



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Gavin W. Kleespies, Paula A. Paris, Kyle Sheffield, *Alternates*

June 9, 2025 (corrected version)

To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Case 5307: James M. Robbins house, 15 Mt Auburn St., by President & Fellows of Harvard College. Demolish existing building and construct new 3-story building.

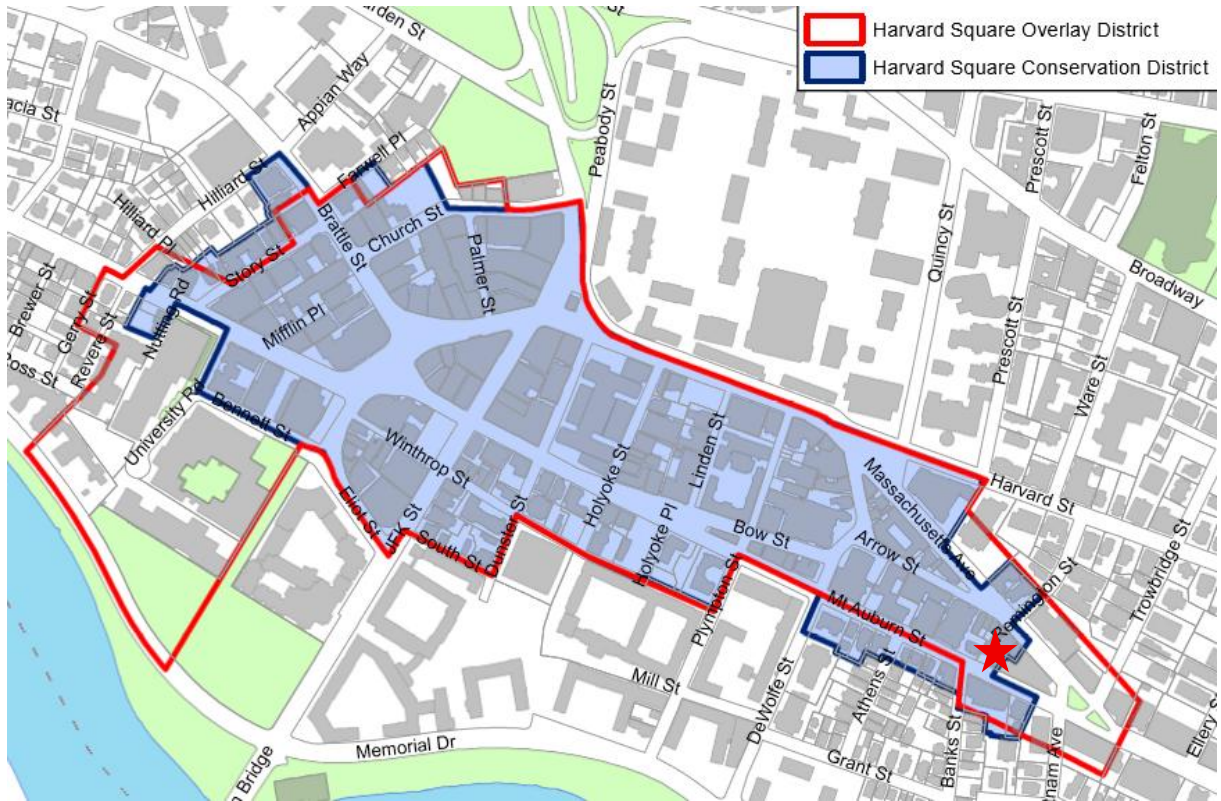
Harvard University has filed an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness to raze the building at 15 Mt. Auburn Street in the Harvard Square Conservation District and construct a new office building. The building, as well as its neighbors at 9 and 11 Mt. Auburn, are also protected by a preservation restriction granted in perpetuity by a former owner in 1989



