

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Fl., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139
Telephone: 617 349 4683 Fax: 617 349 6165 TTY: 617 349 6112
E-mail: histcomm@cambridgema.gov URL: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic>

Bruce A. Irving, *Chair*; Susannah Barton Tobin, *Vice Chair*; Charles Sullivan, *Executive Director*
William Barry, Robert G. Crocker, Joseph V. Ferrara, Chandra Harrington, Jo M. Solet, *Members*
Kyle Sheffield, *Alternate*

July 28, 2017

To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Charles Sullivan
Re: L-120: 851-855 Cambridge Street Landmark Designation Study

Background

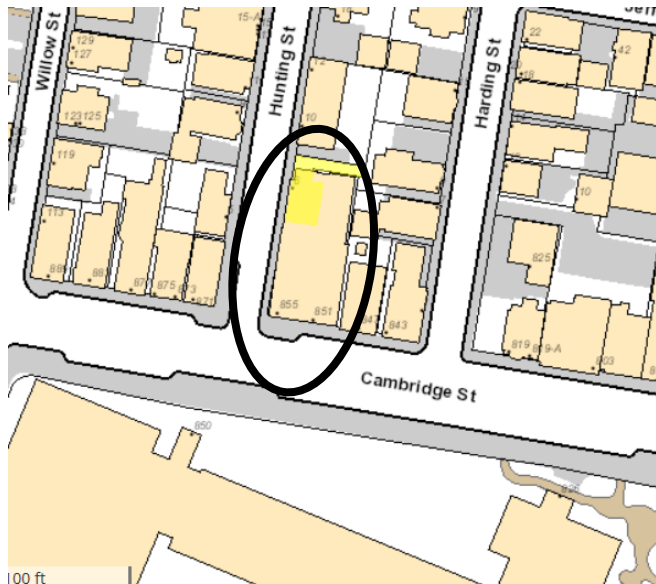
CHC staff received a petition on August 8, 2016 from twenty individuals requesting the Commission to “designate 851 and 855 Cambridge Street, including the Sunset Café, a historic Cambridge landmark.” When the Election Commission found that the petition had not been signed by ten registered voters the proponents submitted a new petition with 120 signatures. A public hearing was scheduled for September 8, 2016 so the Commission could discuss whether to accept the petition. At that meeting the Commission voted unanimously to accept the petition and initiate a landmark designation study



851-855 Cambridge Street, 2016

CHC staff photo

Proposed Landmark



The Sunset Café building at 851-855 Cambridge Street contains two formerly freestanding structures that were joined and given a common facade in 1989. These were the Lawrence Glynn house at 849-851 Cambridge Street (1859) and the John Schuler house at 855-857 (1863). A second house built by John Schuler at 6 Hunting Street (1870), although physically attached to the others, stands on a separate parcel and was not a subject of this petition.

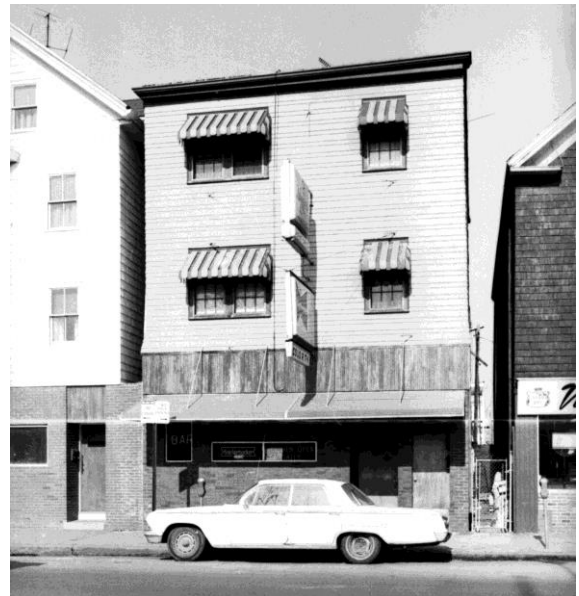
The remodeled building is a four-story structure with a restaurant on the ground floor and eight apartments above. It occupies a lot containing 4,474 square feet at the corner of Hunting Street, across from

the site of the former Harrington School. The lot is zoned Business BA, which for residential purposes has a 1.75 FAR, a 45' height limit, and a minimum lot area per dwelling unit of 600 square feet. The property is now assessed for \$2,171,700, of which \$1,451,200 is attributed to the structure; this represents an 18% increase over 2016. The assessors rate the building's condition as "average."

