



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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August 8, 2025

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director

Re: **Case 5326: 17 Story Street (aka 127 Mt Auburn St.) and 129 Mt Auburn St., by 17 Story Street, LLC.** Demolish 129 Mt. Auburn. Relocate and restore 17 Story Street. Construct hotel/residential building.

Case L-148: 17 Story Street. Consider petition to initiate a landmark study

On July 21, 2025, CHC staff received a petition requesting that the Commission initiate a landmark designation study of the James Monroe Jr.-Harriet Jacobs House at 17 Story Street. The Election Commission confirmed that all but two of the 44 signatories were registered voters in Cambridge, substantially exceeding the minimum of thirty signatures now required by the City Code. CHC staff notified the owners and advertised the petition for the August 14 meeting of the Commission, which had already been scheduled to hear a request for a Certificate of Appropriateness to demolish 129 Mt. Auburn Street, relocate and restore 17 Story Street, and construct a combined hotel and residential structure.

The text of the petition and a staff memo on the history and significance of 17 Story Street and 129 Mt. Auburn Street are attached.



129 Mt. Auburn Street and 17 Story Street

CHC photo, August 2025

Context

CHC staff have long been concerned with the deteriorating condition of the house at 17 Story Street. Designed by William Hovey in the Regency Style, it was erected by bookseller James Monroe Jr. in 1845. It became a boarding house about 1865, and in 1870 it was expanded with a Mansard roof. The building gained significance by its subsequent association with Harriet Jacobs, an escaped slave and author who managed the property as a residence for Harvard professors and local businessmen, some of whom followed her from her previous establishment on Trowbridge Street. After Ms. Jacobs moved to Washington, D.C. in 1875, the building continued as a boarding house or rooming house until 1957, when it was converted to office use. A later owner built the three-decker at 129 Mt. Auburn Street in the front yard in 1911.

From the 1960s until 2020, when the current owners acquired the property, the building received only minimal maintenance and appeared to be in danger of demolition by neglect. In 2018 CHC staff began to receive inquiries about redevelopment possibilities. Callers were informed about the significance of 17 Story Street and advised that it was a significant property within the Harvard Square Conservation where it is subject to review for alterations, demolition, and new construction.

Over the course of discussions with at least three potential purchasers as well as with the present owner, CHC staff accepted the premise that the capital requirements to restore 17 Story Street could only be met by redevelopment of the site; that significant advantages for redevelopment could be gained if the three-decker at 129 Mt. Auburn Street were removed; that the site could not be redeveloped if 17 Story Street remained in its present location on the lot; and that 17 Story Street could advantageously and appropriately be moved to the corner of Mt. Auburn and Story streets.

CHC staff has explored variations of this concept with several different architects since 2018. The current proposal, which involves demolition of 129 Mt. Auburn Street, relocation and restoration of 17 Story Street, and construction of a new structure that combines a hotel with residential dwelling units, some of them affordable, differs from previous proposals in significant ways because of the zoning amendments adopted in February 2025. A community group, the Harriet Jacobs Legacy Committee, has been discussing interior arrangements and potential uses of the interior with the proponents of the development.

Under the current zoning code, the project does not require variances or special permits but must undergo staff review at the Community Development Department for compliance with sustainability standards and other regulatory requirements.

Historical Commission Jurisdiction

Both 17 Story and 129 Mt. Auburn Street were included in the Harvard Square Conservation District in 2000, giving the Commission jurisdiction over the publicly visible aspects of exterior alterations, additions, demolition and new construction. Subsequent to the 2023 amendments to the NCD Ordinance, Ch. 2.78, Art. III, the Commission has no authority to consider the size and shape of new construction or additions and cannot adopt requirements more stringent than those allowed by zoning. The Commission does, however, retain jurisdiction over the demolition of 129 Mt. Auburn, the relocation and alterations of 17 Story Street, and the exterior appearance of the proposed new construction. Under no circumstances may the Commission consider interior features or uses of the property.