15 Mt. Auburn Street

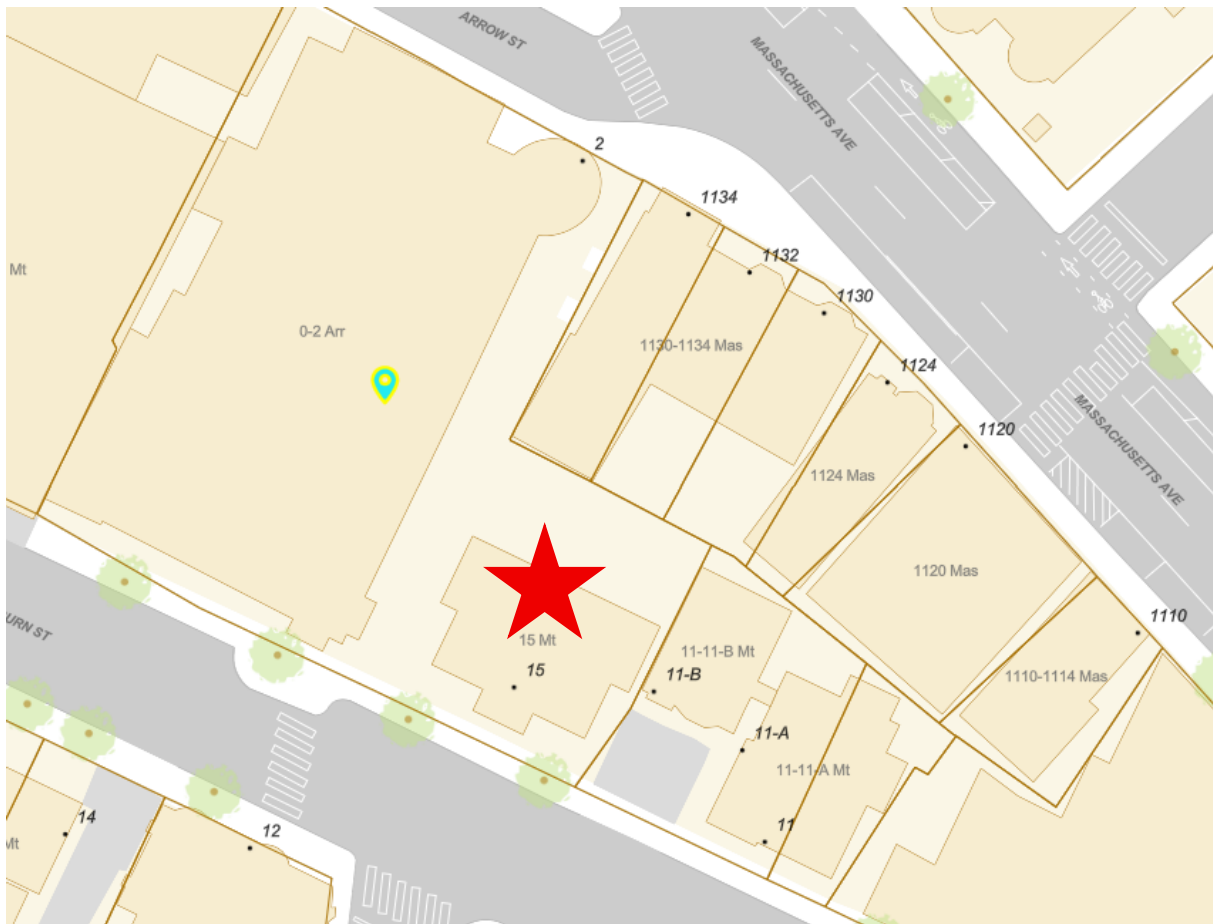
Google Street View, 2020

The building at 15 Mt. Auburn Street occupies a portion of a 18,632 square-foot lot (133/36) on the north side of Mt. Auburn Street, between Putman Avenue and DeWolf Street, the majority of which is occupied by the theater and office building at Two Arrow Street. The two-story frame Mansard was originally constructed as a two-family house. The zoning is Office O-3, which permits offices and multifamily dwellings with an 80' height limit. The location in the Harvard Square Overlay District also requires review by the Harvard Square Advisory Committee, which conducts Large Project reviews and advises the Planning Board.



