

## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Fl., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Telephone: 617 349 4683 Fax: 617 349 3116 TTY: 617 349 6112

E-mail: [histcomm@cambridgema.gov](mailto:histcomm@cambridgema.gov) URL: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic>

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March 30, 2017

To: Cambridge Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: D-1439: 127 Coolidge Hill

An application to demolish the house at 127 Coolidge Hill was received on March 13. The applicants, Emily and Devereaux McClatchey, were notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for April 6.

### Site

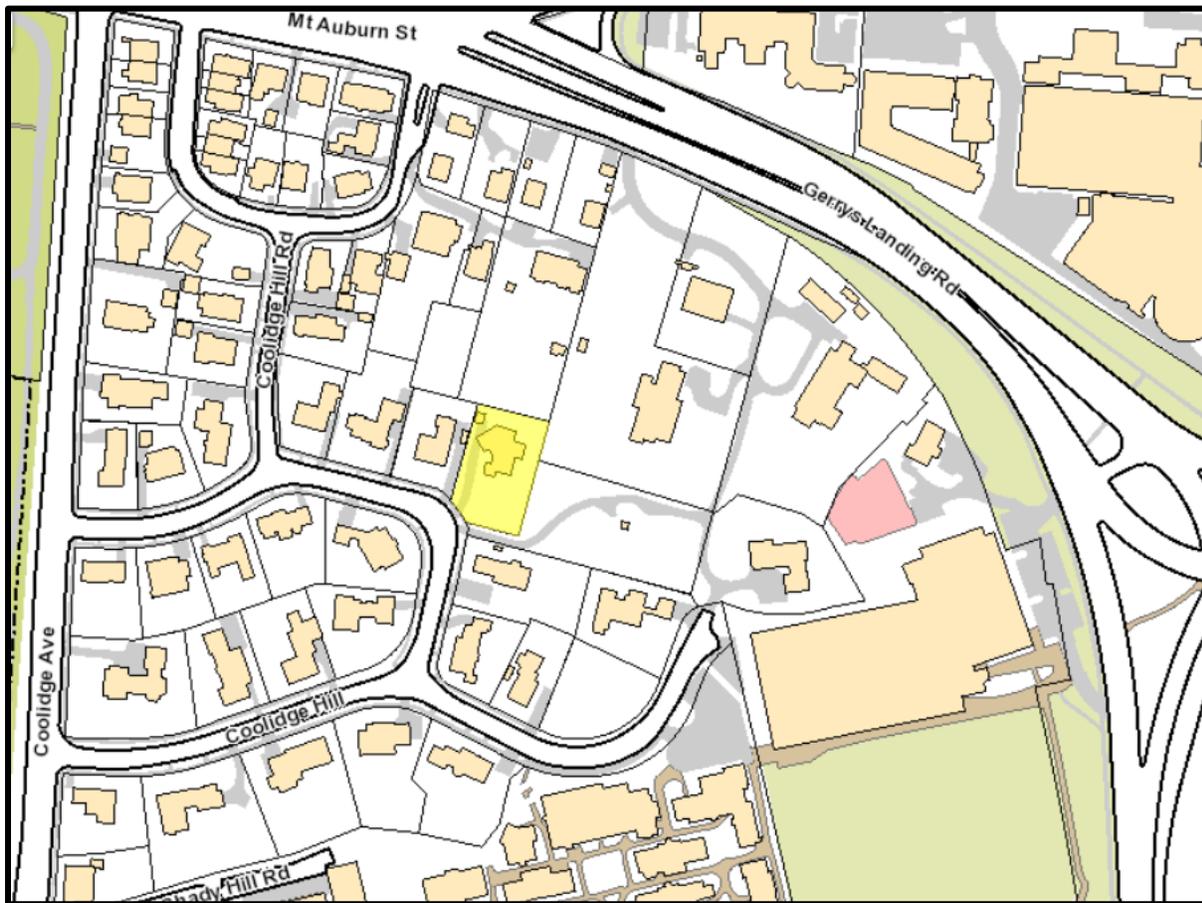
The 2½-story wood-frame dwelling is located on the north side of Coolidge Hill on a 13,854 square-foot lot in a Residence A-1 zoning district. The roughly rectangular lot (Map 242A/Parcel 102) is 95' wide and 150' deep. This is a single-family residential district which permits an FAR of .50 and has a height limit of 35 feet. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the online assessor's property database, is \$2,122,200; the building alone is valued at \$792,600. The property last sold in July 2016 for \$2,660,000.

