



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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February 28, 2025

To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Case D-1721, Ward-Schirmer house, 26 Jay Street

An application to demolish the house at 26 Jay Street was received on February 4, 2025. The owner, 26 Jay Street LLC (Mike Tokatlyan) was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for March 6.

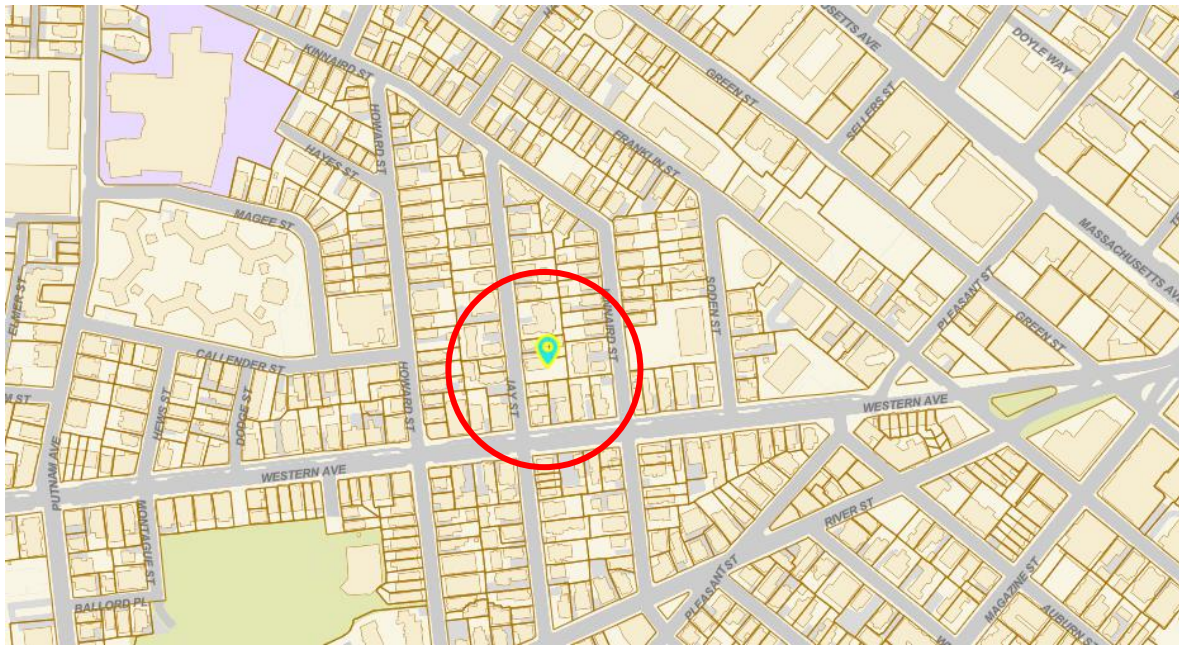


26 Jay Street

Google Street View, 2020

The house at 26 Jay Street occupies a 5,728 square-foot lot (123/15) on the east side of Jay Street, north of Western Avenue. The house is a two-family, three-story frame building on a brick foundation. The zoning is Residence C-1, a multi-family district that allows a four-story building as of right, or six