The 2023 amendments to the enabling ordinance did not change the jurisdiction of the Commission regarding landmarks. The Commission retains jurisdiction over the size and shape of additions and new construction on the premises of designated landmarks and may make conditions

more restrictive than zoning. This authority goes into effect upon acceptance of a petition and exists for the duration of a study period, during which an owner is free to apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness. Permanent landmark jurisdiction would depend upon City Council enactment of the designation, which cannot be taken for granted. If the Council did not designate the property, jurisdiction would revert to the conservation district level of protection at the expiration of the study period.

Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks may be designated by the City Council upon the recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission may commence a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of at least thirty registered voters. The Superior Court has found that the Commission can use its discretion to decline petitions which it determines are unnecessary or duplicative.¹

The purpose of landmark designation is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City; to improve the quality of its built environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, areas, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic, racial, or social history of the City; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas or structures; to welcome a diverse set of residents and broaden appreciation for individuals with marginalized identities who have shaped Cambridge's history; and by furthering these purposes in balance with other City priorities such as affordable housing construction, environmental sustainability, and accessibility to promote the public welfare by making the City a more attractive, desirable, affordable, diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive place in which to live and work (2.78.140).

The procedure for initiating a landmark designation study is outlined in Section 2.78.180.D of the City Code:

Any thirty registered voters of the City may petition that the Historical Commission initiate, or the Historical Commission on its own may initiate, the process of designating a landmark or amending or rescinding any such designation theretofore made. ... The Commission shall within sixty days following the filing of such request or petition hold a preliminary hearing If a petition for a landmark designation is not accepted by the Historical Commission ... the Historical Commission shall not reconsider a proposed designation, amendment or rescission of designation within two years of its previous hearing thereon.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible landmark properties as:

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

¹ *Gladys P. Gifford and Others vs. Cambridge Historical Commission*, Middlesex Superior Court Civil Action No. 17-00372.

(2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of 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 ... (2.78.180.A)

Relationship to Criteria

CHC staff agrees that the Monroe-Jacobs house meets criterion (1) for its associations with historic persons as well as with the social history of Cambridge, and criterion (2) as “architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder).”

Staff Recommendation

The Monroe-Jacobs house is already substantially protected by the Harvard Square Neighborhood Conservation District. The Commission has jurisdiction over the relocation, alteration, and restoration of the house as proposed by the applicants in Case 5326. Designation of the property as a landmark would add jurisdiction over the size and shape of the new construction, but this may not be necessary if the Commission grants a Certificate of Appropriateness for the project as proposed or as may be subsequently altered at the request of the Commission. Landmark designation studies require a significant investment of staff time and a recommended designation cannot go into effect without a majority vote of the City Council.

The staff recommends that the Commission consider the petition in the context of the proposed project. If the Commission decides that the proposed project is eligible for a Certificate of Appropriateness as designed, or as might be modified at the suggestion of the Commission, the Commission should decline to accept the petition.

James Munroe Jr. House, 127 Mt. Auburn Street



James Munroe Jr. House, 127 Mt. Auburn Street (1845, William Hovey, Architect). CHC photo, 2016.

The James Munroe Jr. house at 127 Mt. Auburn Street is a rare surviving example of a Regency Style residence in Cambridge. Enlarged with a Mansard roof in 1870 and embellished with bay windows about 1890, it served the university community as a boarding house for faculty and students until converted to office use in 1957. Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897), who managed the boarding house in 1872-75, is notable as the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and for the important educational and service work she did during and immediately after the Civil War to aid refugees and newly freed Americans.

127 Mt. Auburn Street and the Regency Style²

A few houses built in Old Cambridge during the 1830s and '40s followed a form of the Classical Revival style that was related to the English Regency period of the early 1800s. These flush-boarded houses had cube-like massing, low hip or gabled roofs, and broad pilasters without capitals repeated across the facade. This conservative, academic style was found primarily in the Boston area but also occasionally along the Maine coast. ...