The house is approximately centered on its lot, with an attached two-car garage at the end of a driveway along the west property line. There are mature trees on the property lines and an open yard. It and the neighboring houses on Coolidge Hill were mostly built as part of the same development in 1925-28.



127 Coolidge Hill, main (southwest) elevation

CHC staff photo, March 30, 2017



127 Coolidge Hill

Cambridge Assessing Department, 2017



Current Condition

The Assessing Department rates the current condition of 127 Coolidge Hill as ‘good very good.’ The exterior has been freshly painted, and the lower margins of the slate roof were

replaced with copper in 2016. The siding is original and in good condition, although somewhat obscured by overgrown shrubbery. An interior examination revealed some recent water damage from a burst frozen pipe, but apart from a somewhat cramped plan and dated kitchen and bathrooms the condition appears good.



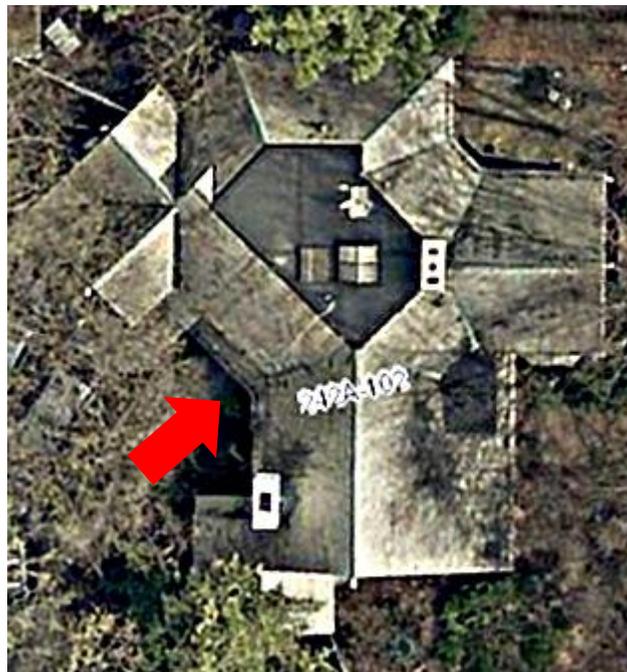
127 Coolidge Hill, south elevation

CHC staff photo, March 30, 2017

The owner proposes to raze the structure and construct a two-story dwelling on a somewhat larger footprint. The proposed design is a complex composition of intersecting gables, dormers, and siding patterns with a detached garage.