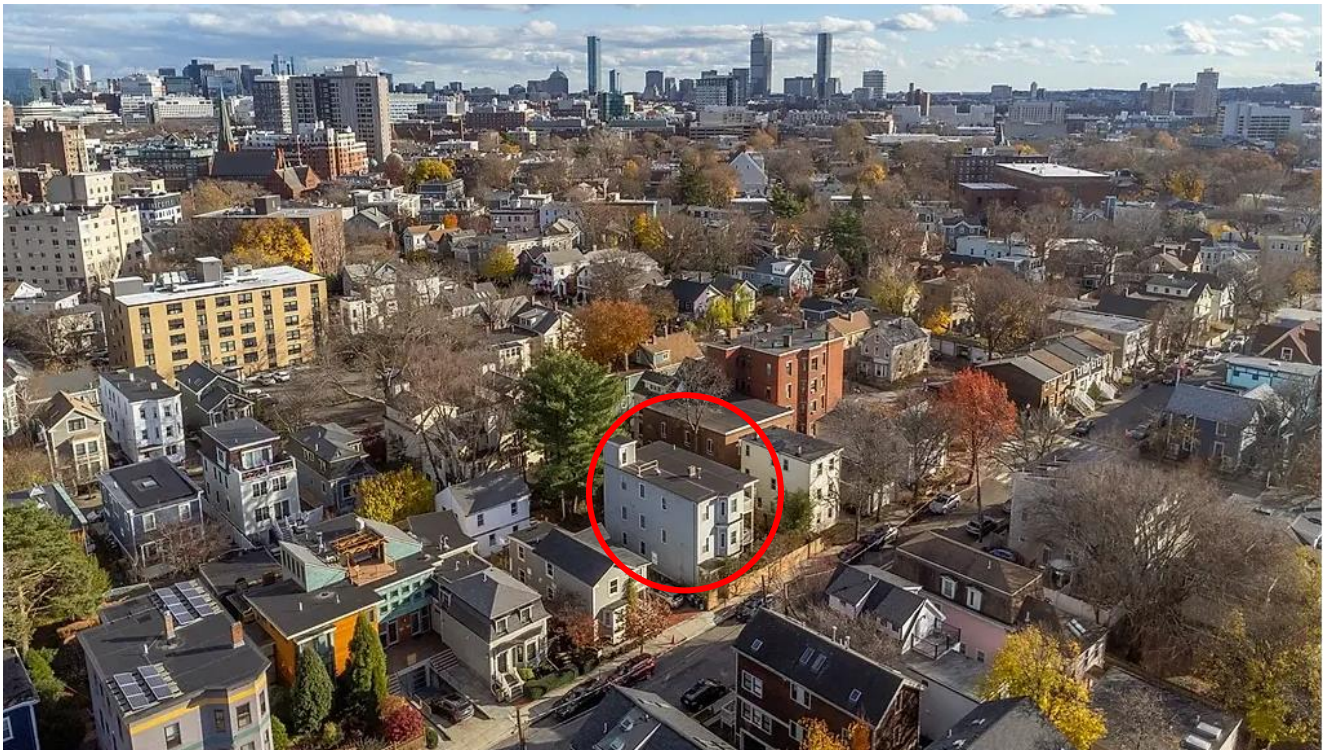
stories with inclusionary affordable housing. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the Assessors' database, is \$2,044,600 - \$1,000,600 for the house, and \$1,044,000 for the land.



Locus map

Cambridge GIS

The lot at 26 Jay Street has 60' of frontage on the sidewalk and is 100' deep. The building adjoins Jay Street Place on the north and has an open side yard on the south. The facade ranges even with other houses on the street. The adjacent buildings are a mixture of three-deckers and 1½ and 2½ story houses. These include a gable-front Italianate at 28 Jay, a three-decker at 36-38 Jay, a gabled Italianate at 33 Jay, and four townhouses at 35-41 Jay, built in 2002. A Mansard cottage at 30 Jay that was moved on its lot to accommodate new townhouses pursuant to a demolition case in 2007 is nearby.



26 Jay Street context, 2024

Real estate listing photo



The Assessing Department rates the condition of 26 Jay Street as good inside and out but average overall. The building was thoroughly renovated in 1988 and has been well maintained. The proponents wish to demolish the house and construct a new three-unit structure on the lot.



26 Jay Street (1858-1988), foreground; 28 Jay Street (1871); 30 Jay Street (1869); and 36-38 Jay Street (1907). CHC photo

Description

The building at 26 Jay Street originated in 1858 as a two-story house, one of four constructed by Samuel Ward between 1858 and 1871. While the original configuration of the roof is not known, the

other three houses Ward put up had gable roofs with the pediments facing the street. Number 28 Jay also originally had two-story side porches similar to those on #26.