Harvard Square Conservation District and Harvard Square [Zoning] Overlay District

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Jurisdiction Under a Façade Preservation Easement Currently in Effect

The building at 15 Mt. Auburn Street, as well as its neighbors at 9 and 11 Mt. Auburn (“the Buildings”), were protected in 1989 by perpetual preservation restrictions granted pursuant with an agreement with the Cambridge Historical Commission that allowed the significant building formerly at 17 Mt. Auburn to be demolished and the building formerly at 19 Mt. Auburn to be moved to its current site at 11. The donors, the Gunwyn Company for 9 and 11 and Graham Gund himself for number 15, were engaged in site assembly for the property now occupied by the building at Two Arrow Street, and Gund in addition wished to create an ensemble of restored buildings adjacent to his project. When Gund gave up the project the properties were sold to different owners. 15 Mt. Auburn was sold along with the development parcel and eventually became the property of Harvard University, and 9 and 11 were sold to a different owner.

The objective of the facade preservation easement was to “encourage preservation of the Buildings’ south, east and west facades” (the “Restricted Facades”).

The Grantor agrees that he and his successors shall not make or permit others to make any alterations to or build or permit others to build any structure affecting the Restricted Facades of the Buildings, if such alterations or structures would change the appearance of the Restricted Facades, unless the consent of the Commission is obtained, as set forth herein.

The agreement incorporates plans and renderings showing improvements to be made by the Grantor, “and thereafter the Restricted Facades shall not be materially altered except in accordance with this Easement.”

Rights retained by the Grantor included

“the right to make alterations to the Buildings, the Restricted Facades, and other structures built on the Premises, and to construct new structures on the premises, any of which changes would change the appearance of the Restricted Facades, if prior written approval of the Commission is obtained ... In deciding whether to grant such approval, the Commission shall consider, among other things, the historical and architectural value and significance of the Restricted Facades and the general design arrangement, texture, material and color of the features involved. In the case of construction of an addition to the existing Buildings, the Commission shall consider the size and shape of the proposed addition in relation to the existing Buildings. ... The Commission shall not make any recommendation or requirement except for the purpose of preventing alterations which would appear to be incongruous with the historical aspects or the architectural characteristics of the Restricted Facades.

The Façade Preservation Easements also grant the Commission authority to “impose dimensional or setback requirements as to any new structures visible from Mt. Auburn Street”, a provision that is no longer available to the Commission under the Harvard Square Conservation District.

Review Authority in the Conservation District

Since 2000 the property has been located in the Harvard Square Conservation District, which limits the issuance of building permits to projects that have received Certificates of Appropriateness, Nonapplicability, or Hardship from the Cambridge Historical Commission.

Applications to demolish existing and construct new buildings in the Harvard Square Conservation District are reviewed under the provisions of Ch. 2.78, Article III and the Order establishing the district. The Demolition Delay Ordinance, which seeks to determine the public interest in delaying demolition versus allowing the project to proceed, does not apply in designated districts.

Ch. 2.78.220 of the City Code describes the factors to be considered by the Commission:

- A. In passing upon matters before it, the Historical Commission or neighborhood conservation district commission shall consider, among other things, the historic and architectural value and significance of the site or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture and material of the features involved, and the relation of such features to similar features of structures in the surrounding area. In the case of new construction or additions to existing structures a Neighborhood Conservation District Commission shall not consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure, and a Neighborhood Conservation District Commission shall not impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by applicable provision of the zoning ordinance. A Commission shall not consider interior arrangements or architectural features not subject to public view.
- B. A Neighborhood Conservation District Commission shall not make any recommendation or requirement except for the purpose of preventing proposals incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance or the distinctive character of the landmark or neighborhood conservation district.
- C. In passing upon matters before it, the Historical Commission or neighborhood conservation district commission shall also consider community goals as may from time to time be expressed by the City Council, including the need to provide additional housing, affordable and otherwise, and to promote the sustainable use of energy and capacity for climate resilience.