² Excerpted from Susan Maycock and Charles Sullivan, *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development* (MIT Press, 2016)

The earliest Cambridge example is the house that William Saunders built for Daniel Treadwell in 1838, now Harvard's Sparks House. Treadwell, an engineer whose inventions equipped the ropewalk at the Charlestown Navy Yard, was appointed Rumford Professor at Harvard in 1834 and supervised construction of Gore Hall in 1837. A trip to England in 1835 to gather material for his lectures may have influenced his choice of the Regency style for his new house. The wide pilasters form a subtle rhythm with the flush boarding of the walls but were not intended to be perceived as Greek columns. A deeply recessed entrance and a low hip roof with four tall chimneys completed the composition, which was originally painted tan to resemble stone. While fewer than a dozen of these broad-pilastered houses were built in Cambridge, Treadwell was responsible for two of them. In 1847 he sold his place to Nathaniel Silsbee and hired Saunders to build a similar house at 29 Concord Avenue. Silsbee's daughter was married to Professor Jared Sparks, and when Sparks became president of Harvard in 1849 Silsbee passed it to them.



Treadwell-Sparks house (1838, William Saunders, builder). Harvard moved the house to 21 Kirkland Street in 1968 to build Gund Hall.



Professor Daniel Treadwell house, 29 Concord Avenue (1847, William A. Saunders, housewright; demolished 1959). Photo ca. 1938

Many of the same features, including cast-iron balconies, elaborate capitals, and fluted columns, ornamented another high-style example at 127 Mt. Auburn on the west corner of Story Street. Designed in 1845 by architect William Hovey for James Munroe Jr., a Harvard Square bookseller, the three-bay, broad-pilastered house resembled the 1838 Treadwell-Sparks house until a Mansard roof and brackets were added in 1869-70. The elegantly recessed entrance, reached by a fine granite stair, once had two fluted columns with capitals based on those at the Temple of the Winds at the Acropolis surmounted by wreaths. The columns were removed after 1957, but the wreaths survive, as do the wrought iron balconies and smoothly-dressed granite foundation.



James Munroe Jr. house, 127 Mt. Auburn St. (1845, William Hovey, architect). The Mansard roof and brackets were added ca. 1868. The entrance columns with acanthus capitals were removed in the 1960s. Photo ca. 1950.

Before the office conversion the interior trim was solidly Greek Revival with heavy woodwork and acanthus designs; a black marble mantel in the right drawing room resembled one in the Sparks house. The monumental staircase from the first to the third floor appears to date with the Mansard roof ca. 1870.



James Munroe Jr. house, 127 Mt. Auburn Street. Portico with fluted columns, Temple of the Winds capitals, and wreaths. D. Wetherell photo, ca. 1935.

A more modest 1851 Regency house on the other side of Story Street also faced Mt. Auburn; it had a pedimented gable, deep projecting cornices, and wide pilasters on the flush-boarded facade, but an Italianate bracketed hood over the main entrance.



James Munroe and Adam Cottrell houses in 1854. H.F. Walling, Map of Cambridge



Adam Cottrell house, 18 Story Street (1851; demolished 1953). Photo 1947.

History of the James Munroe Jr. House

The James Munroe Jr. house sits on its original finely-dressed granite foundation at a substantial distance from Mt. Auburn Street. In 1846 Munroe contracted with builders Nathaniel Stickney and Francis Winn to build a house designed by Cambridge architect William Hovey (1812-1881), who often partnered with Calvin Ryder in designing houses in a range of styles for Cambridge's prosperous middle class.

James Munroe Jr. was a bookseller who occupied the house with his wife and two daughters until his death in 1855. Twelve years later, his daughters sold the property to Harriet Morgan, who with her husband Alfred operated several properties as boarding houses both before and after buying 127 Mt. Auburn Street. There was a steady demand in Cambridge for short-term living situations for both faculty members and students, few of whom could find places in college quarters. Boarding houses competed vigorously on the strength of their accommodations and cuisine, and played a major role in the college social scene until the advent of the house system forced undergraduates into dormitories.