28 Jay Street (1871, Samuel Ward, developer) CHC photo

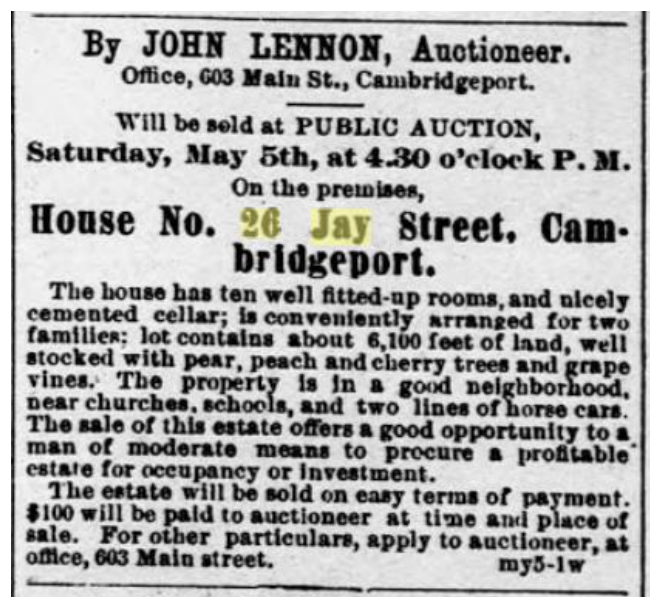
When Ward advertised 26 Jay Street for sale in 1870, he described it as a “nice, small two-story house situated in a good neighborhood, with bay window, [and a] dry cemented cellar”



Cambridge Chronicle, October 29, 1870

When a subsequent owner sold the house in 1888, the auctioneer described it as containing ten rooms suitable for two families, the lot “well stocked with pear, peach and cherry trees and grape vines ... [offering] a good opportunity for a man of moderate means to procure a profitable estate for occupancy or investment.”

In 1909 the house was described as 2½ stories high with an ell, with nine rooms for two families. The new owner, Nathan Samoilovich, constructed an addition and may have been responsible for replacing the gable roof with a flat one, so that the house could then be described a two-decker. With this addition the house gained a two-story porch on the south side, but retained its original vestibule and double front doors, which remain in place today.



Cambridge Press, May 5, 1888



26 Jay Street in 1966

CHC photo

The last major change to the building occurred in 1988, when owner Abigail Schirmer added a third floor, extending the walls straight up and adding a third floor porch above those on the first two floors. The architect of this addition was John Altobello.



26 Jay Street, 2024

Internet real estate listing

The Samuel Ward house now bears a superficial resemblance to a standard early 20th century three decker, but the original 1858 portico and entrance doors and the 1910-1988 side porches betray a different origin.

History

The Riverside neighborhood north of Western Avenue was developed in the 1860s on land originally held by the Dana family. The Western Avenue Bridge was opened in 1824, but the area developed slowly. The ground was marshy and poorly drained. Development initially occurred along Green Street to the north and Pleasant Street to the east. The residential development of the area intensified after the Civil War, spurred by the continued growth of the Riverside Press and the filling of the wetlands that fed the millpond where Hoyt Field is now located.