The *Final Report of the 2017-19 Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee*, adopted in 2020, contains goals and subgoals for the district as well as guidelines for considering demolition and new construction and an analysis of the architectural character and preservation goals of Harvard Square's various subdistricts.

Goals and Relevant Subgoals for the Harvard Square Conservation District

The Goal of the District and of this Order is to protect the Harvard Square Conservation District's distinctive physical and experiential characteristics and to enhance the livability and vitality of the District. The Historical Commission should seek to enhance the unique physical environment and visual form of the District; preserve its architecturally and historically significant structures and their settings; encourage creative design that contributes to the richness of its environment; mitigate character-diminishing impacts of new development; and discourage homogeneity by encouraging diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and ages. The District must remain a pedestrian-friendly, accessible, human-scale, quirky, mixed-use environment that supports dynamic urban experiences, complements nearby neighborhoods, and respects the history and traditions of its location.

The following applicable Secondary Goals for the District are intended to provide general guidance. They are statements of policy, not prescriptive measures that must be applied equally in each situation.

- 1. Significant Buildings. Preserve historically or architecturally significant buildings and structures as well as those that contribute to the distinctive visual character or historical significance of the District.
- 3. Contemporary Design. Where context allows, support creative, contemporary design for new construction that complements the context of abutting buildings and enhances the character of the subdistrict. Recognize and respect well-reasoned contemporary design during the review process. Support innovative approaches to enhancing the

unique character of Harvard Square while mitigating the detrimental impacts of development on proximate areas.

4. **Diversity of Form.** Build on and sustain the diversity of existing building form, scale and material. Preserve and encourage appropriate green spaces, scale-appropriate open spaces, and new buildings that support the prevailing character of the subdistrict. Preserve the remaining wood frame buildings throughout the District. Maintain a consistent setback or streetwall condition where that character has been set. Support small-scale storefronts to preserve the vitality and character of the streetscape.
6. **Pedestrian Experience.** Protect and enhance the pedestrian experience. Expand the network of pedestrian walkways and paths wherever they can conveniently provide alternate routes through the District. Increase public access to alleys and interior spaces where appropriate and upgrade the paving and landscaping of such spaces. Enhance accessibility and safety for pedestrians throughout the District.
8. **Compatible Design.** Encourage compatible design that supports a wide diversity of uses serving the needs of surrounding neighborhoods, students, workers and visitors from around the world.
10. **Environmental Sustainability.** Encourage environmentally sustainable development that takes into consideration the embodied energy of the existing built environment, material life cycles, passive design, energy conservation, and current standards for best energy conservation practices. Alterations to existing buildings that seek to promote energy conservation should be accomplished in a manner that respects character-defining materials and designs.

Guidelines for Demolition

The purpose of reviewing demolition or moving a building within the Conservation District is to preserve significant buildings and the diversity of building ages, styles, and forms that help to define the historical character of the Square. Other benefits include the opportunity to review the significance of individual buildings in the context of specific development proposals, to consider creative reuse possibilities, and to encourage the care and maintenance of the building stock.

The Cambridge Historical Commission will issue a Certificate of Appropriateness to an applicant seeking to demolish a structure in the Conservation District if the project, including both the demolished and the replacement buildings, is determined to be "appropriate for or compatible with the preservation or protection of the . . . district." Approval of demolition will be dependent on a finding by the Cambridge Historical Commission that a) the demolition of the structure will not adversely impact the district, subdistrict, or abutting properties in the sense described in secondary goal #1, and b) the replacement project meets the purposes of the Conservation District with respect to secondary goals #2 through #10, where these are applicable. Projects that involve relocation must provide a location that preserves the character and context of the building.