Mrs. Morgan, who owned 127 Mt. Auburn Street from 1865 until 1879, also leased the William Brattle House at 42 Brattle Street during this period and apparently lived there while she rented the Munroe house or hired individuals who operated it on her behalf. Among these was Harriet Jacobs, the escaped slave and author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, who came to Cambridge about 1869 and initially operated a boarding house at 10 Trowbridge Street. About 1872 she took over 127 Mt. Auburn Street and ran it until 1875. After Mrs. Jacobs relocated to Washington, D.C. Mrs. Morgan continued to run the property as a boarding house until she defaulted on the mortgage in 1879 and entered bankruptcy in 1880. Nevertheless, she continued to operate a summer hotel in Swampscott and maintained a presence at 127 Mt. Auburn at least through the end of that academic year. Morgan, who had divorced her husband in 1878, continued to operate boarding houses and small hotels until her death in 1893.

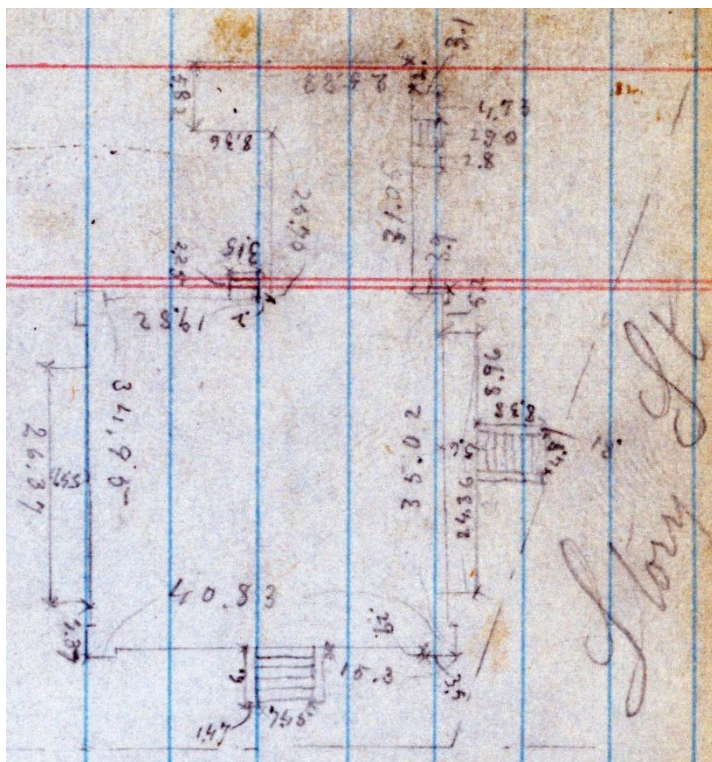
The new owner of 127 Mt. Auburn Street was Eliza Jane Stimson Levy (1840-1923), a daughter of James Stimson, who had loaned Harriet Morgan the funds to buy the property in 1865. Levy

foreclosed the mortgage in 1879 and thenceforth held the property in her own name. Eliza lived in Lexington and Boston with her husband Jules J. Levy (1829-1891), a French Army veteran and language professor. She continued to rent out the property, at least once advertising it as “an attractive, sunny house of fifteen rooms, in perfect repair, modern improvements, handsome grounds with shrubs and trees (some fruit)” for \$900 a year (Cambridge Tribune, June 4, 1892).

