



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Florrie Darwin, Scott Kyle, Michael Rogove, *Alternates*

August 1, 2025

To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: **Case D-1742: 122 Western Ave., by Erik D. Demaine.** Demolish house (1855).
Case D-1743: 124-132 Western Ave., by Anthony Spears, Artis Spears & Andrea Spears Jackson. Demolish two houses and funeral home additions (1856/1860/1984).

Applications to demolish the buildings at 122, 124, and 132 Western Avenue were received on March 13, 2025 (for 122 and 132 Western Avenue) and June 16, 2025 (for 122 Western Avenue). Representatives of the owners of 124-132 Western Avenue, who filed first, requested that a hearing not be held until the owner of the abutting property, which they were negotiating to purchase, could file his own application. The owners were notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for August 7.

Context



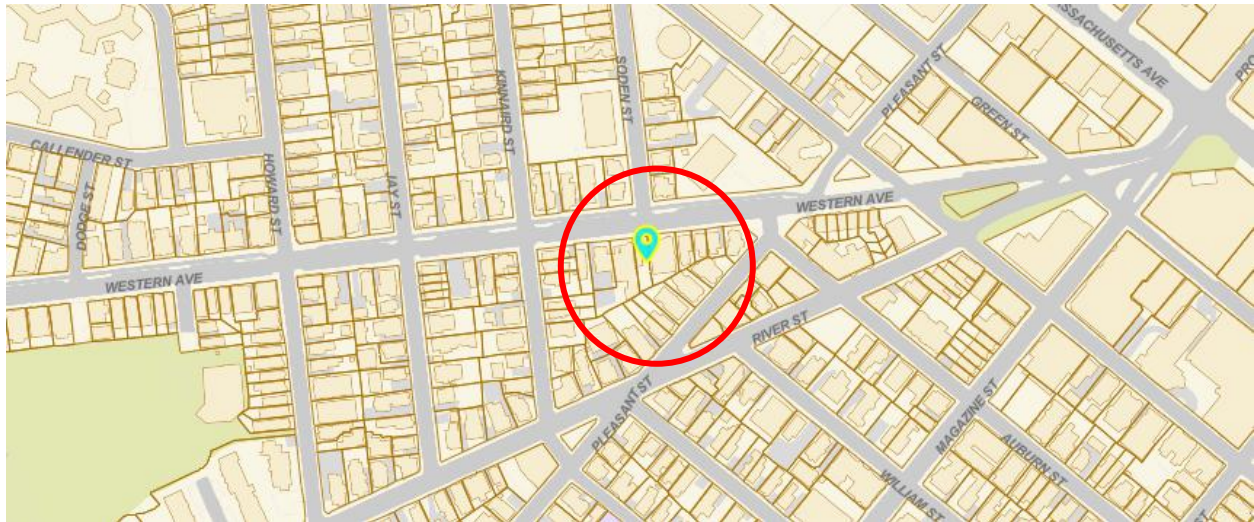
122, 124, and 132 Western Avenue

CHC photo, 2025

The three houses in question are located in the Riverside neighborhood on the south side of Western Avenue opposite Soden Street. 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. All

three were originally two-family, 2½-story frame buildings on brick foundations. The proponents wish to demolish all three houses and construct a six-story residential building on the combined 14,750 square foot lot.

- The building at 122 Western Avenue occupies a 2,978 square-foot lot (125/43), 110' deep with 28' of frontage on the avenue. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the Assessors' database, is \$1,573,200 - \$900,500 for the house, and \$672,700 for the land. Its condition is rated "very good".
- The building at 124 Western Avenue occupies a 7,565 square-foot lot (125/42), between 110' and 150' deep with 46' of frontage on the avenue. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the Assessors' database, is \$1,311,100 - \$567,300 for the house, and \$749,000 for the land. Its condition is rated "good".
- The building at 132 Western Avenue occupies a 4,207 square-foot lot (125/41), 93' deep with 45' of frontage on the avenue. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the Assessors' database, is \$1,443,500 - \$827,500 for the house, and \$616,000 for the land. Its condition is rated "good".
- In 1984 the buildings at 124 and 132 Western Avenue were linked by construction of a one-story chapel and service building with a separate entrance on the avenue. This structure is less than fifty years old and cannot be considered significant for the purpose of the demolition delay ordinance.