The history of Harvard Square suggests some specific criteria that may be applied to demolition proposals. Buildings that are over fifty years old, that are contributing structures in the Harvard Square National Register District, or that are part of the Square's dwindling inventory of wood-frame structures, are generally valued for their contribution to the character of the Square, and it may be presumed that preservation will be strongly preferred to demolition (secondary goal #4). However, all such applications will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the Cambridge Historical Commission

will not necessarily protect all such structures from demolition.¹

Guidelines for New Construction

Harvard Square is a kaleidoscopic urban environment. The Cambridge Historical Commission will recognize the continuing evolution of architectural design and the necessity of keeping the Square fresh, vibrant, and economically viable. Contemporary design expression will be encouraged in new construction (secondary goal #3).

The existence of parallel reviews by the Historical Commission and the Harvard Square Advisory Committee is seen as a productive application of both zoning and historic preservation disciplines in a complex urban environment; in the event of conflict, however, conservation district protection, which requires Cambridge Historical Commission approval of building permits, will prevail. Because the specific circumstances of every development project cannot be predicted, it is not possible to specify an exact regulatory protocol governing the sharing of reviews between the Historical Commission and the Advisory Committee. The inherent logic of the project review process will guide the proponent.

The Cambridge Historical Commission will begin its review of a new construction project or addition with an analysis of the historic significance and architectural value of the premises and its immediate surroundings. New construction that accommodates older structures on or adjacent to the site will be encouraged. Construction that incorporates significant major portions of older structures may be acceptable; however, use of isolated historic architectural elements will be discouraged. Demolition involving retention of facades to allow replacement of historic structures with new construction (misnamed "facadectomies") will be discouraged unless the supporting historic fabric is found to be unsalvageable. Unless the context dictates otherwise, new buildings should be built out to the front property line, respecting the vitality of the sidewalk and plaza spaces.²

While the Commission may no longer consider "the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure both in relation to the land area upon which the structure is situated and to structures in the vicinity," review of new buildings can still be guided by considerations such as "the appropriateness of ... the vertical and horizontal emphasis, rhythm of openings, transparency, texture, and materials of the publicly-visible facades; sunlight and shadow effects; relationship to public open space; and landscaping."

Review of new buildings and additions will be further guided by the subdistrict goals regarding the relationship of a proposed building to the site and to other buildings and structures in the vicinity.

Bow Street and Arrow Street/Putnam Square Subdistrict Guidelines

The Final Report of the 2017-19 Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee also contained guidelines and recommendations for subdistricts. The Bow Street and Arrow Street/Putnam Square Subdistrict "is characterized by a dizzying variety of building types, styles, and functions. St. Paul's and Old Cambridge Baptist churches overlook apartment buildings, tiny residences, and a massive former manufacturing facility, the former Reversible Collar factory. Wood-frame homes abut modern office buildings. Along Massachusetts Avenue most buildings include retail on the ground floor, but there are currently no retail uses along Mt. Auburn Street."

The tallest structures in this subdistrict are the campanile of St. Paul's Catholic Church,

¹ Final Report of the 2017-19 Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee, p. 19

² Op. cit., pp. 20-21.

the spire of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church (in the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District), and the residential tower at 1105 Massachusetts Avenue. The locations of these towers correspond with the triangular boundaries of the subdistrict. The careful siting of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Harvard Street allows the spire to be seen from several viewpoints, making it a prominent landmark in historic and contemporary photographs. The transition from Putnam Square to the residential scale of the Kerry Corner/Riverside neighborhood is evident along Mount Auburn Street.