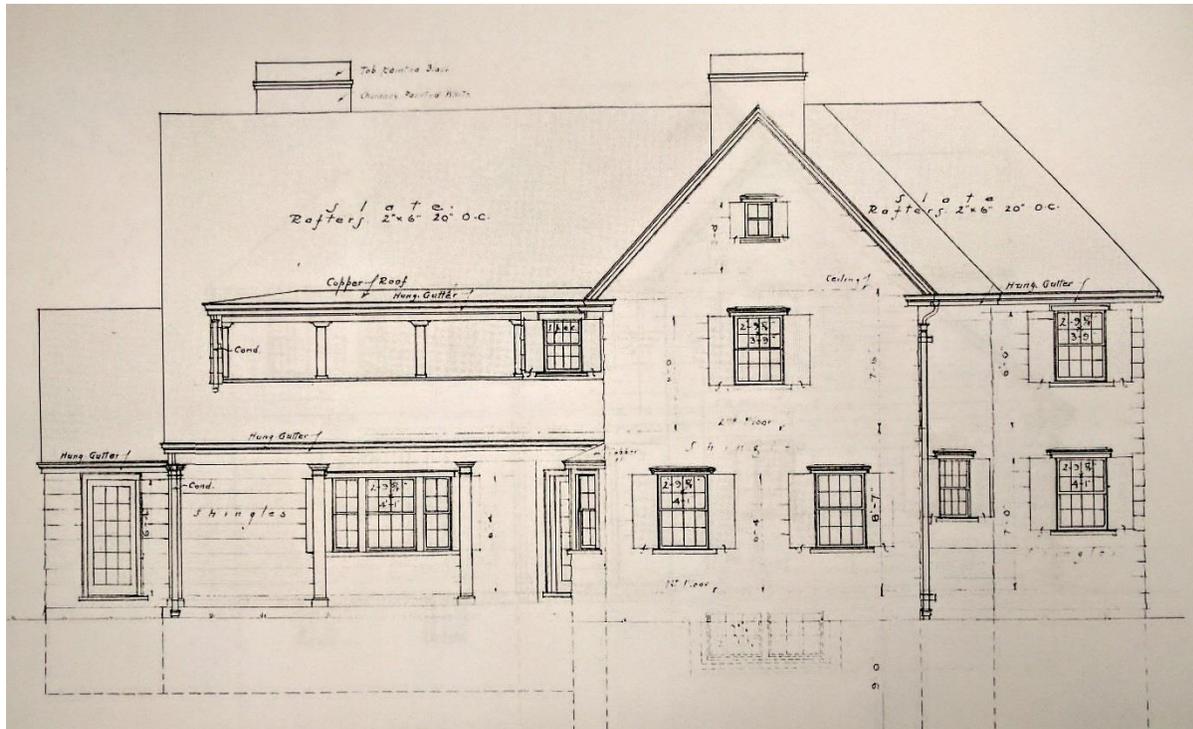
### Architectural Description

The house at 127 Coolidge Hill has an L-shaped plan with the front door at the hinge of the L. The plan revolves around a central stair hall topped by a lay light. On the ground floor the south-facing wing contains the living room and the library; the dining room faces east, and the kitchen is tucked behind the two-car garage. The second floor plan mirrors the first, with the main bedrooms on the south and east and the two servant's rooms over the kitchen and garage. The complex gabled roof incorporates 14 facets; a large skylight (not visible from the street) lights the central hall.