Locus map

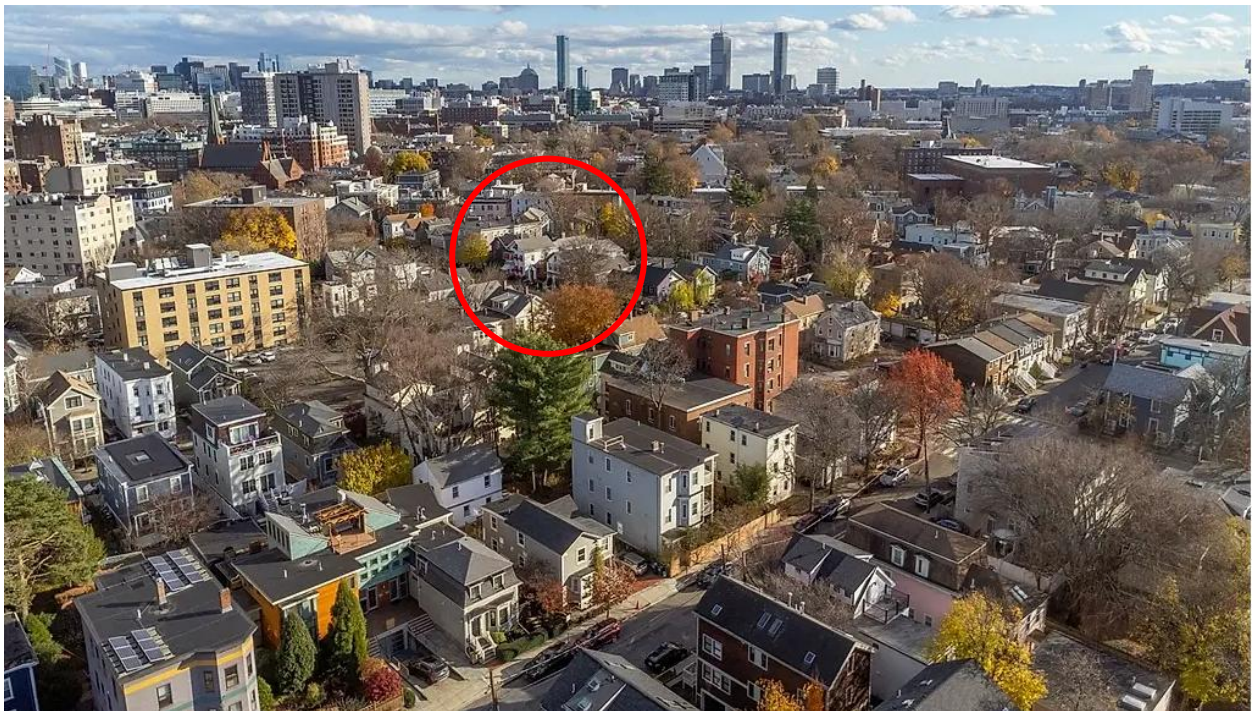
Cambridge GIS



122, 124, and 132 Western Avenue

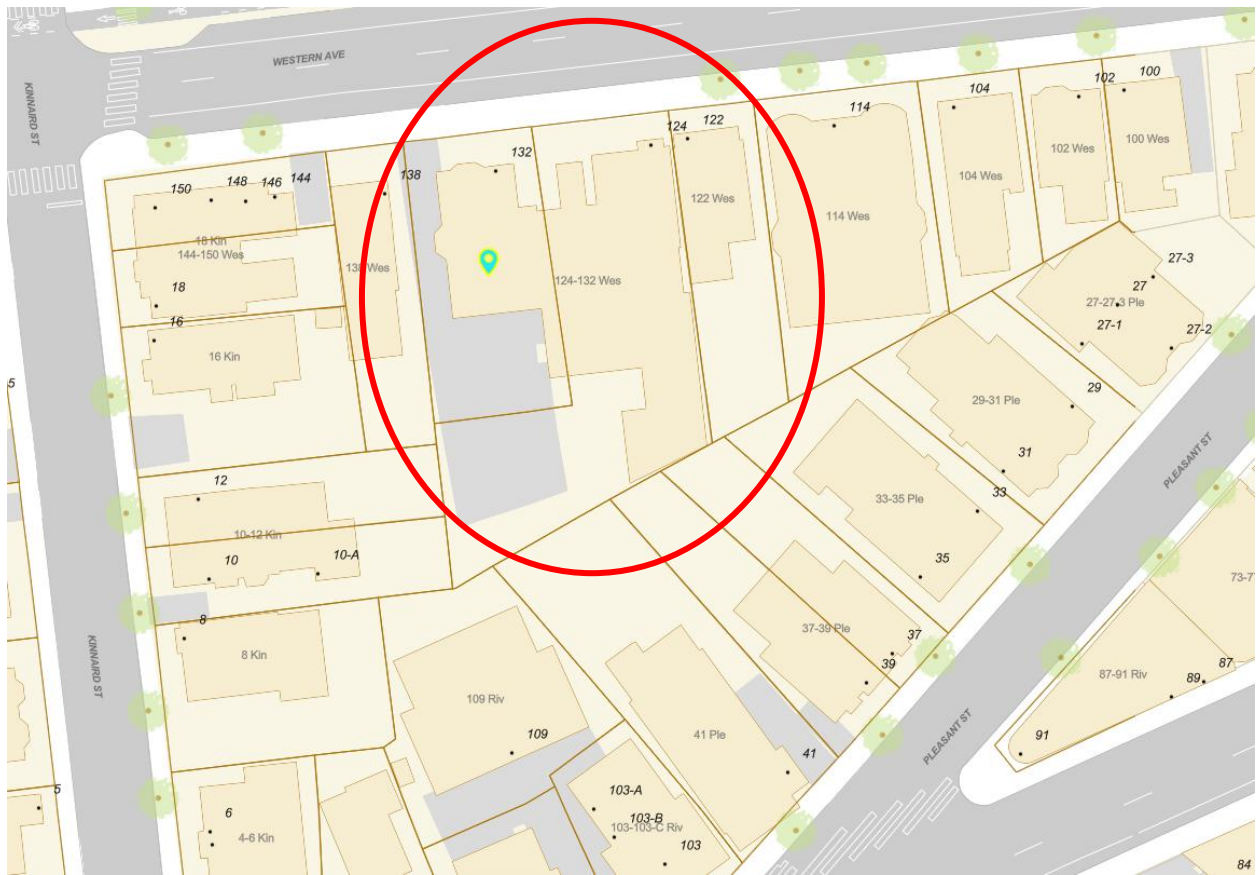
NearMap.com, 2023

The facades of the buildings range even with others on the avenue. The adjacent buildings are a mixture of three-deckers and 2½ story houses. These include the temple-front Greek Revival house opposite at 135 Western Avenue, but also a seven-story apartment building from 1965 and two Modern townhouses at the corner of Soden Street completed in 2023.



122-132 Western Avenue context, 2024

Real estate listing photo



Cambridge Assessing Department

Description

The 2½-story buildings at 122, 124, and 132 Western Avenue each exhibit a side-hall, gable-end plan that became standardized in dense northeastern U.S. neighborhoods in the 1840s to take advantage of the deep but narrow house lots that were the most efficient way of subdividing land in the absence of land-use regulations. While this plan originated in the Greek Revival period, it continued to be used well into the 20th century regardless of prevailing architectural styles.



122, 124, and 132 Western Avenue.

CHC photo. 2025

The houses were built within a five-year period just before the Civil War. The Greek Revival Style of the 1830s and '40s had fallen out of favor and were supplanted by the Italianate Style, which could be applied to side-hall plan houses without major changes in massing or fenestration. Corner boards were narrower, but cornices were still deep and often exhibited the same returns. Gable ends showed the same roof slopes as in the earlier period, but lost the lower chord of their Greek Revival pediments. Entrances were protected by projecting hoods supported by elaborate brackets, rather than the simple pediments of the 1840s.

The house at 122 Western Avenue was put up in 1855 by an unknown builder for Charles Gilson, a house painter. While it is the simplest in massing and details, it is the only one with a



122 Western Avenue in 1984, 2014, and 2025

CHC and Assessing Dept. photos

front porch, which is rare among similar houses along the avenue. The building was once covered with asbestos siding, but the original clapboard siding was restored in about 2010.



122 and 124 Western Ave. Note the exaggerated cornice of 124 in comparison with 122.

CHC photo, 1984

The house at 124 Western Avenue was built by Albert Norris and a partner, probably James Richardson, in 1856. It exhibits a more exaggerated form of the Italianate Style than 122, with a deeper cornice and more prominent returns. The ornate door hood is characteristic of the period, but the bay window above it may have been added later in the century. Aluminum siding has covered the exterior for many years, but original clapboards and trim details probably remain underneath. The

exterior is unchanged from its long use as a funeral home.

The Albert Norris house at 132 Western Avenue was put up by the builder in 1860. The house features a bracketed hood and a bay window of the façade, a typical upgrade in vernacular houses of the period. Unlike the other house 122, it also has a cross-gabled wing at the rear of the main block of the house.