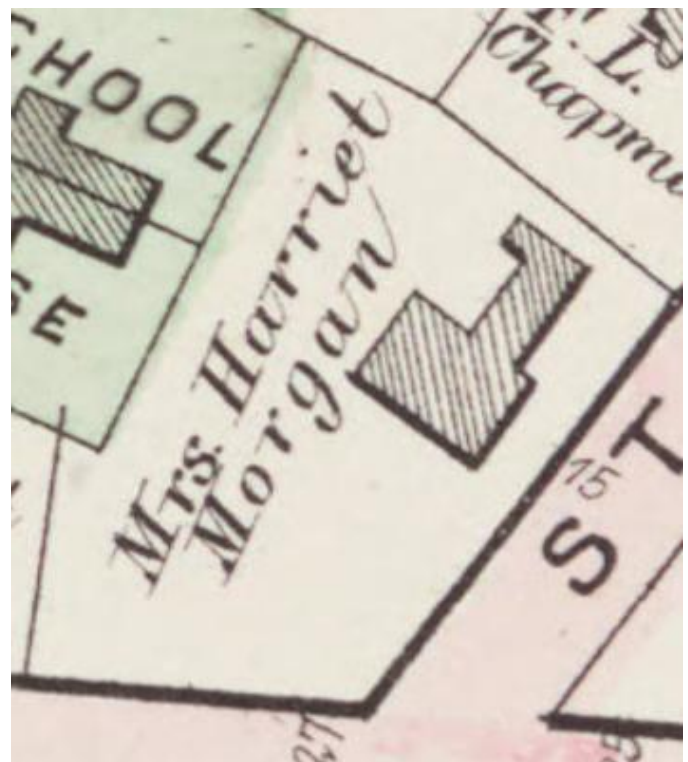
In 1911 Levy sold the property, containing 17,600 square feet of land and two buildings, to Michael O’Sullivan, a general contractor. O’Sullivan immediately built the six-family three-decker at 129 Mt. Auburn Street, while he and his son George continued to operate 127 as a boarding house. The O’Sullivan’s continued the properties in residential use until 1957, when they received a variance to convert them to office use.

Evolution of 127 Mt. Auburn Street

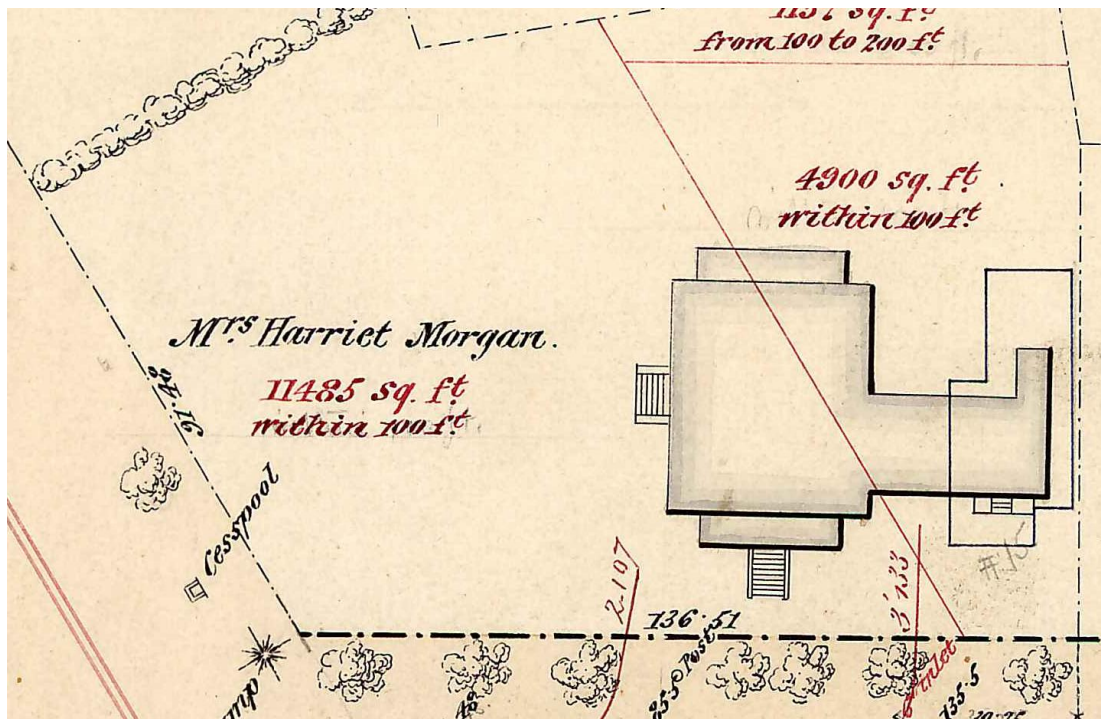
When originally constructed, both the Munroe and Cottrell houses sat on large lots facing southwest with expansive views of the Charles River. The Munroe house, with four spacious rooms on each on the two main floors, had obvious economic potential as a boarding house when Harvard’s enrollment grew after the Civil War. As recorded by the City Engineer in 1870, the footprint measured 35’ deep and 40’ wide, with a 28’ by 30’ ell projecting from the rear. There were porticos on both the east and west elevations, with flights of steps leading to the east portico and the present center entrance.