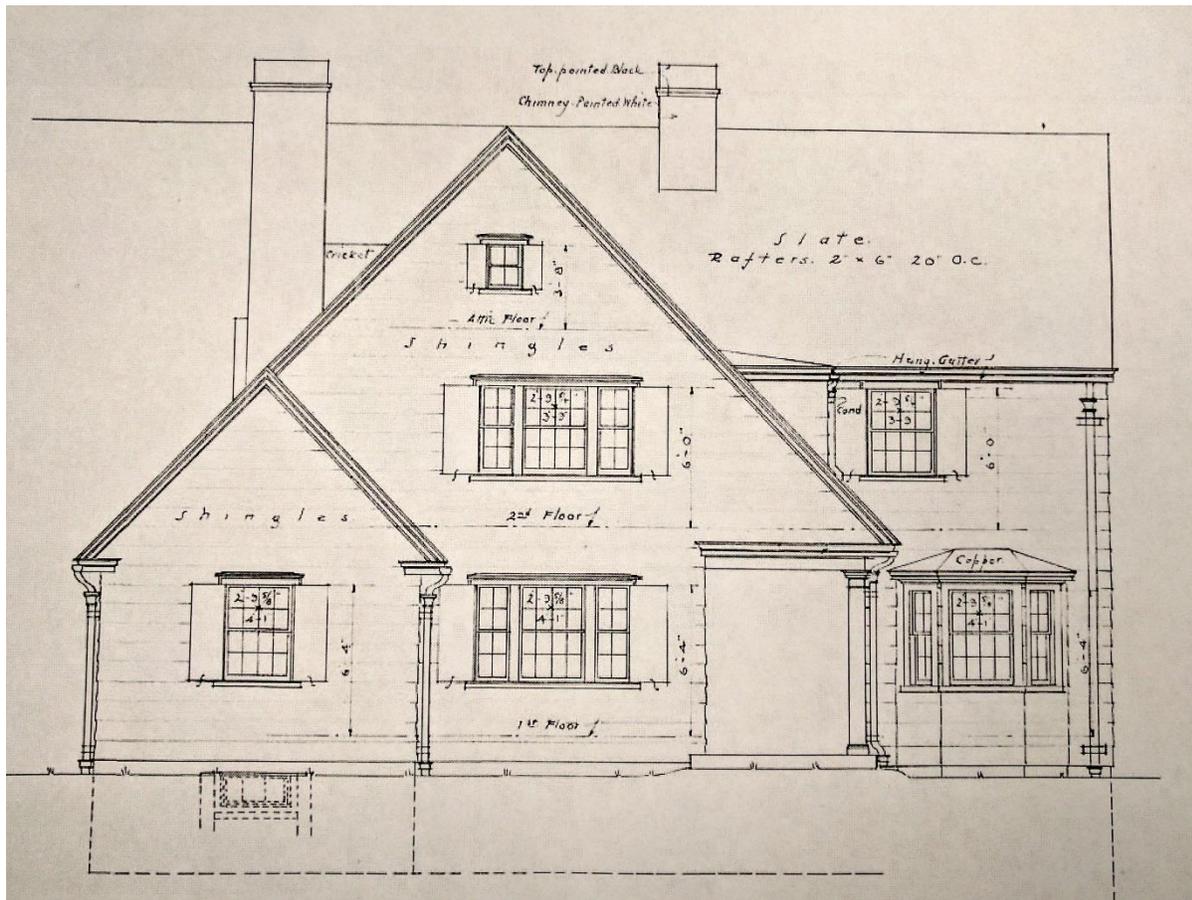
The exterior of 127 Coolidge Hill displays restrained Neo-Classical detailing typical of the 1920s. The exterior is covered with shingles with a broad exposure. The front door, which is only partly visible from the street, is

recessed under an arched porch. The fenestration is balanced but not symmetrical; windows with operable shutters appear to have original 8+8 and 6+6 double hung sash. The roof is covered with slate and copper; the original hung gutters are now built-in. The attached garage has two bays and is entirely fireproof, with reinforced concrete walls and ceiling as required by codes at the time. A freestanding potting shed occupies the northwest corner of the property.



