



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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October 5, 2021

To: Members of the Cambridge Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director

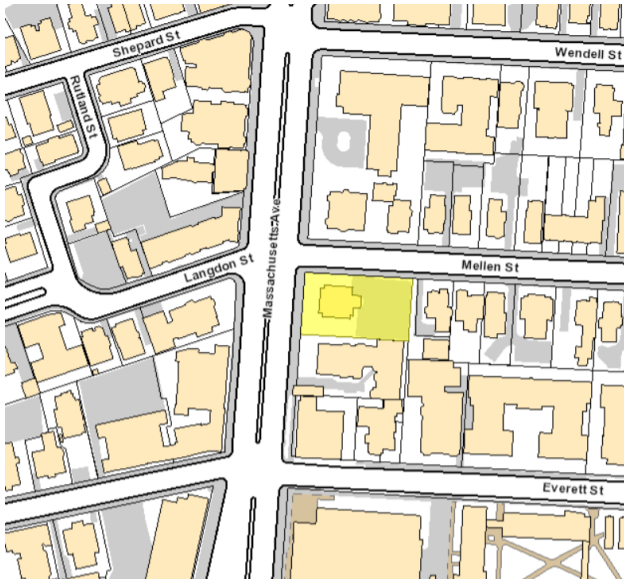
Re: 1627 Massachusetts Avenue, proposed Landmark Designation Study

The Charles Hicks Saunders house at 1627 Massachusetts Avenue was constructed by a merchant and future mayor of Cambridge in 1862-63. It was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 as an important example of the Second Empire style and because of its associations with the Saunders family.



Cambridge Assessors, 2013

The property at 1627 Massachusetts Avenue consists of a 14,400 square foot lot on the south corner of Mellen Street (Assessors map 157/1) with an assessed value of \$3.4 million. The lot has 90' of frontage on the avenue and 160' on Mellen Street. The zoning is C-2A, a multi-family residential district with a height limit of 60' and an FAR of 2.5. At an allowed maximum of 145 dwelling units per acre, the lot could theoretically accommodate 48 units. Slightly more than half of the lot is currently paved and used for parking. Preservation of the Saunders house as a landmark would not preclude appropriate development of the parking lot for housing, either in a separate building or as an addition to the house, as recently seen at 1791 Massachusetts Avenue.



Cambridge Assessors



NearMap.com, 2021

History and Significance

After railroad passenger service began at Porter Square in 1842, North Avenue (as Massachusetts Avenue was then called) became one of the most prestigious addresses in Cambridge. Numerous businessmen, many of whom commuted into Boston, built mansions on the avenue, and until 1910 the stretch from Cambridge Common to Upland Road was entirely residential and mostly single-family in character.



Massachusetts Avenue looking north from the Little Common about 1875.

CHC

On the east side, Everett, Mellen and Wendell streets were laid out in 1847, but the Massachusetts Avenue frontage remained undeveloped until the early 1860s. In 1862 Charles Hicks Saunders acquired the south corner lot at Mellen Street and built one of the most ambitious Second Empire style houses in Cambridge. Featuring a deeply concave Mansard roof with a split gable and arched dormers, an elaborate bracketed cornice, and a full-width porch, with all its original exterior features intact, the Saunders house is the finest remaining Mansard on the avenue.

Charles Hicks Saunders (1821-1901), a hardware merchant in Boston and Mayor of Cambridge in 1868-69, was a son of William Saunders (1787-1861), a housewright who was responsible for some of the most important Federal period houses in Cambridge. William's sons included William Augustus (1818-1899), a builder and Alderman, George Savil (1823-1909), a merchant and President of the Common Council, Francis (1826-1911), a merchant in Harvard Square, and Horace (1830-1902), a dealer in real estate. A daughter, Sarah Ann, died in 1893. Almost all the sons were also builders and speculators in real estate.

The Charles Hicks Saunders house was described in *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development* (pp. 510-511):

One of the finest surviving examples of this type is 1627 Massachusetts Avenue, now owned by Lesley University. Built for Charles Hicks Saunders, a Boston hardware merchant elected mayor of Cambridge in 1868, this house set a new standard for ambitious Mansard mansions on the avenue (figure 6.91). One of the builders penciled an unusual record of its history on a shingle found inside a door jamb:

This House is now being finished by J.H. Littlefield for Charles H. Saunders. It was commenced July 1862 and is to be completed April 1 1863. The cost of the House exclusive of the land will be \$6500.00, Land value \$3500.00, Total \$10,000. Our country is now engaged in Civil War and has 700,000 men in the military service. ... Cambridge has thus far sent 1950 men to the war. Jan. 20, 1863.