History

The Riverside neighborhood west of Central Square was developed in the 1860s on land originally held by the Dana family. Judge Francis Dana had been a principal investor in the West Boston Bridge, and by the time it opened in 1793 he controlled much of the land south of Massachusetts Avenue in present-day Riverside and Cambridgeport.



132 Western Avenue

CHC photo, 2025

The completion of the West Boston Bridge introduced an era of turnpike construction to inland territories seeking the shortest route to the city. River Street, laid out in 1808, and Western Avenue, completed in 1824, opened up Riverside, but much of the ground was marshy and poorly drained. Development initially occurred closer to Central Square along Green Street to the north and Pleasant Street to the east. Residential development in Riverside 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.

While the north-south streets in Cambridgeport were carefully oriented to foster residential construction, River Street and Western Avenue were laid out across the landscape toward distant destinations with no regard for physical barriers or pre-existing streets. This resulted in many oddly-shaped lots, especially in the area where River, Western and Pleasant streets crossed

One such parcel seems to have contained the homestead of Thomas Soden, who sold his farm to Francis Dana in 1777. Judge Dana's daughter Sara inherited this section of her father's land, and after the Soden house was taken down or burned in 1840 was left with an irregularly-shaped lot with frontage on Pleasant Street and Western Avenue. In about 1855 she subdivided the tract into house lots and sold several of them to Cambridge builder Albert Norris and his brother William.



River Street and Western Avenue in 1854. The Soden parcel is circled.

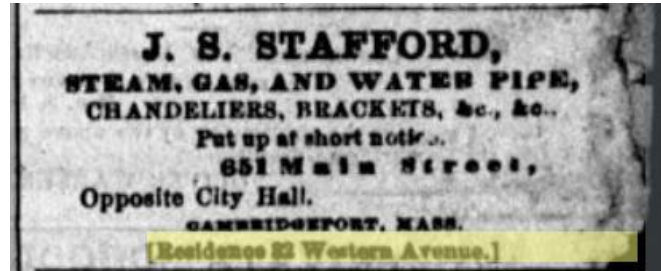


The Soden parcel laid out by Sara Ann Dana about 1855, fully developed in 1873.

Albert Norris (1826-1889) was one of the most prolific and best-regarded builders of his day. Born in Portsmouth, N.H., he arrived in Cambridge in 1843 and apprenticed himself to

housewright Moses Ricker. In the 1850s he started to work as a builder on his own account. Usually in this period builders would acquire one or more lots, subdivide them if necessary, and build houses sequentially and on speculation, using the proceeds from each house to pay off the land cost and finance the next. Builders often lived temporarily in the houses they had just finished but occasionally settled down permanently in one of them. This appears to have been the experience of Albert Norris, who built 124 Western Avenue in 1856 and 132 Western in 1860, choosing the latter as his permanent residence.

The residents of the other houses during the rest of the 19th century were middle-class tradesmen and business owners. Joseph Britton at 122 was a post office clerk in Boston, and John Stafford at 124 was a dealer and installer of gas lighting appliances; the attached sheds and stable at the rear of the house were probably associated with his business.



During the early 20th century a substantial Black community began to settle in the Riverside neighborhood. Immigrants from Barbados found employment at the Riverside Press and other Cambridge industries that enabled them to purchase homes and establish a stable community. Among them were Dr. David N. Turpin, a dentist, who lived at 132 Western Avenue. Dr. Turpin was born in South Carolina in 1895 and studied at Meharry Medical College in Nashville. He opened a practice in Boston in 1923 but soon moved to Cambridge, where he practiced in the community until his retirement in 1973.

The most prominent landmark of the Black community in Riverside is the Spears Funeral Home, which now occupies 124 and 132 Western Avenue. In the late 1930s Kinnaird Street resident Abel Madison Bland, who had previously worked as a custodian, partnered with Thomas O'Brien to open a funeral parlor at 890 Main Street near Lafayette Square. Bland soon took over the operation, and in 1951 received a zoning variance to occupy the premises at 124 Western Avenue. A. Madison Bland died in 1957, but his son carried on the business until 1964 when Andrew J. Spears acquired the business. The A.J. Spears Funeral Home became a mainstay of the community, expanding with a new chapel in 1984.



Recommendation

The buildings at 122, 124, and 132 Western Avenue are significant for their associations with the earliest development of Riverside and as an ensemble of intact or easily recoverable vernacular Italianate Style houses in the context of Western Avenue. Number 132 is significant for its associations with its builder, Albert Norris, and as the residence of Dr. David N. Turpin, while 122 and 132 are significant as the long-time location of the A.J. Spears Funeral Home, perhaps the most prominent Black-owned business in Cambridge.

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