127 Coolidge Hill, original east elevation

Courtesy Devereaux McClatchey



127 Coolidge Hill, original south elevation

Courtesy Devereaux McClatchey

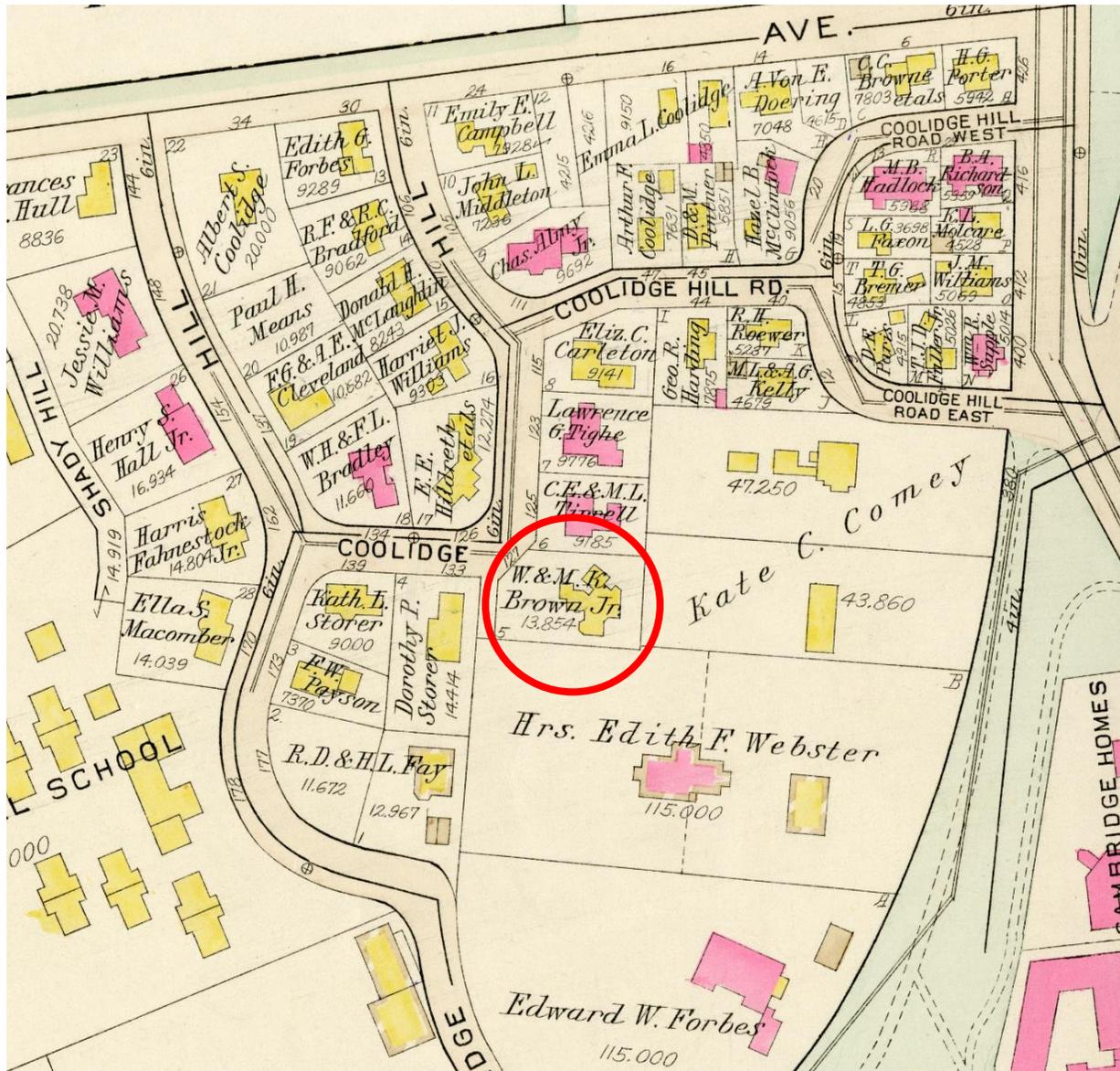
## History

The residential neighborhood of Coolidge Hill was historically part of the Joseph Coolidge farm, the last agricultural enterprise in Cambridge. Development occurred in two phases, shortly before and after World War I. In 1911 the Coolidges sold 5 acres of a meadow along the Charles to the Browne & Nichols School, which leveled a drumlin to create an athletic field. They also sold 5 acres on the hillside along Gerry's Landing Road to the Forbes family, with restrictions establishing standards for residential construction. Edward Waldo Forbes (later the director of the Fogg Museum) and his sister, Mrs. Kenneth Webster, built two substantial houses set well back from the future parkway below.

In 1915, the Coolidge heirs sold the last of their Gerry's Landing Road frontage to Forris Norris, the developer of Larchwood. Pray, Hubbard & White, the landscape architects, laid out Coolidge Hill Road "to conform to the natural contour of the land and to preserve the beautiful trees with which the property is covered" (City Realty Company, "Coolidge Hill," 3). As at Larchwood, purchasers had to have their plans approved by the landscape architects. Both single and semidetached houses were allowed, and some of the earliest were triples this project was essentially built out with modest Georgian and Colonial Revival houses by the early 1920s.