Bow and Arrow Streets/Putnam Square Subdistrict

Google Maps ©2019

Historically, this area included small residences, light industry, and churches. Though industries are no longer active, the former Reversible Collar factory at 8-20 Arrow Street and 21-27 Mount Auburn Street is still a dynamic structure that was adaptively reused for retail and office space in the late 1960s, renovated through the federal tax act program in the mid-1980s, and restored again in the mid-2000s. The large mixed-use buildings in Putnam Square went up mostly in the mid-1970s, replacing one-story storefronts. Construction of the Sundance Residences at 1075 Massachusetts Avenue in 2011 (in the Overlay District, but not in the Conservation District) completed the modern build-out of Putnam Square. ...

Several clusters of low-rise frame and brick buildings represent opportunities for site accumulation and redevelopment that threaten the character of the subdistrict. Near the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Bow Street a group of small-scale frame and brick buildings represents a 140-year span of residential and commercial building construction in Harvard Square. The earliest buildings in the cluster, 12 Bow Street (ca. 1820) and 1208 Massachusetts Avenue (1842), are examples of residential buildings that were later converted to commercial uses. Other clusters occur at the intersection of Arrow Street and Massachusetts Avenue (two buildings) and at 1112-1134 Massachu-

setts Avenue (six buildings). Some buildings in the latter group have little or no significance, but any replacements should be carefully evaluated for compatibility with the eclectic character of the subdistrict. Here and elsewhere, some wood frame buildings have been covered with artificial siding, but their original character is easily recoverable.



12-30 Mt. Auburn Street, 2019

CHC photo



9, 11, and 15 Mt. Auburn Street, 2019

CHC photo

Denser development should be confined to Putnam Square. The industrial character of the Reversible Collar complex should be protected. The quiet, residential character along Mount Auburn Street should be maintained, and the wood-frame structures there should be preserved. Development or adaptive reuse proposals should be sensitive to

the fact that a transition from commercial to residential uses occurs in this subdistrict.³

Description

The James M. Robbins house at 15 Mt. Auburn Street is a two-story Second Empire Style frame office building that was originally constructed as a two-family house. Each side of the house was designed to be two bays wide; paired center entrances reflected a mirror-image side-hall plan. The rectangular footprint measures 42' wide and 32' deep, with one-story bays projecting 4' at the back corners. The high brick foundation reflects the location on the edge of an historic tide marsh, subject to occasional flooding. The entire structure is contained within the main mass; there are no kitchen ells as would have been provided on a more generous lot. The Mansard roof has a slight, straight slope inward from the top plate; the upper roof is a shallow hip. The pedimented dormers appear to be original.

At some point in the 1930s the building was stripped of any projecting ornamentation and clad with asphalt shingles. These and the original entries and porch were removed in 1973 when the house was converted to an office building.



15 Mt. Auburn St., 1973. Asphalt siding and battens are being removed from the front façade; the left side has received new clapboards and trim. The residential double entries have been removed and a new canopy has been installed CHC staff photo

The building underwent a series of renovations after it was purchased by Graham Gund in the early 1980s. Gund initially removed the modern canopy and constructed a traditional porch, as shown in a photo taken in 1985

³ Op. cit., pp. 34-38.



15 Mt. Auburn Street, 1985.

Chris Hail Photo

By 1988 the Gund organization had renovated the exterior again, adding corner boards, a frieze, hoods over the windows, and shutters in conformance with the Façade Preservation Easement agreement. By this point the building had attained its present appearance.