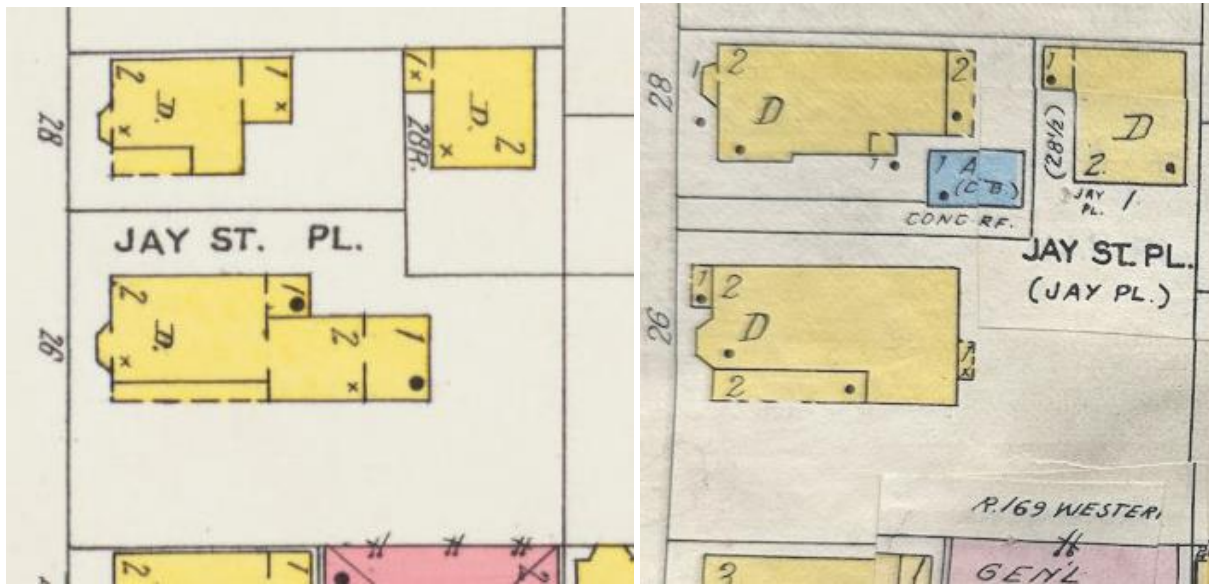


The Riverside neighborhood in 1873. Samuel Ward houses circled. The undeveloped area was a recently-filled mill pond.

The house at 26 Jay Street was constructed in 1858 by Central Square grocer and real estate investor Samuel Ward as his own residence. After the Civil War Ward also put up 25 Jay (1872), 27 Jay (1869), and 28 Jay (1871). These were among the first houses on Jay north of Western Avenue. In the late 1870s the remaining land between Western Avenue and Kinna Street was subdivided into 30 building lots. Developers George and Newell Chamberlain acquired about 15 lots on Howard and Jay streets, and in 1885 began to build two-family houses for rent.

Samuel Ward lived at #26 until he sold it to Henry Sommerman, a bookbinder, in 1873. For many years afterward the house was occupied by a succession of skilled workmen, many of them employed at the Riverside Press, and their families. Among them was Nathan Samoilovich, who may have been responsible for remodeling the roof in 1910. Samoilovich was born in the Ukraine in 1874 and married Sophia Mannos there in 1902. He arrived in New York in 1902, and Sophia followed with their four children in 1906. By 1908 they were living in Cambridge, where four more children were born and

where Nathan worked as a pressman at the Riverside Press while Sophia kept a store on Western Avenue before they relocated to Revere about 1920.



26 Jay Street in 1900, two stories with shingled roof (left), and in 1934, with flat roof (right)

Nicodemus Alston, a Black man born in North Carolina in 1861 who was an employee of the Cambridge Water Department, acquired the property about 1922. His heirs sold it in 1944 to Gaston Wilder, another Black North Carolina native who was a stationary engineer with the Cambridge Electric Light Company.



Abigail B. Schirmer.
Boston Globe photo

After renting it to her for several years, in 1988 his daughter Sylona sold it to Abigail B. Schirmer (1944-2006), a Boston school teacher and social activist whose father, Prof. Daniel Boone Schirmer (1915-2006), was an academic and local activist who was prominent in the movement to establish the Half Crown Neighborhood Conservation District in the early 1980s.

Abigail Schirmer, who taught math and science at Fenway High School for 22 years, is remembered for her frequent activities in support of civil liberties and against apartheid and the war in Viet Nam. She and her mother, Margaret, were instrumental in founding of the Cambridge Peace Commission in 1982.

Ms. Schirmer obtained a zoning variance in 1988 to add the third story to the house. Ms. Schirmer's husband, An H Nguyen, sold the property to the current owner.

Recommendation

The Ward/Schirmer house is significant for its associations with the earliest development of Jay Street; for its continuing adaptation to meet the changing needs of its owners; and for its associations with social activist Abigail Schirmer.

I recommend that the Commission hear testimony from the neighbors and carefully review the plans for replacement construction before making a further determination.

cc: Peter McLaughlin, Inspectional Services
Mike Toykatlian



26 Jay Street, 2024

Real estate listing photo