Surveyed footprint, 1870. Not to scale; measurements in tenths on a foot. Cambridge City Engineer, House Book 2/20



G. M. Hopkins, Atlas of the City of Cambridge, Mass. 1873



City Engineer, Story Street Sewer Plan, 1871. The plan shows the outline of the ell that was relocated to 15 Story Street in 1882.

The Mansard roof appears to have been added in 1869-71. The Morgans received \$3,000 in the sale of a parcel on Hilliard Street in 1869 and may have applied the proceeds to the project noted by the Assessors in 1872 as "House enlarged." At this point, the assessment was raised from \$12,500 to \$15,000, an increase roughly proportional to the addition of approximately 1,400 square feet to a 4,500 square foot house. The extraordinarily broad and well detailed staircase, which extends full-width to the new third floor, exemplifies the importance of the addition to the operation of the house.



127 Mt. Auburn Street. Staircase from second to third floor, ca. 1870. CHC photo, 2023

The second major alteration to the house occurred in 1882, when the Levys detached the 28' by 31' ell and apparently remodeled it as a separate house at 15 Story Street. This reduced the assessed value of the older house from \$12,500 to \$7,500, while the new house was assessed at \$5,400. The new ell at 127 Mt. Auburn Street measured only 6' deep and extended about 20' across the rear of the old house.