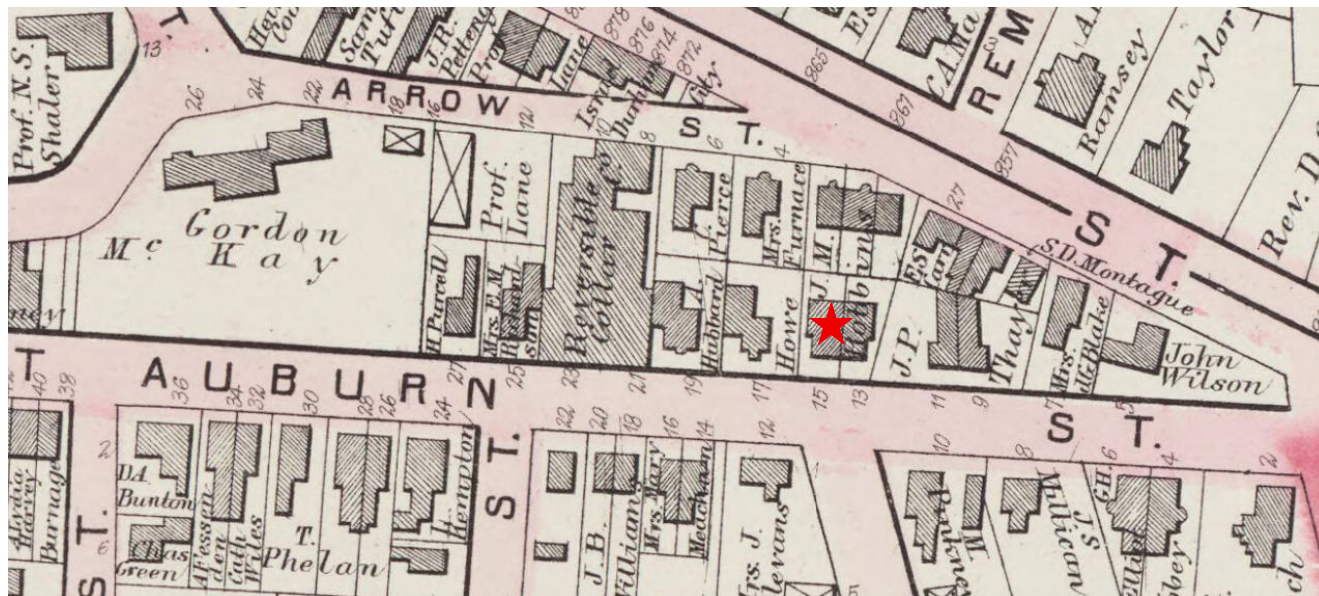


15 Mt. Auburn Street, 1988

Chris Hail photo

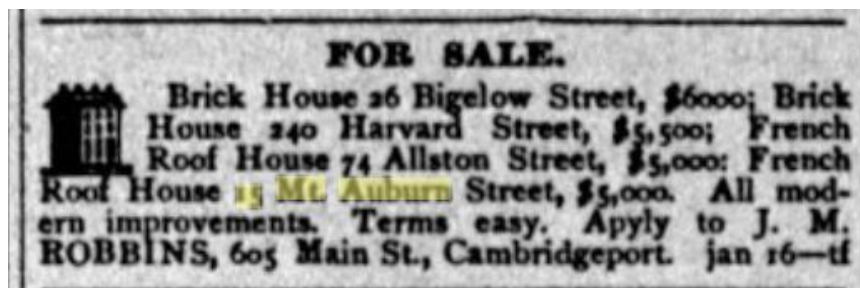
History

The Robbins house faces a section of Mt. Auburn Street that was laid out across the William Winthrop farm in 1808. The frontage closest to Putnam Square was subdivided about 1843, when James H. and James P Thayer built the present Greek Revival house at 9 Mt. Auburn. The Winthrop heirs gradually sold off parcels closer to the mansion house, which stood on the site of today's St. Paul's Church, and by 1873 all but that section of the block was closely packed with small detached houses and the plant of the Reversible Collar Company.



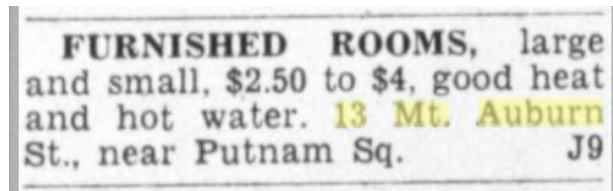
Atlas of Cambridge, 1873

James M. Robbins (1832-1905), who built 13-15 Mt. Auburn Street and the brick row behind it at 1130-1134 Massachusetts Avenue in 1869-1870, was a stove and appliance dealer in Central Square who eventually left that business to focus on real estate development in Mid Cambridge and Cambridgeport. Robbins, who lived on Lee Street, was responsible for about 30 buildings in all, many of them rows and multifamily structures.