In 1924 the Coolidges sold the rest of the hill to Alva Morrison, a banker who had helped develop Gray Gardens East and West, and his Garden Terrace neighbor, Arthur Boylston Nichols, a broker. Their partnership, Coolidge Hill Associates, cleared the site of farm buildings and hired the Olmsted Brothers firm of landscape architects to lay out the new

subdivision, which was also known as Coolidge Hill. The final plan of September 1925 included about thirty large lots along winding roads cut through the Coolidge's pear orchard, with a long, curving extension to Gerry's Landing. Confusingly, while the road through the 1915 subdivision was called Coolidge Hill Road, the new streets were designated simply Coolidge Hill.



G. M. Hopkins, *Atlas of Cambridge*, 1930

CHC

Deed restrictions specified that each lot could contain a single-family residence at least two stories high with a garage for no more than two cars; setbacks controlled the siting. Purchasers of lots were required to submit plans to the Olmsted firm, which advised Morrison on the appropriateness of each project in the context of the overall landscape design. The project proved desirable, and within a few months lots had been sold to socially prominent professionals and businessmen like Theodore and Robert Storer, A. Sprague Coolidge, and Henry S. Hill. By 1929 all but two lots were filled with substantial houses in variations of the popular Georgian Revival style such as 115 Coolidge Hill (1926, George C.

Whiting) and 148 Coolidge Hill (1929, Duguid & Martin).<sup>1</sup>

Among the earliest purchasers of a lot in Coolidge Hill was Winthrop Brown Jr. (1892-1994), a Belmont native who was a descendant of James Brown, a founder of Little, Brown & Co. Winthrop Brown married Margaret Kendall in 1917 and moved to Barrington Hall on Memorial Drive. In the 1920 census Brown was listed as president of a rubber company, but for many years thereafter he was employed at the Hood Rubber Co. as a division manager. In the spring of 1925 Brown purchased the lot at 127 Coolidge Hill and retained Boston architect J. Robertson Ward to design a house for his family. Brown lived there until about 1960 and eventually retired to Peterborough, N.H. He was succeeded in ownership by John Freeman, an executive at Houghton Mifflin.

J. Robertson Ward, a son of American sculptor and artist Frederick MacMonnies, was born out of wedlock in Florence in 1898. His mother, Helen Gordon Glenn of Cincinnati, was married briefly to John R. Ward, but married again to Henry Forster Marx, a librarian in Easton, Pa., where Robertson grew up. Ward studied architecture at MIT, but left without a degree before his scheduled graduation in 1919. He married in Cincinnati that August and returned to Boston, where opened an architectural office in 1923. His earliest known commission was a 1923 elementary school in Orleans, Mass., followed by four houses in a South Brookline development in 1924-25; these were designed in the Colonial Revival, Tudor, and Spanish Eclectic styles.

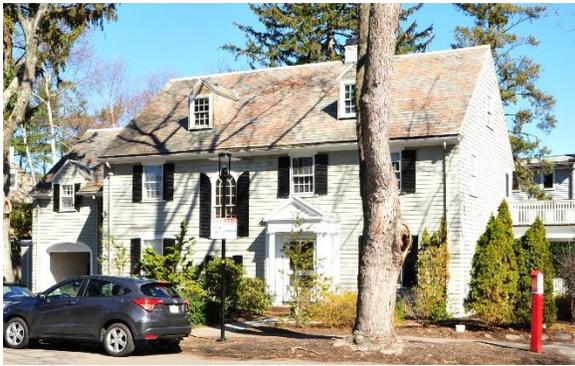
Ward's commission from Brown was his not his first in Coolidge Hill; these were two houses for the Storer brothers commissioned in April 1925. In all, Ward designed six Coolidge Hill houses built in 1925-26. His clients, their occupations in 1927, and the sequence of construction were as follows:

April 18, 1915	139 Coolidge Hill	Theodore Storer [broker]
April 18, 1925	133 Coolidge Hill	Robert T.P. Storer [banker]
July 8, 1925	127 Coolidge Hill	Winthrop Brown Jr. [executive]
August 20, 1925	170 Coolidge Hill	George A. Macomber [banker]
November 2, 1925	154 Coolidge Hill	Henry S. Hall [student]
May 6, 1926	162 Coolidge Hill	Alfred Gardner [lawyer]