Lawrence Glynn house, 849-851 Cambridge Street (1859)

The building at 849-851 Cambridge Street probably originated as a gable-roofed house similar to others of the same age and footprint nearby. It was altered in 1909 by conversion of the ground floor into a store. A one-story concrete block addition built in 1925 and expanded in 1947 contained a bakery. At some point, probably in 1909, the house was given a flat roof and converted to a three-decker. In 1935 it became the original site of the Sunset Café, whose proprietor, Joseph Riviuccio, lived upstairs.

Lawrence Glynn (ca. 1825-1891) was an Irish immigrant blacksmith and East Cambridge resident who prospered sufficiently well that his widow was living on Avon Hill Street at her death in 1901.



849-851 Cambridge St., 1965

CHC photo

John Schuler house, 855-857 Cambridge Street (1863)



855-857 Cambridge Street, 1965

CHC photo

converted to a three-decker with a store on the ground floor in 1892, but this is not under consideration for landmark status.

The building at 855-857 Cambridge Street on the corner of Harding originated as a 2½-story house with a gable roof. In 1889 the house was raised and a new first floor was inserted beneath it. In 1930 the building was altered again by Arthur Stankunas, who operated a grocery store on the corner. In 1954 the storefront was occupied by the Park View Restaurant. John Schuler built an attached house at 6 Harding Street in 1870 that was

John Shuler, a cooper, was born in Germany about 1839 and came to America in 1851. He established a barrel factory on Harding Street and later lived on Prospect Street.

Sunset Café Building, 851-857 Cambridge Street

By 1969 both 849-51 and 855-857 Cambridge Street were owned by three partners: Mario Almeida, proprietor of the Central Bakery nearby on Cambridge Street; Fernando Castanheira, manager of the Sunset Café; and Joseph A. DaSilva. In 1989 the owners combined the two buildings behind a single brick façade along Cambridge and Hunting streets and expanded the Sunset Café to occupy the entire ground floor; the architect of the new façade was Manuel Taures. Fernando Castanheira died in 1992 and passed the café to his sons Freddie and David. Freddie died in 2012 and David followed in August 2016. At the time of the petition the café had been closed for about two years; it has now reopened.



851-855 Cambridge Street, 2014

Cambridge GIS



851-855 Cambridge Street, 2016

CHC staff photo

Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters. The Commission may decline to accept petitions that do not meet the criteria for landmark designation.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible 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 (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)

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 and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

Relationship to Criteria

The Sunset Café building is an amalgamation of buildings constructed in the mid-19th century, altered for commercial use over the next hundred years, and then combined so the structure presents as a brick façade constructed in 1989. The building's significance would have to be found in Criteria (1) for its associations "with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or in Criteria (2) as "historically or architecturally significant ... either by itself or in the context of a group of structures." There is no age requirement for landmarks as there is for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

While the buildings that were incorporated into the Sunset Café building had strong associations with the social history of the city through their construction and ownership by successive generations of Irish, German, Lithuanian and Portuguese immigrants, the same can be said for many structures in the vicinity. The conversion into a single modern structure with a monumental brick façade can be interpreted as representing the success of Portuguese immigrants and their descendants. The façade itself, while impressive in its design and craftsmanship, is less than thirty years old and thus hard to evaluate objectively.

Staff Recommendation

In 2016 the staff noted that "the Sunset Café Building has a strong presence on Cambridge Street, a major arterial, and contributes positively to the architectural character of the neighborhood. However, it presents as a relatively modern structure that is unlike any others designated so far. Some proponents seem concerned with the preservation of the Café itself, but landmark designation offers no protection for uses.

During the course of the study the staff undertook a detailed inspection of the structure and noted many structural deficiencies and anomalies that appeared to derive from the ad hoc nature of multiple renovations and conversion into today's structure. No further meaningful information could be found concerning the early owners, the recent proprietors, or the architect of the façade.

The staff considers the building to be only marginally significant under Criteria 1 and 2. I recommend that the Commission take no further action on this matter and allow the protection period that accompanies the designation study to lapse on September 8, 2017. Protection through the demolition review process will be available if the structure is threatened in the future."

cc: Meredith Hyres, petitioner
 Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services Commissioner
 Carlos Pereira, Tr.
 90 MacDonal Road
 Wilmington, Mass. 01887
 Fernando P. Castanheira, Jr. & City of Cambridge tax title
 170 Cambridge Hunting Street Realty Trust
 Burlington, Mass. 01803