Cambridge Chronicle, January 23, 1875

In 1875 Robbins put 13-15 Mt. Auburn on the market along with several other properties. The new owner was Samuel Cofran, a brick manufacturer who also engaged in real estate. Cofran, who was also an absentee landlord, held on the house until his death in 1891. The house continued as a rental property for decades until it was purchased in 1922 by Abbie O'Meara, a single woman who lived next door at 11 Mt. Auburn. Ms. O'Meara rented furnished rooms, "large and small", until she sold the property in 1950.



Cambridge Chronicle, January 9, 1941

The most prominent occupant after the building was converted to offices was the landscape architecture firm of Carol R. Johnson & Associates. Carol Johnson (1929-2020), a Wellesley graduate, received a degree in landscape architecture from Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 1957. After a year at TAC she founded her own firm in 1959. The firm had grown to become a national practice with 29 employees by the time it moved out of 15 Mt. Auburn Street and sold the building to Graham Gund in 1986.

In the early 1980s architect/developer Graham Gund began assembling properties on Arrow and Mt. Auburn Streets, including 9 and 15 Mt. Auburn, for an office development. The Arrow Street frontage contained garages, but there were two houses at 17 and 19 Mt. Auburn that the Historical Commission considered significant. Following a hearing under the city's Demolition Delay Ordinance, Gund and the Commission agreed to the demolition of 17 Mt. Auburn on the condition that Gund relocate 19 to the space between 9 and 15. The house was moved in 1988 and the renovation was completed in 1990. The result was a three-building complex of mid-19th century houses that were carefully restored and painted in historically-appropriate colors. In conjunction with the development the Gunwyn Corporation (for 9 and 11) and Graham Gund in person (for 15) granted the Historical Commission a perpetual preservation restriction governing alterations to the exterior features of all three buildings.



9, 11, and 15 Mt. Auburn Street as protected by the Façade Preservation Easement, 2018

CHC photo

Gund's office building project at Two Arrow Street received Planning Board approval in 1998, but it was bitterly opposed by the community and he sold the property to Gregory Carr, a philanthropist who put up the present theater/office building in 2003-04. Upon completion the Carr Foundation Arrow Street Condominium comprised Unit 1, about 8,000 square feet probably containing the black box theater, belonging to Harvard University; Unit 2, the remainder of the building that Harvard acquired in 2008; and Unit 3 - 15 Mt. Auburn Street – that Carr sold to Mt. Auburn Condominium LLC in 2006.

Harvard united all three units under one ownership when it acquired 15 Mt. Auburn in 2022. Meanwhile, Gunwyn sold 9 and 11 Mt. Auburn to the Packard Humanities Institute in 2000. The Harvard Square Conservation District encompassed all three properties when it was adopted in 2000, but the perpetual preservation restriction remains in effect.

Recommendation

The Robbins house is significant for its associations with the development of the William Winthrop estate, as an intact example of Second Empire architecture, and in the context of the ensemble of restored 19th century buildings developed by Graham Gund and protected by the Cambridge Historical Commission in the 1980s, before the establishment of the Harvard Square Conservation District.

The Commission's authority under the preservation restriction to allow demolition of 15 Mt. Auburn Street is unclear. In other circumstances the Commission has taken the position that a pre-existing restriction takes precedence over the authority granted by the Conservation District. I recommend that the Commission conduct the public hearing scheduled for June 5 but request the applicant's permission for a continuance to seek legal advice before making a determination.

cc: Peter McLaughlin, Inspectional Services
Alexandria Offiong, Harvard University