How Ward obtained these contiguous commissions cannot be determined. Harold Whiting, the Olmsted partner in charge of the project, wrote of reviewing some of them as a group. Whiting was quite complimentary of the Brown house; he called it "ingenious and interesting" and "a distinct addition to the Coolidge Hill development" (to Alva Morrison, June 20, 1925). In October 1925 Mrs. Brown wrote to inquire if the firm would design a landscape plan for their property, but evidently did not proceed. The following April Whiting reported to Morrison that Brown had asked for advice about a fence; Whiting told him that "a simple colonial picket fence 3½' high would seem to us satisfactory," but that he should have his architect design the posts rather than trust his carpenter to do it. Whiting also advised that the fence should return to posts on both sides of the driveway, as it does today.

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<sup>1</sup> The two empty lots, which were owned in common with 177 Coolidge Hill, remained open until 2017, when construction of a new house commenced at about 173 Coolidge Hill and the unnumbered interior parcel was cleared of trees.



Theodore Storer house, 139 Coolidge Hill



Robert Storer house, 133 Coolidge Hill



Winthrop Brown Jr. house, 127 Coolidge Hill



George Macomber house, 170 Coolidge Hill



Henry S. Hall house, 154 Coolidge Hill



Alfred Gardner house, 162 Coolidge Hill

Whiting's correspondence with Morrison on design matters is voluminous but one-sided; the final decision was Morrison's, but the outcomes can only be inferred from how the buildings turned out. The most difficult and contentious issue had to do with the two-car garages that the affluent buyers were demanding; as Whiting put it, how "to properly subdue the dominance of the large openings into garages." This became especially contentious with Ward's design for Robert Storer at 133 Coolidge Hill, where the garage doors originally dominated the long view down the street from the west. Whiting protested, but Ward resisted making changes and apparently Storer prevailed.

Five of Ward's six houses in Coolidge Hill are wood framed and covered with shingles and clapboards; these are mostly Colonial Revival in design, but none are as adventurous as the Brown house. Because they form a continuous group at the east end of the development they

convey a consistency of design less evident elsewhere on Coolidge Hill, where brick and wood Georgians are mixed. All the houses at Coolidge Hill, however, convey a harmony of siting and consistent attention to detail as desired by Morrison and Whiting in 1925-26.

J. Robertson Ward's career soon took a different turn. In 1928 he left his family, gave up his practice in Boston, and relocated to New Canaan, Conn., where he designed the Woolworth Chapel for Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx in 1935 and numerous houses in New York and Connecticut. (Some sources credit his firm, Ward & Bellows, with the design of the first Modernist house in New Canaan in 1937). In 1935 he and his wife, interior designer Dorothy Elliott Ward, built a home in Bermuda and soon built a practice there. In 1946 Ward founded the Mill Reef Club in Antigua, B.W.I. This exclusive planned community attracted figures such as Archibald MacLeish, Dean Acheson, and Paul Mellon, who commissioned 55 houses designed by Ward and mostly built in the 1950s. A study of his buildings noted that "his modernist architecture capitalized on geographic and cultural influences ... [ and] ... demonstrated a distinctly non-modernist inclination towards fantasy in decoration and embellishment. ... The result was a cocktail of influences." This assessment could easily be applied to Ward's work in the 1920s.

Robertson Ward's firm later designed resort hotels and communities on Barbados, St. Martin's, Nassau, Eleuthera, and Jamaica. Now Robertson Ward International Ltd., it has offices in Antigua, Barbados, and the Bahamas. Ward received a lifetime achievement award from the American Institute of Architects in 1986 and died in London in 1988.

#### Significance and Recommendation

The staff recommends that 127 Coolidge Hill be found significant for its architecture as a distinctive example of the Neo-Colonial style and in the context of the intact planned development of Coolidge Hill, and for its relationship to architect J. Robertson Ward. The house is also significant for its associations with Winthrop Brown Jr. and his wife, Margaret.

The Commission should hear testimony from the owners and neighbors and review the plans for replacement construction before making a further determination.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services Department