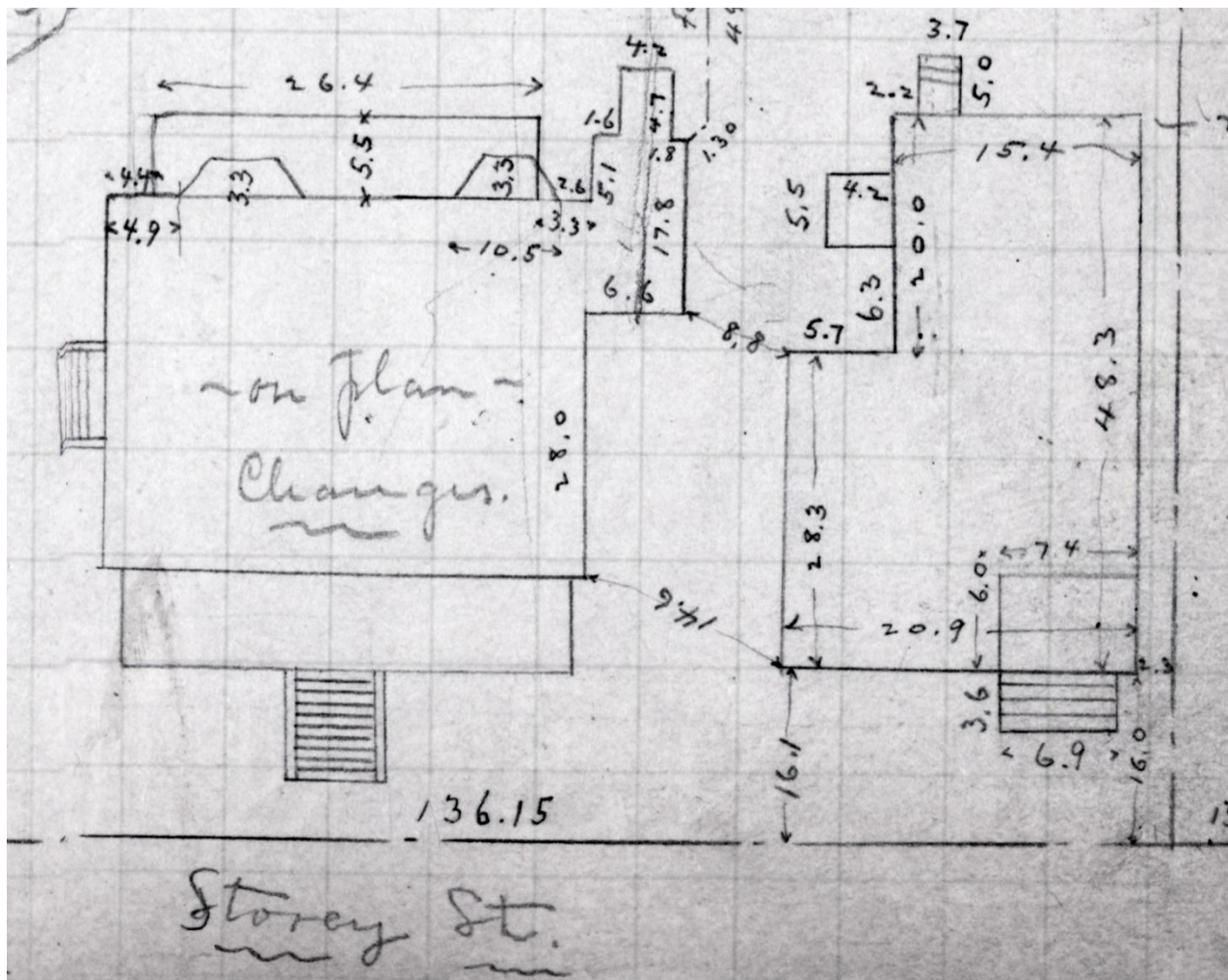


127 Mt. Auburn Street and 15 Story Street, 1886. G.M. Hopkins, Atlas of the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts



127 Mt. Auburn Street and 15 Story Street, 1900. Sanborn-Perris Map Co.

Another alteration that may have occurred at this time was the addition of two full-height bay windows on the west side and one on the second floor of the east side. The west portico must have been removed at this time, while the east portico remained in truncated fashion. (Another possibility is that the bay windows on the west side were originally built above the portico on the second level only, and later extended to grade.) Although this alteration was not recorded by the City Engineer until 1895, it must have occurred before building permits were instituted in 1886.



127 Mt. Auburn and 15 Story Streets, Surveyed footprints, 1895. Not to scale; measurements in tenths on a foot.
Cambridge City Engineer, House Book 33/56



127 Mt. Auburn Street. Bay windows added ca. 1890 on the west elevation, in part replacing the original portico.
CHC photo, 2023

Two more alterations took place in the 20th century. In 1930 the O’Sullivans received a permit to “take down the glass side of the sun parlor and board it up” (BP 33108); this must have been the remains of the east portico, elements of which may survive in the one-story structure facing Story Street. Finally, in 1958 the initial office tenant, Techbuilt, appears to have removed the columns flanking the front door and installed a Modernist screen to mark the entrance.



127 Mt. Auburn Street, ca. 1965. CHC photo by Bonnie Orr.

While 127 Mt. Auburn Street has been altered several times, it retains architectural significance both as an example of the Regency Style and for the alterations that were made to enhance its economic utility in post-Civil War Cambridge. Any further alterations should respect significant features of the structure. Ideally, the missing columns at the entrance would be replaced and the exterior finishes and materials, including the massive granite blocks of the foundation, restored.

Cambridge Historical Commission
December 28, 2023

(original)

Protected Landmark Petition: 17 Story Street

DATE: 7/21/25

To: The Cambridge Historical Commission
Mr. Bruce A. Irwin, Chairman
Mr. Charles M. Sullivan, Executive Director
831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Floor
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

RECEIVED

JUL 21 2025

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL
COMMISSION

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND SIGNIFICANCE

WHEREAS: 17 Story Street (1846), a rare Regency Style house with Greek Revival pillars and a Mansard roof, is historically significant as the former home of Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897), the author of the important slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, and although she escaped in 1835, she and her two children were not officially free until 1852. In 1871, Jacobs moved to Cambridge and ran the first of two boarding houses, 10 Trowbridge Street, for Harvard students and faculty, the second of which was 17 Story Street, where she moved in 1873 and lived with her daughter, Louisa Jacobs, until 1877.

