significant for the purposes of the demolition permit review ordinance as a contributing building within 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 applicant intends to partially demolish the existing structure with the intention of converting it to a four-story multi-family residential building.

Staff recommends that the Commission consider finding the existing building “not preferably preserved” in the context of the proposed remodeling plans as in its current form the structure at 78 Otis Street is a heavily altered detached residence that has lost nearly all of its original fabric.

cc: Peter McLaughlin, Cambridge Inspectional Services Department Commissioner
David P. Kennedy, Trustee of 78 Otis Street Realty Trust
Khalsa Design, Architects