Joseph H. Littlefield (1830–1904), a Maine native, was listed as a builder in Cambridge directories from 1850 to 1864 and as an architect in Boston from 1872 to 1876. His most important commission in Cambridge was the 1874 City Building in Brattle Square. The house he built for Saunders followed the familiar three-bay center entrance plan with an unusual level of decorative detail for the early 1860s, including at least five patterns of complex brackets and dentils. A three-bay porch with chamfered posts and segmental arched struts led to double entrance doors with decorative cut and etched glass panels. Because of the prominent corner site, ornament continued on the side elevations with bay windows and dormers with elaborate scrollwork. The interior was richly appointed with a gracefully curving staircase and eight-sided newel, wide plaster cornices and ceiling medallions, white marble parlor mantels, and a parquet floor (figure 6.92). The excellent 19th-century cast iron fence with granite posts and base is a rare survivor.

Context

The Charles Hicks Saunders house is at the center of the most significant remaining group of north Avenue mansions. Across the avenue, the Nathaniel Sawin house at 1626 Massachusetts Avenue on the corner of Langdon Street was designated a Cambridge Landmark in 1981. In 2007 the Harvard

Law School relocated the Alden Keen (1876) and the D. Gilbert Dexter houses (1875) to the corner of Mellen Street, which had formerly been occupied by the parking lot of a former Holiday Inn. To the east, Mellen Street displays a number of late 19th-century houses that have been maintained in near-original condition by Lesley University. Lesley has recently placed these houses on the market. Preservation of the Saunders house is essential to maintain the architectural character of this enclave.



1626 Massachusetts Avenue (left), 1627 Massachusetts Avenue (left center), and Mellen Street. NearMap, 2021

Designation of Landmarks

Ch. 2.78, Art. III of the City Code provides that the Historical Commission on its own may initiate the process of designating a landmark (2.180.D):

Prior to the recommendation of designation or amendment of designation of any landmark ... an investigation and report on the historical, architectural and other relevant significance thereof shall be made. The report shall recommend the boundaries of any proposed landmark ... and shall recommend for incorporation in the order of the City Council designating each landmark ... general and/or specific standards and appropriate criteria consistent with the purposes of this article ... (2.180.B)

Relationship of the Property to Criteria for Landmark Designation

The enabling ordinance for landmark designation states:

The Historical Commission by majority vote may recommend for designation as a landmark any property within the City being or containing a place, structure, feature or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of its period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures ... (Chapter 2.78.180.A).

The Charles Hicks Saunders house meets criterion (1) of the enabling ordinance for its important associations with Mayor Saunders and the evolution of North Avenue, and criterion (2) as one of the finest remaining examples of the Second Empire style in Cambridge.

Rationale for Initiation of a Landmark Designation Study

On September 30, Lesley University announced that several Cambridge properties, including 1627 Massachusetts Avenue, were no longer needed for academic purposes and were being offered for sale.

Preservation of the remaining North Avenue mansions has been a priority of the Cambridge Historical Commission since the late 1970s, when the demolition of the first Nathaniel Sawin house and The Greycroft at the corner of Chauncy Street caused the City Council to adopt the first demolition delay ordinance in Massachusetts. The generous zoning and large size of the lot places the Saunders house at risk, although the same factors would also make possible the accommodation of new housing in an addition or in a separate building. The recent announcement by Lesley University of the impending sale of 7, 9, 11, 13 and 17-21 Mellen Street, all of which are regarded as significant, threatens the context of the Saunders house, but these can be protected through demolition delay if necessary.

Initiation of a landmark designation study would protect the property for up to a year while the Commission prepares a recommendation to the City Council. During the study period the property is protected as though it were already designated. The owner may at any time during the study apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness to alter the property; although the Commission will not have determined the specific goals and guidelines that would result from the designation study, changes to the property may still take place if found appropriate.

Recommendation

Initiation of a landmark designation study for 1627 Massachusetts Avenue would protect this significant resource while the owner negotiates its sale. A motion to initiate the study should recognize the appropriateness of the property for residential development along with preservation of the Saunders house.

This matter arose too late to be publicly advertised for the current meeting of the commission. If the Commission votes to initiate a study on October 7 a public hearing will be scheduled for November 4, 2021 to review and confirm its decision.

cc: Jan Devereaux, Lesley University
Louis DePasquale, City Manager
Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services Commissioner