WHEREAS: A number of distinguished Harvard faculty members boarded at 17 Story Street, such as the philosopher and mathematician Chauncey Wright (1830-1875), geologist and explorer Raphael Pumpelly (1837-1923), jurist and Dean of Harvard Law School Christopher Columbus Langdell (1826-1906), and journalist and rhetorician Adams Sherman Hill (1833-1910). The historian Henry Adams (1838-1918) also boarded at 17 Story Street after his studies at Harvard. This information is drawn from "Harriet Jacobs House Imagined Conversations," a class project in "Hist 12M/160: Abolitionist Women and Their Worlds," taught by Tiya Miles, Michael Garvey Professor of History, Department of History, Harvard University.

WHEREAS: A historical marker on the property, installed by the Cambridge Historical Commission in 1993, affirms the significance of 17 Story Street to Cambridge residents and visitors as a landmark of Black history.

CURRENT THREATS

WHEREAS: 17 Story Street is a key part of the Harvard Square Cultural area, and this area is rapidly undergoing significant change that risks depriving Cambridge of one of its most interesting of historic sites. In April 2020, 17 Story Street and 127-129 Mt. Auburn Street (1912) were purchased by developer Janet Jiang at First Cambridge Capital for \$16.1 million, with the proposed plan of building what was originally described as a boutique hotel; and

WHEREAS: Current designs for the project no longer indicate a “boutique” hotel at 100-plus rooms, and are incompatible with the scale and historic nature of the neighborhood, which it would disturb dramatically. Even where there are buildings with non-residential uses, such as 17 Mt. Auburn Street, these once comprised residential units and their appearance corresponds to the neighborhood. An oversized hotel or hotel-type structure at this location would reduce the neighborhood and long-term residential feel at this site.

WHEREAS: The hotel project would potentially destroy the scale and charm of 17 Story Street by forcing it into an incongruous use jammed against a much larger unrelated hotel building, gutting 17 Story Street in a way that would damage its historic character, thus impeding the preservation of a key landmark of Black history in Cambridge.

WHEREAS: Cambridge citizens have shown concern for the potential homogenization of architecture and use in this neighborhood, as seen in the Preliminary Report of the 2017-19 Harvard Conservation District Study Committee, updated July 19, 2019, page 51, which states that “Perhaps the most vulnerable site in the subdistrict is the 14,000 sq. foot. property that contains 17 Story Street (1846) and 127-129 Mt. Auburn Street (1912). The house at 17 Story is a rare Regency Style house that is historically significant as the home late in life of Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897), author of the slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The Jacobs house awkwardly shares the lot with a 1912 three-decker and suffers from years of deferred maintenance. It shares a C-2 residential zoning district with the west side of Story Street, which would allow much greater density and height than the present buildings.”

(<https://www.cambridgema.gov/historic/districtsHistoricProperties/harvardsquarencd/harvardsquareconservationdistrictstudycommittee>)

LANDMARK DESIGNATIONS

WHEREAS: Protecting 17 Story Street with local landmark status will enable its unique qualities to be maintained for the benefit of all Cambridge and would “foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge” of its importance; and

WHEREAS: The City of Cambridge has yet to afford official recognition and protected status of 17 Story Street, leaving it vulnerable to demolition or significant alteration, so

THEREFORE do we, the undersigned registered voters of the City of Cambridge, pursuant to Ordinance 1002, Article III, Section 180(D) of Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge Municipal Code, hereby respectfully pray that the Cambridge Historical Commission initiate with all possible haste the process of designating 17 Story Street as a protected landmark of the City of Cambridge.

[Signature pages not included.]